

Rojava

**An Alternative to Imperialism, Nationalism,
and Islamism in the Middle East**

By Oso Sabio

To all of the independent reporters, activists, and academics who keep facts flowing
unrestricted throughout the world and across the web;

To all of those who believe that a freer and fairer world is possible;

To all of those who have given their lives for that dream in the past;

To all of those who fight to make that vision a reality today;

To my family, without which I would not be the person I currently am;

And to Cristina, for her love and support while I wrote this book;

Thank you!

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Note: The majority of sources referred to in this book come from reputable news websites and were accessed between August 2014 and March 2015. This book has been written not for profit but with the intention of increasing the reader's knowledge and understanding of the topics discussed. The references, therefore, are for the benefit of the reader rather than for the benefit of copyright laws.

Foreword

Today, there appears to be mayhem in the Middle East. Dictators and monarchs oppress their people in order to guarantee the continued governance of the small, parasitic elites that fund them and provide them with muscle power. Some are pro-Western and some are not so pro-Western but, regardless of which elites support them, they are all repressive and exploitative in some way. Meanwhile, the supposedly 'democratic' State of Israel continues to avoid peace at all costs, committing numerous war crimes in Gaza and continuing to violate international law throughout Palestine.¹

But it is not only nation states that wage war. There are also resistance movements that seek to change the region in different ways. Many citizens rightly demand more justice, democracy, and freedom, and the Arab Spring showed the world just how much political discontent runs through the Muslim World. However, there are also groups of 'religious' extremists, who have taken advantage of the chaos ensuing from popular rebellions in recent years. As an empathetic observer, I was driven by these events to seek an understanding of the role that imperialism had played in creating the situation I was witnessing, and why nationalist and Islamist reactionaries had not been able to create a genuine alternative to oppressive, dictatorial rule. In short, I asked myself how the region could truly succeed in escaping the vicious cycle in which it has found itself almost since the start of the twentieth century.

One of the main purposes of this book, therefore, is to invite the reader to **analyse the context** behind what has been happening in the Middle East in the last few years. In my opinion, it is essential to emphasise that the Arab Spring did not appear within a vacuum, and that the Syrian Civil War and the spread of ISIS didn't either. To an untrained (or indoctrinated) eye, ethnic, cultural, or religious divisions may seem to explain the violence occurring in the region, but I will argue that **imperialist political manoeuvres from the West are**, in large part at least, **directly responsible** for the current situation. In this book, I aim to demonstrate that link, and the way in which small capitalist elites have consistently been prepared to exploit and exercise control over people in the Muslim World in order to protect their own interests.

There is indeed division in the region, but we must understand why it exists. We must ask why Islamism (or political Islam) has become so extreme and so prominent, and we must acknowledge that there are concrete explanations for the emergence of violent groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS. The West tried hard throughout the Cold War to eliminate anti-imperialist or left-wing groups in the Muslim World, and self-interested nationalists and Islamists were often prepared to provide the manpower for these plots. In other words, Islamists have to a certain extent managed to gain support precisely because of the West's campaign against secular left-wingers in the region. However, they have also gained support because they have expressed some tangible, legitimate demands – such as freedom from Western interference in the region. This book will show, however, that Islamism does not, and cannot, provide a real solution to the injustice and oppression brought by imperialist intervention.

The reason why Islamism is not the answer to the problems of the Middle East is that, while Western powers have practised political, economic, and cultural imperialism in the region, **Islamists focus primarily on the cultural interference of the West**. Furthermore, although they occasionally seek freedom from Western political and economic domination, they **rarely advocate popular democratic rule**. In other words, if we understand imperialism as the "extension or imposition of power, authority, or influence" by a small elite, we see that

¹ <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

the Islamist search to defeat imperialism via the enforcement of a quasi-religious form of domination, control, and oppression is simply illogical.² In short, while claiming to fight against imperialism, Islamists allow it to remain, much like forms of authoritarian 'socialism' did.

A true solution for the region, as I will show towards the end of this book, lies in the **struggle against elite capitalist interests** – both local and international. The socio-economic elites of the Middle East routinely place the interests of Western capitalists, along with their own interests, above those of the hardworking citizens over whom they rule. Whether the former seek to control the population through authoritarianism, religion, or both, the fact is that the latter do not have control over their own lives. Essentially, that was the motivation for the legitimate protests throughout the region during the Arab Spring.

Injustice and oppression are everywhere, just like elsewhere in the world, and that situation will continue as long as one group exerts domination over another. **The only chance, therefore, for real, meaningful change is if workers throughout the Middle East unite – regardless of cultural, tribal, or religious differences** – to oppose a capitalist order that has controlled regional politics and resources for centuries. In Rojava in northern Syria, communities in largely Kurdish territory have done precisely that, coming together in the hope of creating an inclusive and directly democratic system and protecting themselves from the crimes of ISIS and exploitative authoritarian states. The following investigation has been undertaken to honour their fight, and that of all of those who seek to forge a freer and fairer world.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imperialism>

Introduction

The first chapter of this book will seek to give an overview of the key events in the Middle East between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the second, I will take a closer look at the rise and fall of Arab nationalism in Egypt, while in the third I will analyse the phenomenon of Ba'athism in Syria and Iraq. The fourth chapter will involve an exploration of the 'Kurdish Question', and how the fight for Kurdish autonomy has developed ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire left Kurds split between the new states of different ethnic groups.

The fifth chapter will look at how the power of Saudi Arabia and its school of Islam began to grow with British and US help, and how Iran and its school of Islam rose as a reaction to imperialist interference in the region. This battle, as the chapter will show, could effectively be referred to as an Islamist Cold War. In the sixth chapter, I will analyse how US wars in the Middle East (in addition to those launched by Israel) have destabilised the region, fuelled discontent, and acted to radicalise sectors of its population. I will also examine the increasingly spontaneous actions of civilians in the Arab Spring, and how the lack of significant organisation allowed Western-backed Islamist forces to appropriate the uprisings for themselves. The seventh chapter, meanwhile, will examine in further depth the phenomenon of ISIS, which presented itself as a brutal and quasi-fascist reaction to imperialist interference in the Muslim World. In this chapter, I will focus on how the West and its Middle Eastern allies played a key role in facilitating the growth of the jihadist group.

In the eighth chapter, I will analyse the Left's stance on the Syrian Civil War, and explain why 'imperialist against anti-imperialist' rhetoric is both simplistic and counterproductive. The ninth chapter, meanwhile, will show how the Kurdish PKK rebels have developed into a truly alternative force for change in the Middle East, and how this occurrence is of great concern for imperialists, nationalists, and Islamists – though to differing extents. In the tenth chapter, I will explore the Rojava Revolution of northern Syria in greater detail, evaluating how it has developed and how other forces have responded to it. In the eleventh chapter, I will look at how the PKK and its allies have heroically resisted both the advances of ISIS and the hostility of other forces surrounding them in Syria and Iraq. Finally, in the twelfth chapter, I will analyse the responses of the USA, Turkey, and Iraqi Kurdistan to successful Rojavan resistance against ISIS in the city of Kobani. I will also consider in this chapter what these reactions could mean for the Rojava Revolution and progressive forces elsewhere in the region in the coming months and years, whilst emphasising that inclusivity and autonomy are the only paths towards peace in the region.

Part One: Imperialism and Nationalism

1) The Muslim World after the Fall of the Ottoman Empire

During “the epoch of classical Islamic civilisation”, according to LibCom.org, the whole “Arab region was definitively wrenched out of its past”.³ Iraqi-born theoretical physicist Jim Al-Khalili, meanwhile, insists that, as Europe languished in the so-called ‘Dark Ages’, “incredible scientific advances were made in the Muslim world”, with the Ottoman Empire overseeing much of this progress.⁴ However, for a number of reasons, the empire began to decline in the 17th century, and eventually fell apart at the end of the First World War (having chosen to support the wrong side in the conflict between European imperialist powers). The Muslim World, for so long guided by the Ottomans, was now left without a pan-Islamic institution, and the powerful **European states sought to divide** it in order to prevent the creation of another large Muslim empire that could challenge their own supremacy.

The efforts of these superpowers inevitably created friction in the region, and only after the Second World War would attempts to unite it gain momentum. However, it was primarily the Arab section of the Muslim World that sought unity, with the Arab League being established in 1945 and **Arab nationalism** looking set to become the main political opponent of pro-Western monarchies in the region. **The creation of Israel** in 1948, however, divided the Arab World geographically, stifling the endeavours of its newly independent countries to create a unified Arab nation. Israel’s predisposition towards violence, meanwhile, had already generated fierce responses both from Islamists and from Arab nationalists.

The focus of this chapter of the book is to give an overview of the recent history of key countries in the Muslim World, and especially in what is today referred to as the Middle East. **Without this historical context, it is impossible to truly understand the current political situation and, without such understanding, there is no way that the region’s conflicts will ever truly be resolved.** Therefore, instead of delving into political theory or suggesting solutions, this chapter will focus purely on outlining historical details. A large part of the information summarised below comes from TeachMideast.org⁵, unless otherwise specified.

A) The Four Muslim Powerhouses

For the purpose of this book, I suggest that we consider four nations in particular as political powerhouses in the Muslim World. Three of these – Iran, Turkey, and Egypt – all have ancient histories and imperialist pasts, perhaps in part due to their strategic locations on the hub of three continents. From the Egyptian pyramids and the Persian Empire to the prolific Ottoman Empire, **their stories have shaped the Middle East.** After the birth of Islam in the seventh century, however, religion would also exert a significant influence on this region (and much further afield). In fact, historian Tariq Ali speaks of how “Judaism, Christianity and Islam all began as versions of what we would today describe as political movements”, seeking to “resist imperial oppression” and “unite a disparate people”.⁶ And this is precisely the function that Islam would have in each of the three countries mentioned above.

Some Background on Islam

³ <https://libcom.org/library/national-formation-arab-region-critique-samir-amin-mohammad-jafar>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/feb/01/islamic-science>

⁵ <http://www.teachmideast.org/essays/28-history/42-timeline-of-the-middle-east-in-the-20th-century>

⁶ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/17/a-secular-history-of-islam/>

In around 610AD, a forty-year-old Prophet Muhammad experienced a vision (of the archangel Gabriel) near his birthplace, Mecca (in modern-day Saudi Arabia), and then set about convincing locals that there was “one true God”. In 622, he was thrown out of Mecca, having worried “the rich and powerful merchants” of the town, who believed Muhammad’s “religious revolution... might be disastrous for business”. Along with his followers, the prophet found shelter at an oasis, which would later be named ‘Medina’, or “the city [of the Prophet]”. In 629, having “negotiated a truce with the Meccans”, he finally returned to his hometown. After one of his followers was murdered, however, he ordered an invasion of the settlement.⁷ Having won “three important military victories”, Muhammad and his followers soon saw many locals convert to Islam, having been “impressed by the muscularity of the new religion”.

In 632, Muhammad died of a fever, but Islam’s subsequent triumphs, Ali says, would be “a vindication of his action programme”. Some sections of the Koran, he argues, had “the vigour of a political manifesto”, showing that “Muhammad’s spiritual drive was fuelled by socio-economic ambitions” (such as strengthening “the commercial standing of the Arabs” and introducing “a set of common rules” to reduce conflict in society). Islam, Ali insists, “was the cement [Muhammad] used to unite the Arab tribes” and, “within twenty years of Muhammad’s death..., his followers had laid the foundations of the first Islamic empire in the Fertile Crescent”. Impressed by these successes, whole tribes embraced the new religion. With the Persian and Byzantine Empires having been embroiled in conflict “for almost a hundred years” (which “had enfeebled both sides, alienated their populations and created an opening for... new conquerors”), Islam soon “replaced [these] two great empires”. Eventually, there would be “three Muslim empires”, dominating “large parts of the globe”, with the Ottomans governing from Istanbul, the Safavids from Persia, and the Mughal dynasty from India.⁸

The fourth successor (or caliph) to Muhammad would be his cousin Ali, who had been at his side from the very beginning of his conquest, and had even married his daughter Fatimah. Under his rule (between 656 to 661), division grew within Islam, and he “was eventually killed by a member of the Kharijite sect”. Those who followed his successors (claiming that Fatimah and her sons Hasan and Hussein were the only ones who ought to be classed as Muhammad’s family) would become Shia Muslims, while those who followed the Umayyad family (a prominent clan from which the third caliph had come) would become Sunni Muslims. Essentially, this was a “struggle for political power”, which the powerful Umayyad leader Muawiyah I and his successors would appear to win, establishing a new caliphate that would last from 661 to 750.

As a result of Muawiyah’s victory, “a de facto separation of religious and political power” would begin, with caliphs holding “religious authority” but monarchs (known as sultans or emirs) essentially wielding political power. The religious sphere of activity and power would soon be “subordinated to the political one”. The Sunni dynasties of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258) and the Ottoman Empire (1299–1923) would then follow on from the Umayyads, though other Islamic empires would exist at several points over the centuries. Between the ninth to the thirteenth century, says Deepa Kumar at the International Socialist Review, “Turkic warrior-rulers... held political power” with the consent of the religious elites, whose legitimacy and authority were guaranteed by these military regimes.

In order to “develop a set of laws that could be applied uniformly to all Muslim subjects”, a “class of religious scholars” (or ‘ulama’) set about developing “Sharia – a set of rules codified into law” [which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five]. There was generally “a consensus” among the ulama, Kumar asserts, “that as long a ruler could defend

⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/empires/islam/profilesmuhammed.html>

⁸ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/17/a-secular-history-of-islam/>

the territories of Islam (dar al-Islam) and did not prevent his Muslim subjects from practicing their religion”, there should be no rebellion against them. While Muhammad had effectively been “both a political and religious leader”, the empires that followed him essentially undertook a ‘division of labour’ in their upper echelons.⁹ In the fourth powerhouse I will examine in this section of the chapter, this separation began to blur to a certain extent, but essentially remained.

Saudi Arabia, which had a history much less fertile than the other three countries mentioned at the beginning of this section, was bolstered both by its extremely violent, corrupted form of Islam (**Wahhabism/Salafism**), and by the West’s desire for oil in the twentieth century. Although it is a newcomer compared to the other powerhouses mentioned, ignoring its role in the Muslim World over the last few decades would be a fatal error.

Turkey, Ethnic Nationalism, and Military Rule

In 1908, after years of decline in the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks (a group of liberal and nationalist reformists), led a revolt in Macedonia. They took power of the empire and forced the sultan to restore the constitutional monarchy, initiating a series of transformations in Ottoman society. However, a divide developed within their party, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), and liberal reformists soon split off to form their own party. In 1913, the conservative nationalists still in the CUP took power for themselves in a coup.

When World War One broke out, the coup regime saw the Armenian population as a “pro-Russian” threat and, in April 1915, they “arrested about 50 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders”, who would later be executed. Other Armenians, meanwhile, were moved en masse from Anatolia (the largely Turkic areas of modern-day Turkey) to Syria. Around a million Armenians died or were murdered on this journey, which is today considered to have been part of an anti-Armenian genocide. The European Parliament, for example, has “formally recognised genocide against the Armenians”, though the traditional right-wing axis of “the UK, US and Israel” choose to use “different terminology to describe the events”.

After the war, “several senior Ottoman officials were put on trial in Turkey... in connection with the atrocities”, while the “Three Pashas” (who had led the unsuccessful war effort) fled into exile and “were sentenced to death in absentia”. Some historians have since questioned “the degree to which the Turkish authorities may have wished to appease the victorious Allies” with such rulings in this post-war period.¹⁰ Former Young Turk and army hero **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk**, for example, was particularly interested in dealing diplomatically with the European colonial powers, hoping to rescue Anatolia from their self-interested division of the Ottoman Empire.

In **1922**, Atatürk proclaimed the creation of the Turkish Republic, and was backed by Europe’s colonial powers. The following year, he became president and abolished the Islamic Caliphate, renouncing Turkish claims to former Ottoman territories in the Treaty of Lausanne, and beginning a process of modernisation and secularisation in the young nation. Meanwhile, his leadership had managed to convince many Kurds (the largest ethnic minority group in the area sought after by Atatürk) to forget about the idea of creating a Kurdish state in territories with majority Kurdish populations. [The effects of this decision will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Four and in Part Three of this book.]

In 1938, Atatürk died, and his successors remained neutral in the escalating conflict in Europe. They retained a working relationship with Nazi Germany until 1944, and only

⁹ <http://isreview.org/issue/76/political-islam-marxist-analysis>

¹⁰ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6045182.stm>

joined the Allies in 1945, when their invitation to the inaugural meeting of the United Nations was dependent on their full involvement in the Second World War. The country declared war on the Axis powers, but Turkish troops never saw any combat. After this point, it became a firm anti-Communist ally of the West, supporting the UN in the Korean War and then joining NATO in 1952. It did, however, allow open elections (which were won by the opposition Democratic Party) in 1950.

In 1960, the Democratic Party was overthrown by the Turkish army, which approved a new constitution in 1961 giving it “special authority and privileges”, according to Professor Serap Yazıcı. Yazıcı says that “the military and the political elite” implemented these changes in order to “limit the actions of a pluralistic democracy”, insisting that the constitution “featured extremely authoritarian mechanisms within the illusion of democracy”. Professor Ergun Özbudun, meanwhile, asserts that it was “the foundation” of a system of “military tutorship”.¹¹

In 1971, there was another coup and, in 1974, Turkey invaded northern Cyprus. It “occupied just over a third of the island”, claiming to protect the Turkish Cypriot minority (less than 20% of the island’s population) from future unification with Greece. Around 140,000 Greek Cypriot refugees fled to the south, while 50,000 Turkish Cypriots fled to the north.¹² The USA subsequently implemented a trade embargo on Turkey until 1978. In 1980, yet another coup occurred, with the army imposing martial law and approving a new constitution in 1982.

In **1984**, the violent repression of the country’s Kurdish population reached a tipping point, and the **Kurdistan Workers’ Party (or PKK)** began a “bloody war for Stalinist/Maoist revolution” against the state.¹³ Six years later, Turkey allowed the USA to use Turkish airbases for strikes on Saddam Hussein’s forces in Iraq after they had invaded Kuwait. Two years later, meanwhile, twenty thousand Turkish troops entered Kurdish safe havens in northern Iraq in an anti-PKK operation. In 1995, another offensive was launched on Iraqi Kurdistan, but this time with 35,000 troops. In 1996, Islamists in Turkey finally gained enough popular support to win elections, though the Islamist Welfare Party was forced to resign after a military campaign against it in 1997. The following year, the party was banned.

In 1999, the PKK’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured and sentenced to death. In **2002**, the **Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP)** won a landslide election, though it promised to stick to the secular principles of the Turkish constitution (which was almost immediately edited to allow people with criminal convictions, like the party’s leader **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, to run for political office). Erdoğan won a seat in parliament in 2003 and was elevated to the post of Prime Minister within a matter of days. He reformed laws on freedom of speech and Kurdish language rights, and sought to reduce the role of the military in Turkish society. In the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Turkey allowed the USA to fly in Turkish airspace, but prevented it from using Turkish bases to attack Iraq. Apart from the invasion of Cyprus, this would be one of the most serious acts of Turkish defiance to the USA since the country had entered into NATO.

In 2004, just as the PKK claimed there were ‘annihilation operations’ targeting it, the government banned the death penalty completely, letting Öcalan off the hook. Other advances, meanwhile, sought to reduce tensions in Kurdish communities, with the first Kurdish-language programme being allowed to broadcast on state TV. Four Kurdish activists were also freed from jail, though thousands remained. Two years later, however,

¹¹ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=the-8216libertarian-constitution8217-of-61-the-myth-and-the-facts-2010-05-26>

¹² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/06/turkish-invasion-divided-cyprus-40-years-on-eyewitness-greek-cypriot-family>

¹³ <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

the situation deteriorated, with over a dozen people being killed as security forces repressed Kurdish protesters. At the same time, a new anti-terror law was said to 'invite' torture. Thanks to the advances made regarding Kurdish rights, however, the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire.

In 2007, tens of thousands of people protested in favour of secularism in Ankara, asking Erdoğan not to run for president because of his Islamist past. Another AKP candidate ended up becoming president instead. Meanwhile, Turkey launched yet more air strikes against the PKK in Iraq. A year later, a petition to have the AKP banned for undermining the country's secular constitution failed. In 2009, ten years after Öcalan's arrest, Turkish police repressed Kurdish protesters while Kurdish politician Ahmet Turk defied the country's anti-Kurdish laws by giving a speech to parliament in Kurdish. Erdoğan soon met with Turk and sought to increase Kurdish language rights and reduce military presence in the Kurdish southeast. In part, these attempts were aimed at improving Kurdish attitudes towards Erdoğan and his party, and not at allowing Kurds greater political freedom. In fact, Turk's political party would be banned at the end of the year.

In 2010, army officers were arrested over an alleged 2003 plot to overthrow the AKP government. Nine Turks, meanwhile, were killed by Israeli commandos on a flotilla travelling to Gaza, which worsened what had traditionally been good relations between Turkey and Israel. At the same time, the PKK affirmed that it was willing to disarm in return for more rights for Turkish Kurds, though the government ignored the offer.

In 2011, Erdoğan became Prime Minister again, and the civilian government was put in charge of choosing military leaders for the first time in Turkish history. As Erdoğan began to back anti-government rebels in Syria, meanwhile, thousands of Syrian refugees fled to Turkey. The following year, armed forces struck PKK rebel bases in Iraq, showing no real sign of wanting to resolve the conflict with the Kurdish movement. After Syrian mortar fire on a Turkish border town killed five civilians, meanwhile, Turkey's parliament authorised military action inside Syria. The armed forces subsequently responded with artillery fire into Syria. (Note here that Turkey has not fired at Islamist targets in Syria when their shells have fallen on Turkish territory during the war.)

In 2013, the PKK, which had shifted towards a libertarian socialist ideology over the last decade or so, announced it would withdraw from Turkey after Öcalan called for a ceasefire. As a result of a new peace process, the PKK officially refrained from participating in the mass anti-government protests sparked by an urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. Popular mobilisations had been sparked by a number of factors, including: Erdoğan's perceived authoritarianism; the lack of public consultation; media censorship and disinformation; Turkish involvement in the Syrian Civil War; the excessive force used by police; government corruption; and internet censorship. Twenty-two people were killed in the subsequent government crackdown, and many thousands were injured or arrested.

In 2014, police chiefs in 15 different provinces were sacked, and it was suspected that the AKP had ordered this action in response to corruption investigations connected to its members. Trade unions, meanwhile, led a strike over a mine disaster which caused 282 deaths (and was attributed to government-backed privatisation). Erdoğan would soon be elected president, and violent protests would break out once again. This time, the discontent was driven primarily by Turkey's blockade of the largely Kurdish city of Kobanî in Syria, which ISIS terrorists were attacking with perceived Turkish support or complicity. These events, and others related to Erdoğan and the PKK, will be explored in greater detail in Part Three of this book.

Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and Authoritarianism

Between 1922 and 1924, Egypt was given independence from the UK under a king, but security issues remained in the hands of the British government. The nationalist Wafd Party was founded in the hope of ensuring Britain's definitive exit from the country, and it won the elections of 1924. The women's rights movement, meanwhile, began to gain steam, as did the country's secularisation process. In 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was created, attracting thousands of anti-imperialist Islamists. When formal independence from Britain finally came in 1936, a new king was installed, though Britain still had significant political influence in the country. When violent anti-British demonstrations began in **1952**, the Wafd government abolished the 1936 treaty with Britain, and the **Free Officers Movement** (led by the young Gamal Abdel Nasser and Muhammad Naguib) overthrew the monarchy. The Wafd Party was soon dissolved.

Naguib was granted a 3-year term as dictator of Egypt, but Nasser seized power in 1954, redistributing land to peasants whilst suspending the constitution and banning political parties. He reached an agreement with the British saying they would withdraw from the Suez Canal by 1956. As a result of Muslim Brotherhood protests, hundreds of its members were imprisoned and tortured, with thousands fleeing to other countries. In **1956**, **Nasser** was elected President of Egypt and, after the USA refused to help fund the Aswan High Dam, he **nationalised the Suez Canal** (giving compensation to those who previously owned it). However, Britain, France and Israel decided to invade the country. Their invasion failed, and the USSR eventually helped to fund the dam, though Israel held onto the land it had taken in the Sinai Peninsula. The following year, Israel returned Sinai to Egypt, and women, having received the vote under Nasser, elected their first female MP.

In 1958, the dream of Arab unity moved forward a step, with Egypt and Syria joining together to become the United Arab Republic (UAR) after a popular referendum. Nasser became its president, but it would be dissolved in 1961 due to internal disagreements. In 1967, Israeli border clashes with Syria led Nasser to prepare support for his ally. Even though there was no evidence that Egyptian forces were planning to attack Israel, the Zionist State launched the Six-Day War, in which Egypt's air force was destroyed in a surprise attack and Israel occupied Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Thousands of Egyptian troops would either be killed or captured in the conflict.

In 1970, Nasser died, leaving Anwar El-Sadat to take charge just as the Aswan Dam was approaching completion. The following year, in what was called the 'May Reform Movement', Sadat cracked down on his opposition, imprisoning and exiling most former Free Officers. Opposing the continued Israeli occupation of their land, Egypt and Syria launched joint airstrikes on Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. On the back foot, Israel asked for help from President Nixon, who ordered a massive airlift of military equipment to his Zionist allies. Israel soon gained the upper hand as a consequence, and the UN called for a ceasefire. The Arab nations subsequently imposed an oil embargo on the USA and Europe for having supported Israel in the conflict, causing oil prices to increase and Western economies to suffer as a result.

In 1974, Egypt and Israel signed a non-aggression treaty (which Syria opposed), and Sadat visited Israel in 1977, leading to him being shunned by the Arab League but welcomed in as a treasured American ally. Between 1978 and 1979, the Camp David Accords were signed, and Sinai was returned to Egypt. Full diplomatic relations were established between Egypt and Israel, and **Sadat's regime began to receive economic and military aid from the USA**. In 1981, he was assassinated by Islamists, who were angry about his liberalisation of the Egyptian economy, his truce with Israel, and his imprisonment of intellectuals, dissidents, and religious figures. Vice-president Hosni Mubarak soon took control, proclaiming martial

law and executing those linked to the assassination plot. In 1989, Egypt re-joined the Arab League.

In 1992, an Islamist insurgency began, which would eventually leave a thousand Egyptians and foreigners dead. Perhaps as a result, the non-violent Muslim Brotherhood was once again allowed to participate in elections in 2000, though anti-government demonstrations were necessary in 2005 before a referendum over allowing numerous candidates to stand in presidential elections could take place. In 2006, a report suggested that Egypt was developing nuclear programs though, as it was a US ally, it was not sanctioned like Iran or other nations were.

In 2008, a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood saw 800 people arrested in just one month. The government, meanwhile, set out to privatise state firms. The following year, activists were stopped from taking aid to Gaza – which was being blockaded by both Israel and Egypt. In 2010, the Muslim Brotherhood surprisingly won no seats in elections and there were allegations of vote rigging. In 2011, protesters called for reform, and eventually forced Mubarak to step down, though only after at least 846 civilians had died (with over six hundred of these having been “killed by gunfire”).¹⁴ Protests continued, however, with the Muslim Brotherhood in particular increasing its presence, and the army eventually dispersed protesters from Cairo’s Tahrir Square. The Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi won the elections of 2012, but issued a decree stripping the judiciary of the right to challenge his decisions. After popular protests, he rescinded the decree, but the constituent assembly soon approved a draft constitution which boosted the role of Islam in the country and restricted freedom of speech and assembly.

In 2013, mass demonstrations and violent street protests broke out, and army chief Abdul Fattah al-Sisi led a coup against President Morsi. Later in the year, “more than 600 people” would be killed as security forces stormed Muslim Brotherhood protest camps in Cairo.¹⁵ A state of emergency was declared and curfews were imposed, while around 40 Coptic churches were destroyed and the Muslim Brotherhood was definitively banned. Its assets were confiscated, and a new law was passed to restrict public protests. The Brotherhood was declared a terrorist group, and Egyptians ‘voted’ in 2014 to approve a new constitution which would ban parties based on religion. Al-Sisi subsequently won the country’s presidential election. [More details on the Arab Spring in Egypt and elsewhere will be examined in Chapter Six.]

Iran, the West, and Shiite Islamism

In 1890, riots and mass protests in Persia led the country’s ruler to withdraw trade concessions previously granted to Britain. Eleven years later, however, **oil** was discovered, and colonial interest in the territory increased. In 1921, military commander Reza Khan seized power, and he crowned himself king – or ‘Reza Shah Pahlavi’ – five years later. In 1935, he asked the international community to refer to his country as Iran. International diplomacy was affected, though, by the Shah’s alliance with the Axis powers in World War Two, encouraging Anglo-Russian forces to occupy Iranian territory in 1941. The king was subsequently replaced by his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

In 1950, the elected prime minister was assassinated months after taking office, and was succeeded by the progressive nationalist, Mohammad Mossadegh. A year later, Mossadegh’s parliament voted to nationalise the oil industry, which was dominated by the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Britain responded by imposing an embargo on the country, which halted oil exports and hit Iran’s economy hard. The Shah and Mossadegh

¹⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/15/egypt-revolution-death-toll-arab-network-human-rights_n_1519393.html

¹⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/16/egypt-nationalism-muslim-brotherhood-crackdown>

then became embroiled in a power struggle, which led the Shah to flee the country in **1953**. Soon after, **Mossadegh was overthrown in a coup engineered by the British and American intelligence services** (a “joint US-British” venture known as “Operation Ajax”).¹⁶ General Fazlollah Zahedi was subsequently proclaimed prime minister, and the Shah returned to Iran. The CIA’s “first formal acknowledgement” of involvement in planning and executing the coup would come in August 2013.¹⁷

A decade later, the Shah embarked on a campaign to modernise and westernise Iran. Part of this drive was a programme of land reform and socio-economic modernisation referred to as the ‘White Revolution’. In the late 1960s, the Shah became increasingly dependent on the SAVAK (Iran’s secret police), which helped him to oppress the opposition movements which criticised his reforms. In 1978, the alienation and repression of both civil society groups and the Shia Islamic clergy led to riots, strikes, and mass demonstrations in the country – leading the Shah to impose martial law.

In **1979**, while the Shah was in the USA receiving medical treatment, he was ousted by a **popular rebellion**. Demanding his extradition to Iran, a handful of rebels held American hostages in the US embassy until 1981 (even though the Shah had died in 1980). Meanwhile, Iranians had voted in a referendum to make Iran an ‘Islamic Republic’, and Seyyad Abolhassan Banisadr became the first president of the country in 1980. He led a major nationalisation programme in January of that year. In September, however, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq attacked Iran, leading Islamist powers within the Iranian Revolution to cement their own power as part of the war effort. In 1981, Banisadr was impeached (and went into exile not long afterwards).

In 1985, both the USA and the USSR halted arms supplies to Iran, fearing the spread of Islamist opposition to both Western imperialism and Soviet atheism. However, the Reagan Administration sought a way to get hostages in Lebanon released, and sold arms to Iran as a way of taking advantage of the power of Iranian diplomacy. The money earned from the arms sales was subsequently funnelled to the right-wing Contra paramilitaries fighting against the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua, as part of a deal known later as the Iran-Contra scandal.

Starting in 1987, the USA launched Operation Earnest Will, which aimed to protect Kuwaiti-owned oil tankers destined for export. In 1988, the USA shot down an Iranian passenger plane, killing 290 (and 66 children). In the same month, a ceasefire was agreed, and the Iran-Iraq War officially ended soon after. Over “1 million people were dead and both countries deeply scarred” at the end of the conflict.¹⁸ The spiritual leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, died a year later, and was replaced by Ayatollah Khamenei as the country’s ‘supreme leader’. In the same year, the “neoliberal” Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected president, and his assumption of power led the USA to release \$567 million of frozen Iranian assets.¹⁹

In 1995, the USA imposed oil and trade sanctions on Iran for its alleged sponsorship of ‘terrorism’ in the Middle East (even though, as will be seen in Chapter Five, the USA had helped to create the most violent form of terrorism in Afghanistan in the 1980s). It was also accused of seeking to acquire nuclear arms. Mohammad Khatami was elected president two years later by a landslide, seeking to continue the liberalising economic policies of his predecessor and bring about limited democratic reforms. A year later, Iran deployed troops to its border with Afghanistan to protect itself from the Taliban (which had risen from the

¹⁶ <http://rt.com/usa/iran-coup-cia-operation-647/>

¹⁷ <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/>

¹⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/23/iran-iraq-war-anniversary>

¹⁹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/02/2012215164958644116.html>

ashes of the USA's anti-communist war there in the 1980s). In 1999, pro-democracy students protested in the streets but were repressed by Iranian police. Rioting ensued, and over 1,000 people were arrested.

Over the next few years, liberals would retain control of the Iranian parliament, and Khatami would be re-elected. However, US President Bush would claim Iran was part of an 'axis of evil'. Soon afterwards, work on a nuclear reactor – allegedly for power generation – began. In 2003, thousands of people attended student-led protests. In the same year, Iran suspended its nuclear programme and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that the country had no weapons programme. A year later, though, conservatives regained control of the country (as many reformists had been disqualified from the elections by the Council of Guardians). In 2005, uranium conversion resumed, though supposedly for 'peaceful purposes'.

2005 also saw Mahmoud Ahmadinejad beat Rafsanjani in the country's presidential elections, and the new president soon proved himself to be a lot less prepared to accept international ultimatums on Iranian use of nuclear fuel. He had backed the "post-1979 cleric-dominated capitalist political system" in the run-up to the elections, but had also promised "higher wages, more rural development funds, expanded health insurance and more social benefits for women". He also emphasised that Iran did "not need imposed ties with the United States". As the only candidate really standing on a "populist platform", he succeeded in appealing to the disenfranchised poor and rural voters of Iran.²⁰ A year later, the UN Security Council voted to impose sanctions on Iran's trade in nuclear materials and technology. In 2007, Iran allowed nuclear inspectors into the country, but the USA imposed tough new sanctions nonetheless, in spite of a US intelligence report which had played down the perceived nuclear threat posed by Iran.

In 2008, Ahmadinejad visited Iraq, expressing the desire for friendship between the two countries and signing several cooperation agreements with the Shia-dominated government. Continued international sanctions on Iran, meanwhile, stirred up anti-imperialist and nationalist sentiment among Ahmadinejad's supporters, who would criticise Western interference more and more. In a provocative move, the president approved the test-firing of a long-range missile which was supposedly 'capable of hitting targets in Israel'. Ahmadinejad was re-elected the following year, though allegations of vote-rigging led to protests (in which at least 30 people were killed and more than 1,000 were arrested). In 2011, the Arab Spring inspired many Iranians to attend mass demonstrations once again, but they were not suppressed as violently as those of 2009. According to Dissident Voice, Ahmadinejad, far from serving the best interests of the Iranian people, oversaw "a regime dedicated to the privatization of state-controlled industries".²¹

After years of tightening international sanctions on Iran, the EU imposed an oil embargo on the country in 2012, pushing its currency to a new record low against the US dollar (with it already having lost about 80% of its value since 2011). In part, this situation was responsible for the Iranians' decision to vote cleric Hassan Rouhani, a "proponent of neoliberal economics", into power in 2013.²² Promising US broadcaster NBC that Iran would "never develop nuclear weapons", he spoke of his hopes about moving forward with nuclear talks in order to end international sanctions.²³ In 2014, he pledged to help Iraq in its battle against ISIS extremists by providing "military advisers and weapons" to the country.²⁴

²⁰ <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/32191>

²¹ <http://dissidentvoice.org/2009/06/selling-iran-ahmadinejad-privatization-and-a-bus-diver-who-said-no/>

²² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/17/neoliberal-economics-comes-to-iran/>

²³ <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/irans-president-rouhani-we-will-never-develop-nuclear-weapons-f4B11191585>

²⁴ <http://www.ibtimes.com/amid-new-attacks-iraqi-shiites-irans-rouhani-pledges-more-support-iraqi-military-fight-1708747>

Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism, and Dictatorship

Between 1915 and 1916, Britain tried to convince Arabs to rebel against Ottoman rule in what later became known as the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence. During this period, Britain promised to facilitate the creation of an independent Arab State after the First World War if Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, would lead a rebellion. Few tribes supported him, though, and in **1926** Abdul Aziz ibn Saud conquered Mecca and Medina thanks to the violent, intolerant form of Islam (known as Wahhabism) followed by his supporters. Saudi Arabia was formed, and **Wahhabism** became its official religion. Having made the ideology more 'stately' to attract the support of the West, King Abdul finally died in 1953.

In 1975, King Faisal was killed by a family member because of his role in the 1973 Arab oil embargo (which came after the Yom Kippur War). With the country's Wahhabi population growing increasingly unhappy with the monarchy's alliance with the West, Juhayman al-Oteibi and a band of armed followers seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979. After 2 weeks, police raided the mosque and publicly beheaded Juhayman and 63 of his followers. These events marked the start of an "Islamic Awakening" of Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia.

After fuelling Wahhabi presence in the Islamist opposition to communism in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia stripped dissident Osama Bin Laden of his Saudi nationality in 1994. Nonetheless, extremism remained in the country, and 15 of the 19 hijackers involved in the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 were Saudi nationals. A year later, the country's criminal code was revised, with a ban on torture and suspects being given the right to legal representation. Rights campaigners, however, affirmed that violations continued. The country's foreign minister, meanwhile, said the USA would not be allowed to use its facilities in Saudi Arabia to attack Iraq, even as part of a UN-sanctioned strike.

In 2003, the USA promised to pull out almost all of its troops from Saudi Arabia, ending a military presence that dated back to the 1991 Gulf war. Both countries, however, stressed that they would remain allies. In the same year, suicide bombers killed 35 people at housing compounds for Westerners in Riyadh, but there was no Western retaliation against Saudi Arabia. Protesters, meanwhile, called for political reforms, and hundreds were arrested as a result. Later in the year, another terrorist attack would see 17 people killed. In 2004, three gun attacks in Riyadh within a week left two Americans and a BBC cameraman dead, while a US engineer was abducted and beheaded, with his filmed death being shown in the USA. In December, five US workers were killed at the US consulate in Jeddah but, yet again, there was no Western military campaign against Saudi Arabia as a result.

In 2005, King Abdullah took the throne, and he banned the religious police from detaining suspects two years later because it had come under increasing criticism after recent deaths in its custody. In 2010, the USA confirmed a plan to sell \$60 billion worth of arms to Saudi Arabia, in what was to be the most lucrative single arms deal in US history. Nonetheless, Wikileaks cables would reveal soon afterwards the USA's concern that Saudi Arabia was the **'most significant' source of funding for Sunni terrorist groups worldwide.**

In 2011, King Abdullah announced an increase in welfare spending in an attempt to stop the Arab Spring from spreading to Saudi Arabia. However, he also decided to ban public protests after small demonstrations had taken place in the mostly Shia areas of the east, saying that threats to the nation's security and stability would not be tolerated. When the regime of neighbouring Bahrain was put under pressure by protesters, Saudi troops were sent in to help with the government crackdown. In the same year, Abdullah gave women the right to vote, run in municipal elections, and be appointed to the consultative Shura Council. When a woman was sentenced to 10 lashes for driving a car, Abdullah even stepped in to

overturn the sentence. This action showed the balance Abdullah was trying to seek between pleasing the West and protecting his own rule.

In 2013, 30 women were sworn in to the previously all-male Shura consultative council – allowing women to hold political office for the first time in Saudi history. However, Amnesty International accused Riyadh of failing to live up to its promises about improving its human rights record after the critical report that had been issued by the UN in 2009. In fact, Amnesty criticised Saudi Arabia for ‘ratcheting up’ its repression. Accused of supporting Wahhabi extremists in Syria, meanwhile, Abdullah implemented a new anti-terrorism law in 2014, though social activists claimed the act was aimed at further stifling dissent.

B) Colonial and Imperialist Intervention in the Muslim World

Palestine, Zionist Colonialism, and Arab Reaction

My essay “Gaza: A Capitalist Genocide”²⁵ discusses the violent nationalism of Zionism in greater depth, but in this section my main aim is to point out the significant role that Israel played in the escalation of violence in the Middle East. The story officially started when Britain sought to secure Jewish support during the First World War by signing the Balfour Declaration of 1917, promising to facilitate the establishment in Palestine of a ‘national home for the Jewish people’. In 1923, the **British Mandate** over Palestine officially began, as did significant Zionist migration to the region.

In 1929, Arab-Zionist violence broke out and, six years later, mass protests began when a popular Islamic leader was killed by British police. Nazi persecution of Jews in Europe, meanwhile, would soon see many Jews migrate to Palestine, rapidly increasing the Jewish population of Palestine. Arab peasants, who were being dispossessed as Jews bought land from wealthy landowners, rebelled against the governing colonial regime in 1936. As the rebellion continued, a British commission recommended the division of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states.

The tensions were still present, but the rebellion died down in part because the British government agreed in 1939 to reject the idea of a Jewish state (in the ‘White Paper’) and to limit Jewish migration. Zionist zealots, however, were committed to ensuring they had control over Palestine, and the terrorist organisation known as Irgun (led by eventual Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin) blew up the King David Hotel in 1946, killing 91 people. The following year, such Zionists officially declared war on the British Mandate government, and the British, dealing with wartime devastation at home, handed the ‘Palestinian Question’ over to the UN. A UN commission, in spite of contrary information from previous investigations, decided that the partition in Palestine was the best solution to unrest in the territory. Such action was opposed by all of the Arab states in the region but, thanks to intense Zionist lobbying, the plan was approved.

In preparation for the **1948 partition of Palestine**, Irgun (along with the Haganah paramilitary organisation) began to remove Arabs from land ‘assigned’ to Jews by the UN, creating around 400,000 refugees in the process. When the day of independence came, Britain withdrew its forces from Palestine, and the State of Israel was immediately recognised by both the USA and the USSR (showing that both lacked an understanding of (or interest in) the unrest that would inevitably follow). Arab nations, angry about Israeli crimes against the Arab population of Palestine, decided to invade Israel. The heavily armed new state, however, easily routed the Arab coalition, and subsequently took extra land

²⁵ <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

which had previously been allotted to Palestinians. The resulting refugees fled to either the Egyptian-controlled Gaza Strip or the Jordanian-controlled West Bank.

Although it had become a member of the UN, Israel refused to put Jerusalem under international control in accordance with the organisation's partition plan. In 1950, Jordan would officially annex the West Bank, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) would be created by the Arab League four years later in an attempt to 'represent Palestinian Arabs'. The continuing refugee situation, however, saw conflict escalate over the coming years, as did **Israel's invasion of Egypt in 1956**. In 1967, the Zionist state attacked Egypt and Syria in the **Six-Day War**, occupying Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem in the process.

Two years after the war, Yasser Arafat became the chairman of the PLO's executive committee, and the largest movement within the coalition, al-Fatah, committed itself to an armed liberation struggle against Israel. Thousands of Palestinian refugees in the region would join the group as a result of this declaration. After Jordan's King Hussein ordered attacks in 1970 on the PLO in refugee camps (which killed thousands of Palestinians in what would be known as 'Black September'), the organisation was forced to regroup in Lebanon. Some refugees, however, turned towards terrorist activities, with a group known as Black September taking Israeli athletes hostage in 1972.

In 1974, after the **Yom Kippur War**, Yasser Arafat addressed the UN, which recognised Palestine's right to sovereignty, and gave it observer status in the organisation. In **1987**, after years of deteriorating living conditions for Palestinians and continued occupation of their land, the **First Intifada** was launched. A large number of the movement's peaceful protesters would be viciously killed by Israeli 'security forces' and, after the first three years of the uprising, Israel had killed thousands of activists and civilians. During this period, the Islamist group Hamas was founded in Gaza, and it would soon gain support from Palestinians who were angry about the lack of change obtained through peaceful resistance.

In 1988, Palestine declared its independence, and more than 25 countries recognised the Palestine National Council (PNC) in exile. Yasser Arafat declared that the PNC rejected terrorism and recognised the State of Israel, but only after years of continued mobilisation would the Oslo I agreement finally be signed with Israel in 1993. Subsequently, Arafat and other leaders returned to the West Bank in 1994 to set up the Palestinian Authority - which would control both administration and security in Gaza and the West Bank. Unfortunately, 1994 also saw a Zionist extremist kill 29 Palestinians, an event which led Hamas to retaliate with suicide bombs targeting Jewish settlements.

In 1995, the Oslo II accords made provisions for permanent Palestinian self-rule, but living conditions continued to worsen, and widespread disillusionment with the peace process began to grow. In Israel, the Prime Minister was assassinated by a Zionist extremist, showing that there was significant tension in the country between anti-peace right-wingers and the much weaker forces for change. In the Palestinian Authority, meanwhile, little would change after Arafat's election as president in 1996, leading to greater and greater discontent. The **Second Intifada**, between 2000 and 2005, was a lot more violent than the first and, even though many more Palestinians died, Israelis also began to feel the impact of the uprising (with suicide attacks from groups like Hamas killing a number of Israelis). Feeling the pressure, Israel pulled out of Gaza at the end of the conflict, though it would intensify a blockade on the territory after Hamas's electoral victory there in 2006. At the same time, many Israeli citizens were now "less supportive of peace efforts" and "more willing to accept or simply ignore the occupation's effects on Palestinians". These sentiments fuelled the growth of the **right wing Likud party**, which played on these sentiments as

“right-wing Israeli extremists” became “increasingly violent”, particularly in their illegal settlements in the West Bank.

Israel’s blockade strangled economic life in Gaza, creating a sense of “hopelessness and distrust in Israel”, while nurturing a “climate... hospitable to extremism” there.²⁶ Peaceful tactics had not succeeded in improving the lives of Palestinians, so resistance to the Israeli blockade seemed like the best way – however suicidal – of changing the hostile, authoritarian political stance of the Israeli regime. The subsequent Israeli genocidal campaigns against Palestinians, as discussed in my essay on Gaza²⁷, have been a result of both the increasing right-wing domination of Israel’s political system and the “catastrophalist” way of thinking in Israeli society, which has contributed to a significant loss of “humanitarian sensibility” towards Palestinians.²⁸ An important consequence of these oppressive and murderous actions, however, has been to contribute even further to radicalisation within marginalised Muslim communities. **Israeli policies, therefore, must be considered as a major driving force behind increasing conflict and extremism in the Middle East.**

Resistance, Communism, and Islamism in Afghanistan

In addition to propping up the State of Israel, the USA’s main goal in the Muslim World in the twentieth century was to prevent communism from gaining popularity or power. As a result of this Cold War stance, Afghanistan became embroiled in the imperialist strategies that affected the rest of the Muslim World to its west. In part, this was because of its large border with the Soviet Union, which meant that even the conservative forces in Afghanistan had long tried to maintain a working relationship with the USSR during the twentieth century. A lot of the information below, unless otherwise specified, has been taken from the BBC’s Afghanistan Profile.²⁹

In 1863, Amir Sher Ali Khan came to power, and sought to modernise Afghanistan and build a modern army. Britain “had failed to colonialize Afghanistan” in the **First Anglo-Afghan War** between 1839 and 1842, but “the danger of colonialism and imperialist conquest was still looming at the door”. Khan made reforms that helped Afghanistan to develop capitalist structures and defend itself more effectively against colonial invasion. Between 1878 and 1880, however, the British were successful in the **Second Anglo-Afghan War** and, while the Afghans could maintain their internal sovereignty, they had to give Britain control of their foreign relations. When Amir Abdur Rahman Khan became king in 1880, he ruthlessly established “a strong centralized state”, which “was essential for the development of capital”. His successor continued these efforts until he was assassinated in 1919.

Amanullah Khan then “claimed the throne” and effectively regained political sovereignty over international issues as a result of his army’s resistance in the **Third Anglo-Afghan war**. He sought to end feudalism “by attacking the rights and privileges of the big landlords, the nobility, tribal chiefs and the Islamic clergy”. In the 1920s, he was “deeply influenced by the “progress” in European countries he visited”, and he enshrined “individual political freedoms” in a new constitution. Other reforms saw women given access to higher education; slavery abolished; the “obligatory veiling” of women discouraged; the equality of men and women proclaimed; child marriages and polygyny discouraged; land reforms introduced; and the tax privileges “of feudal and tribal lords” challenged. A lack of real change for peasants, however, “led to discontent on their part”.

²⁶ <http://www.vox.com/2014/7/17/5902177/9-questions-about-the-israel-palestine-conflict-you-were-too>

²⁷ <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

²⁸ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-sociologist-eva-illouz-about-gaza-and-israeli-society-a-984536.html>

²⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12024253>

In response, British colonialists helped to “generate resentment among the oppressed” by taking advantage of some of Amanullah’s unpopular cultural reforms, adding to already existent “opposition from the feudal lords and the Islamic clergy”. These British lackeys in Afghanistan “spread rumors to the effect that the King was sowing the seeds of infidelity in society” with his reforms, and he was “branded an “infidel” who had introduced human-made laws in contradiction to the divine laws”. When he was finally overthrown in 1929, the Constitutional Movement of Afghanistan was violently suppressed by the monarchs that succeeded him. His reform movement, according to Fraidoon Amel at Global Research, had been defeated “because the Afghan bourgeoisie” he led had not been strong enough “to defeat the feudal class in the social battle”. Nonetheless, his Treaty of Friendship with the USSR, signed in 1921, had helped to set in motion a “slow state-driven transition towards capitalism under a succession of oppressive rulers” after him.³⁰

In 1933, King Zahir Shah took control of Afghanistan, though “his uncles... immediately rallied round and ran the country for the next 20 years”.³¹ The country courted the West, and remained neutral throughout the Second World War. When India gained its independence after the conflict, the king sought to defend its Pashtun population, which would eventually be absorbed into Pakistan. Between 1953 and 1963, his cousin Mohammed Daoud Khan served as Prime Minister, taking a hard line on the ‘Pashtun Question’ and overseeing a souring of bilateral relations with Pakistan. The Afghan economy suffered as a result, and the government was forced by the Afghan people to reform. In 1964, a constitution was introduced that provided for free elections, civil rights, women’s rights, and universal suffrage. Relatives of the king, meanwhile, including Daoud Khan himself, would no longer be allowed to serve within the government.

In 1973, the king’s “terrible response to a three-year drought that killed an estimated 80,000 people” created an opportunity for Khan to lead a coup d’état while the king was in Europe.³² Supported by the Afghan communist party (the PDPA), he abolished the monarchy and named himself president. According to Fraidoon Amel, the government subsequently “launched a persecution campaign against Islamists inspired by the extremist ideology of [the] Muslim-Brotherhood”. The Bhutto government in Pakistan, meanwhile, welcomed some of the exiled Afghan Islamists, hoping that they would help to topple the country’s new regime. In 1975, these forces launched an attack on Daoud Khan’s forces, but lost due to a lack of popular support. At the same time, though, Khan was seeking to distance himself from the Soviet Union, in the hope of establishing “close relations with the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other US cronies in the region”. In order to do so, he expelled PDPA ministers from his cabinet, set up “an authoritarian government”, and “banned all political parties”.

Meanwhile, the differences between two factions of the PDPA, the Parcham (more moderate, urban, and middle class) and the Khalq (more radical, tribal, and working class), would soon become more acute. Towards the late seventies, Khan had increased repression against PDPA members, and had arrested many of them after mass protests following the assassination of a prominent member of the Parcham. As a result, key Khalq member Hafizullah Amin (who would later be accused by the USSR of collaboration with the CIA) ordered Khalq officers in the military to overthrow Khan’s regime. Through a successful coup in April 1978, these forces initiated the **Saur Revolution**, immediately winning the support of “millions of oppressed Afghans” (in spite of the fact that the PDPA sought to bring about a “revolution from above” rather than from below).

³⁰ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/permanent-occupation-imperialism-in-afghanistan-past-and-present/5341442>

³¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/jul/24/guardianobituaries.afghanistan>

³² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/23/AR2007072301824.html>

In 1978, around 5% of Afghan landowners possessed 45% of the country's fertile land, while 83% of them possessed small plots which, in total, made up only 35%. In other words, there was an incredibly unjust distribution of land which favoured a small elite and confined the majority of Afghans to poverty. When the PDPA took over control of the country, they immediately set about changing this situation. They also sought to cancel "debts, loans, mortgages and revenues due from peasants to the usurers and big landlords"; ensure "equality of rights between women and men"; criminalise "marriage based on [an] exchange for money and goods", forced marriage, child marriage, and the prevention of remarriage; confiscate "feudal lands and the lands owned by the deposed royal family" and redistribute them "among landless peasants and peasants with small land owning"; and set a "ceiling for land ownership" - above which extra land would be "qualified for confiscation [and redistribution] with no compensation". All of these measures were shocking for the West, as they were much more radical than any steps that had previously been taken elsewhere in the Muslim World. It felt that it had to act in order to prevent other nations from following the Afghan path. Therefore, it immediately set about exploiting internal divisions in Afghanistan and undermining the PDPA regime with the help of its lackeys in the region.³³

Initially, there was unity between the Khalq and Parcham in the new communist government, but the Khalq's attempt to drastically reform society in a short amount of time created resistance in what was essentially a conservative Muslim nation (especially in the countryside). In its revolutionary fervour, the Khalq arrested and executed tens of thousands of people who opposed their reforms and, in September 1979, Hafizullah Amin even had a key Khalq comrade assassinated so he could take control of the government himself. Trying to reduce Afghanistan's dependence on the Soviet Union and combat counter-insurgency, he sought to maintain good relations with the West and convince citizens he was not anti-Islamic by strengthening ties with Pakistan and Iran. It was too late, though, as the USSR's doubts about Amin's abilities to lead the country, along with Parcham requests for Soviet intervention to 'protect the revolutionary process', meant that his days were numbered.

In December 1979, **Soviet troops entered into Afghanistan** to bolster their allies there. According to President Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, the USA had "provoked the Soviet Union into invading Afghanistan" with its support for opposition movements in the country.³⁴ As a response to the invasion, the United States and Saudi Arabia paid Pakistan to train and arm Islamist forces to fight against the Afghan government and its Soviet partners. By 1992, there would be "more than a million dead, three million disabled, and five million made refugees, in total about half the population", even though peace accords had officially been signed in 1988. The "two superpowers", meanwhile, "had abandoned the war", says William Blum, leaving Islamist guerrillas to take Kabul and establish "the first Islamic regime in Afghanistan since it had become... [an] independent country in the mid-18th century".³⁵

In 1997, a year after Islamists united under the name of the Taliban had entered Kabul, a newly-installed extremist regime was recognised as the legitimate government of Afghanistan by US allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Two years later, the UN imposed sanctions on the country in an attempt to encourage them to extradite Osama Bin Laden, who had been gaining a reputation as an influential Wahhabi terrorist. He wasn't extradited, though, and was soon said to be behind the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. President Bush, looking to show his patriotism (and idiocy), launched an attack on Afghanistan a month later.

³³ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/permanent-occupation-imperialism-in-afghanistan-past-and-present/5341442>

³⁴ <http://williamblum.org/essays/read/how-the-us-provoked-the-soviet-union-into-invading-afghanistan-and-starting>

³⁵ <http://williamblum.org/chapters/killing-hope/afghanistan>

After the **US invasion**, former CIA collaborator and Islamist tribal leader Hamid Karzai led an interim power-sharing government, before serving as president until 2014. During this period, 2349 US soldiers were killed, along with 453 from the UK and 674 from elsewhere. Most were killed in areas on the border with Pakistan.³⁶ In the same period, “at least 21,000 civilians [were] estimated to have died violent deaths as a result of the war”.³⁷ In 2013, Afghan forces officially took command of all military and security operations, but widespread fraud in the following year’s elections led to Ashraf Ghani entering into a power sharing deal as Afghani president. [Further analysis of Western intervention in Afghanistan will be seen in both Chapters 5 and 6.]

Pakistan as a Counterweight to India and a Base for Extremism

In the mid-1800s, the East India Company began to take greater control of the Indian subcontinent, building railways and canals but repressing opposition to foreign rule. Invasive reforms, harsh taxes, and provocation of members of the Indian ruling class all led to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which was violently suppressed the following year and resulted in the dissolution of the Company and the implementation of direct colonial rule. The Indian aristocracy was now protected by Britain, but the Indian National Congress (INC) would be founded in 1885 to fight for India’s right to self-rule. In 1906, meanwhile, the Muslim League was founded in the largely Muslim areas of India, and it endorsed the idea of a separate nation for the country’s Muslims in 1940.

After World War I, repressive British legislation led to the growth of more organised Indian movements in favour of independence. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in particular would lead a peaceful movement focussed on non-cooperation, which would help the INC win electoral victories in the 1930s. Meanwhile, Muslim nationalism grew in popularity and, when British rule ended in **1947, East and West Pakistan** were created as a Muslim state. This division would soon contribute to communal violence which saw “hundreds of thousands” killed and millions made homeless.³⁸ The following year, Pakistan and India would go to war over who would control the territory of Kashmir, a region “rich in natural resources”.³⁹

In 1956, the Pakistani Constitution proclaimed the nation as an **Islamic republic**. Two years later, martial law was declared and General Ayub Khan led a coup. He became president in 1960 and, believing India to be weak after its defeat by China in 1962, he planned a quick military campaign in Kashmir which he thought would rout the Indian Army with ease. In 1965, whilst implementing pro-Western policies, he launched the Second Kashmir War. As a result of the offensive’s failure and changing economic fortunes, there was a popular uprising in 1969, which led general Yahya Khan to overthrow the ruling regime.

In 1971, civil war broke out, and India helped East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) to secede from Pakistan. Soon afterwards, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (of the Pakistan People’s Party, or PPP), who had grown in popularity because of his progressive policies and opposition to military rule, was made president in unprecedented elections. Two years later, he became prime minister. After conservatives rioted in 1977, however, alleging vote rigging, General Zia-ul-Haq deposed Bhutto in a bloodless coup. Nonetheless, the PPP leader would be executed two years later.

Zia sought to introduce Islamic law and usher in an Islamic system in Pakistan, and the **USA pledged military assistance** to him in 1980 so he could **back anti-communist Islamists in Afghanistan**. This support was responsible for fuelling the radical Islamism that the USA

³⁶ <http://icasualties.org/oef/>

³⁷ <http://costsofwar.org/article/afghan-civilians>

³⁸ <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/india-and-pakistan-win-independence>

³⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/06/09/the-fate-of-kashmir/>

and its allies claim to fight against today. In 1985, Zia lifted the state of martial law and the ban on political parties, allowing Bhutto's daughter Benazir to return from exile to lead the PPP. In 1988, Zia and other key political figures died in a mysterious air crash, leaving the PPP free to win the elections without any significant opposition.

However, Bhutto was dismissed as prime minister in 1990 on charges of incompetence and corruption. Her replacement, Nawaz Sharif, began a programme of economic liberalisation and formally incorporated Islamic Shariah law into legal code. In 1993, the Islamists were pushed from power by the army, and Bhutto once again won elections (before being dismissed for a second time in 1996). Sharif and the Muslim League returned to power in 1997 but, when a thousand people died in renewed clashes in Kashmir in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf seized power in coup. A Kashmir ceasefire was reached in 2003. The following year, the USA began drone strikes near the Afghan border, and Pakistan's parliament approved the creation of a military-led National Security Council (which institutionalised the role of the armed forces in civilian affairs).

The 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan had radicalised many Muslims in Pakistan, and fighting continued on the border until a peace accord with pro-Al-Qaeda militants was signed in 2006. The following year, Bhutto was allowed to return from exile but, as she arrived, dozens of her supporters were killed by Islamists. An election win for Musharraf, meanwhile, triggered mass protests which saw Sharif return from exile and Bhutto assassinated. The PPP and Sharif formed a coalition to push Musharraf out of power, and Bhutto's widower became president. Whilst cracking down on terrorism (a suicide bombing on the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad killed 53 people in 2008), he borrowed billions of dollars from the IMF and oversaw the killing of more than a thousand people in an offensive in the Bajaur tribal region of Pakistan.

After Bin Laden's assassination by American forces in Pakistan in 2011, and NATO's murder of 25 Pakistani soldiers, the government shut down NATO's Afghan supply routes and imprisoned the doctor who had helped US troops to find Bin Laden. The USA responded by cutting aid to the country in 2012, but Pakistan soon reopened the supply routes after the United States officially apologised for the killings. In 2013, Musharraf returned to Pakistan from exile, but he was arrested and put on trial in 2014. Meanwhile, the largest turnout of voters since 1970 had put Sharif and his neoliberal Islamists back in power. The Prime Minister, who had created a "huge business empire"⁴⁰ whilst in exile in Saudi Arabia, would be ranked as the fifth richest person in Pakistan in early 2015, with a net worth of \$1.4 billion.⁴¹ In power, he "advertised himself as a business-friendly leader eager to privatise loss-making state groups".⁴² At the same time, he would oversee increasing tensions with India over the 'Kashmir Question'.

Ethnic Tensions, Oil, and Ba'athism in Iraq

In 1921, Britain installed Faisal, the son of the Sharif of Mecca, as king of Iraq. Ten years later, the newly-formed country was given nominal independence from Britain, though it also signed a treaty giving the British special privileges. When a pro-Nazi coup took place in 1941, Britain intervened to install pro-British leaders. In 1958, the pro-Western monarch and prime minister of the country were overthrown by nationalist brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim, who had been inspired by Nasser and the Free Officers of Egypt.

He sought to create a nation inclusive of all different ethnicities and religious groups, and appease the poorest in Iraq by nationalising the oil industry. However, after tribal Kurds

⁴⁰ <http://teeth.com.pk/blog/2007/12/08/pakistans-rich-list-of-2008>

⁴¹ <http://gotest.pk/education/pakistan-education/top-10-richest-people-in-pakistan/>

⁴² <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/029b3250-487a-11e4-ad19-00144feab7de.html#axzz3OBoZcK1i>

rebelled, possibly with Western support, Qasim began to lose legitimacy, and he was eventually toppled in a **CIA-backed Ba'athist coup in 1963**. Horrors committed by the Ba'athists against Iraqi left-wingers after the coup were eventually followed by a less bloodthirsty nationalist leadership. Ba'athist General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr would later lead another coup in 1968, though, and Saddam Hussein would become the vice chairman of the Ba'ath Party a year later. Six years on, the Iraqi government signed a deal with Iran aimed at curbing Kurdish influence and resistance in both countries.

In **1979, Saddam Hussein** became president as al-Bakr retired. Soon afterwards, he attacked Iran, eventually receiving **support from the West** for his attack on the 'anti-imperialist' Iranian regime. In 1988, thousands of Kurds in Halabja were killed in a chemical weapon attack allegedly launched by the Iraqi government, but the West continued to support Saddam. Two years later, however, the Iraqi leader decided to invade Kuwait, and around 500,000 Western-backed soldiers immediately began to prepare for intervention from Saudi Arabia. Jordan, Yemen, and the PLO condemned the subsequent 'Operation Desert Storm', but allied air strikes and ground offensives continued regardless, decimating the Iraqi army. International sanctions were then placed on Iraq, and living conditions for Iraqis rapidly deteriorated. Meanwhile, Kurds in the north managed to gain a certain amount of autonomy from Baghdad thanks to a Western-backed no-fly zone.

In **2003, a US-led coalition invaded Iraq** to overthrow Saddam Hussein once and for all. Around "133,000 civilians [were] killed by direct violence" between 2003 and 2014, and "approximately 1.5 million people [were] still displaced from their homes" in 2014.⁴³ This war played a significant role in allowing Wahhabi extremism to take hold in Iraq, in spite of the country's previous secularism, whilst also weakening the power of the central government (giving northern Kurds in particular much more autonomy). [Issues related to Iraqi Ba'athism and ISIS will be covered in greater detail in Chapter Three and between Chapters Five and Seven.]

Libya, Gaddafi, and Imperialist Hostility

Libya plays a fairly secondary role in this book, but it is relevant particularly because of the influence it had on the Muslim World under the Gaddafi regime and because it became an example of Western hypocrisy after the start of the Arab Spring. Only when Gaddafi came into power in 1969 would Libya truly become a key player in the fight against imperialism in the Muslim World, and his nationalist search to apply 'progressive' political measures within a religious context would make his regime a target for Western aggression on numerous occasions.

The twentieth century began for Libya with an Italian invasion and the brutal repression of popular resistance to their colonial forces. The territory was officially named Libya in 1929, and would gain independence from Italy in 1951. The king that was installed, however, allowed foreign countries to exploit the country's oil resources (discovered in 1959), and was subsequently overthrown in a **bloodless coup in 1969** (led by **Muammar Gaddafi**). British and US personnel were immediately expelled by the new regime, and a wave of nationalisations began, instantly gaining Gaddafi fame as an enemy of the West and an ally of anti-imperialist nations throughout the world.

In 1973, after unsuccessfully invading northern Chad, Gaddafi revealed his 'Third Universal Theory' – combining socialism, popular democracy, Arab unity, and progressive Islam. These ideas would later be put together in his Green Book. In 1980, he invaded Chad again, but failed due to local resistance backed by France and the USA. Thousands of Libyans died

⁴³ <http://costsofwar.org/article/iraqi-civilians>

and millions of dollars were lost in this mission. Meanwhile, Gaddafi supported attempts to unify anti-imperialist groups throughout the world, and especially in Africa, making him one of the biggest enemies of Western imperialism. In 1992, the UN placed sanctions on Libya for its alleged involvement in the Lockerbie Bombing of 1988 in Scotland and the explosion of a French plane over Niger. Three years after the implementation of these sanctions, Gaddafi expelled around 30,000 Palestinians from Libya in protest at the Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel.

After Gaddafi handed over suspects in the Lockerbie Bombing for trial in the Netherlands in 1999, UN sanctions were suspended and diplomatic relations with the UK were restored. A year later, dozens of African migrants were killed as a result of rising racial tension, while in 2001 Abdelbaset al-Megrahi was sentenced to life imprisonment in Scotland for the Lockerbie Bombing. Two years on, Libya took official responsibility for the bombing and gave \$2.7 billion worth of compensation to the families of Lockerbie victims. As a consequence, the UN Security Council definitively lifted sanctions on Libya.

In 2005, Gaddafi began to auction off oil and gas exploration licences to foreign companies, leading the USA to restore full diplomatic ties with Libya in 2006. The following year, meanwhile, the government would declare that over a third of the total Libyan workforce would be made redundant, with around 400,000 government workers losing their jobs as a result of increasing austerity measures.

In 2010, US senators began to push for an inquiry into claims that oil giant BP had lobbied for al-Megrahi's release from prison on compassionate grounds the previous year. At the same time, BP confirmed it was to begin drilling off the Libyan coast. A year later, the **Arab Spring** spread to Libya, with the detention of a human rights campaigner sparking violent protests in the eastern city of Benghazi. Escalating clashes between security forces and Western-backed rebels ensued, while Gaddafi refused to step down. In March, the UN Security Council authorised a no-fly zone over the country, and **NATO began air strikes**, allegedly to 'protect civilians'. The fight soon became a large-scale civil conflict, with Gaddafi only fleeing in August and being murdered two months later.

Over the next three years, the blind self-interest of the West's intervention became clear, as clashes between different rebel forces (mostly pro-Western and Islamist groups) began to plague the country. In September 2012, for example, the US ambassador in Benghazi, along with three other Americans, was killed after armed men, suspected to be Islamists, stormed the American consulate. With a pro-US regime in place in the country, there was no significant US response to this killing.

In June 2014, the democratic process in Libya was still shaky, as new elections were marred by a low turn-out – caused by a lack of security and opposition boycotts. The following month, UN staff pulled out of the country, embassies were shut, and foreigners were evacuated as the security situation deteriorated drastically. In August, two rival parliaments (in Tripoli and Tobruk) began to compete for control of the country. According to the BBC in early 2015, Libya had “been plagued by instability and infighting”⁴⁴ ever since the toppling of Gaddafi, while The Economist called it the “next failed state”. According to the latter, the country was suffering a “chaotic decline” and was now “barely a country at all”. While the east of Libya was “under the control of a more or less secular alliance, based in Tobruk”, the west was run by “a hotch-potch of groups... backed by hardline Islamist militias”. These western militias were being backed by “Turkey, Qatar and Sudan”, and “Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), among others” were backing those in the east.⁴⁵ Either way,

⁴⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30695048>

⁴⁵ <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21638122-another-front-global-mayhem-emerging-not-helped-regional-meddling-and-western?fsrc=rss|lea>

however, it had become clear that the West's meddling had succeeded in creating yet another Iraq. [More on this disastrous interference will be seen in Chapter Six.]

Syria - Libya Mark II

In 1922, the territory of the newly-created Syria would fall under the influence of **French colonialists**, who would separate Druze and Alawite populations, saying they should have separate states. Between 1925 and 1927, the Druze state began a rebellion, along with the rest of Syria, and six thousand people died in the subsequent colonialist crackdown. In the following years, nationalism began to grow in popularity and, in 1940, the Ba'ath Party was founded in a search for Arab unity in the region. When France was occupied by the Nazis and Vichy rule was installed, the British moved into Syria to impose Free French rule, though full independence from France would only come in 1946.

In 1958, Syria joined the UAR with Egypt after a popular referendum, but Nasser's land redistribution and other progressive policies angered conservative Syrians, who saw the UAR dissolved three years later. In **1963**, the **Ba'ath Party led a coup**, and soon found itself at odds with Israel. During the **Six-Day War**, Syrian jets were shot down, and Egypt could not provide sufficient support to them because of the decimation of its own forces. The Golan Heights were captured by Israel in the conflict, and the leadership of the Ba'athist regime was brought into question. As a result, General **Hafez al-Assad** led an internal coup in **1970** to push out pro-Soviet Ba'athists and implement a more capitalist system of rule. His Alawite minority began to exert a tight control over the country, though it officially remained a secular state. Soon, the Ba'ath Party was made the only legal political organization, and free expression was severely curbed by a notoriously brutal secret police.

In **1982**, the Egyptian-inspired **Muslim Brotherhood led an uprising**, which was repressed after Syrian policemen were killed. Thousands of troops besieged the town of Hama for days, killing between 5,000 and 25,000 civilians in the process. The town was effectively destroyed, and it stood as an example of Assad's intolerance of all opposition to his rule. When he died in the year 2000, his son Bashar soon assumed the same tight political control as his father.

When the Arab Spring arrived over a decade later, the Ba'athist regime represented an unpredictable force, much like Libya, that Western elites wanted to destroy. While it had become friendlier with the West and more open to capitalism (also like Libya), it still demanded a certain amount of independence from Western interference in its internal politics. NATO could not intervene as it did in Libya, however, as it had neither UN nor popular support for such action. As a result, it had to support largely Islamist anti-Assad rebels through third parties like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar. The make-up of the Syrian opposition, however, along with the nature of its foreign backing, facilitated the rise to prominence of more intolerant and determined Wahhabi Islamist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. In particular, the rapid growth of the latter between 2013 and 2014 would eventually lead the USA and its allies to begin airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria in late 2014. Meanwhile, the most effective anti-ISIS fighters on the ground in Syria would prove to be the largely Kurdish YPG/YPJ based in the autonomous Rojava region in the north of the country. [As Syria is an important part of this book's investigation, issues relating to Ba'athism, Islamism, the Syrian Civil War, and Rojava will be covered in greater detail from Chapter Three onwards.]

C) Events Elsewhere in the Muslim World

Below, I will take a brief look at the recent histories of Yemen, Lebanon, the Gulf States, and northern African states. While there are Muslim nations to the east of India, in the former

Soviet Union, and outside the northernmost countries of Africa, my focus in this section is just to look at some of the key nations which are particularly relevant to the issues discussed in this book. I am not denying the importance of nations like Somalia and Nigeria, Indonesia and Malaysia, or Kosovo and Chechnya. To understand Islamism, we must indeed be aware of the Wahhabis of Chechnya⁴⁶, Boko Haram in northern Nigeria⁴⁷, al-Shabaab in Somalia⁴⁸, and Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia⁴⁹. At the same time, however, I wish to focus primarily on northern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and the countries between Turkey and Pakistan in this book. The inclusion of other Islamic nations would indeed be appropriate, but I have chosen not to go into great detail in order to avoid overloading the reader.

Yemen, Nationalism, and a Former Workers' State

During the Cold War, Yemen was yet another worry for the West in the Muslim World. The southern part of the country had previously been controlled by the British, while the north had found itself under Ottoman rule. When an army coup in North Yemen saw the monarchy abolished in 1962, civil war broke out, in which Nasser's Egypt supported progressive republicans, and pro-Western conservatives in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Jordan supported the royalists. The south, meanwhile, was promised full independence from Britain in 1968. However, two southern nationalist groups (the NLF & the FLOSY) began to fight against British control, in what became known as the **Aden Emergency**. These events led Britain to begin withdrawing troops in 1967, after which the People's Republic of South Yemen (PRSY) would be formed.

After 6 years of war in the north, the republicans emerged victorious, forming the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). In the south, meanwhile, the Marxist wing of the NLF gained power in **1969**, and the country became the **People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)**. Described by Marxist.com as "a military-police-bonapartist dictatorship", it aimed to nationalise the economy 'from above', albeit "with the support of the overwhelming majority" of the population. It nurtured close ties with the Communist Bloc and the PLO, and received support from the USSR to build up its military. In 1972, a small border proxy conflict began, with the YAR being backed by the West, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and the PDRY being backed by the Soviet Bloc, Cuba, and Libya. The PDRY, meanwhile, funded Red rebels in YAR, but became less interventionist when a new leader gained power in 1980. By 1986, "unemployment [had] been completely eliminated" but, at the same time, the country had joined the ranks of "other deformed workers' states" (like China, Russia, and Cuba), whose model of 'revolution from above' had seen 'revolutionary' elites "carving out privileges for themselves".

Civil war broke out in South Yemen in 1986, with thousands dying and around 60,000 fleeing to the YAR. Two "bureaucratic factions" had begun to jostle for power after one had tried a "classical Stalinist purge" against its internal opponents. Marxist.com summarises the regime as having been "progressive on the one hand with the abolition of landlordism and capitalism - but reactionary in the setting up of [a one-party dictatorship] without democracy for the workers and peasants". Led by the Soviet process of Perestroika in 1988, the PDRY finally released prisoners, allowed other parties to form, and improved its justice system. As a result of the Soviet-recommended policy of dealing with non-workers' states, **South and North Yemen would eventually unite in 1990**.⁵⁰

In 2004, Zaidi Shias, who "make up one-third of the population" of Yemen, and "ruled North Yemen... for almost 1,000 years until 1962", rebelled against the government. Named

⁴⁶ <http://www.islamicpluralism.org/2226/the-boston-horrors-and-wahhabism-in-chechnya>

⁴⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13809501>

⁴⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-15336689>

⁴⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16850706>

⁵⁰ <http://www.marxist.com/colonial-revolution-and-civil-war-in-south-yemen.htm>

'Houthis', after the leader of their first uprising, they were seeking to "win greater autonomy" in the Saada province of Yemen. Perceiving "encroachment by Sunni Islamists", they would lead five more rebellions "before a ceasefire was signed with the government in 2010".

In 2012, however, **Ali Abdullah Saleh**, who had been president of the YAR (and then Yemen) since 1978, was forced to step down as the country's leader. He had long been an authoritarian ally of the West in its war on 'terrorism', but had also allowed corruption, human rights abuses, and an increase in Wahhabi-influenced extremism. The Arab Spring-inspired protests of 2011 had been backed by the Houthis, who "took advantage of the power vacuum to expand their territorial control in Saada" and Amran. They then participated in negotiations which saw plans made in February 2014 "for Yemen to become a federation of six regions".⁵¹ Although they took control of most of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in September, they were still involved in fierce battles with Al Qaeda insurgents in early 2015. "Regional rivals like Saudi Arabia and Iran", meanwhile, appeared to be playing "an increasingly incendiary role" in the country, "amid mounting evidence that they [were] actively supporting the opposing factions".⁵²

Lebanon, Sectarianism, and Israel

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, French rulers in Lebanon helped **Maronite Christians** to gain power, mostly through the Phalange (a right-wing militant group). During the Second World War, Britain stepped in to impose Free French rule and, in **1943**, Lebanon gained independence from France. A **National Pact** was signed which guaranteed that the President would always be a Maronite. Tensions gradually rose as a result of this pact and, in **1975**, a **civil war** broke out - with Maronite Christian leaders clashing with reformist Muslim groups, including poor, disenfranchised Shiites.

Maronite militias attacked Palestinian refugee camps, where the PLO had been operating since leaving Jordan in 1971. The PLO was drawn into the conflict, which would last 15 years, see hundreds of thousands of people killed, and 30,000 Syrian troops enter Lebanon to protect Christian militias. In **1982**, **Israel invaded** in the hope of driving out the PLO. It killed hundreds of people, while its allies in the Phalangist militias massacred hundreds more in the Palestinian refugee camps of **Sabra and Shatila** as Israel stood by. Defence Minister Ariel Sharon was forced to resign in 1983 for his failure to act against this massacre (though he would continue to serve in Israel's government almost uninterrupted until 2006).

Muslim militias, uniting under the name **Hezbollah**, called for armed resistance to Israeli occupation, and many Shiites in the south heeded their call. By giving social and economic services to the poor, the organisation would soon turn into a powerful organisation, and a major instrument of opposition to Israeli presence in southern Lebanon. In 1983, radical Islamists unrelated to Hezbollah bombed the US Embassy and Marine barracks in Lebanon after suspected US interference in the Civil War. US troops withdrew a year later as a result.

In 1990, as a result of Syrian bombing of the Presidential Palace, the war finally ended. Nonetheless, Israel invaded once again in 1996 in order to bomb Hezbollah bases, only being forced to withdraw its unsuccessful forces in the year 2000. Syrian forces, meanwhile, would withdraw five years later. In 2006, Israel launched a renewed offensive against Hezbollah, though it again failed to achieve anything apart from destruction and civilian deaths. In 2013, Hezbollah began to fight against anti-Assad Islamists who were encroaching on Lebanese territory, and tensions began to rise between Hezbollah and Sunni Islamist groups in Lebanon as a consequence. By 2014, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon had

⁵¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>

⁵² http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/08/world/violence-grows-in-yemen-as-al-qaeda-tries-to-fight-its-way-back.html?_r=0

“surpassed one million”, and Wahhabi extremists from groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra threatened to spread their jihad into Lebanese territory.⁵³ [More on Hezbollah and the different types of Islamism in the Middle East will be examined in greater depth between Chapters Five and Eight of this book.]

The West’s Allies in the Gulf States and Jordan

In 1923, Britain installed a monarchy in Jordan, which would only gain its independence from the colonial power in 1946. King Abdullah, caught up in the Arab opposition to the creation of Israel, joined other nations in the attack on the newly-formed state in 1948. Though defeated in battle, he occupied the West Bank, which would be officially annexed by Jordan in 1950. A year later, he was killed in Jerusalem by Palestinians opposed to the annexation of the West Bank. His grandson, Hussein, became king at 16 years of age, and soon had to deal with border skirmishes with Zionist forces. In 1957, he decided to declare martial law.

Ten years later, Israel seized control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the **Six-Day War**. In the aftermath of the conflict, the king took a different stance towards the ‘Palestinian Question’, ordering attacks on the PLO in Jordanian refugee camps in 1970. Thousands of Palestinians were killed in what soon became known as ‘**Black September**’, and Jordan subsequently became a target of aggression for radical Palestinians seeking retribution. Hussein, meanwhile, was gradually becoming an important ally of the West in the Middle East, and Jordanian relations with Israel soon became more neutral. The king eventually signed a peace treaty in 1994, before dying five years later. He was succeeded by King Abdullah, who continued to be a strong Western ally in the region.

Like Jordan, the Gulf States were largely under the control of Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, and most only saw British troops withdraw from their territory in 1971. Afterwards, they continued to be repressive pro-Western dictatorships, and took advantage of the oil resources available to them to control their populations with religion or force.

Kuwait, for example, had asked for British protection from Ottoman rule in 1899, and London began to control its foreign affairs as a result. In 1937, **large oil reserves** were discovered by the US-British Kuwait Oil Company and, in 1951, a major public-works programme began. Ten years later, Kuwait became independent under a monarch, who would intervene in the country’s National Assembly on numerous occasions over the next few decades. When Iraq accused Kuwait of stealing its oil in 1990, it attracted Western attention. It invaded a month later, meanwhile, forced the monarch to flee and saw a US-led (and UN-backed) aerial bombing campaign begin early in **1991**. Towards the end of the 1990s, Islamists began to gain power in the country, and this was facilitated by the chaos caused by the Kuwaiti-backed Invasion of Iraq in **2003**. In 2012, the monarch stepped in to stop Islamists running the parliament, but private citizens were already heavily involved in fuelling Wahhabi groups in both Syria and Iraq. Like in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait’s monarchy was playing a balancing act between ensuring authoritarian ‘progress’ and stopping Islamists from gaining too much power.⁵⁴

In **Qatar**, meanwhile, democratic elections came for the first time since independence in 1999, and the country supported the USA with its invasion of Iraq in 2003. Four years later, the country’s natural resource deals with the West allowed it and its neighbour Dubai to “become the two biggest shareholders of the London Stock Exchange”. In both Libya and Syria, Qatar would be a **key Western ally** in funding the Islamist opposition to the Gaddafi

⁵³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14649284>

⁵⁴ Most information here summarised from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14647211>, <http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/kuwait/kwtimeln.htm> and <http://www.timelines.ws/countries/KUWAIT.HTML>

and Assad regimes.⁵⁵ As the “only other country [apart from Saudi Arabia] whose native population is Wahhabi and that **adheres to the Wahhabi creed**”, Qatar began to seek greater independence from Saudi protection. Consequently, it developed “an activist foreign policy promoting Islamist-led political change in the Middle East and North Africa”.

Possessing “long-standing, deep-seated ties to the Muslim Brotherhood” in Egypt, Qatar experienced souring relations with its Wahhabi neighbour Saudi Arabia in 2013 when it became clear that the Saudis were committed to toppling Morsi’s Brotherhood government there. The Saudis had also tried to curtail “Qatari influence within the rebel movement” in Syria. Unlike Qatar, meanwhile, the Saudi regime was seen by James Dorsey at Middle East Online as having “less control of [its] empowered clergy”. He speaks of how “Qatari rulers do not derive their legitimacy from a clerical class”, and do not “have a religious force that polices public morality”, in contrast with Saudi leaders, who do.⁵⁶ As a result of these differences, Qatar officially sought to back “the moderate Syrian opposition, which was derived from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood”, while Saudi Arabia “allegedly installed radical Salafi-Wahhabi groups”.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Qatar was still accused by its US allies of having created “a permissive environment for financing terrorist groups”.⁵⁸

In 1971, The **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) was formed when seven states joined together (though Abu Dhabi and Dubai have since become the two best known of the states). The UAE is “governed by a Supreme Council of Rulers made up of the seven emirs, who appoint the prime minister and the cabinet”. Although “one of the most liberal countries in the Gulf”, it “remains authoritarian”, and didn’t have “elected bodies until 2006”.⁵⁹ In 2012, it outlawed “online mockery of its own government or attempts to organise public protests through social media”, detaining over “60 activists without charge”.⁶⁰ In August 2014, UAE forces “flying out of Egyptian airbases” targeted Wahhabi-backed Islamist fighters in Libya in what The Guardian called “a watershed moment”, suggesting “that a block of Middle Eastern countries led by the UAE [were] seeking to step up their opposition to the Islamist movements that [had] sought to undermine the region’s old order since the start of the Arab spring” three years previously.⁶¹

In the past, the state of **Oman** had been different from other Gulf States in the sense that it “had its own empire, which at its peak in the 19th century... vied with Portugal and Britain for influence” in the Middle East.⁶² As a “pivotal point of the trade of the Middle and Far East”, it had built an empire “spanning both the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean... between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries”. Seeking greater influence in the country, Britain effectively “undermined and destroyed the Omani economy” in the nineteenth century.⁶³ Between 1932 and 1970, society in Oman was “run along feudal lines” and suffered both “international isolation” and “internal rebellion”.⁶⁴ However, it avoided Westernisation, along with the Islamic reactionism that such a policy often generated in the region.

Economic and welfare reforms only began to occur in Oman after Sultan Qaboos Bin Said overthrew his father in a **bloodless coup in 1970**. Being predominantly Ibadi (“a distinct sect of Islam that is neither Sunni nor Shi’i”, but in a “thoroughly natural and non-politicized way”),⁶⁵ the country was largely “spared the militant Islamist violence that [had] plagued

⁵⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14702609>

⁵⁶ <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=61189>

⁵⁷ <http://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2014/10/15/isis-threat-causes-rapprochement-between-saudi-arabia-and-qatar>

⁵⁸ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qatar-and-isis-funding-the-u.s.-approach>

⁵⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703998>

⁶⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14704414>

⁶¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/united-arab-emirates-bombing-raids-libyan-militias>

⁶² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14654150>

⁶³ <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/maproom/oman/sultanate.htm>

⁶⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14654150>

⁶⁵ <http://islam.uga.edu/ibadis.html>

some of its neighbours". Though a peaceful and "quietly influential" power,⁶⁶ however, it became another **authoritarian Western ally** from the 1970s onwards, and has since been useful to the West because of its "steady relations with Iran".⁶⁷ Its "unique status of having close ties to both Iran and the United States" have long made it "a pivotal behind-the-scenes player in the region", according to The New York Times. Whilst "concerned about Iran's exporting its Islamic revolutionary ideology", many Omani citizens apparently see "the ultraconservative Saudi Arabian approach... as more of a danger to Omani interests, and stability, than Iranian activities in the region".⁶⁸ At the same time, however, Oman seeks to maintain an "ambivalent fraternal friendship with the House of Saud", principally because of its "vulnerability, and need for strategic depth in the context of the Shia-Sunni rift" rather than "any wish to share a common political destiny [with other] Sunni Arab monarchies" in the Arabian Peninsula.⁶⁹

The oil-rich island nation of **Bahrain**, meanwhile, "forged close links with the United States" after its independence from Britain in 1971, establishing a Sunni monarchy in a Shia majority country. Protests by the country's Shia population would often break out as a result of sectarian inequality and, though the country became a constitutional monarchy in 2001, little improved. When demonstrators took to the streets in 2011, for example, the government "called in the Saudi military to crush protests".⁷⁰ A number of people were killed as a result, while 2,300 people⁷¹ were injured and many political activists were imprisoned. [More on Bahrain's role in the Arab Spring will be seen in Chapter Six.]

Overall, **the authoritarian Gulf States count on the West's greed for oil to survive**, and thus value their alliance with Western nations. However, their repression of dissent has led to the growing internal popularity of Islamist groups, and their vast wealth (concentrated in the hands of a privileged few) has often found its way into the hands of such organisations. In short, the fact that these repressive, exploitative elites are key Western allies shows that **Western governments' statements about democracy, freedom, and anti-terrorism are simply examples of their frequent, deceitful, and self-interested rhetoric.**

Islamism in North Africa

In Algeria, Muslim Arab nationalism began to grow in 1931 with the creation of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama. Under the **French colonialists**, however, there was vicious suppression of massive independence demonstrations, with one in 1945 seeing 54,000 people killed. Nine years later, the National Liberation Front (or FLN), which exhibited a mixture of nationalist and socialist progressivism, began its **war of independence** against French forces. Between 1954 and 1962, around 1.5 million Algerians were killed, and the country was left devastated, though the conflict had proved to be a watershed in the anti-colonial struggle of African nations.

Progressive nationalist Ahmed **Ben Bella** served as the country's president from 1963 to 1965, and he immediately sought to implement populist reforms. He focussed primarily on rural Algeria, experimenting with socialist cooperative businesses (referred to as 'self-management'), whilst also seeking to purge the FLN of those who opposed his policies. Nonetheless, the country became a "haven for all the anti-imperialists of the world" during his time in power.⁷² In 1965, he was overthrown by Defence Minister **Houari Boumédiène** in a bloodless coup, and placed under house arrest until Boumédiène's death. The new leader subsequently led a systematic programme of state-led industrialisation, undertaking

⁶⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/16/world/middleeast/16oman.html>

⁶⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14654150>

⁶⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/16/world/middleeast/16oman.html>

⁶⁹ <http://orientxxi.info/magazine/oman-says-no-to-saudi-arabia,0496>

⁷⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14540571>

⁷¹ <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/press-release/us-government-should-call-release-bahraini-political-prisoners>

⁷² <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/40/058.html>

agrarian reforms and nationalising the hydrocarbons industry in six years later. In **1978**, he died and was replaced by **Chadli Bendjedid**, who strengthened authoritarian rule and engaged in **liberal economic reforms** aimed at undoing the progressive measures implemented under Boumédiène and Ben Bella.

In 1980, the Berber Spring began, and a massive protest march was brutally suppressed. Eight years later, youngsters rioted in response to the poverty and lack of freedom in Algeria, only to be harshly repressed like those who had demonstrated years before. Hundreds died, and Bendjedid was forced to allow freedom of association and expression and to implement a multi-party system in the country. In 1990, the FIS (a **coalition of Islamists (including Wahhabis)**) won the majority in the first local multiparty elections. They were repressed, and called for strikes and huge demonstrations in 1991. Thousands were arrested, and the army would push Bendjedid from power definitively the following year when a landslide victory for the FIS looked probable. The coalition was banned, and its members were arrested. An **all-out war** ensued as a response and, over the following decade, around 200,000 people were killed.

In 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika became president, though he had run unchallenged. He implemented an amnesty for thousands of rebels who had surrendered. Other Islamist groups (mostly Wahhabis), however, continued to fight. According to a 2013 New Internationalist article, there was apparently collusion between Algeria's secret police (the DRS) and certain Islamist groups in the country. The "majority of 'terrorist' incidents in the country" since 2003, the magazine's Jeremy Keenan said, had "involved some degree of collusion between the DRS and the terrorists" - the purpose of which had been to spark situations in which the army could suppress Islamists and "convince the West" that it was "the best guarantor of Western interests in the region".⁷³

In **Tunisia**, meanwhile, independence from France came in 1956, with progressive bourgeois nationalist **Habib Bourguiba** becoming the country's first president. He secularised the country, and allowed the PLO to resettle in Tunis after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982. Three years later, however, the Israeli air force bombed Tunis in retaliation for Tunisia's hospitality. In **1987**, Bourguiba was ousted for his alleged mental incompetence, with Zine El Abidine **Ben Ali** taking over and ruling with an iron fist, whilst **liberalising the economy**.

In December 2010, mass protests began, demanding free and democratic elections. The subsequent unrest was the starting point of the **Arab Spring**, which would spread across the region. In January 2011, Ben Ali fled into exile. As a result of subsequent violence led by radical Islamists, thousands of Tunisians fled "to the Italian island of Lampedusa". Meanwhile, Islamists won elections, and Wahhabi violence began to spread. The following year, however, thousands protested when the government attempted to "reduce women's rights" and, after mass protests in 2013, the government finally resigned.⁷⁴

Morocco, which had been a French Protectorate since 1912, would gain independence in 1956. Between 1921 and 1926, France had repressed a rebellion, along with Spanish troops, and the 1930s saw the colonialists attempt to divide Berbers from Arabs. When **Sultan Muhammad V** was overthrown in 1953, however, pro-independence sentiment grew much stronger, and the sultan became a hero in exile. Two years later, he returned to the country and was made king again in 1957. Six years later, the sultan's successor Hassan II invaded revolutionary Algeria, killing 300 Algerians but failing to make the territorial gains he sought.

⁷³ <http://newint.org/features/2013/04/01/real-story-terrorist-attack-algerian-gas-plant/>

⁷⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14107720>

With the growth of radical Islamism in the early 1970s, there were two coup attempts launched against the king and, when the leader of Islamist group Adl wa Ihsan (Justice and Benevolence) criticised the king in 1974, he was imprisoned. A year later, the king called for a “Green March” on Western Sahara, which had just been decolonised by Spain. The Islamic socialists of the **Polisario Front**, however, resisted the occupation with Algerian support, declaring the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in early 1976. Although the UN recognised the front as the legitimate representative of the people of Western Sahara in 1979, a ceasefire would only be signed with Morocco in 1991. This armistice, however, would only come after the completion of “the Berm”, which is considered to be “one of the most secure defensive barriers ever”, consisting of “10-foot-high walls, barbed wire, electric fences and, every seven miles, human sentries”. It also lies “amid the world’s longest continuous minefield”.⁷⁵ While Morocco controlled the western side of the wall, Polisario controlled the territory to the east. The African Union, meanwhile, recognised the SADR and removed Morocco from the organisation (making it the only African nation not to be a member).

In the rest of Morocco, meanwhile, reforms began to take place, with Berber dialects being allowed to broadcast on TV in 1994 and a ‘socialist’ being allowed to control the government for the first time in 1998. In **1999, King Hassan died**, and his successor Mohammed VI tried to deal with poverty and illiteracy in the country. He ruled in a less authoritarian manner, freeing prisoners and allowing dissidents to return from exile. In 2003, over 40 people were killed “when suicide bombers [attacked] several sites in Casablanca”, but a free trade agreement was nonetheless signed with the USA the following year, with the USA designating Morocco “as a major non-Nato ally”.

More terrorist attacks would take place in 2007, and political unrest exploded in 2011 when thousands of protesters called for political reforms, forcing King Mohammed to change the constitution several months later. Meanwhile, a terrorist attack would kill 17 people in Marrakech, just months before the “moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD)” won parliamentary elections. Between 2012 and 2013, however, further mass protests would lead to the governing coalition’s downfall.⁷⁶ In mid-2014, however, The New York Times would speak about how “pro-democracy activists and journalists” had been facing “increasing repression”, and about how little was changing in the country.⁷⁷

Finally, I believe it is worth mentioning the role of **Sudan** in northern Africa. Connected to Egypt at the start of the twentieth century, Sudan remained a British colony after its neighbour gained independence, and only in 1956 did it become a self-governing republic. Two years later, the Sudanese military led a coup against the recently-elected civilian government, and civil war would break out in the south in 1962. Two years on, an “**Islamist-led government** was established”, though another coup, led by Jaafar Numeiri, would take place in 1969. Three years later, southern Sudan became “a self-governing region”, though a civil war would start up again in 1983, five years after the discovery of oil in the south. While the South resisted the North’s monopoly over state resources, Sharia Islamic law was officially established in Sudan.

In 1985, Numeiri was deposed in a coup “after widespread popular unrest” and, four years later, another coup took place, eventually leading **Omar Bashir** to power in **1993**. Five years on, the USA launched a “missile attack on a pharmaceutical plant in Khartoum, alleging that it was making materials for chemical weapons”, and Bashir would soon declare a state of emergency (just as the country began to export oil). In 2003, people in Darfur rose up against the government, claiming it was “being neglected by Khartoum”. The following year, the rebellion was repressed, and “hundreds of thousands of refugees” fled to Chad, with the

⁷⁵ <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/the-longest-minefield-in-the-world-isnt-where-you-think-it-is-9abd521cd770>

⁷⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14123260>

⁷⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/world/africa/moroccos-king-slow-to-deliver-on-pro-democracy-vows.html>

UN saying that “pro-government Arab... militias [had been] carrying out systematic killings of non-Arab villagers in Darfur”. In 2008, the International Criminal Court (ICC) called “for the arrest of President Bashir for **genocide**, crimes against humanity and war crimes in Darfur”, in what would be the “first ever request... for the arrest of a sitting head of state”. In 2011, South Sudan gained independence, though it would soon be blighted by further civil conflict. The North, meanwhile, would be left fighting a conflict with the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) over the oil-rich region of Abyei.

In summary, North African Arab nations have been split since their independence from colonialists between dictatorial regimes of either nationalist or conservative Islamic varieties. Their repression of Islamist groups, far from destroying them, has contributed to their further radicalisation, as has their continued suppression of basic human rights. Their authoritarian domination, meanwhile, has prevented autonomous, secular democratic experiments from arising. Recent democratic reforms, particularly since the Arab Spring, have only seen different elites take power, while a resurgent Islamism has gained the support of many people opposed to the corrupt regimes in power and their imposition ‘from above’ of neoliberal economic policies.

Conclusion

In the timelines above, I have aimed to show that there have been some governments in the Muslim World that had ‘progressive’ characteristics. Arab nationalists like Nasser improved conditions ‘from above’ for previously marginalised and dispossessed sectors of society (even if only for a short period of time), though without giving citizens any real democratic control over their destinies. Ba’athists did the same, though often much more along ethnic lines and with more brutal internal repression. [The achievements and negative impacts of state nationalism in the region will be discussed in greater depth between Chapters Two and Four.]

While ‘communist’ regimes took power in Yemen and Afghanistan, attempting to lift people there out of poverty, their belief in authoritarian and bureaucratic progress ‘from above’ made it easier for Western imperialists to rally opposition against them. Afghanistan, as will be seen in Chapter Five, would prove to be a turning point in the existence of both Soviet-style revolution and radical Wahhabi-influenced Islamism. The former would fade away with the USSR’s failures in the Afghan conflict (which turned out to be the superpower’s Vietnam), but the latter would be bolstered by the support it had received from the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Having shown it could defeat communist secularism, it began to make plans to take power elsewhere in the Muslim World, taking advantage of the political unrest that had been left behind by colonial division of land, dictatorial secularism, and imperialist intervention in the region.

Where secular nationalist and communist governments were successful, it was generally because of their opposition to Western colonialism and imperialism. However, by repressing religious groups or not giving them control over their own destinies, they laid the foundations for their own collapse. Imperialists, meanwhile, having realised the importance of religion in the region, actively supported Islamists in exchange for either loyalty or support in the fight against anything progressive that might put their economic interests at risk. The rise of Wahhabi extremism in Middle Eastern politics, therefore, can be explained as both a direct and indirect consequence of Western (and in particular American) attempts to undermine progressive movements. In late 2014, analyst Ulson Gunnar would say that “the lack of biting [Western] sanctions” against Islamist allies in the Middle East was “an indictment of the West’s lack of sincerity in its “war” on ISIS”.⁷⁸ In the rest of this book, I

⁷⁸ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-state-sponsors-of-isis-saudi-arabia-qatar-turkey-why-are-they-no-subjected-to-sanctions/5403310>

will look at precisely how Western interference has affected areas formerly controlled or influenced by the Ottoman Empire, and how it has shaped the turbulent political scene we see there today.

2) Nasser and the Corruption of Civic Arab Nationalism

As asserted at Libcom.org, “it is only the exploiting classes under capitalism that have a stake in presenting the interests of their own class as if they were those of the nation - the sum of all classes”.⁷⁹ The interests of the exploited, on the other hand, lie in realising that the exploited throughout the world are ultimately fighting the same battle, and that international unity is necessary in order to overthrow the world’s exploiting classes.

In this chapter, in which I will examine the growth of **Arab Nationalism** (using Nasser’s Egypt as an example), it is important to remember the words above. While certain nationalist measures may indeed appear to benefit exploited workers, the true interests of the exploited ultimately always lie in the overthrow of the capitalist system, which is inherently exploitative. Although we may sympathise with the positive aspects of nationalism, we must also recognise that its negative aspects have simply perpetuated the suffering and oppression of the exploited and, in the Middle East, have allowed reactionary Islamist groups to attract support for themselves.

In looking at nationalism in the Middle East, it is important that we understand the distinction “between civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism”.⁸⁰ Historian Michael Ignatieff explains how civic nationalism advocates “common citizenship... regardless of ethnicity..., color, religion, gender, [or] language”⁸¹ while, according to Margareta Mary Nikolas at The Nationalism Project, it seeks a “cultural standardisation” through “communication and education”. If the desired effect is not achieved, Nikolas says, “the elite [then] draw elements from the people [to develop] a populist movement” with “a shared memory and shared destiny”.

Ethnic nationalism, meanwhile, is arguably more dangerous, in the sense that it seeks “ethnic homogeneity” or ‘purity’ in a society. Although both civic and ethnic nationalism can cause problems with other countries in extreme cases, ethnic nationalism often causes significant problems within the country itself. Because of historical ethnic divisions, and the fact that non-ethnic unity requires more educational efforts, ethnic nationalism has developed a lot more easily, and has often represented the “more powerful and vigorous elements of nationalism”, Nikolas insists.⁸²

In the late nineteenth century, with Arab communities facing “two levels of foreign domination, coming from both the Ottoman Empire and Western colonialism”, there was a cultural renaissance (or Nahda), which led to the growth of Arab nationalism. Discourses arose which began “challenging the status-quo, whether... in the form of British colonialism or the... Ottoman caliphate”, and the idea of **Pan-Arabism** (or the political unification of Arab countries) gained popularity.⁸³ The works of intellectuals like Lebanese writer Jurji Zaydan, who published the first Arabic, but non-religious, version of Middle Eastern history in 1890, had a significant influence on this movement. Through Zaydan’s text, for example, history was made accessible for all literate Arabs, and modern Arabic soon became widely accepted as the official language in the region as a result. According to the al-hakawati Arab Cultural Trust, he “laid down the foundation for a pan-Arab national identity”.⁸⁴

When the Ottoman Empire finally fell, the UK and France took control of much of the Middle East to prevent the formation of one united Arab state, which was an idea growing in popularity thanks to the Nahda. As a result of continued colonial control over Arab

⁷⁹ <https://libcom.org/library/national-formation-arab-region-critique-samir-amin-mohammad-jafar>

⁸⁰ <http://www.nationalismproject.org/articles/nikolas/ch1.htm>

⁸¹ <https://www.msu.edu/user/hillrr/161lec16.htm>

⁸² <http://www.nationalismproject.org/articles/nikolas/ch1.htm>

⁸³ http://www.academia.edu/6095765/The_Al-Nahda_period_as_a_precursor_for_twentieth_century_Islamism

⁸⁴ <http://al-hakawati.net/english/Arabpers/jurji-zaidan.asp>

communities, both ethnic and civic forms of nationalism appeared in the region, and the formation of the Arab League in 1945 was a watershed moment for official Arab representation in the world. The new organisation sought to find “a common way for the affairs and interests of the [young] Arab countries” and, initially, to pursue their political unification.⁸⁵ Egypt was a founding member of the group, and would soon become a key proponent of Arab unity in the Middle East. In this chapter, I will analyse the nature of Arab nationalism in Egypt, and the effect it had on the region as a whole.

A) The Rise and Fall of Nasserism

British Presence in Egypt

Great Britain “acquired” Egypt in 1882 through its political desire for the territory not to fall into the hands of another imperialist power, which it thought would be the case if it didn’t step in. That is what the first British Viceroy of Egypt, the Earl of Cromer, made clear in 1908. The country, he said, could “never cease to be an object of interest to all the powers of Europe”. One reason for this was that many Europeans had previously moved to Egypt, although the fact that these people had “sunk” their capital into the country was surely of much more importance. The “rights and privileges of Europeans”, the Earl insisted, had to be “jealously guarded”, especially as “exotic institutions [had] sprung up” in Egypt in recent years.

The Egyptian population was “heterogeneous and cosmopolitan”, and the Earl considered the country to be unique. However, as the “[Egyptian] army was in a state of mutiny” in 1882, “the treasury was bankrupt”, and the “ancient and arbitrary method” of the country’s Ottoman administration had not been replaced, it was in need of reform. The territory was being run, he argued, by “men of such poor ability”, and it needed the rule of “men of comparative education and enlightenment, acting under the guidance and inspiration of a first-class European power”. For the Earl, this power had to be Britain.

The demands of “Arabists” for an “Egypt for the Egyptians”, he stressed, was an “impossible” concept. The “sudden transfer of power” to “a class so ignorant as the pure Egyptians”, which had been “a subject race” for centuries, would be a foolish move, he suggested. For him, they did not “appear to possess the qualities which would render it desirable... to raise them... to the category of autonomous rulers with full rights of internal sovereignty”. In other words, they were perceived as children that the British Empire needed to teach and guide, much like others under colonial rule at the time.

The Earl believed that Turkish intervention in Egypt would be catastrophic, and that only the British had a “special aptitude... in the government of Oriental races”. Their presence, he thought, would be the “most effective and beneficent instrument for the gradual introduction of European civilization into Egypt”. Britain had the “responsibility of intervening”, he insisted, as it would bring progress to the ‘backward’ and ‘inferior’ Egyptian nation. At the same time, it needed to occupy the country to protect its own garrison there, which would be at risk of attack by other colonial powers if they ever disagreed with British policy there. Some “foreign occupation was necessary”, he said, and it was much better that such an intervention came from Britain. Not only was it the “right” decision, but it was also the one “most in accordance with British interests”.

These words should help the reader to understand the racism and arrogance of the British state, and other colonial powers, at the time. They should also make it clear that Britain’s elites were more than prepared to protect their economic interests in the Arab World by

⁸⁵ <http://www.internationaldemocracywatch.org/index.php/arab-league->

force. Like others in Europe, they were scared about what could happen after the seemingly inevitable collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Ideas of Arab unity could not be allowed, and neither could ideas of true national sovereignty. Through political and military manoeuvres, like those practised in Egypt, the British and other European colonial powers would remain the main forces which sought to undermine Arab interests, at least until the foundation of the State of Israel. After that point, the USA would gradually replace them as the leading authority seeking to secure its economic hegemony in the region.⁸⁶

The Expression of Nationalism in Egypt

Eric Ruder at the International Socialist Review speaks of how Egypt's "**strategic location** in the heart of the Middle East and the opening of the **Suez Canal** in 1869" had led Britain to see "a compliant Egypt [as] central to the control and maintenance of its far-flung possessions, especially India". Its occupation of "the Suez area" in 1882, he says, pushed Egyptian nationalists into a 72-year struggle to "get the British to act on their expressed desire to withdraw". When the USA emerged from the Second World War as the planet's main imperialist power, "displacing British and French influence", its **main policy in the Middle East was to stop the Soviet Union from "establishing influence in the region"**, and it thus began a policy of "**empire by invitation**" – using the imagined 'threat' of an 'evil' USSR to justify its aggressive actions. Although this form of imperialism was different from the European model, it would soon prove to be just as intrusive.

With Western companies beginning to exploit **oil** from around the Arabian Peninsula, the Suez Canal became crucial for transporting it to the West. The USA thus sought to cement "'friendly relations" with the Arab regimes of the region", though its "support for the fledgling Israeli state" subsequently "complicated matters", as it was "difficult [for Arab nations] to reconcile" the idea of a new European colony in the middle of an "era of decolonization". In Egypt, Egyptian nationalism was dominant in the early twentieth century but, after the Second World War, Arab nationalism came to the fore – being made more apparent in **1952**, when a group of Arab nationalists known as the **Free Officers Movement** came to power in a coup.⁸⁷

After overthrowing the monarchy, they sought to end British occupation of both Egypt and Sudan, and support anti-imperialist Arab movements throughout the region. **Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein** soon became the most prominent figure in the movement, and served as President of Egypt between 1956 and 1970. He pursued certain socialist measures, which improved conditions for poor Egyptians, but rejected the idea of class struggle, which left the ruling elites effectively intact. This school of 'Arab socialism' would soon be repeated in other countries, though to varying extents.

Tarek Osman at openDemocracy has stated that there were "five Nassers - the hero, the oppressor, the revolutionist, the civic Arab nationalist, [and] the socialist".⁸⁸ The most important incarnation, however, was that of the civic Arab nationalist. As a charismatic speaker, Nasser convinced many Egyptians that Arab unity was necessary to combat the influence of Western imperialists. He successfully mixed Arab nationalism with Egyptian nationalism to attract supporters, but events at home and elsewhere would eventually contribute to the demise of Nasserite policies, with his successors abandoning Arab causes like Palestinian independence and opening their arms to the imperialist policies of the West.

Nasser's Souring Relations with the West

⁸⁶ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1908cromer.html>

⁸⁷ <http://isreview.org/issue/70/nasserism-collaboration>

⁸⁸ https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/nassers_complex_legacy

When a “wave of popular nationalism” brought Nasser’s “group of junior army officers” into power in 1952, their talk of “pan-Arab unity and resistance to Western powers... inspired millions and made Egypt the leader” of anti-imperialist efforts throughout the region. Seeking support for his plans to end British military presence in Egypt, Nasser initially “turned to the United States for support”, and US elites hoped that Kermit Roosevelt could help to shape the young nationalists “into a positive influence on postcolonial leaders in Africa and Asia”. Nasser, however, ultimately “grew frustrated with the slow pace” of change and the limited support received from the USA, setting himself on a “collision course” with the Western powers.

At the “1955 Bandung conference of twenty-nine independent African and Asian countries”, Nasser “dramatically increased [his] prestige” among developing nations, and he began to see these forces as a “viable bloc of **non-aligned nations**” which could contribute to his own cause. It suddenly seemed possible to him that national sovereignty could be exerted in Egypt without his regime having to rely on any imperialist power. Consequently, he signed an “arms deal with the Soviet bloc [in the form of a “\$200 million deal with Czechoslovakia”], hoping to strengthen the Egyptian army and assert Egypt’s “rightful place as leader of the Arab world”.

The country’s economy, however, was struggling, with cotton exports, the centrepiece of the economy, falling “by 26 percent in little over a year”. And it didn’t help that “American agricultural subsidies... permitted U.S. farmers to dump cotton on the world market”. The Egyptian leader, therefore, felt forced to look elsewhere to offload the excess Egyptian cotton, and “China and Russia offered an alternative outlet”, giving Nasser a “barter deal for arms”. The subsequent “souring of relations with the West” contributed significantly to his decision to **nationalise the Suez Canal in 1956**, which in turn saw Britain, France, and Israel make a “military pact to invade Egypt”. The USA, however, would see itself pushing its invading allies to “withdraw before fully accomplishing their goals”, and Nasser “emerged the victor” of the conflict as a result.⁸⁹

The invasion of Egypt had threatened to cause an escalation of tensions in the Cold War, and the USSR had even suggested it would “rain down nuclear missiles on Western Europe if the Israeli-French-British force did not withdraw”. Seeking to avoid direct confrontation, the United States “issued stern warnings” to its allies to leave Egyptian soil, and even held the threat of “economic sanctions [over them] if they persisted in their attack”.⁹⁰ By putting pressure on them, the superpower had, probably without wanting to, bolstered Nasser’s regime. However, President Eisenhower soon called in Congress for “a new and more proactive American policy in the region” (which would be known as the ‘Eisenhower Doctrine’), in which the Middle East would be established as an important Cold War battlefield. He would soon see “new programs of economic and military cooperation with friendly nations in the region” authorised, along with permission to use US troops “to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations”.⁹¹ With this latter assertion, he was referring not to independence from US political influence in the Middle East, but to independence from communist influence.

The Growth of State Capitalism

Nasser was not a communist, and the USA probably knew it. In reality, he was not committed “to any particular economic or political program”, and was guided more by “pragmatism and realpolitik”. Because of his perceived resistance to imperialist invasion, however, he was soon recognised as the “undisputed leader of the Arab world”, though his

⁸⁹ <http://isreview.org/issue/70/nasserism-collaboration>

⁹⁰ <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/suez-crisis>

⁹¹ <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/eisenhower-doctrine>

mixture of capitalist and socialist systems was doomed to fail. He also gained support through his “ambitious High Dam construction project” and his “nationalization of the economy”, which were facilitated by the fact that he had “sufficient concentrations of capital to undertake industrialization and development projects that would enable [his country] to catch up with the already industrialized West”. In his opinion, these measures were the best way of ‘modernising’ Egypt.

The Egyptian role of regional “political leadership” under Nasser, meanwhile, saw Egypt “benefit from the growing wealth of the oil-rich Arab nations”, and even set in motion an experiment in Arab unity in the form of the UAR (something the West had feared since at least the start of the twentieth century). The Arab World was now becoming a “modern force” that was capable of competing with European and North American industrialism and, “by the mid-1960s, the five largest Arab oil-producing countries – Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Algeria – between them had government revenues of some \$2 billion a year”. This wealth was allowing these nations to create their own military and social infrastructure, along with “elaborate structures of administration” (or state bureaucracies). In other words, regional elites were undertaking development projects for themselves, with relative independence from foreign capitalist elites.

Although Nasser’s regime was not communist, his friendship with the Soviet Union and his “revolutionary nationalist rhetoric” meant that he would be “routinely described as [a] “socialist”” by Western governments. In truth, his “state capitalist policy was undertaken” merely to “direct Egyptian economic development”, rather than because of any commitment to a particular ideology. Eric Ruder insists that he “in no way altered the capitalist relations of production” in Egyptian society, and that there was essentially still a dichotomy between those who earned the most money but did the least work and those who earned the least money but did the most work.

Initially, steps had indeed been made towards greater equality in Egypt, but “further progress” proved “highly problematic” because of the “essential incapacity of... the bureaucrats in control of the state... to formulate a coherent project”. The regime’s nationalist rhetoric simply “served to mystify the crucial socio-economic differentiation of the traditional classes”, hiding the fact that there was essentially a privileged class developing at the top of society as a result of the government’s policies. In other words, the Egyptian elites in power spoke of nationalism in order to “blunt the demands of the growing Egyptian working class”, and claim that everyone was ‘in it together’ when, in reality, they were not.

The Six Day War and the Decline of Nasserism

Nasser’s attempts to unite the Arab World began to fall apart in the early 1960s, in part because of the split “between states ruled by groups committed to rapid change or revolution... and those ruled by dynasties or groups more cautious about political and social change and more hostile to the spread of Nasserist influence”. One group that soon became hostile to Nasserism was the Ba’ath Party [which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Three]. Another reason for Egypt’s changing position as the ‘leader of the Arab World’ was the 1964 foundation of the PLO. The Egyptian government had acted as the “chief spokesperson for Palestinian national demands since the 1948 war”, but the PLO now brought together a number of different political groups – meaning that Nasserism was no longer the main voice of the Palestinian national movement.

Israel, meanwhile, was in a much stronger military position than it had been in the previous two decades, comprising of 2.3 million inhabitants by 1967 and enjoying an economy that had grown significantly (thanks to US aid, contributions from foreign Zionists, and

“reparations from West Germany”). Planning to further its own goals and exert its military dominance in the region, it had built up both the “strength and expertise of its armed forces” in the belief that a show of strength could lead to a “more stable agreement” with its Arab neighbours. There were also sections of the country’s Zionist elite which still hoped to conquer the rest of Palestine, and thus complete the “unfinished war of 1948”. Whatever Israel’s aims were, it succeeded in crushing Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the **Six Day War of 1967** and, in doing so, **reshaped “the balance of power in the region”**. In essence, it had managed, with Western support, to put one of the first nails into the coffin of Arab nationalism.

Western propaganda suggested that Israel had waged war on its neighbours because of a ‘threat to its existence’ and, with the memory of the Holocaust still fresh in the minds of many, there was a lot of sympathy for the country’s actions. Its swift military victory, meanwhile, made it much “more desirable as an ally in American eyes”. Meanwhile, Egyptian forces were left bogged down in a bloody civil war in North Yemen, which was draining away resources and which, at the height of Egyptian involvement, saw “70,000 troops stationed” in the fellow Arab nation. At the same time, Nasser found himself having to devote more and more economic resources into “rebuilding the Egyptian army” in order to oppose Israel’s “military presence in the Sinai”. Far from playing a positive role in Egypt, Nasser’s military spending “exacerbated economic stagnation”, and he soon felt that, in order to reclaim the territory Egypt had lost in the Six Day War, he had “no choice but to recognize the existence of Israel”. The USA, meanwhile, began to give more and more “military and economic aid” to Israel as a sign of gratitude for its effective defeat of Nasserism and its “role of stalwart defender of U.S. interests” in the Middle East.

Sadat’s Neoliberal Reforms

When **Nasser died in 1970**, his successor Anwar Sadat knew that “state capitalist measures were no longer able to propel the Egyptian economy forward”, especially as the country was suffering from “heavy debt, high inflation, and high oil prices”. The main choice available to the nationalist regime was to enact truly democratic social reforms, ‘from the bottom up’, or to open the Egyptian economy up to foreign capitalists. Even before Nasser’s death, the latter looked set to be the chosen path of the country’s governing elite, but Sadat’s assumption of power “hastened [the] trend that was already underway”. An “open-door policy” and a “neoliberal agenda” soon began to determine Sadat’s political manoeuvres, in part because he saw a rapprochement with the United States as a move that could facilitate “a rapid solution of the Arab-Israel conflict”, and thus take Egypt out of the constant conflicts which had become such a drain on its economy. The only catch to this step, however, would be that the quasi-socialist measures implemented by Nasser would have to be abandoned, and there would have to be an “openly capitalist development” in Egypt.

In 1972, Sadat (who would never be as focussed as Nasser on issues of equality, social justice, or Arab unity) began his reconciliation with the West by expelling “some twenty thousand Soviet military advisers” from Egypt. This act, however, would not complete the new president’s transformation of Egyptian politics. A year later, in the **Yom Kippur War**, he launched a last gasp attempt at pushing the West into seeking a settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbours. While the conflict initially favoured the Arab alliance, Western support for Israel would help the Zionist state neutralise the offensive and launch a counter-attack.

A peace agreement, in which the USA would gain an increasingly prominent position in Egyptian politics, followed the confrontation. Setting up an alliance that would seek to end all “Soviet influence in the region” and remove the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict “from its ideological context” (transforming it into “a simple conflict over territory”), the

United States took a significant step forward for its interests in the Middle East after the Yom Kippur War. It effectively delegitimised both Palestinian and Arab nationalist resistance to the “settler colonialism and imperialist penetration” of Israel while, through the provision of economic aid, removing Egypt “from the Arab front against Israel” which it had previously led.⁹²

Egypt had not been the first Arab nation to pull out of the conflict with Israel, however. In 1970, ‘Black September’ had seen Jordanian forces kill thousands of Palestinians in an offensive against the PLO, which led to a short-lived Syrian invasion. According to declassified US documents, King Hussein even asked “the United States and Great Britain to intervene in the war in Jordan, [while] asking the United States... to attack Syria”.⁹³ Eventually, Israel stepped in to protect the Jordanian monarchy and, in the Yom Kippur War, Jordan only participated “to preserve [its] position in the Arab world” rather than out of open hostility towards Israel. As part of a secret agreement, Hussein had even promised his forces would act “slowly and cautiously” with regards to Israeli troops, and Israel in turn “tried to avoid attacking the Jordanian brigade” that had been sent to Syria.⁹⁴

Back in Egypt, Sadat officially proclaimed his “open-door policy in 1974”, though foreign capitalists were not initially convinced enough to “take the plunge and undertake investment in Egypt”. Instead, they were critical of the country’s “crumbling infrastructure” and “fragile transportation and telecommunications networks”, whilst feeling a “lingering fear of state expropriation”. Although luxury goods soon flooded into Egypt for the rich, Sadat’s reforms actually “worsened rather than strengthened the economy”, with the “poor and working class [faring] particularly badly”. Between 1961 and 1981, the country was even “transformed from a food exporter to one of the world’s most food-dependent nations”. In short, Sadat’s policies simultaneously helped the rich get richer while making the poor even poorer.

By 1977, Sadat had formalised a peace agreement with Israel, which subsequently returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in exchange for “full diplomatic and economic relations”. Egypt effectively abandoned the Palestinian cause in the accords, settling for Israeli promises of future ‘autonomy’ in Gaza and the West Bank (even though Zionists continued to settle in the Occupied Territories). Economy had thoroughly trumped ideology for Sadat, and his country was “expelled from the Arab League” as a result of its new relationship with Israel. His “political integration into the Western alliance was [now] complete”, though, so he wasn’t too worried about isolation from his neighbours. His murder at the hands of Islamists in 1981, however, represented the “deep bitterness” that existed in the country as a result of his perceived abandonment of the Palestinians (and the Egyptians), and Hosni Mubarak’s subsequent crackdown on dissidents would not help to change these feelings.

The Consolidation of Western-Backed Authoritarianism

Although Egypt had left the Palestinians to fend for themselves, the latter and their allies continued to resist Israeli occupation. When Israel got involved in the Lebanese Civil War, invading in 1982 to attack the PLO there, Mubarak “looked to the U.S. for his diplomatic cues”. Like US officials, he echoed the line that ““moderate” Arab states” could “settle the Palestine problem... without the bothersome presence of a militant PLO”. The fact was, however, that intensifying Palestinian resistance was a direct result of the long-running failure of Arab nations to negotiate a solution on behalf of the Palestinian people. In short, their insufficient action, together with continued Israeli aggression and occupation, had forced Palestinians to become more and more militant in their resistance.

⁹² <http://isreview.org/issue/70/nasserism-collaboration>

⁹³ <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/11/28/nixon.papers/>

⁹⁴ <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.546843>

Meanwhile, the Egyptian regime received “handsome rewards” for its “slavish devotion” to protecting US interests in the Middle East. As a result of Egyptian participation in the 1991 Gulf War, “America, the Gulf states, and Europe forgave Egypt around \$20 billion worth of debt, and rescheduled nearly as much again”. The country would also be “a willing collaborator” in the US-led Invasion of Iraq twelve years later. The USA, however, would eventually begin to suffer as a result of its alliance with Egypt, as it demonstrated very clearly that US economic interests in the region were far more important for the superpower than human rights. The “ruthless secret police” of Egypt, and its “torture of [Mubarak’s] political opponents”, simply undermined US claims of defending democracy in the Middle East, and there were many nations and citizens in the world aware of this hypocrisy (if not necessarily the citizens of the USA itself).

The aforementioned double standards of US elites can be seen a lot more clearly when we look at how, between 1979 and the Arab Spring in 2011, Egypt received “\$1.3 billion a year in military aid” from the USA. In the same period, it got “an average of \$815 million a year in economic assistance”, showing that the United States was only interested in paying off its lackey in exchange for its unconditional protection of US interests, and not in what the regime did with the aid it received. As a result of political corruption, for example, this money and support served to create “a very thin layer of obscenely wealthy Egyptians”, many of whom were members of “Mubarak’s own family”.

Meanwhile, ordinary working Egyptians were living in desperate conditions, with “unemployment that [had] remained in double digits for years, per capita income of less than \$6,000 dollars annually, and periodic food crises”. By supporting the irresponsible and exploitative behaviour of the Egyptian regime, the USA had indirectly forced many Egyptian citizens into the arms of Islamists like those of the Muslim Brotherhood (as secular nationalists were now seen by many to have failed the population). According to Eric Ruder, “U.S. domination of the Middle East [had begun] with Israel and Egypt”, and that was precisely why the superpower didn’t want to step in when Mubarak faced mass protests in 2011. It is also why the USA has consistently protected and defended Israel, in spite of its war crimes and flagrant violations of international law.

According to Tariq Ali, “no client regime [in the Arab World has] failed to do its duty to the paymaster-general” (i.e. the USA), even when faced with “overwhelming opposition of Arab public opinion”. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf States, he says, “have long become virtual military annexes of Washington”. The Arab League, meanwhile, has simply served as a “collective expression of ignominy”, opposing wars even when it is heavily involved in them. The US conquest and corruption of nationalism in Egypt, though, had been particularly impressive as, unlike monarchs on the Arabian Peninsula, it had originally claimed (under Nasser) to seek equality and justice.

Egyptian Complicity with Israeli War Crimes

According to Eric Ruder, one of the most shameful examples of Mubarak’s pandering to the West and its Israeli allies was its “commitment to enforcing the U.S./Israeli siege of Gaza” after Hamas’s electoral victory there in 2006. His construction of a “six-mile underground wall made of steel plates” and decision to “pump seawater through pipes in the wall in order to make tunneling under the wall a death trap” was all part of an attempt to “cut off the tunnels that [had] sustained Gaza’s economy” and thus satisfy his Zionist neighbours.

At the same time, Mubarak’s government sought to “frustrate, divide, and thwart the efforts of Gaza solidarity activists attempting to enter Gaza through the Rafah border crossing”. International activists were “harassed and brutalized”, and five hundred participants in the

“Viva Palestina humanitarian aid convoy [were]... told they could cross the border”, only to be beaten up before they were eventually allowed in. All of this shameful behaviour, meanwhile, was funded by US aid to Egypt. In fact, the US Congress “withheld \$100 million in aid” to Egypt precisely in order to pressurise it to “crack down” on the smuggling of aid to Gaza. When it obliged, by closing its border with Gaza, “criticism from Washington of Egypt’s human rights record and its illiberal political system” was suddenly “muted”.

Nonetheless, the regime’s actions were also determined by its “own domestic considerations”, such as its desire to starve support for Hamas, which it considered to be “both an Iranian proxy and an ally of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood” (the regime’s “largest and best-organized opposition” at home). Egypt had also been disengaging from the Palestinian cause, and increasing “security cooperation with Israel”, since Sadat’s rise to power in the 1970s, long before Hamas was formed. By moving from an “open defiance of Western imperialism... into a “strategic partnership”” with the West, the Egyptian regime had left anti-imperialist rhetoric largely to Islamists for decades, and had suppressed them for precisely that reason.

In spite of “broad support of the Egyptian populace [for] the national rights of the Palestinian people”, political leaders since Nasser have “always exhibited ambivalence toward the Palestinian cause”, thus clearly ignoring the views of their people. Instead, they have even tried to generate “anti-Palestinian and anti-Lebanese feelings to create nationalist hysteria”, focussing “scorn on Hamas and Hezbollah as a way of countering the growing influence of the Muslim Brotherhood” in Egypt. In a contradictory way, however, Sadat had actually launched a “vicious anti-Arab campaign” when he was trying to consolidate his power, insisting on the importance of an Egyptian rather than an Arab identity. Moving away from Nasser’s pan-Arabist ideals, he even scapegoated “the Palestinians for Egypt’s wars and poverty” in the state-run media, thus distracting attention away from the real issue (which was that a corrupt and exploitative Egyptian elite had taken control of the economy primarily for its own benefit). Through some form of warped logic, Egyptian leaders came to portray “Gaza and not Israel [as] the main threat to Egypt” in the region.

While Egyptian politicians have tried to maintain a “rhetorical commitment to the Palestinian cause”, they usually do so only in order to appease an impoverished Egyptian people which instinctively identifies with the Palestinian struggle against Israeli colonialism. In reality, meanwhile, such sympathy “plays no role in guiding Egypt’s foreign policy”. The ruling class, which “owes its wealth, its power, and its continued prosperity to an alliance with imperialism”, would simply see the “entire regional balance of power” upset if Palestinians obtained their own state. Former Israeli socialist organisation Matzpen, for example, affirmed that “the Palestinian people are waging a battle where they confront Zionism, which is supported by imperialism”, but in which they are also “menaced by the Arab regimes and by Arab reaction, which is also supported by imperialism”. Imperialism, it said, “will defend [Zionism] to the last drop of Arab oil”. As a result, it insisted, there is no way to shatter “imperialist interests and domination in the region... without overthrowing... the ruling classes in the Arab world”. Justice for the Palestinians, therefore, just like justice for the Egyptians, is based on a fight for complete “political and social liberation of the Middle East as a whole” from the economic and political systems set up by imperialists and their pawns.⁹⁵

B) Why Did Nasserism Turn Into Authoritarianism?

Bourgeois Nationalism

⁹⁵ <http://isreview.org/issue/70/nasserism-collaboration>

Alejandro Iturbe speaks about bourgeois (or capitalist) nationalism on the LIT-CI website, using Nasser as one example of this political phenomenon. Although he refers primarily to the Latin American examples of Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico and Juan Perón in Argentina, his comments also apply to the system in Egypt under Nasserism.

One of the characteristics that is most recognised in bourgeois nationalism, according to Iturbe, is the fact that “bourgeois nationalist leaders and movements” in the twentieth century, at least at certain points, “faced off... against imperialism”. As the Cold War progressed, he insists, these movements met with “profound limits” and, eventually, “global political and economic conditions” (such as the increasing domination of Western capitalism) “reduced almost to zero the possibility of sustaining the processes” of bourgeois nationalism.

Referring primarily to the works of Leon Trotsky regarding Cárdenas, but also to the works of Argentine Trotskyist Nahuel Moreno, Iturbe emphasises that bourgeois nationalist movements arose “as an attempt by the national bourgeois sectors to resist the pressures of imperialism” and, in particular, to “use the friction and differences between imperialist powers to their favour”, taking advantage of the imperialist conflicts of the First and Second World Wars. Much like Perón in Argentina, Nasser took advantage of the “withdrawal of British imperialism and the full offensive of US imperialism” after World War Two in order to capitalise on the anti-imperialist “sentiment of an important sector of the bourgeoisie and the army [in Egypt], which sought to resist the onslaught of imperialism, albeit with bourgeois tactics”.

There was a “structural weakness” in the Egyptian bourgeoisie, however, meaning it was not “strong enough to stop the US offensive” by itself. In order to resist “imperialist pressure”, therefore, the movement of Nasser and his allies had to “seek the support of the workers and the masses”, and give them “important concessions”. Nasser knew how important the Suez Canal was to the West, and he knew that controlling it was the best way to ensure he could offer the working class at least some of what they had been asking for. However, to ensure their subservience, the forces of the state would also seek to exercise a “bureaucratic and totalitarian control” over the working class, in order to “stop their independent mobilisation and organisation”. The reason why they feared an independent working class was precisely because of their own weaknesses, which the population could easily have exploited if they had organised independently.

Control of the Working Class

Although Nasser did not seek to implement the same type of system as Stalin had in the USSR, his “strict control” over both the political system and Egyptian unions was aimed (in a similar way) at directing workers according to his own interests (and the interests of the bureaucratic elite surrounding him). According to Iturbe, “unions were practically nationalised (legally and financially) and put under the control of union bureaucrats unconditionally supportive of the government”. As such, they were more “state officials than labour leaders”, and gave pretty much no democratic voice to the workers themselves. What encouraged the latter to accept this position, however, was the presence of certain “anti-imperialist measures and concessions to the masses”, which convinced many of them that Nasser’s party and government were ““their” party and “their” government”. At the same time, communists influenced by the USSR saw these as largely positive moves, and generally participated in the process.

Largely fooled by the concessions they had received, the Egyptian masses failed to form a truly autonomous and democratic workers’ movement that could function as a progressive alternative to Nasserism. As a consequence, the “limits of the capitalist system or the

bourgeois State” were “never surpassed”, in spite of Nasser’s anti-imperialist measures and rhetoric. Nationalisations, meanwhile, only took place because they were seen as “the only effective means of safeguarding national independence”. They were “neither socialist nor communist” measures, though. In reality, they were simply acts of “highly progressive national defence” or, in Trotsky’s words, acts of “**State Capitalism**”.

The meagre nature of land reforms largely left the “economic bases” of the national bourgeoisie intact, allowing them later to “advance and dominate”, while industrialisation was placed into the hands of national elites rather than those of the workers, thus propelling “the development of a strong industrial bourgeoisie”. This bureaucratic class would later “align itself” with US imperialists in order to defeat the progressive figures in government like Nasser (once he had served his purpose of strengthening the national bourgeoisie, of course). In Egypt, the Six Day War had pushed Nasser into a corner and, although reconciliation with the USA would not fully occur under his rule, the seeds for that move had already been sown in the devastating conflict. After Nasser’s death, Sadat was finally able to complete the inevitable transition from State Capitalism to ‘open-door’ capitalism.

The Contradictory Nature of Bourgeois Nationalism

Like with other bourgeois nationalists, **Nasser’s rule was “reactionary** because of its totalitarian control of the masses” and its accommodation with both the national and international capitalist class (at different points). As a result, both the weakening of the working masses and the strengthening of capitalists would eventually facilitate Egypt’s pro-Western rapprochement in the 1970s under Sadat. The new Egyptian leader had a clear path ahead of him, as his bourgeois allies were in favour of his actions and the former allies that had offered too much resistance had already been purged from the government.

In short, Nasser’s bourgeois nationalism, far from strengthening the position of Egyptian workers, had left them too weak to respond effectively to Sadat’s economic ‘reforms’. In spite of all of the progressive concessions they had received from Nasser, their independence and democratic voice had been taken away. The bourgeois nationalist regime, meanwhile, by hiding the true interests of the workers behind a smokescreen of progressive nationalist rhetoric, had simply served as a bridge from colonialism to capitalism.

Essentially, progress under Nasser’s bourgeois nationalism had been temporary, filling a gap while European colonialism declined and US imperialism “acquired its hegemonic strength at a global level”. By the 1970s, the “Post-War Boom” was over, and the USA was beginning its “policy of recolonization”, liquidating the “state economic structures created by bourgeois nationalist movements” and ensuring that such movements would find it almost impossible to re-emerge. What had been ‘revolutionary’ factions in their time had now been “totally integrated” into the capitalist establishment, and most (like in Egypt) even became “direct agents of imperialist colonisation”. State companies would soon be privatised, and “the vast majority of concessions made to the previous generation” of workers would be done away with.

Today, such movements have “much smaller margins” for giving concessions to the masses, Iturbe insists, primarily due to the dominance of neoliberal globalisation. As Trotsky said, the only group that can “achieve the aim of national independence” from imperialism is “the revolutionary movement of the working masses”, and not that of a capitalist elite.⁹⁶ In other words, only a popular, democratically organised mass movement of workers in Egypt, and elsewhere, will be able to end the dominance of an exploitative and authoritarian capitalist economic system. As will be seen in Part Three of this book, the independent,

⁹⁶ <http://www.litci.org/index.php/especiales/cuba-y-venezuela/item/2677-pasado-y-presente-del-nacionalismo-burgues#.VCr0uxaGcSE>

democratic voice and autonomy of the People is what must guide their advancement towards a more just and equal society. The corruption of bourgeois nationalism in Egypt is just one example which shows that undemocratic capitalist leadership is not the path forward.

Conclusion

Whilst I have sought to examine the weaknesses of Nasser's bourgeois nationalism in this chapter, arguing that a similar political model cannot truly bring progress to the Middle East, it is clear that his regime was certainly progressive, at least in some ways. It challenged the reigning systems in the region, abandoning monarch-based politics and standing up to imperialist interference. It also made positive concessions to the Egyptian people (while weakening their independent and democratic voice in the process). In addition, it helped to spread anti-imperialism through the region, showing that an alternative to the status quo was in fact possible. Although his ideology was ultimately doomed to failure, as I have argued above, it pushed the region one step further forward.

In many ways, however, Nasserism also influenced the rise of Ba'athism in the Middle East, which would soon reveal a much darker side to Arab nationalism. Taking advantage of the errors of Nasser and his supporters in the region, Ba'athism also benefitted from the popularity of Arab nationalism at the time, which Nasser had helped to spearhead. In Chapter Three, I will look at the effect that Ba'athism had on Iraq and Syria, and how its mistakes and gradual downfall have played an important part in the growth of extremist Islamist movements in the Middle East.

3) Ba'athism and Ethnic Arab Nationalism

Ba'athism is an ideology that arose alongside Nasserism in the mid-twentieth century which also sought to unify Arabs in opposition to Western imperialism in the Middle East. The former, however, was initially focussed more on the development and creation of a unified Arab state than the latter. Like Nasserism, it was a largely **secular ideology**, with more links to ethnicity than to religion. As it sought to push imperialist forces out of the region and unite the Arab World, Ba'athism theoretically became a threat to both Western economic interests and to the West's proxy force in the region – Israel.

In 1907, the British Prime Minister wrote the Bannerman Report, in which he spoke of how the Arabs controlled “spacious territories teeming with manifest and hidden resources”, and dominated “the intersections of world routes”. He warned that, if a unified Arab state could ever be formed, this state “would then take the fate of the world into its hands and would separate Europe from the rest of the world”.⁹⁷ As seen in my essay about Israel⁹⁸, imperialists considered the creation of a non-Arab nation (i.e. Israel) in the Middle East as a way of **ensuring the Arab world remained divided, and thus that the interests of Western capitalists were protected**. Any force, therefore, that opposed Israel or sought to bring about Arab unity (as both Nasser and the Ba'athists did) was inevitably considered a danger to Western interests in the Middle East.

Although Arab unity was theoretically the most important part of Ba'athist ideology, neither of the ruling Ba'ath parties in the Middle East actually focussed on the unification of the Arab World as a priority once in government. In the end, the ideology was hijacked by charismatic figures, who used their authority to benefit themselves and the circles of power surrounding them. As a result, “the likes of **Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad**”, representing both the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'athist regimes, are often accused of having “**corrupted and co-opted**” Ba'athism, by repressing criticism of their ideology and actions through authoritarian governance.⁹⁹ In this chapter, I will look at how Ba'athist politics evolved in Syria and Iraq under Assad and Hussein, and how their administrations seriously damaged the cause of secular ‘progressivism’ in the Middle East through their nepotism and repression.

Nationalism in the Middle East

In 2013, Michael Bolt reflected on academic Fred Halliday's statement that Middle Eastern nationalisms had been “modern, contingent, confused and instrumental ideologies”. Bolt touches on how both Nasserism and Ba'athism, as nationalist forces in the region, sought both autonomy from imperialist powers and the entrenchment of “a sense of unity and identity”. Both political philosophies, he asserts, emerged “from the nineteenth century or later”, were “man-made” rather than a natural human condition, and were “largely **constructed from above**”. He also argues that their forms of nationalism had an “inconsistent and often divided nature”, and that they were essentially used “by political leaderships in or out of power to **serve their particular ends**”.

In both Nasserism and Ba'athism, Bolt suggests, **nationalism served as “a tool”**, rather than a firm political ideology to which leaders were truly committed. Although scholars following a ‘Primordialist’ narrative believe “national identities are a ‘natural’ part of human beings” (i.e. that similar ethnic, linguistic, and cultural features facilitate co-existence), those following a “Modernist” narrative tend to emphasise that “nationalist ideologies and the state system are modern”. Therefore, a Modernist would believe

⁹⁷ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/07/22/blinded-by-israel-visionless-in-gaza/>

⁹⁸ <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

⁹⁹ http://www.academia.edu/1787409/Rise_and_Fall_of_Baathism

“national identities” to be “recent and novel”, while being “products of processes such as “capitalism, industrialism, the emergence of the bureaucratic state, urbanization and secularism””. Ernest Gellner, for example, argues that “**nations as a natural, God given way of classifying men... are a myth**”.

Scholars following an “Ethno-symbolist” narrative, meanwhile, believe that the foundation of a nation relies very much on a “pre-existing foundation of myths, memories, values, and symbols”. Whilst these are not necessarily ‘natural’ parts of human beings, neither are they simply products of the processes outlined by Modernists. Therefore, as Bolt shows, one’s interpretation of nationalism very much depends on whether one believes **national identities** are a naturally-determined phenomenon or simply a **manipulation of pre-existing similarities or myths by self-interested political groups**.

The Move from Nasserism to Ba’athism

In the Middle East, the fall of the Ottoman Empire was a key determining factor in the development of nationalism. Previously, citizens of the empire had experienced a certain “cultural autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman state” but, when this system ended, **nationalism began to develop as a ““reactive” phenomenon**”. Although the Arab awakening of the nineteenth century had already seen activists “struggling against policies of Turkification” within the empire, they finally saw their chance, when the empire fell, to step into the vacuum left behind. According to Bolt, the Arab movement may have even played a “pivotal role” in opposing “the political reforms” made in the Ottoman Empire after the 1908 Young Turk revolution. In a desperate (but abortive) attempt to save their empire, Turks had sought to centralise their power and make Turkish the principal “means of communication and as the language of government”. This nascent Turkish nationalism would prove “very divisive” in the empire (as it would later on within the Republic of Turkey itself), and arguably contributed to its eventual collapse.

After the “Arab revolt of 1916 against the Ottoman Empire”, Arab nationalism increased in popularity, and would soon have to fight a new enemy in British and French colonialism when the Arab population of the region was “severely and artificially divided into several states under direct or indirect European control”. Having finally escaped the clutches of the Ottoman Empire, they were not prepared to embrace their new colonial masters with open arms. Consequently, colonialist presence in the Middle East actually acted as a “catalyst for the spread of Arab nationalist ideas”. The failure of numerous isolated rebellions, however, made it very clear that there was a “need for solidarity” between Arabs if their cause was ever to succeed. **Arab nationalism** (and state-led nationalism), therefore, **became both a “response to domination by external forces” and “an instrument of emancipation”**. Having seen how Europeans had created nation states, the political elites of the Middle East were intent on emphasising their own claims to nationhood. As a result, they would “highlight the achievements of the Arabs and reinterpret their contributions to areas of science and government” in order to convince both citizens and states of that right.

As seen in Chapter Two of this book, Nasserism was the first school of ‘progressive’ Arab Nationalism to truly gain success in the Arab World. Far from a pan-Arabist movement at the start, the Free Officers’ revolution had been “primarily an Egyptian affair”, and the main aim had been to exert national sovereignty in Egypt. Pan-Arabism, Bolt says, would only be “added later on” as a means of exerting greater Egyptian influence in the region. He affirms, as I showed in Chapter Two, that Nasserism had “no clear programme” apart from getting rid of the king and the British, and pan-Arabism was never as high on Egypt’s agenda as national sovereignty was. When Nasser spoke of the ideology, Bolt stresses, his words lacked “much of the emotional resonance that he expressed towards Egypt”, though he did recognise that Egyptians and Arabs had “common problems”, and that solidarity was

therefore a “practical utility” for both of them. As a result, Nasser adapted policies “at his whim” for “merely pragmatic” purposes, with his pan-Arabist rhetoric having “evolved from day to day” as a way to “aid [his] anti-imperial efforts”, maintain Egyptian independence, and ensure Egypt’s emergence “as a dominant force in the Arab world”. For Bolt, Nasser used such rhetoric to “shrewdly attain regional hegemony”, whilst in reality remaining “ambivalent” to ideas of Arab unity (as his initial “rebuffing of... Syrian unification efforts in 1955-56” suggested). Only in 1958 did he see Arab unification as beneficial to his own cause, pushing forward with his own plan to unite Syria and Egypt.

Ba’athism, meanwhile, arose as a force which was theoretically more committed to Arab unity. Unlike Nasser, it actually had “regional offices in several Arab countries”, reflecting its genuine theoretical aim of building a Ba’athist movement that could gain success throughout the region. Also, it “was not tied to a specific leader” in the same way as Nasserism, though it was “organised along hierarchical lines”. Similarly to Nasser, Ba’athists were in favour of a “mild form” of socialism for practical purposes, but in reality were even less committed to “Marx and the emancipation of the working class” than Stalinist Russia was. The reason for this relative ideological apathy was that their “paramount objective” was “the unification of the Arab world” (a very ethno-centric goal). In this way, they clearly had very different priorities from Nasser.

In summary, Bolt suggests that Arab nationalism served as a political instrument for both Nasser and the Ba’athists. While, for Nasser, the aim was “achieve regional hegemony and to ascertain Egyptian independence”, the Ba’athists had “a firmer ideological grounding” which they hoped would eventually lead to the establishment of “a single pan-Arab state”. Unlike under Nasser, however, there was a lot of division within Ba’athism itself, as would eventually become apparent with the split between the Syrian and Iraqi branches. This division would be exploited by smaller and smaller cliques, which would corrupt Ba’athism for their own purposes. Colloquially speaking, **nationalism would eventually turn out to be the gateway drug to a form of fascism.**¹⁰⁰ In the meantime, however, the sixties would see the popularity of Ba’athism increase and that of Nasserism decrease

The Rise of Ba’athism

The political thought behind Ba’athism was developed primarily by Zaki al-Arsuzi, Michel Aflaq, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, though, as mentioned above, the movement was divided from the very beginning. All had been educated in France, and Arsuzi, for example, had been inspired whilst studying there by the French Revolution, Marxism, and the unification movements of Germany and Italy. In 1939, the three tried to establish a party but, because of personal differences between Aflaq and Arsuzi, the attempt was unsuccessful. Arsuzi founded the Arab Ba’ath Party a year later, while Aflaq founded the Arab Ihya Movement (which later substituted the word Ihya for the word Ba’ath). Arsuzi was suspicious of Aflaq’s group, and initially thought it was part of an “imperialist plot” to prevent his party from gaining followers.¹⁰¹

In 1941, the two groups disagreed over how to respond to the “Nazi-inspired” coup in Iraq and the subsequent Anglo-Iraqi war, with Aflaq supporting the movement of the coup leader, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, and Arsuzi opposing it.¹⁰² Aflaq’s popularity grew as a result of this decision, while Arsuzi’s fell, showing to a certain extent the fascist sympathies of a number of Arab nationalists. To add insult to injury, Arsuzi was expelled from Syria by Vichy French authorities later that year. Aflaq’s movement, meanwhile, went from strength to strength, gaining even more support after backing the Lebanese war of independence in

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/08/02/nasserism-and-bathism-modern-contingent-confused-and-instrumental/>

¹⁰¹ Curtis, Michael ed. (1971). *People and Politics in the Middle East: The Arab-Israeli Conflict-Its Background and the Prognosis for Peace*. Transaction Publishers. P.139.

¹⁰² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13610702>

1943. Four years later, the movement merged with the Arab Socialist Party of Akram al-Hawrani, and the **Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party** was formed.

Aflaq opposed monarchies, and believed progressive economic policies must accompany the process of decolonisation. Considering that the old ruling classes had to be overthrown, he argued that a secular society needed to be created by separating Islam from the state. The former elites, meanwhile, would be replaced by a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries, just like in the Russian Revolution. However, Aflaq's Ba'athism did not advocate class war, and rejected the materialism of communism. It thus refused to take sides in the Cold War, favouring instead membership of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Language and history were seen to be the main factors uniting the Arab World, rather than socio-economic factors and, for this reason, Ba'athism never truly sought to destroy the capitalist dichotomy between the exploitative and the exploited classes of the region. Officially, 'unity, liberty, and socialism' were the main principles of Ba'athism, though the latter two were considered to be more of a means of attaining the first. In other words, there was never really a strong ideological commitment to either freedom or socialism. The Ba'ath Party, just like the Bolsheviks in Russia, would take charge of everything until the uneducated masses became enlightened and the reactionary and conservative elements had been dealt with. Theoretically, it would take political power, by any means necessary, and then set about transforming society (whether the majority of the population liked it or not). In essence, the **basis for authoritarianism** was apparent from the very beginning within Ba'athism.

For Aflaq, Ba'athism could not succeed if it had control of only one 'country', and the whole of the Arab World would need to evolve into one entity in order for the ideology to flourish. In his opinion, the creation of the Arab League in 1945 was a major obstacle for the emergence of a single Arab nation, as it functioned as an advocate for the interests of existent ruling classes in distinct 'countries'. In other words, he was not opposed to the rule of an elite if it was 'enlightened' (in his view), but was opposed if he considered it to go against Ba'athist ideology. Under Aflaq, no concepts, institutions, or rules for the protection of liberty were developed, and his belief in the need for a one-party state led by the Ba'ath Party seemed to contradict clearly his call for 'unity, liberty, and socialism'. Meanwhile, in failing to analyse the global political situation as one of a struggle between exploitative and exploited classes, Aflaq had instead created a form of **ethnocentric thought** which was antagonistic to socialist ideals of equality for all. The interests of the Arab World were seen to be more important than those of workers in the rest of the world, and this ethnocentrism reduced solidarity between different ethnic groups, eventually leading to the takeover of Ba'athism by small, tight-knit elites with racist tendencies.

Socialist economics, meanwhile, had not been adopted by Ba'athists "out of books, abstractions, humanism, or pity, but rather out of need", according to Aflaq.¹⁰³ Essentially, socialist measures had nothing to do with ideological commitment, and everything to do with pragmatism. Knowing that workers would have to be on the side of the Ba'athists if their aims were to be achieved, he believed socialist policies would be a successful way of attracting them. Instead of choosing to set them against their exploitative masters, however, he shunned a class-based rhetoric, affirming that all classes in the Arab World were part of the fight against the "capitalist domination of the foreign powers". Therefore, he insisted, there was no point in setting different local groups against each other.¹⁰⁴ However, his short-sightedness, in focussing only on an 'external enemy', would prove to be one of the causes for the weak ideology of Ba'athism, which would eventually facilitate its corruption.

¹⁰³ Salem, Paul (1994). *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World*. Syracuse University Press. P.68.

¹⁰⁴ Salem, Paul (1994) *Ibid*.

According to Cyprian Blamires, Ba'athism under Aflaq was the “**Middle Eastern variant of fascism**”, seeking to “synthesize radical, illiberal nationalism and non-Marxist socialism”. In fact, Aflaq may even have been “directly inspired by certain fascist and Nazi theorists”, as his support of the 1941 Iraqi coup would suggest.¹⁰⁵ Arsuzi, meanwhile, may have been less influenced by fascism, but he allegedly believed in the “racial superiority of the Arabs” nonetheless.¹⁰⁶ When Saddam Hussein gained power in Iraq decades later, the fascist tendencies of Ba'athist would become a lot clearer, with the leader favouring harsh anti-Iranian propaganda during the Iran-Iraq War. From 1979 onwards, he even forced tens of thousands of “Iraqis of Iranian descent” to leave for Iran.¹⁰⁷ In the same period, his foster-father was allowed to publish a book called ‘Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews, and Flies’ through “the state press”. Inside the text, Persians were referred to as “animals”, while Jews were called “a mixture of the dirt and leftovers of diverse people”.¹⁰⁸ Driven by such ideas, the Ba'athists under Saddam asserted that “no approval should be given to [party] members who plan to marry [someone] from a non-Arab origin”.¹⁰⁹ [More on Saddam's particular brand of Ba'athism will be covered in Section B of this chapter.]

A) Ba'athism in Syria

The Rise of the Military Committee

Syria was the first regional branch of Ba'athism, and one of the party's first tasks was to respond to the military dictatorship of Colonel Adib Shishakli, whose first coup in 1949 had been facilitated by the CIA “in order to complete an oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia to the Mediterranean Sea”.¹¹⁰ Struggling to keep control, he led another coup in 1951, and subsequently ran Syria until 1954, with his Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) adopting a policy of pan-Arabism and anti-Zionism whilst also seeking to maintain good relations with the West. Having repressed all political parties and sent Ba'athist leaders into exile, he soon had to fight back against a popular insurgency. After a successful popular coup in **1954**, a form of democracy was installed, and the Ba'athists soon became one of the country's most successful parties. After a Ba'athist colonel was assassinated in 1955 by an SSNP member, however, the Ba'athists and their allies led a crackdown on the party.

One focus for the Ba'athists in government was to seek unity with Nasser's government in Egypt, sympathising as they did with his pan-Arabist policies and, in 1957, they partnered with the Syrian Communist Party in the hope of weakening Syria's conservatives. When Egypt was finally in favour of unity with Syria, Ba'athists voted to establish the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958. This move, however, meant that the Ba'ath Party had to be dissolved, as Nasser believed complete commitment to his cause was necessary. As a result, Syrian General Salah Jadid and other disgruntled officers founded the Military Committee in 1959, which sought to end the union.

By **1961**, the “authoritarian and centralist structure of the UAR had given Egypt practical domination over Syria in all fields”, and Nasser had begun to use ex-Ba'ath members as scapegoats for the failures of the UAR. At the end of September, a **military coup, “backed by landowners [and] the bourgeoisie”**, led to the restoration of an independent Syria. With a “democratic covering”, these elites undid Nasser's nationalisation measures and agrarian reforms, and “turned a great many peasants and workers against them” in the process. In the following year, there were a number of coup attempts, and the Ba'ath Party was soon

¹⁰⁵ Blamires, Cyprian (2006). World Fascism: A Historical Encyclopedia 1. ABC-CLIO. P.84.

¹⁰⁶ Ma'oz, Moshe (2005). Arab-Jewish Relations: From Conflict to Resolution?: Essays in Honour of Moshe Ma'oz. Sussex Academic Press. P.141.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ac0d54.html>

¹⁰⁸ Karsh, Efraim and Rautsi, Inari (1991). Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography. Futura Publications. P.15.

¹⁰⁹ Sassoon, Joseph (2012). Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. P.43

¹¹⁰ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/12/energy-geopolitics-and-the-u-s-mission-in-iraq-and-syria/>

reassembled. Its “reincarnation”, however, “was no longer identical with the old party which preceded the union with Egypt”.

In March 1963, “the military group of the Ba’ath”, called the “**Military Committee**”, carried out a **coup**, and soon sought to consolidate its own power “from above”. All “contact between military and civilian groups” was soon prohibited, “except at the highest level”, and the committee had to “be consulted on all major decisions”. After a year in power, “the Military Committee [had] managed to get rid of the leftists” in the Ba’ath Party and, with it only just having been re-established, it was easy for the ruling factions to “winnow out unwelcome individuals or branches and admit new members of its own choosing”.

The new leadership of the Ba’athists contained “**not a single worker** or son of a worker”, and “appeared to have **no consistent ideological or political principles**”. Just as Stalin had done in the Soviet Union decades before, the Military Committee used left-wingers to push out right-wingers in the party, and then right-wingers to push out left-wingers. When it led another coup in 1966, led by General Salah Jadid, civilian Ba’ath leaders supported it, not even contemplating “taking a stand against” what “was, and still is, the true power behind the scenes of the Ba’ath regime”. The Military Committee had essentially become the essence of the new Ba’ath movement, and Aflaq and al-Bitar “were expelled from their own party”. Effectively, it was now “a bureaucratic apparatus headed by the military, whose daily life and routine [were] shaped by rigid military oppression”. Reflecting on the domination of military bureaucracy in the ruling regime, Abraham Ben-Tzur would soon refer to the party in Syria as ‘**neo-Ba’athist**’.¹¹¹

After the 1966 coup, the Ba’ath movement in the Arab World suffered a schism, with one half following the Syrian line, and the other following the Iraqi line. In Syria, Arsuzi (an Alawite) was suddenly resurrected as the founder of Ba’athism, while Aflaq would become the father of Iraqi Ba’athism. Until 1970, General Jadid would govern Syria, including several communists in his government and showing clear Soviet influence on his regime. He sought state ownership over industry and foreign trade, and made agrarian reforms. His government also included many Alawites, marking the increasingly sectarian nature of the upper echelons of Ba’athism. When he called for a people’s war against Israel, however, overseeing the devastation of Syrian forces in the Six Day War, his popularity fell significantly. Defence Minister **Hafez al-Assad** subsequently called for a more moderate stance, and for relations to be improved with Syria’s conservative neighbours, gradually increasing his own influence over the Military Committee. Following a purge of Jadid loyalists in 1969, the path had been cleared for Assad to definitively take power of the Syrian Ba’athist regime.

The Assad Dynasty

Jadid, aware of what was happening, tried to fire Assad in 1970, though the latter already had other plans. Leading a ‘Corrective Movement’ against Jadid, who was arrested and kept in prison until his death in 1993, Assad finally took control of the country. Soon, the government revolved around the Assad family, which favoured its fellow Alawites in an extremely disproportionate manner. A leadership cult built around Assad was now supported by the army, the Mukhabarat (the intelligence service), and an elite group of Alawites, and the General set about running the country according to his own interests. Ba’athist co-founder Jamal al-Atassi would later say that, “despite its socialist slogans, the state is run by a class who has made a fortune without contributing—a *nouvelle bourgeoisie parasitaire*”.¹¹² This parasitic bourgeoisie, he thought, represented the corruption of

¹¹¹ Ben-Tzur, Avraham (1968). The Neo-Ba’th Party of Syria <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259704>

¹¹² Viorst, Milton (1995). Sandcastles: The Arabs in Search of the Modern World. Syracuse University Press. P.146.

Ba'athism in Syria and, far from following a specific ideology, demonstrated a form of pragmatic and self-interested populism.

Membership of the Ba'ath Party expanded rapidly after 1970, as Assad sought to turn it from a vanguard party into an organisation of the masses (and therefore increase his ability to control it by diluting the voices of the party's political theoreticians). Opportunism grew, especially as people had to be members of the Ba'ath Party in order to take posts in, for example, the education sector. Freedom of thought was curtailed, while conformity and internal discipline were emphasised. As unconditional fidelity to Assad was the order of the day, the leader had actually considered abolishing the Ba'ath Party, but instead inflated it to neutralise the influence of its left-wingers. It was "**de-ideologised**", "restructured", and simply "became an instrument for generating mass support and political control".¹¹³ Ba'athism had now lost its independence from the state.

In order to bring other parties into line, meanwhile, Assad created the **National Progressive Front** (NPF) in 1972, forcing parties like the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) into either illegality or submission to the dominance of the NPF. Although the SCP would initially choose submission, the NPF's support for pro-Western right-wingers in Lebanon in 1976 divided the party, with a faction of the SCP led by Riad al-Turk opting for illegality. Assad's rapprochement with the West would continue, though, with Syria receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in US foreign aid in the late 1970s.¹¹⁴ As a result, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita grew slowly, though it experienced a small setback in the mid-1980s. Between 2003 and the start of the Civil War in 2011, the country's GDP began to grow more rapidly, though the distribution of its wealth would be firmly concentrated in the hands of Syrian elites.¹¹⁵ In short, Assad had "brought stability" to the country, but had done so "through repression".¹¹⁶

Although the Ba'ath Party had immense influence on Syrian society, the "real power was increasingly collected in the hands of President Assad, his family, close advisers, the military and security services". To make the matter even more complex, a large number of these figures were members of "Syria's minority groups, including the president's own Alawite sect", which would almost certainly have lost their lucrative position in society if the regime had been toppled. The "top officials in the Baath Party", meanwhile, also led "a privileged life", making it very unlikely for them to ever betray their colleagues. In spite of its secondary role behind the Assad-led 'power clique', the Ba'ath Party would nonetheless be the target of blame for the "corruption, nepotism and stagnation" in Syria on numerous occasions. As a result, Ba'ath officials were attacked in the 1970s and 80s by Sunni Islamists, though the latter were then brutally suppressed (like in Hama in 1982).¹¹⁷

When Syria got involved in the Lebanese Civil War in the late 1970s, Assad actually forged a "strategic alliance" with the SSNP (which Ba'athists had helped to overthrow from power two decades previously). Having advocated the unification of the "fertile crescent", or "Greater Syria", the latter saw that the Syrian regime best represented "their choices and attitudes, whether in politics or ideology", even though "many SSNP members felt unfairly harassed by Syrian security services on Syrian soil". Nonetheless, they shared the same Islamist and left-wing enemies, with their founder Antoun Saadeh even being "among the first to warn against the danger of Wahhabism and the risk it [posed] to the Levant". Saadeh had insisted that "the movement led by Ibn Saud carries a political threat to Syria".

¹¹³ George, Alan (2003). Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom. Zed Books. P.70.

¹¹⁴ <http://country-facts.findthebest.com/1/183/Syrian-Arab-Republic>

¹¹⁵ http://kushnirs.org/macroeconomics/gdp/gdp_syria.html#p2

¹¹⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>

¹¹⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18582755>

After Assad's death in 2000, his son Bashar was expected to make some changes to the country, but the new leader did not oblige. Intimidation of groups like the SSNP "slowly receded", but the country's political system was essentially unchanged.¹¹⁸ In 2005, the Ba'ath Party remained the "leader of state and society", and parties outside the NPF remained illegal.¹¹⁹ In fact, reforms only began to come during the civil war in 2011, with Bashar holding a referendum on a new constitution in 2012. Although this change meant that the Ba'ath Party would no longer be considered the sole 'guiding force' of Syrian politics, it did not mean that Bashar or his military clique would step aside. Therefore, the reform was not significant enough to convince dissidents to put down their arms (though their receipt of significant financial support from oppressive Gulf monarchies and NATO members also had a substantial impact on their decision to keep fighting). [More information on the Syrian Civil War will be analysed in Chapter Eight of this book.]

Under the Assads, the percentage of women in parliament was around 29% - higher than the global average of 17%, and the country's literacy rate rose to 84.1%. Its proven natural gas reserves, meanwhile, stood at 240,700,000,000 cubic meters, and its proven oil reserves stood at 2,500,000,000 barrels, making it a noteworthy supplier of natural resources¹²⁰ and the "most significant producer of crude oil in the Eastern Mediterranean" (perhaps explaining the West's interest in installing a submissive regime in the country). In 2012, Syria's unemployment rate was around 8.3%,¹²¹ and its economy was considered to be "a major player" in the world and "a leader among middle-eastern countries". Although the country's economy was said to be "very diverse and stable", however, "the majority of Syrians" still struggled "to earn a decent living".¹²²

In 2002, US Undersecretary for State John Bolton said Syria was "acquiring weapons of mass destruction", in an attempt to include the country in the list of nations the US government wanted to overthrow. Two years later, the USA imposed "economic sanctions on Syria over what it [called] its support for terrorism". If the US-led invasion of Iraq had been more successful or popular, Syria may well have been the next country on the list. However, the quagmire of Iraq meant that only Israel was prepared to attack Syria and, in 2007, the Zionist regime led an aerial strike on what it called "a nuclear facility under construction" in the country. After this attack, Western relations with Syria thawed, though the USA would renew its sanctions against the Assad regime in 2010.¹²³ Amid clear hostility from the West and its allies, the scene had long been set for destabilisation of the Syrian Ba'ath regime in the name of the USA's so-called 'War on Terror' (even though Syria vehemently opposed the kind of terrorism responsible for the 2001 attacks in the USA). [The twenty-first century imperialist assault on the Middle East, and more specifically on Syria, will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Six and Eight.]

The Role of the Syrian Communist Party

The Syrian Communist Party (or SCP) had been a "bitter adversary of the Baath Party in the late 1950s" but, as seen earlier in this section, it soon became the "second largest legal political party in Syria and an important constituent element of the NPF". Its leaders eventually became an important bridge between the Assad regime and the USSR, helping to facilitate their positive relationship. The early 1980s, however, saw the SCP "temporarily banned", though it was "restored to favour" in 1986 as a "concession to the Soviet Union".

¹¹⁸ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18502>

¹¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18582755>

¹²⁰ <http://country-facts.findthebest.com/1/183/Syrian-Arab-Republic>

¹²¹ <http://globaledege.msu.edu/countries/syria/economy>

¹²² <http://www.made-in-syria.com/economy-in-syria.html>

¹²³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995>

In return for its legalisation, the SCP was forced to purge the “SCP Central Committee members who had precipitated the rift with Assad through strident criticism of the regime”. In 1984, for example, Khalid Hammami had expressed “surprisingly candid” criticism, saying that Syria had “abandoned its progressive socioeconomic policy” and that the “ruling quarters [were] suspicious and fearful of the masses”. The Ba’ath Party’s restrictions on democratic freedoms had also been condemned by SCP members, with Yusuf Faysal having called out the reign of a “**parasitic and bureaucratic bourgeoisie**” in the Syrian government. Nonetheless, the SCP’s role as a “silent partner” of the Ba’ath Party meant that criticism was generally limited to “lower level Syrian politicians”, avoiding attacks against high-ranking party members as much as was possible.¹²⁴

How the Ba’athists ‘Mobilised the Masses’

In 2012, the BBC spoke about how Syrian Ba’athists knew very well “how to mobilise the masses for political activities” through the power of their “vast organisation that [had] infiltrated every aspect of public life”. This proficient mobilisation, it said, had been crucial in ensuring that the main Ba’athist leaders stayed loyal to Bashar al-Assad in spite of the “violent crackdown on anti-government protests that began in March 2011”.

In an attempt to attract Syrian socialists to Ba’athism, the party had merged with “Akram Hawrani’s Arab Socialist Party” in 1953 in what would prove to be a “shrewd alliance” which “helped the new group quickly become a serious challenge to its rivals”. As seen previously in this section of the chapter, however, it was army officers, such as Hafez al-Assad, who would eventually play “the leading role in establishing Ba’athist rule” in Syria. As a result, many civilian Ba’athists supported the split in the Ba’athist movement, while Assad sought to divide the party even more by condemning “Aflaq and other veteran Baathists to death” as they and their supporters fled to Iraq.

Only under Assad was the Syrian Constitution amended (in 1973) “to give the Ba’ath Party unique status as the “leader of the state and society””. This change meant that the responsibility of the party was to function as the ‘middle-man’ for the government, telling “regional representatives” what they were expected to do and reporting back to the government on the “mood” of the general population”. Thus, the party played a significant role in ‘mobilising the masses’.

Schools, unions, and the army, meanwhile, were heavily controlled, with the Ba’ath Party exercising hegemony over almost every aspect of Syrian society and reserving “many posts in the public sector, the military and government” for Ba’athists. Consequently, party membership skyrocketed, as people sought to bypass this political discrimination. In 2010, for example, around 1.2 million people (or 10% of the population) belonged to the party, while support for other parties was only permitted if they belonged to the NPF and accepted the Ba’athists’ ‘leading role’ in society. Through party membership, the Assad regime had effectively created a vital tool for mobilising people in its favour.¹²⁵

B) Ba’athism in Iraq

I) The Rise of Nationalism in Iraq

In order to understand Ba’athist success in Iraq, it is important to look at the factors that saw nationalism rise to prominence in the country. As seen in Chapter Two, this political phenomenon was largely a reactionary response to colonial exploitation and oppression,

¹²⁴ <http://countrystudies.us/syria/55.htm>

¹²⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18582755>

though some nationalist movements would prove to be more 'progressive' than others. In this first subsection on Ba'athism in Iraq, I will explore the reasons for civilian discontent in the country in the early twentieth century, and the effect it had on the popularity of nationalism.

British Colonialism and the Early 20th Century in Iraq

According to Libcom.org, Iraqi workers were subjected to "brutal exploitation and repression" regardless of the government in power in the twentieth century, whilst at the same time facing the "bullets and bombs of the global capitalist powers" who sought to control the oil wealth of their country. The website also claims that opposition political parties, like the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), betrayed those they claimed to fight for on numerous occasions, and "consistently made deals with both Iraqi regimes and the global powers". Nonetheless, the Iraqi working class raised their voices on numerous occasions, and often suffered the consequences as a result, though their actions did manage on certain occasions to topple governments or sabotage their war efforts.

At the start of the twentieth century, rule in the Ottoman territories where Iraq would later be formed was "based in the cities", while the countryside was generally "dominated by rural tribal groups". Although the empire gave "concessions to prospect for oil" in Baghdad and Mosul to Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany in 1912, the British army decided to occupy Basra and Baghdad when the Ottomans sided with Germany in the First World War. The majority of Iraq soon followed, and "colonial direct rule" was implemented, with "British Mesopotamia" being created.

The first real opposition the British faced came from Kurdish tribes in the north, where there were "constant risings" in 1919 and 1920. Though there was "little demand for a separate Kurdish nation state", tribes were nonetheless committed to fighting "any external state authority". In response, the Royal Air Force (RAF) was brought into Iraq to bomb the rebellious Kurds. According to Wing-Commander Arthur Harris (later involved in the horrific bombing of Dresden in World War Two), "within 45 minutes a full-size village [could] be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured". Another "leading British officer", meanwhile, would affirm that the "only way to deal with the tribes was "wholesale slaughter"".

This arrogant and inhumane British position was unfortunately rife at the time in the colonial army. With domination in mind, dialogue and compromise were simply not on the table. In fact, the RAF even asked for "chemical weapons to use "against recalcitrant Arabs as (an) experiment"". Fortunately, "technical problems [prevented] the use of gas" in this case, but the will was clearly there. Winston Churchill, for example, shockingly affirmed that he was "strongly in favour of using poisonous gas against uncivilised tribes", as it would "cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror" without leaving "serious permanent effects on most of those affected". (The gas Churchill was referring to here would allegedly have had the power to "kill children and sickly persons" and "permanently damage eyesight").

As the British and French split up the former Ottoman territories between themselves, Britain began to impose "tight controls" in Iraq and elsewhere, "collecting taxes" and initiating "forced labour schemes". As a consequence, there was an "armed revolt" in southern and central Iraq in June 1920, and Britain lost control.¹²⁶ Although around 450 British troops were killed, the subsequent retaliation saw "about ten thousand Arabs" killed.

¹²⁶ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

Army officer T.E. Lawrence even went as far as to say “our government is worse than the old Turkish system”.¹²⁷ By the time the rebellion had been crushed, “whole villages [had been] destroyed by British artillery”, and “suspected rebels [had been] shot without trial”. In fact, one report suggested that “men, women and children had been machine gunned as they fled from a village”. For those who claim British colonialism was civilising, these acts are simply one example of many showing why it was often, in reality, the complete opposite.

These horrific events, however, caused Britain to take a step back, replacing “direct colonial rule with an Arab administration” that would “serve British interests”. A king was crowned, but the “ultimate control” would remain with his British “advisers”. In 1924, however, resistance returned, and Britain’s minority Labour government felt it had to sanction “the use of the RAF against the Kurds” in Iraq once again. The “appalling” acts that followed would soon see “panic stricken tribespeople fleeing” into the desert.

In 1927, the “first substantial oil well” in Iraq was opened by the British-controlled **Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC)**, and the local countryside was decimated by spilled oil in the process. After three years, the British felt pressured once more to give Iraqis more power, and signed the Anglo-Iraq Treaty, though they would still maintain influence over Iraq’s foreign policy until 1957. Kurdish uprisings, meanwhile, were again quelled by the RAF. The following year, however, a general strike would see “thousands of workers and artisans” hit the streets to protest against “draconian new taxes” and for “unemployment compensation”. In 1932, Iraq officially became independent.

A year later, there was a month-long union boycott of the “British-owned Baghdad Electric Light and Power Company”, and the government responded by banning “unions and workers’ organisations” (which would go underground for ten years) and imprisoning their leaders. This crackdown facilitated the first “commercial export of oil” by the IPC the following year. Meanwhile, the government’s authoritarianism would continue, and its attempts to introduce conscription and place tribally-owned lands in private hands between 1935 and 1936 led to a series of rebellions (mostly in the south of Iraq). The air force bombed the rebels, there were summary executions, and Mussolini-admirer General Bakr Sidqi quickly installed a military government, repressing Iraqi left-wingers in the process. Subsequently, strikes spread “throughout the country”.

By 1939, the king “had become outspokenly anti-British” and, when he was killed in a car crash, demonstrations soon broke out, and the British Consul in the country was killed. The following year, a coup saw Iraq establish relations with Nazi Germany and refuse to support Britain in the Second World War unless it granted Syria and Palestine independence. As a response, Britain re-invaded the country, establishing martial law, hanging Arab nationalist leaders, and imprisoning around 1,000 people without trial. At the same time, the British failed to prevent a “pogrom in the Jewish area of Baghdad”, in which 150 Jews were killed.

In 1943, there were strikes over the shortage of food in Iraq, but they were “put down by the police”. Three years later, a strike by oil workers demanded “higher wages and other benefits”, and ten people died when “police [opened] fire on a mass meeting”. The Labour government in Britain, meanwhile, stayed quiet about this repression of strikers, and even moved troops towards the Iranian border when a strike broke out there soon afterwards. When “opposition papers criticising this move” were suppressed by the Iraqi government, more strikes soon began, leading eventually to the resignation of the cabinet.

¹²⁷ http://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/A_Report_on_Mesopotamia_by_T.E._Lawrence

In the run-up to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, there were yet more mass strikes and demonstrations. At the same time, a new Anglo-Iraqi treaty was signed, which extended "Britain's say in military policy until 1973", giving it the "right to return in [the] event of war". In response, students took to the streets, and the police shot four of them dead. **The Al-Wathba Uprising** subsequently began, with "militant demonstrations and riots" also representing citizens protesting "against bread shortages and rising prices" in Iraq. The police again opened fire, and murdered up to four hundred people before the end of January. The government resigned soon after, and the treaty with Britain was "repudiated". Nonetheless, strikes resumed in May, and the government and the IPC "cut off supplies of food and water to the strikers" in retaliation. The strikers marched on Baghdad, but were arrested in Fallujah before they could arrive. With war breaking out in Palestine, meanwhile, martial law was declared, demonstrations were banned, and Britain withdrew its troops from Iraq.

A year later, leaders of the Communist Party (ICP) were "publicly hanged in Baghdad" as a "warning to opponents" of the governing regime. In 1952, port workers went on strike and cut off the water and electricity supply to Basra. The police quickly moved in on them, and many strikers were killed as a result. Later in the year, students announced a strike, and there were "mass riots in most urban centres" in what was referred to as **al-Intifada**. After a police station and American "Information Office" were burned down, though, a military government took over, announcing curfews, martial law, and undertaking mass arrests. A number of newspapers were subsequently banned, and 18 demonstrators were killed.¹²⁸ The self-interested ruling elite of Iraq soon "followed the examples of Venezuela and of Saudi Arabia by demanding and receiving a 50 percent tax on all oil company profits made in the country". As a result, their "profits per ton on exported oil... more than doubled".¹²⁹

In 1954, the government passed legislation allowing it to "deport persons convicted of communism [or] anarchism", and to give the police force "new powers to stop meetings". When Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal two years later, though, shockwaves were sent to Iraq. "Huge demonstrations, strikes and riots spread" throughout the country, and the government declared martial law, closing "all colleges and secondary schools in Baghdad" in order to exert complete control over the public arena. Tensions were rising, and the current order would not be able to survive for much longer.¹³⁰

Qasim and the Iraqi Revolution of 1958

Iraqi Ba'athism developed largely as an independent force from Ba'athism in Syria. In fact, Ba'athists in Iraq received significant support from the CIA in their rise to power. The first key event in the ascent of the ideology in the country, however, came with the "popularly-backed coup" in 1958, in which a pro-Western ally was overthrown by a nationalist army officer named Qasim. The new Iraqi leader immediately "got recognized in Washington", though for all the wrong reasons. The most worrying thing for the West was that Qasim took Iraq out of "the US-initiated right-wing Baghdad Pact", which promised to hold back Soviet influence in the region. The new leader also decriminalised the ICP and, in 1961, set about "nationalizing foreign oil companies". In addition, he "resurrected a long-standing Iraqi claim to Kuwait", which was a key Western ally in the region. Such measures clearly had to be stopped, by any means necessary, even though Qasim was rapidly becoming "Iraq's most popular leader" in a long time.¹³¹

Qasim was rocketed into power by popular unrest in Iraq, which had been repressed violently by the country's 'security forces', and had seen dozens killed. Emulating Nasser's

¹²⁸ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹²⁹ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/54.htm>

¹³⁰ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹³¹ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html>

experience in Egypt, Qasim and his 'Free Officers' denounced imperialism and abolished the pro-Western monarchy. When crowds subsequently took to the streets, seeking to punish those perceived to have propped up the previous regime, a "number of US businessmen and Jordanian ministers" were killed, along with the Iraqi royal family. In order to stop the revolution from escaping their control, the 'revolutionary' officers imposed a curfew.

Qasim soon became prime minister, and he was backed by the ICP and "other leftists" in Iraq. In a move that marginalised religious communities, however, there were "public expressions of anti-clericalism", and even a "public burning of the Koran". Peasants in the south of Iraq, meanwhile, didn't wait for Qasim to come good on his promises of land reform, and decided to "take matters into their own hands". They looted the property of the landowners who had been imposed on them years before, burned their houses down, and destroyed "accounts and land registers". Witnessing the social revolution unfolding in Iraq, the USA sent 14,000 marines to Lebanon, though "plans for a joint US/British invasion of Iraq" would collapse when they realised they had insufficient support from within the country itself.¹³² Nonetheless, the West would soon find proxies in Iraq willing to overthrow Qasim's regime.

Qasim showed no interest in sectarianism, and he "cancelled all the restrictions against the Jews" in Iraq. However, he was not in favour of giving religious groups any special privileges either, allowing the "confiscation and destruction of [a] Jewish cemetery, located in the middle of the capital, in order to build a tower".¹³³ His 'progressive' alliance with the Iraqi left wing, meanwhile, saw "Ba'athists and nationalists form underground anti-communist hit squads" to counter the left's influence on him. By 1961, around "300 people [had] been murdered in this way in Baghdad and around 400 in Mosul". In 1959, anti-communist Arab nationalists staged an unsuccessful coup in Mosul, defeated by popular resistance. At the same time, "a young Saddam Hussein" led a "failed assassination attempt on Qasim", which had been backed by the CIA.¹³⁴ All of these plotters, however, had touched a nerve with the Iraqi people, and riots soon saw "the rich... attacked and their houses looted" in both Mosul and Kirkuk.

These violent actions encouraged Qasim to exercise his authority more strictly, though, and he would crack down on his "radical opposition" the following year, sacking six thousand militant workers, and seeing "several Communist Party members... sentenced to death". In spite of his previous alliance with Iraqi communists, it was now very clear that Qasim was not a communist himself. Nonetheless, the ICP was "urged on by Moscow" to continue supporting his government. **Kurdish nationalists**, however, did launch a war against Qasim (fuelled by their desire for greater autonomy and, allegedly, supported by the West and its regional proxies). The government showed neither mercy nor a desire to deal with the Kurds, bombing five hundred of their villages and leaving "80,000 people displaced" between 1961 and 1962. Kuwait, meanwhile, gained 'independence' from Britain and, when Qasim claimed it was part of Iraqi territory, British troops were sent to protect the newly independent country. Qasim was now playing with fire, both at home and internationally, and the West could not stand its economic interests in the region being threatened any longer.¹³⁵

Despite the fact that "Iran's experience when it nationalized its oil industry was a vivid reminder to the Iraqis of the power the oil companies still wielded" in the region, Qasim was put under significant pressure from workers to improve their conditions. When oil surpluses in 1959 and 1960 led "international oil companies to reduce the posted price for Middle Eastern oil unilaterally", government revenues were reduced considerably, and Qasim

¹³² <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹³³ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/Iraq.html>

¹³⁴ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html>

¹³⁵ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

“convened a meeting in Baghdad of the major oil-producing nations” in the world in response. This gathering “resulted in the September 1960 formation of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)” and, the following year, Qasim expropriated “all of the IPC group’s concession area that was not in production”.¹³⁶

The Kurds and Qasim’s Civic Nationalism

Under Qasim’s nationalist government, “confrontation with Iraq’s Kurds [could not] be explained in terms of ethnic rivalry”. The leader in fact “shied away from overt identification with Arab nationalism”, principally in order to avoid “Egyptian interference” which could aid his “Ba’athist and Nasserist rivals within Iraq”. Nonetheless, his main aim was not to create “a pluralistic Iraq”, but to “centralize the state and consolidate its sovereign power”. Just like with Nasser, ‘progressive’ nationalism was simply a tool used by Qasim to ensure Iraq’s sovereignty and economic development. One of the reasons for Qasim’s alliance with the ICP, therefore, was partially to attract support from the members of the party, which had proved “an attractive home for many young, educated Iraqi Kurds” (as the tribal elite of Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) had alienated them). Even the KDP, however, would move closer to the coalition when the 1958 revolution grew nearer.

After the revolution, the Free Officers hoped to “bind... Iraq’s Kurds closer to the state”, and invited the KDP’s Mustafa Barzani to return from exile in the hope of achieving that aim. In the Provisional Constitution, Qasim’s government even insisted that “Arabs and Kurds are partners in the Homeland”. As a result, the KDP helped Qasim to “crush anti-regime resistance among Arab nationalists” (and “make war on his tribal rivals” too), but also continued to demand “some form of Kurdish autonomy” in Iraq. Although Qasim sought to “forge an ethnically inclusive Iraqi polity”, however, he failed to respond to Kurdish demands for autonomy, and would eventually see the **Kurdish Revolt** break out in 1961. Through his stubborn commitment to forging a strong, centralised state, he had “failed to keep his squabbling coalition of supporters together” and, as a consequence, had opened the path for the more hard-line, uncompromising Arab nationalists of the Ba’ath Party to take control of the country.¹³⁷

Followers of the ICP, meanwhile, had “counterposed themselves to Arab nationalism”, due to Stalinist (or ‘socialism in one country’) thought, and had thus “adapted to local nationalist pressure” – like that of Qasim’s regime. The party consequently found itself more and more at odds with nationalists like the Ba’athists, who were theoretically more concerned with cross-border unity between Arabs. Eventually, its position left it “outflanked by nationalist formations” in Iraq, and it became increasingly “marginalised” as a result.¹³⁸

II) The CIA-Backed Rise of the Ba’athists

The 1963 Coup and the Ba’ath Party in Power

Saddam Hussein was allegedly “on the CIA payroll as early as 1959, when he participated in a failed assassination attempt” against Qasim,¹³⁹ but the agency would only see Qasim fall in 1963, when Saddam’s Ba’athists finally came to power “on a CIA train”. Qasim was still popular, and “support for the conspirators was limited”, but “the involvement of the United States... tipped the balance against him”. The CIA had “decided to use [the Ba’ath Party] because of its close relations with the army”. US ally Kuwait soon became “the foreign base”

¹³⁶ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/54.htm>

¹³⁷ <http://www.middle-east-studies.net/archives/2238>

¹³⁸ <https://libcom.org/library/national-formation-arab-region-critique-samir-amin-mohammad-jafar>

¹³⁹ <https://www.globalpolicy.org/iraq-conflict-the-historical-background-/us-and-british-support-for-huss-regime.html>

for the coup, and the “CIA closely controlled the planning stages” of the plot. In fact, many of the most critical meetings “were held between the Ba'ath party and American intelligence” in the small Gulf nation. When Qasim was eventually overthrown, the agency “regarded it as a great victory”.¹⁴⁰

Whereas Qasim had represented a form of civic nationalism (as seen in Chapter Two), the Ba'ath Party was more and more in the clutches of people sympathetic to ethnic nationalism. The latter was also completely opposed to any other group taking away its social base, and therefore in favour of crushing opponents by any means necessary. After the **CIA-backed coup of 1963**, “Saddam returned from exile in Egypt and took up the key post as head of Iraq’s secret service”, known as the Al-Jihaz al-Khas. With supposedly pro-Western actors now in power, **the CIA “provided the new, pliant Iraqi regime with the names of thousands of communists”, along with those of “other leftist activists and organizers”**. A “cleansing programme” then took place, and around **five thousand Qasim supporters were soon dead**, “including many doctors, lawyers, teachers and professors who [had] formed Iraq’s educated elite”. This “monstrous stratagem... led to the decimation of Iraq’s professional class”, and made the Iraqi coup “far bloodier than the coup [the CIA] orchestrated in 1953 to restore the shah of Iran to power”. The Ba’athists, meanwhile, “did not deny plotting with the CIA”.¹⁴¹

After the Ba’athist coup, demonstrators were “mown down by tanks” and around 10,000 people were imprisoned, while many others were tortured or “buried alive in mass graves”. In the meantime, the state’s war with Iraqi Kurds continued, with tanks and planes attacking Kurdistan and villages being bulldozed.¹⁴² This time, however, the conflict was also fuelled by ethnic hatred, rather than just authoritarianism.

Just another Act of CIA Intrusion

Upon former CIA director Richard Helms’s death in 2002, the CIA’s “use of political assassinations” gained some coverage in the mainstream media. However, a much “larger cluster of crimes”, which had been used by the CIA to execute ‘regime changes’ around the world since the end of the Second World War, was ignored. According to anti-war activist Richard Sanders, many of these crimes were, “arguably, even worse” than the politically-motivated murders which were mentioned in the press. The “planning, coordinating, arming, training and financing [of] repressive military coups”, for example, was an important method used by the CIA during the Cold War, he insists. Far from just killing key political figures, he says, such behaviour often resulted in the CIA’s mercenary forces carrying out “mass arrests, mass torture and mass murder”.¹⁴³

Regarding the anti-communist, US-backed Chilean coup of 1973, influential Republican Henry Kissinger at the time spoke of how he did not see why the USA had to “stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people”. The issues in Chile were simply “much too important”, in Kissinger’s eyes, “for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves”.¹⁴⁴ This anti-democratic figure also asserted on another occasion that “covert action should not be confused with missionary work”. In other words, he clarifies the US position on foreign affairs, which was that, ultimately, the CIA’s work abroad was to protect the interests of US elites, and not to protect democracy, justice, or civilian lives there.

¹⁴⁰ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html>

¹⁴¹ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html>

¹⁴² <http://www.muslimedia.com/archives/features98/saddam.htm>

¹⁴³ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html> and <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/SAN210A.html>

¹⁴⁴ http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2006/12/14/ask_kissinger_about_pinocet_http_seattlepinwsourcocom_opinion_295792_amv14html

When the media reported on the demise of Helms, Sanders says, it barely mentioned the word “coup”. Neither did it mention how Helms had worked closely with a “notorious Nazi spymaster who was hired by US “intelligence” to set up an organization within the CIA” which would recruit “thousands of Nazi agents to run covert operations in Eastern Europe after the war” in order to undermine the communist systems there. In fact, Sanders goes as far as to say that “the OSS (the US agency that preceded the CIA) had a lot in common with the SS”, in that “the elimination of communists, labour activists and other undesirable elements that got in the way of corporatism was their chief preoccupation”. In short, as nationalist anti-communists themselves, the leaders of the USA clearly had a number of things in common with the Nazis.

A “successful right-wing covert action”, Sanders says, requires replacing “governments that are unfriendly to US corporate interests” with “regimes that are more likely to work closely and slavishly to carry out the economic and geopolitical desires of the US corporate elite”. Once such ‘regime change’ has been carried out, the CIA then works hard to “keep its repressive despots in power... with arms sales (and outright gifts of “surplus” weapons), glowing diplomatic support, “intelligence support” (sic) and massive economic investment (i.e., pillaging as much profit as possible by exploiting the natural resources that drew them in there in the first place, and handing out some of the spoils to a loyal local elite)”. In other words, while the USA often speaks of ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’, or ‘human rights’, its friendships with dictators have revealed on numerous occasions that the country simply seeks to ensure its own interests abroad, as any other imperialist power would.

The corporate media, meanwhile, functions like any other business seeking to protect its economic interests, working hard to “cover up the horror, pain and suffering experienced by thousands of ordinary people in countries where CIA-backed blood baths have taken place”. Whilst focussing on the deaths of political figures, it tends to ignore the fact that the “standard procedure with many coups [is] that thousands of grassroots activists and organizers get rounded up, tortured and killed”. It also overlooks the role of the mercenaries who commit these acts of “mass violence”, who have frequently been used by the CIA “to eliminate its opponents and as a scare tactic” to prevent other opponents from daring to dream of change. In the “Phoenix Program” during the Vietnam War, for example, “tens of thousands of people” were “tracked down and assassinated” in a mass serial assassination program, and a total of “three to five million people” were killed by the end of the conflict. “CIA directors”, Sanders summarises, are essentially “criminals”, for having overseen “the deliberate murder of millions of innocent civilians” around the world.

CIA ‘Regime Change’ in Iraq

The “CIA-organized “regime change”” in Iraq in 1963 is a good example of what Sanders talks about. “Political assassination, mass imprisonment, torture and murder” were all elements of the coup, and were facilitated by the CIA’s Director for Plans (the “top CIA position responsible for covert actions, like organizing coups”) at the time, Richard Helms. While the Ba’ath Party was not totally in line with US policy in the Middle East, the superpower was clearly convinced that there was at least some overlap between Ba’athist interests and US interests. In the absence of a better (more subservient) option, therefore, the Arab nationalists were chosen as a gateway movement to a pro-US regime in Iraq.

Having helped to found OPEC, and thus helped “curtail Western control of Arab oil”, Qasim was a dangerous figure for US interests. The fact that he had also “immediately restored diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union”, and “lifted a ban on the Iraqi Communist party while suppressing pro-Western parties”, meant that he had to be stopped. His plans to nationalise the oil industry, along with his disapproval of Kuwait’s independence under “a pro-west emir” (and its “oil concessions to Western companies”),

was also a good reason for the USA to want him gone. According to declassified British government papers, the UK also backed attempts to overthrow him. In spite of all of these factors, however, writer Said Aburish asserts that, even today, Qasim “retains more of the affection of the Iraqi people than any leader” of the twentieth century.

Although US elites desperately wanted to get rid of Qasim, however, “assassination was [still] too sensitive a matter to be discussed in official meetings or to be recorded in official memos and minutes”. Nonetheless, former government official Armin Meyer would later affirm that the “incapacitation” of Qasim had been supported by Richard Helms in February 1960, though the subsequent assassination attempt would not kill the Iraqi leader.

It was no coincidence that, after the 1963 coup, “the new government [promised] not to nationalise American oil interests and [renounced] its claim to Kuwait”. Nor was it a coincidence that the USA immediately recognised and praised the new regime. For Sanders, such clearly invasive US actions soon made it “very difficult for the United States to be seen as a reliable, or even honest, presence in the Middle East”. The Iraqi Kurdish forces that would eventually become US allies, for example, would not easily be able to forget the USA’s role in “engineering the 1975 Algiers agreement between Iraq and Iran”, which would see Kurds repressed in both nations “just two years after Massoud [Barzani] went to Washington” for a meeting with Richard Helms (which “led to both CIA and Israeli advisers moving into northern Iraq to help the Kurds”). While the USA was simply looking out for its own interests, so was Barzani – in the hope that an alliance with his enemies’ enemies would help him to gain power in Iraqi Kurdistan. In short, neither party had a principled ideological stance.

Aburish, meanwhile, states that “many anti-Saddam Iraqis” had spoken of how there had been “CIA cooperation with the second Ba’ath coup in 1968”, even after the horrors of 1963 had been made known. Collaboration didn’t stop there, however, with the USA and Britain helping “to arm Saddam in his confrontation with Iran” in the 1980s, and standing by as the Republican Guard crushed a largely Shi’ite rebellion in 1991. According to Noam Chomsky, who criticised the USA’s hypocritical opposition to Saddam in the 1990s, “there were no passionate calls for a military strike after Saddam’s gassing of Kurds at Halabja in March, 1988; on the contrary, the US and U.K. extended their strong support for the mass murderer”. Also, when “Saddam exploited Kurdish in-fighting” in 1996 to crush opposition presence in the north of Iraq, the CIA “fled and left the INC people”, the anti-Saddam allies of the USA, “to their fate”.¹⁴⁵

Richard Sale, at United Press International, reported in 2003 on how, in the past, Saddam Hussein had been “seen by U.S. intelligence services as a bulwark of anti-communism”, and thus used “as their instrument for more than 40 years” (in the words of “former U.S. intelligence diplomats and intelligence officials”). For the West, **Iraq was “a key buffer and strategic asset in the Cold War”**. Having been under pro-Western rule in the 1950s, the country has previously been “quick to join the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact..., whose members included Turkey, Britain, Iran and Pakistan”. Qasim’s decision to “withdraw from the pact in 1959”, however, was a wake-up call, which apparently “freaked everybody out” in the Western spheres of power. It was when the Iraqi leader began to “buy arms from the Soviet Union and put his own domestic communists into ministry positions of “real power”, though, that the West became really worried, Sale says. As a result, the CIA soon developed “close ties” with the Ba’ath Party, choosing “the authoritarian and anti-communist” party “as its instrument” for regime change in Iraq.

¹⁴⁵ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/217.html> and <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/SAN210A.html>

Much of the CIA's relationship with Saddam Hussein occurred while he was in exile in Egypt (which had clearly sought to maintain a friendly relationship with the USA in spite of its dealing with the USSR, whilst also hoping to undermine opposing progressive nationalists in the region which might threaten the dominance of Nasserism). Saddam's handler was even "working for [both] CIA and Egyptian intelligence". However, when Saddam attempted to assassinate Qasim in 1959, the attempt was "completely botched", and it apparently "bordered on farce". He was quickly whisked away by the intelligence agencies into Lebanon, though, where "the CIA paid for Saddam's apartment and put him through a brief training course", before moving him to Cairo. In spite of all of this sustenance, it was widely accepted that Saddam was "a thug" rather than a statesman.

Saddam made "frequent visits to the American Embassy" whilst in Cairo, and some officials quoted by Sale even claimed the CIA was directly responsible for planning the 1963 coup against Qasim, though there were conflicting accounts on the matter. Whether the coup was directly planned by US intelligence or not, the agency certainly "moved into action... quickly" after the coup, providing "the submachine gun-toting Iraqi National Guardsmen with lists of suspected communists", who would subsequently be "jailed, interrogated, and summarily gunned down". The "mass killings" that followed the coup, says Sale, were "presided over by Saddam" (as the CIA's key asset in Iraq). According to one former US State Department official, he and his colleagues were "frankly glad to be rid of them", referring to the supposed 'communists' who were gunned down without trial. Senior Middle East agency official at the time Jim Critchfield, meanwhile, apparently said the events had been "a great victory" and that he "wasn't sorry to see the communists go at all". Such comments clearly place the coup in the context of the irrational anti-communist hate propaganda that was rife in the USA in the fifties and sixties.

Having been trained by the CIA, Saddam soon "became head of al-Jihaz a-Khas, the secret intelligence apparatus of the Baath Party", and his relationship with the CIA apparently "intensified [once again] after the start of the Iran-Iraq war". According to Sale's sources, the agency "sent a team to Saddam to deliver battlefield intelligence obtained from Saudi AWACS surveillance aircraft" on a regular basis in this war, whilst simultaneously attempting "to produce a military stalemate". It was only when Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, Sale asserts, that the "Saddam-U.S. intelligence alliance of convenience [officially] came to an end".¹⁴⁶

The CIA's 'Favourite Coup'

In 1997, Irish journalist Patrick Cockburn spoke of how the 1963 coup against Qasim had been the "CIA's favourite coup", even though Iraqi citizens had "less happy memories" of the event. Emboldened by the temporary success (for Western economic interests) of the CIA-backed coup in Iran ten years earlier, the agency had hoped to repeat its achievement in Iraq. The Iraqi coup, however, would turn out to be "far bloodier". It would also definitively start Saddam Hussein "on his climb to power", seeing him, his family, and his party never "wholly lose their grip on Iraq, despite wars and massacres in which more than one million Iraqis, Kurds and Iranians were killed". One Iraqi minister in the coup regime even boasted that he and his colleagues "came to power on a CIA train".

"Squads from the Ba'ath party", Cockburn says, killed around 5,000 people from the "educated elite" of Iraq in the coup, whose names had been "drawn up in CIA stations". It was a "massacre of extraordinary ferocity", he insists, in which "pregnant women and old men were killed, some tortured to death in front of their children", all with the personal

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/169/36408.html>

involvement of Saddam Hussein.¹⁴⁷ Many of the dead, as mentioned above, were even “buried alive in mass graves”.¹⁴⁸

In the planning phase of the coup, King Hussein of Jordan (who had close relations with the CIA), said that “many meetings were held between the Ba'ath party and American intelligence”, with “the most critical ones” being held in Kuwait. The USA was now “taking over its role as the predominant foreign power in the region” after Britain’s “failure to overthrow Nasser in Egypt during the Suez crisis in 1956”, and exerting its own influence. In the coup itself, the “conspirators had just nine tanks under their control”, while “thousands of supporters of [Qasim] rallied around him”. The tanks only reached him in the end because they pretended “they had come to support him”. Eventually, the Iraqi leader was executed, shouting “long live the people” before dying.

With both Cuba and Vietnam high on the US agenda at the time of the coup, **US elites were perfectly happy to exterminate as many potential communist sympathisers in the world as they could.** A “similar CIA-backed purge”, for example, was also “about to be carried out in Indonesia”. Essentially, they were **committed to attacking freedom of speech, thought, and action abroad** in their efforts to protect their own interests, and to prevent the spread of progressive thought within their own country.¹⁴⁹

Nasserists Take Power from the Ba'athists

The Ba'ath Party had initially “recruited... students, intellectuals, and professionals--virtually all of whom were urban Sunni Arabs” (who formed only around fifteen percent of the Iraqi population), and had “joined with other opposition parties to form the underground United National Front” that “participated in the activities that led to the 1958 revolution”. When it had become clear that Qasim’s government “was dominated by non-Baathist military officers who did not support Arab unity or other Baath principles”, the Ba'athists went underground, suffering “a period of internal dissension as members debated over which tactics were appropriate to achieve their political objectives”. After the 1963 coup, the party “was more divided than ever between ideologues and more pragmatic members”, and its internal divisions helped its Nasserist coup partners to outmanoeuvre it and “expel all Baathists from the government”.¹⁵⁰

November 1963 saw the party effectively “removed from power” by Nasserists.¹⁵¹ It was clear now that state nationalism in Iraq had shifted rapidly from one extreme (Qasim) to another (the Ba'athists), before finally settling on a fairly moderate and pragmatic option (in the Nasserists). In February 1964, the government “established the state-owned Iraq National Oil Company (INOC) to develop the concession areas taken over from [the] IPC under Qasim”. It was “eventually granted exclusive rights by law to develop Iraq's oil reserves”, though foreign companies were still allowed to develop their “existing concessions”, which had been left untouched by Qasim. As a result, the IPC effectively “remained the arbiter of existing, if not potential, Iraqi oil production”. Nonetheless, the Nasserist government “applied pressure on OPEC to adopt a unified negotiating stance vis-a-vis the oil companies”, in an attempt to give oil-producing nations more power to determine conditions and prices than international corporations.

In spite of Iraq’s attempts, however, “OPEC members negotiated separately”, allowing “oil companies to extract concessions that permitted them to switch production away from Iraq and therefore to pressure Iraq with the prospect of lower oil revenues”. After further games

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/revealed-how-the-west-set-saddam-on-the-bloody-road-to-power-1258618.html>

¹⁴⁸ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁴⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/revealed-how-the-west-set-saddam-on-the-bloody-road-to-power-1258618.html>

¹⁵⁰ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/77.htm>

¹⁵¹ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

by the oil companies, Iraq focussed on making the INOC “a viable substitute for [the] IPC”, though its “activities were hampered by lack of experience and expertise”. In 1967, it entered into an agreement with the state-owned French company ERAP, which would allow it to explore and develop oil in “a large segment of southern Iraq”, while leaving control “in Iraqi hands”. If oil were to be discovered, the INOC would take control, but it would sell the oil to ERAP “at a discounted rate”. In the same year, the USSR “provided more than US\$500 million worth of tied aid for drilling rigs, pumps, pipelines, a deep-water port on the Persian Gulf, tankers, and a large contingent of technicians”. Essentially, while the West had tried to end Soviet relations with Iraq through its coup against Qasim in 1963, Iraq was still controlled by nationalists, who wanted to exploit national resources without the scheming of Western companies.¹⁵² As a result, it would soon be time for another Western-backed coup.

Ba’athists Regain Power

Only in 1965 did Iraq’s Ba’athists overcome “the debilitating effects of ideological and of personal rivalries” and reorganise “under the direction of General Bakr as secretary general with Saddam Hussein as his deputy”. Under a more unified leadership, however, the Ba’athists “primary concerns” were more “domestic issues rather than pan-Arab ones”. Official statements “called for abandonment of traditional ways in favor of a new life-style fashioned on the principles of patriotism, national loyalty, collectivism, participation, selflessness, love of labor, and civic responsibility”.¹⁵³

In 1967, a split in the ICP saw a Maoist-inspired insurgency assassinate “individual capitalists” and enter into “wide-scale armed confrontations” with the Nasserite government.¹⁵⁴ At the same time, Iraq “severed diplomatic relations” with the USA, which it considered “complicit in Israeli military conquests during the so-called Six Day War”.¹⁵⁵ Taking advantage of this moment of crisis, **the Ba’athists staged another coup in 1968**, and they soon created “a state apparatus systematically dominated by the Baath party” to ensure that competing parties would not return to power. Their first task, however, was to get their militia, the National Guard, to “crack down on demonstrations and strikes”, albeit not as bloodily as in 1963.¹⁵⁶

According to Tarik Kafala, even in the early days of rule after 1968, “actual power” was held “in the hands of a narrow elite united by family and tribal ties, not ideology”, and “surnames were abolished [in the 1970s] to attempt to disguise this”. Like in Syria, the Ba’ath Party in Iraq also had a “highly regimented structure”, which sought to keep the rank and file in line and prevent criticism of their leaders.¹⁵⁷ In 1969, to defeat the guerrilla movement and bring the country into line with Ba’athism, the regime began “rounding up suspected communists”, many of whom would eventually be “tortured to death”. The air force, meanwhile, was sent to bomb Kurdish areas in northern Iraq, in a move that would lead to an agreement being signed the following year with the KDP. “In exchange for limited autonomy”, the latter would soon promise to “integrate its Peshmerga fighters into the Iraqi army”.¹⁵⁸

In 1972, the IPC finally “promised to increase its production in Iraq and to raise the price it paid for Iraqi oil”, though it would also seek “compensation for its lost concession areas” not long afterwards. As a result, the Ba’athists “nationalized IPC’s remaining holdings in Iraq”. Iraq and the IPC “settled their claims” the following year, but the Yom Kippur War of 1973 “impelled the Iraqis to take complete control of their oil resources”, with the country

¹⁵² <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/54.htm>

¹⁵³ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/77.htm>

¹⁵⁴ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁵⁵ <http://origins.osu.edu/article/century-us-relations-iraq>

¹⁵⁶ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁵⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2886733.stm

¹⁵⁸ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

subsequently becoming “one of the strongest proponents of an Arab oil boycott of Israel’s supporters”. This move no doubt increased the Iraqi regime’s popularity in the Arab World, and among anti-imperialist nations further away, but it also made the West increasingly restless. By 1975, “all remaining foreign interests [had been] nationalized”, helping “Iraqi oil revenues to skyrocket” in a period of rising prices. “Much of this revenue” was funnelled “into expanding the oil industry infrastructure”, and a “key pipeline was completed from the Kirkuk fields across Turkey” in 1977 (in order to bypass Syria), while “refinery capacity was doubled”.¹⁵⁹

During the 1970s, the USA had been growing increasingly reluctant to intervene militarily in foreign nations, and was even seeking a détente with certain ‘progressive’ nations (as long as they were not in the immediate sphere of influence of the USSR). It initially sought to equip Kurdish nationalists in the early seventies “in order to weaken the Iraqi government”, but repression and diplomacy eventually made these attempts unsuccessful.¹⁶⁰ In 1972, President Nixon announced that Iran “could buy any non-nuclear weapons it wished from the United States”, in an effort to weaken the hand of the Iraqi regime in territorial negotiations with its neighbour. The fact was that, far from being a submissive pro-US proxy, the Ba’athists were turning out to be an irritating presence for Western interests in the region. In fact, “both the domestic and international policies” of Iraq in the 1970s “were often at odds with the interests of American imperialism”.¹⁶¹ The Ba’athist regime also “displayed renewed anti-U.S. tendencies in its approach to Arab-Israeli issues in the late 1970s”.¹⁶²

As Iraq had already consolidated its ‘progressive’ measures, however, it was now difficult for the USA to reverse them without invading the country – which was not considered an option at the time. Although American elites did not give up on attempts to weaken the Ba’athists, events elsewhere would soon determine a renewal of friendly US-Iraqi relations. With increasing anti-government unrest in Iran and the communist Saur Revolution in Afghanistan in 1978, and then the toppling of the Shah and the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR in 1979, there was “an abrupt rightward shift in the attitude of the US on the world stage”. Together with “the growing economic strains faced by the American ruling class”, the momentum of ‘progressive’ movements abroad led the US regime “to adopt a more confrontational policy at home and abroad... during the second half of the Carter administration”.¹⁶³ The Ba’athists would now be seen as the ‘lesser evil’ in the region.

Controlling the Opposition

Just like Nasser and other nationalists had done previously, the Iraqi Ba’athists sought to increase support for their rule among the populace with progressive economic concessions, while in reality ensuring that they themselves (and the national bourgeoisie surrounding them) reaped the real benefits. As a result of such bourgeois nationalist measures, Iraq managed to get the USSR on its side in 1974, and the latter in turn pushed the ICP into the “pro-government National Progressive Front”, just as it had done with Syria communists. Accepting this tactic ‘from above’, the ICP effectively sought to forget about the previous Ba’athist persecution of communists in Iraq.

In Kurdistan, meanwhile, the Ba’athists’ agreement with the KDP broke down. “Deprived of its traditional allies in the [ICP] and the Soviet Union”, it turned to “the USA and the Shah of Iran” for aid in the early seventies. As a result of the renewed fighting, the regime launched napalm attacks on Kurdish areas. In the following year, such attacks on civilian areas would

¹⁵⁹ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/54.htm>

¹⁶⁰ <http://origins.osu.edu/article/century-us-relations-iraq>

¹⁶¹ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2004/03/iraq-m17.html>

¹⁶² <http://origins.osu.edu/article/century-us-relations-iraq>

¹⁶³ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2004/03/iraq-m17.html>

kill over 200 people. To make matters worse, both Iran and Iraq decided to sign a deal in 1975, in which they pledged to reduce support for Kurdish influence in neighbouring countries. Iran subsequently withdrew the equipment it had given to the KDP, thus allowing Iraq to conquer Kurdish territory without significant resistance.¹⁶⁴

The myth of inclusiveness pervaded, however, even though political activities were “restricted to those defined by the Ba’ath regime”. The Ba’athists knew that they were never going to convince the majority of Iraqis to join their party, and sought to “provide a controlled forum for non-Baathist political participation”, creating “the Progressive National Front (PNF) in 1974”. Other parties “considered to be progressive” were invited into the PNF to participate in the “broadest coalition among all the national, patriotic, and progressive forces” in Iraq. The ICP was clearly “one of the important political groups that the Ba’athists wanted involved in the PNF”, as it had previously been a “major ideological rival”. In order to contain all “potential opposition to their policies”, therefore, the Ba’athists desperately needed the ICP onside.

Being similar to the Ba’athists, in the sense of being “an elitist party that advocated socialist programs to benefit the masses and that appealed primarily to intellectuals”, the ICP’s adherence to the PNF in 1974 was a real political victory for the Ba’ath Party. They had previously suspected the ICP of reserving “ultimate loyalty to a foreign power”, albeit an ‘ideological’ power in the form of the Soviet Union, “rather than to the Arab nation”, which was an ethnocentric power. Nonetheless, the ICP was temporarily forgiven for this supposed allegiance, as long as it accepted the Ba’ath Party’s “privileged” or leading role in the PNF (and the fact that half of the sixteen members of the PNF’s High Council were to be Ba’athists). The ICP would be given only three positions of the council but, for the time being at least, it was seen to be better than nothing. Friction soon developed, though, and between 1975 and 1977 “at least twenty individual ICP members were arrested, tried, and sentenced to prison for allegedly attempting to organize communist cells within the army”.

In 1978, the Ba’athists finally felt they had enough military control over the country to definitively crack down on their opponents. The 1978 coup in Afghanistan, meanwhile, “seemed to serve as a catalyst for a wholesale assault on the ICP”. Communists previously convicted by the Ba’athist regime were soon “retried”, and “twenty-one of them were executed”,¹⁶⁵ accused of “political activity in the army”. A law was subsequently passed preventing “all non-Baathist political activity in the army (such as reading a political newspaper), or by former members of the armed forces”. Those breaking this law would be sentenced to death and, with “universal conscription” in place, this effectively meant that no opposition political participation would be permitted in Iraq. With Saddam Hussein “having increasingly concentrated power in his hands during the preceding eleven years”, this crackdown could effectively be seen as a prelude to his assumption of power the following year.¹⁶⁶

There were now “virulent attacks on the ICP in the Baathist press”, and “party members and sympathizers were arrested” arbitrarily. Although the ICP complained that “communists were being purged from government jobs, arrested, and tortured in prisons”, the Ba’athists now believed they had strong enough control over Iraq to afford losing the support of its ICP collaborators. By 1979, “ICP leaders who had not been arrested had either fled the country or had gone underground”, and the party “formally withdrew from the PNF” in 1980.¹⁶⁷ Saddam’s rise to power had effectively coincided with an anti-communist purge in

¹⁶⁴ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁶⁵ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/78.htm>

¹⁶⁶ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁶⁷ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/78.htm>

the government, and paved the way for renewed Western support for Ba'athists in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.

ICP survivors of the 1963 repression had previously "fled to the relatively isolated mountainous regions of Kurdistan", only to return when the Ba'athists called for reconciliation after 1968. Being legalised in 1973 after ten years of regular repression (only to experience continued attacks in the following years), the party was again outlawed in 1985. In the late 1980s, it was still "a credible force and a constant threat to the Baath leadership", with Syria having "provided material support to the ICP's struggle" and supported its condemnation of the war with Iran. However, Kurdish figures "gained control of the ICP" during the decade, and Kurdish interests allegedly began to outweigh 'national' interests in the eyes of the party. Denouncing the Iran-Iraq war, along with Iran's leading Marxist party (the Tudeh), it called for "a just democratic peace with no annexations whatsoever", and an endorsement of "each people's right to determine the socio-political system they desire".¹⁶⁸

The three seats on the PNF reserved for Kurdish parties, meanwhile, were not filled by the KDP (many of whose leaders and members had "sought and obtained refuge in Iran" after the treaty of 1975). Nonetheless, some former leaders of the KDP, who had been "disturbed by Barzani's acceptance of aid from Iran, Israel, and the United States", had broken off into "rival KDP factions" in 1974 and begun to negotiate with the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad. Unlike the KDP, they were prepared to join the PNF, and effectively allowed the Ba'ath Party "to claim that its policies in the Autonomous Region [of Kurdistan] had the backing of progressive Kurdish forces". The PUK party, for example, split from the KDP in 1975 and, after "intermittent negotiations with Baathist representatives...", two additional seats... were created in the PNF" to accommodate it.¹⁶⁹

Religious Opposition

In 1974, the Ba'athists "deported to Iran 60,000 Shias of Iranian origin", showing their ethnic discrimination towards non-Arabs. Three years later, Iraqi police interfered in "religious processions", and "massive anti-government demonstrations" followed as a result, with "several thousand participants" being arrested and "eight Shia dignitaries, including five members of the clergy" being executed. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, meanwhile, the Iraqi regime would deport "nearly 35,000 more ethnic Iranians", leading to a "deterioration of relations between Ba'athist Iraq and Islamic Iran" which would eventually result in war.¹⁷⁰

Organised religious opposition to the Ba'ath Party, meanwhile, was "primarily concentrated among the devout Shia population", who "opposed the regime's secular policies" and established Ad Dawah al Islamiyah (the Islamic Call) in the early 1960s to express their views. In 1979, the "most respected Shia leader" in Iraq was executed, and "his death precipitated widespread, violent demonstrations and acts of sabotage", leading to yet further government repression. Ad Dawah was banned the following year, and only in 1982 were the remaining Iraqi Shia parties encouraged to unite under one umbrella group (by the Iranian authorities). A Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (or SAIRI) was created, and the following year it "established a government-in-exile", thus cementing the links between the Iranian Revolution and Shias in Iraq.¹⁷¹

The Erosion of Progressivism

¹⁶⁸ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/113.htm>

¹⁶⁹ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/78.htm>

¹⁷⁰ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/114.htm>

¹⁷¹ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/79.htm>

For the Ba'athists, dictatorship and national unity (in the form of the PNF) were necessary because of the wartime threats that the country was under. Nonetheless, it is clear that the PNF was never "an independent political institution", with Ba'athists having controlled it "by monopolizing executive positions, by holding half of the total seats, and by requiring that all PNF decisions must be by unanimous vote".¹⁷² Talk of inclusion, unity, and democracy, therefore, was simply unsubstantiated rhetoric.

Although the Ba'ath Party was "meant to rule and make policy by consensus", all "major decisions" eventually "went through Saddam Hussein who, from 1979, was president, head of the Revolutionary Command Council, and secretary general of the Baath party". When he reached the presidency, for example, he led a purge, trying and executing "several high-ranking Baathists" in 1979 for "allegedly planning a coup". Other opponents within the regime, meanwhile, were "forcibly retired" in 1982. In the years that followed, Saddam made sure that the country's economic structure "**accommodated itself to capitalism**", and that "**nationalised industries were privatised**".¹⁷³

The Ba'athists' bourgeois nationalism was now showing its true character, as a servant of the national bourgeoisie and eventually a collaborator with the international bourgeoisie. Just like in Egypt, these sectors of society had finally defeated the more progressive nationalists in government, and had elevated the most reactionary elements into prime position. If there had been tension between Baghdad and Washington throughout the 1970s, the two centres of power now had much more in common. In fact, Saddam's rise to power (given his history as a CIA asset) could even suggest that the USA had a direct role in ensuring he took power away from more progressive Ba'athists. Whether that is true or not, however, the start of his period in office would definitively mark a watershed moment for Arab nationalism in Iraq, in which previously enacted progressive measures would be gradually eroded away.

III) The Military Cult of Saddam Hussein

Controlling Iraq without the Army

The Ba'ath Party founded the People's Army in 1970 as its own personal militia. It grew rapidly, and was soon given "extensive internal security functions", although its "original purpose" had been "to give the Ba'ath Party an active role in every town and village" of Iraq. Members of the militia would take part in "guarding government buildings and installations, and they were concentrated around sensitive centers in major towns". Approaching 1980, units were also dispatched to Iraqi Kurdistan, while others were sent to Lebanon "to fight with Palestinian guerrillas during the 1975-76 Civil War".

During the 1970s, however, its main tasks were "to enlist popular support for the Ba'ath Party" and "act as a counterweight against any coup attempts by the regular armed forces". Under Saddam, its role increased significantly, with it even taking on the role of supporting the Iraqi Army in its war against Iran in 1981. Six years later, it would have around 650,000 members and approach "the regular armed forces' manpower strength". Another organisation, meanwhile, founded in 1975 and known as the Futuwah (or 'Youth Vanguard'), taught secondary-school students "between the ages of fourteen and eighteen" how to use "light arms" and "grenades".¹⁷⁴ Like in other authoritarian societies, militarisation of citizens considered to be under the influence of the ruling party was seen to be crucial for preventing coup attempts from opposing organisations.

¹⁷² <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/78.htm>

¹⁷³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2886733.stm

¹⁷⁴ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/95.htm>

Iraq under Saddam

After 1979, Iraqi nationalism began to replace Arab nationalism, with Saddam advocating an Iraqi-led Arab World (much like Nasser had proposed an Egyptian-led Arab World a couple of decades previously). Such ideologies had already been increasing in popularity in the Ba'ath Party since the mid-1960s but, under Saddam, they became much more dominant. This shift would be reflected in Babil, the official daily newspaper (owned by Saddam's son Uday), which would repeat the regime's political line. Marxism and atheism were criticised, as was the direct rule of the people, though Saddam also considered the Ba'ath Party to be a popular revolutionary movement (and therefore the mouthpiece of the people). Saddam himself, however, emphasised his respect for nationalist/communist figures like Hồ Chí Minh, Fidel Castro, and Josip Broz Tito. For him, they had asserted their 'national independence rather than their communism', suggesting that they essentially shared bourgeois nationalist ideals in common.¹⁷⁵

One of the Qasim's "most significant achievements" had been the "proclamation and partial implementation of a radical agrarian reform program". In spite of this policy, however, a "tremendous migration... from rural to urban areas" occurred between the 1960s and 1980s. A combination of these two factors "reduced the number of landless peasants" in Iraq, though it undoubtedly increased the amount of urban poor in the country. Limited government statistics between the reform and 1985 show that "the amount of land distributed" in the land reform "totalled 2,271,250 hectares", though the coup against Qasim in 1963 had caused the process to progress much more slowly than anticipated. In the 'progressive' Ba'athist period after 1968, the party "made a considerable effort to reactivate" the reform, with Law 117 in 1970, for example, seeking to further limit "the maximum size of holdings", whilst eliminating "compensation to the landowner". If the process continued under Saddam, it was principally because he sought to increase Ba'athist presence in the countryside, which saw him lead "a determined effort... to build bridges between the party cadre in the capital and the provinces".¹⁷⁶

Education was also a big focus for the Ba'athists, whose "historic emphasis on the expansion of educational facilities" meant that social mobility increased during their time in power. Between 1976 and 1986, for example, "the number of primary-school students increased [by] 30 percent; female students increased [by] 45 percent", and the number of primary school teachers "increased [by] 40 percent", while similar increases also occurred in secondary schools. Before the Iran-Iraq War, meanwhile, the government "had made considerable gains... in lessening the extreme concentration of primary and secondary educational facilities in the main cities" and "in reducing regional disparities". Because of the regime's focus on education, students were "routinely exempted... from military service" during the conflict with Iran, at least until they had graduated.¹⁷⁷ In short, Saddam was inheriting a system of generally progressive measures in education when he took power in 1979.

In 1981, "programs to collectivize agriculture were reversed", though "government investment in industrial production remained important in the late 1980s". For example, "large-scale industries such as iron, steel, and petrochemicals were fully owned and managed by the government, as were many medium-sized factories that manufactured textiles, processed food, and turned out construction materials". The focus on creating "a unified Arab nation", meanwhile, had now become "a long-term ideal rather than a short-term objective", and Saddam said in 1982 that the Iraqi Ba'ath Party believed that "Arab unity must not take place through the elimination of the local and national characteristics of any Arab country" but "through common fraternal opinion". In other words, Arab nations

¹⁷⁵ Niblock, Tim (1982). Iraq, the contemporary state. Croom Helm, Ltd. P.70.

¹⁷⁶ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/41.htm>

¹⁷⁷ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/45.htm>

around Iraq would have to come into line with the ideology of Iraqi Ba'athists, because the latter were not prepared to adapt culturally or politically.

In early 1988, about 10 percent of the Iraqi population were Ba'ath Party members, though only 0.2 percent were "full party members". The reason for this phenomenon was, essentially, that the party's "recruitment procedures emphasized selectivity rather than quantity", an "elitist approach" that valued the party's "ability to mobilize and to lead the people" over its ability to collaborate on an equal basis with them. For the party leadership, the former was the only way to demonstrate the party's true effectiveness (at controlling the population according to its own whims rather than according to the interests and wishes of the people). Although party membership did not translate as anything close to democratic rule, however, "participation in the party was virtually a requisite for social mobility" in Ba'athist Iraq.

Although the "Iraqi Regional Command" was supposed to determine Ba'athist policy "based on consensus", Saddam "worked closely with a small group of supporters, especially members of the Talfah family from the town of Tikrit", to make all of the real decisions for the party. Any "suspected opposition to his rule from within the party", meanwhile, would be dealt with "ruthlessly". As a consequence, his detractors would accuse him "of monopolizing power and of promoting a cult of personality".¹⁷⁸

The Iran-Iraq War

In 1980, Saddam invaded Iran, officially as a result of border disputes but at least partially in order to stop the Islamic Revolution from inspiring Iraq's majority Shiite population. In 1982, a "popular anti-government uprising in Kurdish areas" was crushed, with "villages supporting the rebels [being] destroyed and their inhabitants [being] massacred". In the southern marsh regions of Iraq, meanwhile, a "massive military operation" was launched to "flush out the thousands of deserters and their supporters in the area". Some "armed inhabitants", however, actively prevented the police from carrying out "house-to-house searches for deserters".¹⁷⁹

Before the 1980s, the "dominant view of contemporary political analysts... was that the Sunnis--although a minority--ran Iraq and subjected the majority Shias to systematic discrimination". In the security services, for example, the top posts were "usually... held by Sunnis", while "most of the army's corps commanders [were] Sunnis". At the same time, "the most depressed region of the country [was] the south", which was "where the bulk of the Shias [resided]". Nonetheless, "Shias actually predominated" on the Ba'ath Party Regional Command Council (as one might expect if the council were to be representative of the country's religious and ethnic communities). For most of the Iran-Iraq war, meanwhile, there were no significant Shia uprisings, "despite intense propaganda barrages mounted by the Iranians, calling on them to join the Islamic revolution".

During the war, at least, "nationalism was the basic determiner of loyalty" in Iraq, perhaps in part because Iraq's Shias "are Arabs, not Persians", and had "been the traditional enemies of the Persians for centuries". Saddam's regime shrewdly took advantage of this sentiment, "publicizing the war as part of the ancient struggle between the Arab and Persian empires". In fact, in the run up to the war, he had "taken steps toward integrating the Shias", precisely in the hope of strengthening national cohesion in Iraq in the face of 'external enemies'. The "real tension" in Iraq during this period was in fact "between the majority of the

¹⁷⁸ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/77.htm>

¹⁷⁹ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

population..., for whom religious belief and practice were significant values, and the secular Baathists" in the government.¹⁸⁰

In 1984, the USA increased its support for Iraq's war efforts, restoring diplomatic relations and supporting Iraq through its allies Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The aim of this backing was to "curtail the influence of Iran and [Shiite] Islamic fundamentalism" in the region. Because the Iranian Revolution was opposed to both Soviet and Western interests, meanwhile, each force supported Iraq's war efforts, with the USSR sending missiles and France sending military planes. The Kurdish troops of the PUK, meanwhile, decided to fight alongside the Ba'athist regime after calling a truce with it. Three years later, however, a popular "uprising in the Kurdish town of Halabja led by the many deserters from the army living in the town" saw "governmental forces... toppled" and citizens take control. The police and army temporarily "had to go into hiding" but, after reinforcements arrived, the rebellion was crushed and hundreds of insurrectionaries were killed.¹⁸¹

In spite of the viciousness of the war, Iraq's oil industry was not destroyed. In fact, in 1987, petroleum actually accounted for "more than one-third of nominal gross national product", although damage caused by Iranian attacks and Syria's closure of the "pipeline running from Iraq to the Mediterranean" in 1982 had clearly had an effect on production. As Iraq sought to export oil in alternative ways, though, Turkey stepped in to help its neighbour, benefitting greatly in the process, and collaboration with Saudi Arabia also increased. Meanwhile, Saddam "instituted a new round of reorganizations in the petroleum sector", and "oil production and distribution... was to be granted corporate status in an effort to make it more efficient". The war had "spurred rapid development... in the oil sector", but it had also clearly encouraged the national bourgeoisie to push the regime to introduce more capitalist procedures into the economy.

With oil "worth less than half as much" in 1988 "as it was when the Iran-Iraq War started", Saddam ramped up his bourgeois nationalist rhetoric and actions in the next couple of years.¹⁸² Having become a Western ally during the war, he was becoming increasingly desperate, and would soon turn out not to be as reliable a partner as some Western regimes had perhaps believed him to be. In private, he was even reported to have, on at least one occasion, had sets of 30 Kurdish prisoners brought to him, before shooting them "one after another with a Browning pistol" while "laughing and obviously enjoying himself".¹⁸³ He was clearly an unhinged character (as US officials had noted when he was a CIA asset in the late 1950s), but he was still useful to the West, which was unlikely to end its alliance with Saddam just because of 'internal repression'.

In 1988, "armed deserters" took over Sirwan, near Halabja, and the Iraqi air force was instructed to destroy the town. Halabja, meanwhile, was bombed by Iran. On March 13th, the Iraqi regime allegedly ordered **attacks on Halabja "with chemical weapons"**, in which **"at least 5,000 civilians" were killed**. At the same time, the "poor people attempting to flee the town" were apparently "stopped from doing so by Kurdish nationalist Peshmerga [soldiers]", who had a "history of collaboration with the state" and were not supportive of "working class revolts".

US intervention in the war finally increased when attacks were carried out on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf. By "shooting down an Iranian passenger jet" and "attacking Iranian oil platforms" (killing around five hundred altogether), the USA dealt a conclusive blow to Iran's war efforts. Soon afterwards, a ceasefire was agreed between Iran and Iraq, and the

¹⁸⁰ <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/38.htm>

¹⁸¹ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁸² <http://countrystudies.us/iraq/55.htm>

¹⁸³ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3324053.stm

latter would come out of the conflict bolstered by the fact that a range of international powers had improved their relations with it in support of its war efforts. [In Chapter Five, I will explore in greater detail the importance of the Iran-Iraq War for Middle Eastern politics, along with the decisive role that the West played in securing the survival of Ba'athist Iraq.]

The Invasion of Kuwait, Coalition Massacres, and Popular Uprisings

In 1990, Britain approved the exportation of "engineering equipment" to Iraq which could be "used to manufacture shells and missiles", just one month before Saddam chose to invade Kuwait. A coalition led by the USA subsequently stepped in to protect its subservient Kuwaiti allies. In **Operation Desert Storm**, this alliance launched a "massive attack on Iraq and its forces in Kuwait", which would later be called a "one-sided blood-fest" by journalist John Pilger (**around 250,000 Iraqis were left dead**, while only 131 allied deaths (mostly from 'friendly fire') were recorded). Reports even came in which insisted that soldiers had been "slaughtered... after the unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait [had] begun". Both troops and civilians "retreating from Kuwait city" had apparently been "massacred" the day before the end of the war, and the road out of the city was left full of "charred bodies and tangled wreckage".

Soon after these horrors, "popular uprisings against the Iraqi government spread across the country", with rebels in Basra using "a tank to fire at the huge pictures of Saddam Hussein in the city" and citizens in Kurdish areas taking up arms against the government. "Police stations, army bases and other government buildings" were "wrecked and torched", shops were looted, and food warehouses were occupied. In Sulaymaniyah, a key Kurdish city, prisoners were set free by rebels, and the "secret police HQ" was stormed. Meanwhile, "self-organised workers' councils (shoras) [were] set up to run things". At the same time, wartime deserters and their supporters took control in two areas of Baghdad. In short, the West had clearly succeeded in dealing a blow to Saddam Hussein's popularity, but it now risked popular revolution in Iraq, which it could stomach even less than Saddam.

Saddam hit back, brutally repressing the rebellion in the south and retaking Sulaymaniyah, leaving most of the city's inhabitants to flee into the mountains to avoid government reprisals. The uprisings had been presented in ethnic terms by the Western media (as "the work of Kurdish nationalists in the north and Shiite Muslims in the south"), but they had in fact been "**mass revolts of the poor**". In fact, the KDP and PUK in Kurdistan had actually opposed the "radical aspects of the uprisings", and had even tried "to destroy the shora movement" altogether. Exemplifying their common opposition to popular rule, the Kurdish nationalist parties announced "a new negotiated agreement with Saddam Hussein soon after the uprisings [had been] crushed".¹⁸⁴

Perhaps as an attempt to reduce opposition between the religious population of Iraq and the secular Ba'athist government (and thus prevent an Islamic rebellion in Iraq similar to that of Iran), the Iraqi regime announced after Michel Aflaq's death in 1989 that the Ba'athist founder had converted to Islam before dying (though his family was apparently unaware of the event). The party gradually aimed to emphasise its Islamic characteristics, and Saddam was soon referred to in the 1990s as a "champion of Arabism and Islam".¹⁸⁵ With the country's "embargo-weary populace" increasingly "vulnerable to ultraconservative Muslim preachers from Iran and Saudi Arabia", Saddam allegedly "began manipulating religion for political ends", seeing in Islam "a propaganda tool" through which he could direct his anger at the USA and its allies in the UN. At one point, he even invented "a lineage that connected him to a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad".

¹⁸⁴ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.islamopediaonline.org/country-profile/iraq/islam-and-education-system/rebuilding-iraq%E2%80%99s-education-system-and-addressing-fo?page=6>

From 1994, Saddam launched a “faith campaign”, in which the government promoted “mandatory Qur’an studies in schools”, “built training centers for imams”, and had alcohol “banned in restaurants”. The state media often showed Saddam “in prayer” and, increasingly, “more women began wearing veils”. The leader’s plan also including plans to “construct three gigantic mosques”. In one of the mosques built in the program, there would even appear a Qur’an which had been published with ink mixed with “50 pints of blood over three years” from the new-born “charismatic religious leader”.¹⁸⁶

Genocidal Sanctions and the Run Up to the 2003 Invasion

Allied bombs had destroyed both “water pumping stations and sewage filtration plants” during Operation Desert Storm, and sanctions on the Iraqi Ba’athist regime effectively prevented them from being repaired. This form of “germ warfare” inevitably led to diseases like “dysentery, typhoid and cholera”, which had killed “1.2 million people, including 750,000 children below the age of five,” by 1997, according to the UN. The illnesses had simply been worsened by the “scarcity of food and medicine” resulting from international sanctions on Iraq. Saddam’s subsequent tirades against the West, which distracted attention away from the popular desire for internal political change, were effectively justified in this period, and they fomented a certain hatred of the West that would persist in much of Iraq in the twenty-first century.¹⁸⁷ In particular, Saddam “manipulated to powerful effect” reports of children dying in “poorly equipped hospitals”.

In 1991, Saddam refused to accept a UN offer “to allow Iraq to sell a small amount of oil in return for humanitarian supplies”. While the Iraqi elite still had access to luxuries, and “military spending remained high”, the propaganda system within the country was aimed at distracting the attention of Iraqi citizens away from the injustices within their own country. By the mid-90s, Western governments were rightly beginning to look bad because of their sanctions on Iraq, and they were desperate to get rid of Saddam sooner rather than later. The Democratic government of the USA, however, was not willing to jump into another war so easily, so it continued to pursue the path of sanctions against the Ba’ath government. Nonetheless, in an attempt to “counter the impact of economic sanctions on the people of Iraq”, the UN introduced its “Oil-for-Food” programme in 1995.

After four years of playing with his people’s lives by not accepting the UN’s offer to send humanitarian supplies, Saddam finally agreed to the Oil-for-Food plan. Although ordinary Iraqis would be guaranteed “monthly basic food rations” under this program, however, the “first shipments of food did not arrive until March 1997”. The following year, Denis Halliday (who co-ordinated the program) “resigned, saying **sanctions were bankrupt as a concept and damaged innocent people**”. In 1999, meanwhile, UNICEF proved that Oil-for-Food was doing little to lessen the effect of sanctions on the Iraqi people, and estimated that “**child mortality in Iraq had doubled** since before the Gulf War”. The “ceiling on the amount of oil Iraq [could] export was completely lifted” soon afterwards, though “strict controls” remained “on imports of “dual use” items which could potentially be used in the manufacture of prohibited weapons”. In 2000, Halliday’s successor, Hans von Sponeck, also “quit his post”, arguing that “sanctions had created “a true human tragedy”” in Iraq.¹⁸⁸

In spite of the small international efforts to diminish the effect of sanctions on ordinary Iraqis, Western hostility continued. In 1996, the USA launched “27 cruise missiles against Iraq”, before beginning a “massive military build-up” in the Gulf the following year (supported by its British allies). This military presence served its stated purpose, forcing

¹⁸⁶ <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2003/04/Saddam-Plays-The-Faith-Card.aspx?p=1#> and <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2003/04/Saddam-Plays-The-Faith-Card.aspx?p=2>

¹⁸⁷ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁸⁸ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/oil_food.stm

Saddam to allow UN Weapons Inspectors into Iraq. Later in the year, however, he purged opposition elements in the Iraqi army, and continued a ““prison-cleansing” campaign”, which had started the previous year and had seen “an estimated 2500 prisoners... executed”. The West only reacted after the Weapons Inspectors were expelled at the end of the year, though, with the USA and Britain firing “400 cruise missiles” at Iraq in response, allegedly **killing and wounding thousands of people**.

In 1999, Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr (the “most senior Shi’ite religious leader in Iraq”) was murdered, and government agents were suspected of carrying out the assassination. A “major uprising” subsequently broke out in Basra, and hundreds of people were killed “in mass executions” as a result, while Western military attacks on Iraq continued.¹⁸⁹ In fact, there would be “over 300 bombing incidents between January 1999 and the March 2003 invasion”.¹⁹⁰ According to The History Guy, “the estimated, unofficial cost of this war to U.S. and British taxpayers [was] around \$1 billion per year”.¹⁹¹ For a large percentage of Iraq’s religious population, meanwhile, both the secular dictatorship of Saddam and the imperialist sanctions of the West were to blame for the country’s problems, and the nationalist Kurds (generally protected by the no-fly zone in northern Iraq) were the biggest group in the country that genuinely saw the latter as a truly positive force in the fight against Saddam. As such, they would be the group to benefit the most after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq. [In Chapter Six, I will undertake a more detailed analysis of this invasion, and the effect it had on both Iraq and the Muslim World as a whole.]

C) The Rise and Fall of Ba’athism

Senior editor at The New Republic Paul Berman says that Ba’athism, apparently facing its last stand in the Syria, is “one of the last of the grandiose revolutionary ideologies of the mid-twentieth century”, albeit an “Arab version suitable for the age of decolonization”. Under Saddam Hussein in Iraq, he insists, there were “repeated military campaigns and acts of extermination against Iraq’s Kurdish population”, against the country’s Shias, and against Iran and Kuwait. He argues that “the poor and suffering Iraqis will need a hundred years to recover” from this period, and that Syrian Ba’athists managed to govern a lot “more shrewdly than Saddam”, even though “permanent crisis has [also] been the norm” in Syria. As a result of the latter’s “repeated wars against Israel”, its “proxy wars... in Palestine and Jordan”, and its “intervention in Lebanon”, along with the death toll from “mass executions and civilian massacres within Syria itself”, it is impossible to say that Syrian Ba’athists have their hands clean.

I) The Features that Led to Ba’athist Decline

Ba’athism’s Fascist Tendencies

According to Berman, Ba’athism was “a product of the European 1930s”, though its founders “never could decide which version of revolutionary reform might suit them best”. As a result, “oscillation became Ba’athism’s identifying trait”, as it flipped between fascism and ‘communism’. While Michel Aflaq sympathised with communism to a certain extent, he also believed that the subservience of most Middle Eastern communist parties to the leadership of the Soviet Union meant that their “interests were not those of the Arab world”. Therefore, he “found new and more fecund inspirations in... German nationalism”, perceiving the “reuniting [of] scattered Germanic tribes” as something he could apply to the Arab World. German nationalists, however, knew all too well “how to loathe” those who were not perceived to be as pure as they were. “Mooning over the Arab seventh century”,

¹⁸⁹ <http://libcom.org/history/1900-2000-iraq-timeline>

¹⁹⁰ <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/beyond/counting-the-human-cost/4>

¹⁹¹ http://www.historyguy.com/no-fly_zone_war.html#_VL2-NC68480

Aflaq attached ethnocentric nationalist sentiments to the “modern-sounding concept of socialism, thus arriving [much like the Nazis] at a national-socialism”.

Having “located ethnic enemies”, Aflaq was inspired by the anti-British (and pro-Nazi) coup of Iraq in 1941. He and his comrades quickly “put together a solidarity committee for the coup”, which eventually became the Ba’ath Party. Focussing on “Arab weakness in the modern world”, he insisted that the psychological “conflict between our glorious past and shameful present” was something that had to be dealt with. For him, a process of “purification” was needed in order to carry out this task, meaning that “all obstacles of stagnation and degradation” had to be removed so that the “pure blood lineage” of Arabs could “run anew in [their] veins”.

By claiming a lineage going back “to the origins of Islam”, the early Ba’athists sought to attract both people with nationalist sentiments and people with Islamist sentiments, thus uniting the majority of opponents to Western imperialism. In fact, the Ba’athist process of repulsing what Aflaq called “Western civilization’s invasion of the Arab mind” actually coincided with the growth of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which sought to invoke the importance of religion rather than nationalism in expelling Western powers from the region.

Islamism and Ba’athism

Berman insists that there were significant overlaps in the Islamist and Ba’athist movements, as they both sought a return to an “ancient Islamic past in order to construct a postcolonial future”, an expulsion of the corrupting force of the West, a “special role” for the Arab people, and a “veneration of Islam and its prophet”. With “occasional fascist overtones”, meanwhile, each movement showed its essentially arrogant and discriminatory nature. The only significant difference between the two ideologies was that Ba’athist party leaders “thought of themselves [rather than religious leaders] as the ultimate authority”. In other words, they both sought domination, but the Ba’athists political domination and the Islamists religious domination.

As a result of these differences and similarities, there are both “examples of Baathist-Islamist alliance and enmity in roughly equal measures”. While the Syrian regime opposed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, for example, it had “longstanding alliances with any number of Islamist groups: Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Muslim Brotherhood of Jordan, Hezbollah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran”. The Iraqi regime, meanwhile, launched a “war against the Islamist mullahs of Iran” whilst supporting Islamist groups elsewhere in the region. We could even speak of “the Iraqi Baath’s post-defeat guerrilla alliance... with Al Qaeda” in the years following 2003, though this subject is more relevant to Chapters Six and Seven of this book.

In spite of the fact that Saddam Hussein was allegedly a “religious believer” all of his life, his rhetoric in the 1970s was similar to that which came out of the Soviet Union and other ‘communist’ nations. However, he soon “oscillated back into [a] renewed emphasis on Islam”, as seen in Section B of this chapter, even including in a novel in 2003 a “barely disguised burst of Baathist applause for Al Qaeda’s destruction of the World Trade Center” two years previously. Hafez al-Assad, meanwhile, came to power in a clear attempt to curb Marxist prestige within the Syrian Ba’ath Party, “courting... traditional-minded clerics and Islamic scholars” in order to do so.

Having initially gained “prestige almost everywhere across the region” for their criticism of imperialism, the Ba’athists eventually showed themselves to be despots, and thus helped to provoke the “triumphant zeal of Ba’athism’s principal rivals” in the region – the reactionary Islamists. Both Ba’athists and Islamists had sought to play on existing differences between

the Muslim World and the West, with the former focussing on ethnic roots and the latter on religious roots. Thanks to Western opposition to Ba'athism in the Middle East (after the Invasion of Kuwait at least), along with the corrupt and authoritarian nature of the ideology, the attempts of the Assad and Hussein regimes to capture the imagination of their populations were clearly failing by the end of the twentieth century (though to different extents). And, with the gradual weakening of these secular nationalists, Islamists grew more and more in popularity, either as a result of funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies, or from Iran. [The extent of this Islamist Cold War, between Sunni radicals and Shia radicals, will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Five of this book.]

A Conspiracy of the Elites

For Berman, the different Ba'ath parties were essentially "conspiracies of the elite", composed of intellectuals but also of "military officers and tough-guy bruisers". Each of these forces "manoeuvred clandestinely" with indifference "to questions of mere popularity", seeking to exert their dominance by any means necessary. They were "secretive, crafty, steely", and very similar to what the European Left would call Blanquists (in reference to Louis Auguste Blanqui's conception of a revolution led 'from above' by a small group of revolutionaries disconnected from the working masses). In order to ensure Ba'athist leaders could "trust the other conspirators" alongside them, therefore, they gradually became less inclusive and more inclined to enrolling "people from similar backgrounds" to them. Such "conspiratorial habits", as seen earlier in this chapter, would inevitably lead to very tight-knit groups and, eventually, to the "triumph of the party's military cells over its civilian cells", in both Syria and Iraq.

In Syria after 1963, Berman says, "the leading personalities turned out to be not just members of Syria's Alawi minority, but people from a single village, belonging to a section of a single tribe and, in the inner circle, to the family of Colonel Hafez Al Assad". In Iraq, meanwhile, Shiites had been the "original leaders" of the Ba'ath Party but, around the time of the CIA-backed coup of 1963, the "new leaders" were "ruffians from a single neighborhood in Baghdad". After 1968, meanwhile, the leaders were "members of a single tribe from the town of Tikrit", who came from the Sunni minority group. The most prominent family in the tribe, unsurprisingly, was that of future leader Saddam Hussein.

While "preaching an expansive pan-Arabism", therefore, the Ba'athists in both Syria and Iraq were "practising a narrow politics dominated by ever tinier kinship groups". In power, meanwhile, the **ethnocentric and anti-democratic nature** of their movement became increasingly apparent. In all fairness to the Muslim Brotherhood, Berman insists, it had "always been a mass organization, never a conspiracy" and, within the party, "no one... could alter the ideology at whim". **Ba'athism**, on the other hand, **became whatever the coup leaders said it was**. After the 1950s, for example, Aflaq began to sound "ever more left-wing", saying Ba'athism was "scientific socialism plus spirit". Such a shift away from talk of 'blood lineages' clearly had a big impact on "Baathism's inspirational appeal to Third World revolutionaries in Africa and Latin America", who generally accepted the ideology with open arms. This change, whether profound or not, simply proved that "revolutionary political movements" like Ba'athism "could adopt everything that was deemed to be attractive in communism... without having to abandon a sentimental nostalgia for the local culture and a pious veneration of the local religion". Essentially, Aflaq and his colleagues had shown that "**political manoeuvrability**", or what today we might call 'populist' rhetoric and actions, could give movements like theirs significant (if temporary) success.

Ferocity over Pragmatism

Berman insists that, “given a choice between ferocity and their own best interest, the Ba’athist leaders have more than once chosen ferocity”. One key example, he affirms, is how Saddam Hussein preferred to hold out until the very end in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq rather than “negotiate a gilded exile for himself and his family”, which would have been more than possible. Bashar al-Assad’s determination to remain in power after the protests of the Arab Spring, meanwhile, showed that he was set to suffer the same fate as Saddam (and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya). Ba’athism and Arab nationalism proved in these cases to truly be “a cult of resistance”, while Ben Ali in Tunisia (along with other corrupt dictators in the region) simply “proved that he was genuinely a pragmatist by cutting his losses and those of Tunisia and getting on a plane”.

Resistance to both imperialism and Zionism was always a major source of support for Ba’athists, so the commitment of leaders like Hussein and Assad to dying before abandoning their ‘principles’ proved to be key. Their pig-headedness, however, whilst inspiring many people opposed to imperialism and Zionism, meant that pragmatic decisions under Ba’athist rule were not very common, and leaders effectively lost the “capacity to weigh evidence”, feel “curiosity about other people’s views”, and encourage real tolerance. In fact, Ba’athist co-founder Salah al-Din al-Bitar “spoke his mind to Hafez Al Assad in person” in 1977, saying that “Syria was dead” and that “only democracy [could] give a new vitality to Syria”. Rather than learning from al-Bitar’s comments, however, the Assad regime sent him into exile, and eventually had him assassinated. In short, while voices of moderation did exist within the Ba’athist movement, they were effectively silenced by the dogmatic and self-interested party leaders.

One “insane” element of the inflexibility of Ba’athism, says Berman, is that, rather than enlightening or improving the lives of Arab people, the movement actually “slaughtered more Arabs than any institution in modern history”. In Syria, “tens of thousands” were killed (if we don’t count the civil war), and in Iraq the figure was closer to “hundreds of thousands”. In fact, Saddam Hussein’s regime even achieved the unfortunate title of the “only government in the world, after the Nazis, to use poison gas on its own people”. In Berman’s opinion, therefore, it is a lot more apt to say that Ba’athism, far from being a movement for Arab enlightenment and progress, was actually “an anti-Arab movement”.

In summary, Berman argues that “totalitarians never achieve total control”, though they do “give it an honest try”. On the list of totalitarian states in the Middle East were Nasser’s pan-Arabist Egypt, Qasim’s single-country nationalist Iraq, Hussein and Assad’s Ba’athism, and Afghanistan’s Soviet-style ‘communism’ (or state capitalism). With each of these movements failing, in varying degrees, to truly bring progress, justice, and peace to the region’s populations, Islamism soon gained steam (thanks to Western support for Gulf monarchies and their proxies in Pakistan and Afghanistan) as a perceived political alternative.

For Islamists, “the era of decolonization has somehow not yet come to an end”, and “questions about alienation” have not yet been solved. And, in their view, such problems can only really be dealt with through a return to medieval Islam. Berman, meanwhile, insists that there is indeed a need for a political alternative in the Middle East, but “the Islamist answers are unlikely to be any better than Aflaq’s”. In his mind, a “non-ideological habit of mind” is necessary, although “the world left behind by the Baath and its doctrines does not appear to be a world of the post-ideological”. Nonetheless, the task for the region’s progressive political movements is still to seek an end to the following of rigid doctrines, and an acceptance of the idea of a popular, inclusive democracy that seeks justice for all people, regardless of their religion or ethnicity.¹⁹²

¹⁹² <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/magazine/107238/baathism-obituary>

II) The Distinction between Revolutionary and Reactionary Anti-Imperialism

Anti-Imperialism Does Not Mean Defending Ba'athism

According to Michel Collon at Global Research, “the local bourgeoisie” of a country “often has no recourse other than opposing imperialism... in order to survive”. As a result, he says, it needs to involve “the largest part of the population in the struggle” against external interference. As seen in Nasser’s Egypt, this process also happened in Ba’athist Iraq and Syria, with the poor and marginalised being brought into the political process (albeit without consciousness of how they were being used as a tool to prop up their own elites). Consequently, the concessions made to workers in both countries meant that any attempt to overthrow the ruling elites was weak, as insurrectionaries would struggle to convince workers to join their rebellion. The authoritarian nature of the states, meanwhile, also meant that the risk factor entailed in opposing them was very high.

Even though the world’s imperialist powers sought to overthrow nationalist leaders like the Ba’athists for economic reasons rather than humanitarian reasons, they nonetheless realised the importance of setting workers against the regime ruling over them. Collon insists, for example, that by bringing this conflict “between the Iraqi bourgeoisie and its population... into the foreground”, leaders like George W. Bush could get away with waging war on Ba’athist Iraq without significant opposition. However, once the horrors of the Invasion of Iraq became more apparent, many Iraqi people began to proclaim that they wanted “neither Bush nor Saddam”.

Whilst not trying to sympathise with Saddam, Collon asserts that “the aggressor [i.e. the West] and the victim [i.e. Saddam (or, more accurately, the Iraqi people)] of aggression must never be put on the same footing”. In other words, just like the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the invading, occupying force should never be described in the same way as the defensive force (however much their methods may sometimes appear to be similar). From Collon’s point of view, therefore, “the “Neither ... nor ...” proposition prevents the growth and unification of resistance to US imperialism”. A popular anti-imperialist stance, this opinion could unfortunately appear to justify nationalist internal repression (as long as there is also nationalist resistance to imperialism). The argument in this case would be that ‘Saddam was not perfect, but he was the best chance of stopping imperialism in Iraq’.

While Collon is spot on about the need to differentiate between the actions of oppressors and those of the oppressed, I strongly believe that a truly progressive and revolutionary stance must oppose imperialist intervention whilst also clarifying that Saddam and other nationalists are, essentially, **reactionary anti-imperialist forces**. In other words, these groups may use seemingly anti-imperialist rhetoric and undertake seemingly anti-imperialist actions, but in reality they are not truly ‘progressive’, building systems designed to protect the national bourgeoisie rather than directly democratic societies centred around the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist resistance of working people.

In fact, Collon does recognise that “Saddam [represented] the Iraqi nationalist bourgeoisie”, and “certainly [did] not represent a “model for society” for those who advocate a socialist society and democracy”, whilst emphasising that he did seek to avoid “pouring petrodollars back into US multi-national corporations”. He supports the acknowledgement of Saddam’s regime for what it really was – a smokescreen for the domination of the national bourgeoisie, while at the same time stressing that his government also used oil income “to develop education, health care and, in general, the economy of his country”. Even though such measures were taken in order to convince the Iraqi population that the government was ‘on their side’, there is no denying that they were essentially progressive in nature.

Likewise, says Collon, “it was Iran’s leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who refused to sign a peace treaty and made the [Iran-Iraq] war last eight years”. It may have been Saddam who started the war, he insists, but this occurred “after Iranian provocations, one of which was the attempted assassination of Tariq Aziz”. Again, Collon slightly misleads the reader, presenting a very unsympathetic view of Iran (another reactionary anti-imperialist force in the region) while failing to acknowledge Ba’athist provocations of the Shia community of Iraq and the fact that the USA played a significant role in prolonging the conflict. Essentially, Collon appears here, in his own words, to ‘put the aggressor (Western imperialism) and the victim (Iran) on an equal footing’.

The Islamist regime in Iran was indeed a reactionary force, but the violent acts it perpetrated must fundamentally be understood as a mere mirror image of the violence that Iranian civilians had suffered both at the hands of Iraq’s Ba’athist regime and imperialist proxies for many years. In 2003, for example, The New York Times quoted CIA officer Stephen C. Pelletiere as saying that there were doubts about whether Saddam’s regime had actually launched the chemical attacks on Halabja in 1988. According to Pelletiere, the gassing had either “occurred by mistake during a battle between the Iraqi and Iranian armies”, or had been “the work of the Iranian army, the only one that possessed this type of gas (cyanide-based)”. Such suggestions, however, do not exonerate Iraq’s Ba’athists, who committed many more war crimes in addition to Halabja, and do not suddenly turn Iran into the prime culprit of the violence in the Iran-Iraq War. [More on this conflict, however, will be discussed in Chapter Five.]

Regarding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Collon insists that the Gulf nation “had always been part of Iraq” and that, only after “British colonialists granted it independence in 1920 “in order to weaken Iraq and to deprive it of access to the sea” (as a British governor stated) did Iraq have to find “ways to regain this lost province”. Collon is indeed right in stating that imperialist powers had sought to separate the Arab World in order to weaken Arab opposition to Western imperialism but, at the same time, the idea that Kuwait ‘belonged to Iraq’ simply represents a continuation of imperialist logic. In reality, no-one has a divine right to claim ‘ownership’ of any land, apart from perhaps those who live and work on the land. Equally, the ‘nation’ of Iraq simply did not exist under the Ottoman Empire, and was actually split into three Vilayets (or provinces): the Mosul Vilayet, Baghdad Vilayet, and Basra Vilayet. Even these divisions were arbitrary Ottoman inventions rather than communities united according to the will of the region’s inhabitants. Therefore, Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait cannot be justified by so-called ‘national claims’, as accepting such an idea simply seeks to rationalise the domination of a centralised state over the affairs of individual communities.

In other words, Collon’s apparent attempts to exculpate Iraqi Ba’athists do not stand up against closer analysis, though his emphasis on the importance of differentiating between the actions of ‘aggressors’ and ‘victims’ is indeed a valid and praiseworthy idea. By way of a summary, we must remember that anti-imperialist sentiments can be expressed by both revolutionary and reactionary political groups. As a result, we should never proclaim an organisation or government to be worthy of support simply because of anti-imperialist actions or rhetoric. Although reactionary anti-imperialism can be expressed in some progressive ways, it is essentially counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic. [In Chapter Eight, these issues will be covered in greater depth with regards to the Syrian Civil War.]

The Imperialist Search to Replace Nationalism with Western Puppets

As seen in Chapter Two of this book, Nasser’s ‘progressive’ nationalist regime was soon replaced by Western puppet governments in Egypt, firstly under Sadat and then under Mubarak. To “replace rebels with puppets”, Collon says, is a “global strategy of re-

colonization". A number of "made-in-the-USA "democratic leaders"", he asserts, "are spearheading the re-colonization of the world" in a "merciless process for the [world's] workers and farmers". Whether we look at Latin America, Asia, or Africa, we see numerous examples of how these tactics played out, particularly during the Cold War and the years following the fall of the Soviet Union.

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's "appeal to the countries of the Middle East to unite in order to become more independent of the USA" in 1989 made it clear to the USA that it had to turn on its old ally. Consequently, the US Congress "decided to impose an embargo against Iraq" for the first time, in a clear expression of US awareness that Saddam was no longer a tool that the USA could use for its own advantage in the region. When Saddam sought to take control of Kuwait (which was now effectively a pro-Western buffer zone between Western ally Saudi Arabia and Western enemy Iran), the West saw its chance to act to weaken the dangerously self-assured Iraqi regime.

Collon asserts that "the hidden economic interests behind each war must be denounced", and that, in the case of the Western-led 'defence' of Kuwait in 1991, the aim was primarily to put a check on Saddam's growing anti-imperialist rhetoric and protect Western access to Kuwaiti natural resources.¹⁹³ And, to a certain extent, Collon is right. Reactionary anti-imperialist forces like Ba'athist Iraq could be courted by imperialist forces if the former served the interests of the latter but, as soon as the former began to go against the latter's interests, the former would become public enemy number one. The fact that the USA and its allies wanted a pro-Western regime in Iraq, in other words, was not because of a desire for democracy or progressive reforms, but because of opposition to overly-confident reactionaries.

Nonetheless, resistance against Western puppet regimes does not necessitate support for reactionary anti-imperialists. On occasions, a temporary alliance between revolutionaries and reactionaries may seem to be the best option but, ultimately, the latter will remain a counter-revolutionary force. In Chapter Five, I will take a look at how exactly this sort of alliance came together in the streets of Iran between 1978 and 1979, but eventually resulted in Islamist reactionaries suppressing progressive revolutionaries. In short, while perfect movements never exist in politics, it is of great importance that lovers of democracy, justice, and peace make a clear distinction between revolutionary and reactionary anti-imperialists, and never lose sight of it, even when bigger enemies come along.

III) Imperialist and Zionist Opposition to Ba'athist Iraq

Saddam's Support for Palestinians

Like Nasser, Saddam showed his support for the Palestinians (through the PLO) from the very beginning of his rule. As a result of the 'progressive' Arab nationalist and anti-Zionist alliance between Saddam and the PLO, Zionists have sought to imply that the two forces were just as bad as each other. In 2003, the supposedly "independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization"¹⁹⁴ of MEMRI, which in reality has a strong conservative and capitalist bias, reported on the publishing of "a confidential document" from 2000 "attesting to intelligence coordination between top officials in the Palestinian leadership, headed by Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat, and the regime of Saddam Hussein, against Iraqi opposition organizations".

The PUK was said to have intercepted a coded telegram from Arafat to Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, in which "Arafat warned the Iraqi regime of attacks on the Iraqi city of

¹⁹³ <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/COI303C.html>

¹⁹⁴ <http://www.memri.org/about-memri.html>

Kirkuk planned by the Iraqi opposition”, which included the PUK.¹⁹⁵ While I do not believe the PLO was ever a perfect movement, I feel it is important to emphasise again the point that Michel Collon made about distinguishing between aggressors and victims. The PUK, for example, was itself a ‘victim’, but was also essentially a reactionary force (albeit with some progressive characteristics). The PLO, meanwhile, was for all intents and purposes in the same situation. Kurds in Iraq did not have their own state, and had their territory occupied by the Iraqi Ba’athist regime, while Palestinians also lacked their own state, and were fighting against the Zionist occupation of their land.

All that is proved by the document referred to by MEMRI is that the Arabs of the PLO appreciated the support given to them by the Arabs of the Ba’athist regime in Iraq, and sought to repay the favour in whatever way they could. With Iraqi Kurdish nationalists allegedly being supported by both the USA and Israel, the PLO perhaps even believed it was doing the right thing by revealing dissident plans to undermine their sponsors in Saddam’s government. If anything, the telegram reveals the tension that existed at the time between Zionists and anti-Zionists, which would often be expressed in the region as a fight between aggressors and victims. While the PLO could be accused of having sided with the oppressive Iraqi Ba’athist regime, the PUK and other Kurdish nationalists of Iraq could be accused of having sided with the oppressive imperialist and Zionist forces which had created so much violence and injustice in the region. For pro-Israeli mouthpieces, the undermining of Ba’athism in Iraq was essentially akin to the undermining of the PLO in Palestine, and there was therefore cause to support Kurdish dissidents in Iraq in the run-up to the 2003 US-led invasion. In other words, I believe that the economic power of both the USA and Israel should not be discounted totally when we discuss the collapse of Ba’athism in Iraq.

In summary, the PLO’s contribution to Ba’athist suppression of Kurdish nationalists could be understood as one victim contributing to the suppression of another victim (even if the former was arguably more progressive than the latter). In a context of oppression and occupation, it is very easy for victims to emulate aggressors and lose sight of their common cause. In fact, such a lack of unity between oppressed peoples in the region was actually fuelled by the competing Ba’athist regimes of Syria and Iraq. The division between Iraqi-backed Arab nationalists and Syrian-backed Arab nationalists, however, will be further touched upon in Chapter Five, with a view to better understanding the dynamics of the Lebanese Civil War and the resistance movement against Zionist crimes in the region.

The 2003 Invasion of Iraq

After a US-led coalition invaded Iraq in 2003, the Ba’ath Party was banned, and thousands of Iraqi professionals were removed from their posts as a result. As “membership in the Baath party [had been] the standard requirement for state employment”, many employees were immediately excluded from the new political system, regardless of whether they held strong Ba’athist beliefs or not. This process, referred to as ‘de-Ba’athification’, “was so poorly designed and executed”, according to Al Jazeera, that it “significantly contributed to the collapse of many state functions” in post-invasion Iraq, leading to the problems that would plague the country in the following decade.

The policy of the new, US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) was “intended to rid the country of the Baath party's influence”, and it “led to the dismissal of thousands of individuals based on their rank within the Baath party hierarchy, rather than on their actual conduct, which should have been assessed through fair vetting procedures”.¹⁹⁶ In reality, the de-Ba’athification law posed a significant “obstacle to Iraqi reconciliation” after the 2003

¹⁹⁵ <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/897.htm>

¹⁹⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/03/201331055338463426.html>

invasion, nearly leading to “the collapse of the political process as evidenced by the expulsion of prominent leaders on the Iraqi National List just before the 2010 elections”.¹⁹⁷

The “wholesale dismissals” resulting from de-Ba’athification, “combined with a lack of due process, badly undermined Iraq’s government and military structures and fuelled a sense of grievance among those affected - not just employees, but also their families, friends and communities”. It thus “became a significant contributing factor in widespread social and political conflict”. In short, it was “a dysfunctional, counterproductive process that intensified social, sectarian and political divisions” in Iraq.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, with “secular veterans of Saddam Hussein’s military” later forming a “marriage of convenience” (under the name of the Naqshbandi Army (or JRTN)) with the Wahhabi jihadists of ISIS, the need for bringing “ex-Hussein loyalists” back into the political system would become ever more apparent.¹⁹⁹ [More on the 2003 Invasion of Iraq and its consequences will be covered between Chapters Four and Seven.]

What Arab Nationalism Left Behind

Nasserism, which had been “the great hope of the Arab world in the 1950s”, seeking to modernise Egypt, nationalise its assets, and resist imperialism in the region, was effectively defeated by the “fatal blow” of the Six Day War of 1967, as seen in Chapter Two. Ba’athists soon took over the baton of Arab nationalism from Nasserists in Iraq and Syria, though “Gaddafi’s Libya [also] saw itself as the inheritor of [Nasser’s] ‘historical mission’” of uniting anti-imperialists in the Arab World from the 1970s onwards. In the “first two decades of his rule”, Gaddafi “tried to blow new life into the project”, though Libya’s national bourgeoisie would eventually force Libya to embrace capitalism more and more in the last twenty years of Gaddafi’s rule (much in the same way that the Egyptian bourgeoisie had).

Ba’athism, meanwhile, began as “a more ideological form of Arab socialism” than Nasserism, according to Gulf Art Guide. Only after the 1968 coup in Iraq and Assad’s internal coup of 1970 in Syria, the website insists, was the “pan-Arab aspect of Ba’athism” finally “undermined”. These governments became “primarily concerned with consolidating their own power within their national borders” through autocratic means, while Nasser (and Gaddafi) had actively sought to be leaders of the whole region. With the dictatorial character of the Syrian and Iraqi regimes now becoming much clearer, the appeal of Ba’athism “diminished... in the rest of the Arab world”. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the failure of Ba’athism to inspire the confidence of the region’s citizens would eventually facilitate the rise of political Islam.

Saddam’s attempts to emphasise his religious character in the last decade of his rule may have bolstered his regime to a certain extent, but they were not enough to save Ba’athism in Iraq. Gaddafi’s embrace of the Islamic nature of Libya from the very beginning, meanwhile, may have helped him achieve the difficult task of retaining power for four decades, but he would not be successful at preventing the rise of Islamism in the country. In both cases, Western governments would exploit Islamist opposition to government secularism, even giving direct support to Islamist dissidents. Perhaps as a combination of both secular authoritarianism and Western interference, the downfall of the Iraqi and Libyan regimes would result in an inevitable rise to prominence of militant Islamism.

Under groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, a “hybrid form of ‘Islamic socialism’” would form, rejecting the “materialist and secular aspects of Marxist thought” whilst capturing the

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/01/de-baathification-10-years.html#>

¹⁹⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/03/201331055338463426.html>

¹⁹⁹ http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/08/21/the_re_baathification_of_iraq

imagination of a significant section of Muslim society. Having been “persecuted by all Arab regimes”, these groups split into “national factions”, which focussed on gaining a “solid local footing” in their respective nations by “providing community services”. This grassroots action meant that, whenever “free and fair elections were held in an Arab country”, their popular support became “evident”, forcing the ruling elites to ensure that they did not assume power or retain it for too long. Nonetheless, years of underground activism would pay off in the Arab Spring of 2011 (which saw Islamists come to power in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt).

Not all Islamists would wait for electoral opportunities, however. After decades of repression by autocratic regimes in the Muslim World (whether nationalists or pro-Western dictatorships), and the Western-backed Islamist campaign to defeat communism in Afghanistan, violent extremism would become increasingly popular in the region, leading to the “creation of more radical Salafi movements from the 1980s onward”. According to the Gulf Art Guide, the discrediting of Nasserism and Ba’athism, along with the repression of moderate Islamism, led to the “long period of intellectual despondency” that eventually resulted in the growth of radical Islamism. The region seemed largely “resigned to its second-tier status within the global setting, and to autocratic rule”, which created a sense of political desperation in many communities.

Thanks to Western political support and immense oil revenues, meanwhile, the “anti-ideology” of Wahhabism (or Salafism), which will be discussed between Chapters Five and Seven, appeared to offer citizens hope of religious salvation. Harking back to a “pristine state of human society” in the “times of [the] Prophet Muhammad”, the ideology’s proponents believed that violence was necessary to emulate these medieval years.²⁰⁰ In the wake of Arab nationalist failures, in other words, the region looked set to continue with the pattern of violent authoritarianism that had plagued it ever since the fall of the Ottoman Empire and which, in large part, was due to the increasing interference of Western imperialism in the Muslim World.

Conclusion

Ba’athism was born from a legitimate desire to keep imperial powers out of the Middle East, but its ethnocentric behaviour, vague ideological basis, and repression of dissent would lead to its eventual downfall. By encouraging nationalism and giving progressive concessions to the populous, the Syrian and Iraqi Ba’athists managed to rally many Syrians and Iraqis behind them, but effectively fooled them into accepting a system that would not truly serve their interests. The regimes, whilst trying to show themselves as anti-imperialists and anti-Zionists, largely ignored the similarities between workers throughout the world – and thus the need for a unified struggle, with all ethnic groups working together. In short, their commitment to militarisation, bureaucratisation, and authoritarianism hurt the Iraqi and Syrian people more than it helped them, simply facilitating the rise of charismatic figures like Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein, who would form cults of personality around themselves.

As will be analysed in further depth in Chapter Eight, Ba’athism in both Iraq and Syria exhibited certain anti-imperialist characteristics, but in effect perpetuated the subjugation of the people of those nation states. What it left behind in Iraq, as I will show from Chapter Six onwards, was a popular inability to empathise and cooperate with fellow citizens, and a dependency on strong ideological groups, such as Islamists. Iraqi Ba’athists simply had not focussed on creating independent, free-thinking citizens, and had spent their time instead forging a populous susceptible to continued authoritarian rule. Blame should not be placed

²⁰⁰ <http://gulfartguide.com/essay/nasserism-baathism-and-political-islam/>

totally on Ba'athism, however, as it simply represented a reactionary response to a context of European and Zionist colonialism and exploitation. In fact, this chapter has even shown that the USA and other nations actually supported the Iraqi Ba'athists' rise to power, both directly and indirectly.

Ba'athism's reactionary nature also drew from the popular desire of Iraqis and Syrians to resist imperialist attempts to prevent the rise of any truly progressive political movement. In the absence of the latter, Ba'athism stood up as the strongest quasi-progressive force in the region. As with other forms of nationalism, it may have had both fascist and authoritarian characteristics but, if we fail to understand that it was a direct consequence of violent oppression and exploitation itself, we fail to realise that its ideals cannot simply be destroyed with more violence. As I have argued in this chapter, nationalist groups like the Ba'athists deserve significant criticism, and their murderous, counterrevolutionary actions must be stopped. In the following chapter, meanwhile, I will argue that Kurdish nationalism is just as dangerous as Arab nationalism. In summary, however, such philosophies can only be eroded away in the long term, through popular opposition to imperialism in all its forms and attempts to create universal access to autonomous, high quality education. Only in these ways will communities be able to build up inclusive, grassroots democracies truly capable of nurturing peace, justice, and equality.

4) The Kurdish Question

In the two nations where Ba'athism managed to get into power, there were significant minority populations, and neither government did much to make them feel like they were valued sectors of their respective nations. In particular, the Iraqi and Syrian regimes both sought to manage their Kurdish populations in the way that most served their own interests, though they did so in different ways. Meanwhile, the numerous twentieth-century nationalist governments of Turkey and Iran would also try to 'neutralise' their Kurdish citizens in order to prevent them from rebelling, mostly through the use of assimilation policies. Deprived of a nation of their own, however, and discriminated against by Arab, Turkish, and Iranian nationalists alike, Kurds inevitably began to stand up for their rights.

Although Kurdish political movements were discussed very briefly in the previous chapter, I will refer in much greater detail to the 'Kurdish Question' in this chapter, with the aim of clarifying the Kurds' role in the currently changing dynamics of the Middle East (in the wake of the 2003 Invasion of Iraq). In particular, I will analyse the Kurdish nationalist movement centred in Iraq, looking both at its fight for greater autonomy in the twentieth century and at the gradual gains that it made after Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

A) The Roots of the Problem

The "ancestors of the modern Kurds", known as the Medes, were an Iranian tribe "conventionally recognized as the founders of the historical and national entity of Iran". As a result of this role, Kurds have "had exceptional and immensely important roles in the history of... the entire Middle East".²⁰¹ At the start of the twentieth century, however, they were set to become one of the largest minority groups in the world without its own state. In 2010, Salah Bayaziddi at Global Research gave a summary of the twentieth-century history of Kurdistan, which I will discuss in this section of the chapter.

The Colonialist Scramble

During the First World War, Bayaziddi emphasises, both the **Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916** and the **Bolshevik Revolution of 1917** would have a significant impact on developments which would affect the Kurds. In particular, the former saw Britain, France, and Russia draw up their "respective spheres of influence and control in West Asia after the expected downfall of the Ottoman Empire". The majority of northern Kurdistan (now in Turkey) looked set to become "part of the Russian Empire", so Russia gave "rosy promises to Kurdish tribes that helped her during the war". Although it occupied "Kurdish and Armenian regions of the Ottoman empire" in 1916, however, the triumph of Bolshevism and Lenin's subsequent abandonment of "all previous Tsarist policies" meant that the Russian Army "began to withdraw" the following year.

In spite of the fact that an end to Russian imperialism was in many ways a positive development, it would also have negative side effects in Kurdish communities, because the "other two colonial powers" now had an opportunity "to divide the Kurdish regions among themselves". Effectively, Britain and France were unaffected by Russia's withdrawal from the previous alliance, even though the Bolsheviks had "found a copy of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in the Russian government's archives" and made it public (seeing it appear in the Manchester Guardian) towards the end of 1917. At the same time, however, Russia's withdrawal from Northern Kurdistan would also provide "ample opportunities" for "Turkish nationalists to launch their struggle from the east", making it harder for the European colonialists to divide the region up exactly in the way that it wished.

²⁰¹ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-exploits-kurdish-elements-against-iran/3940>

In essence, the subsequent successes of Turkish nationalism therefore owed a lot to the Bolshevik Revolution, as continued Russian presence would have “considerably diminished... Turkish nationalists’ chances to consolidate their power in Anatolia and Kurdistan”. Kurds, meanwhile, would soon receive a “historic opportunity” to assert their autonomy from the ethnic groups surrounding them, thanks to the chaotic and “potentially volatile political and military vacuum” that prevailed after the Ottoman Empire’s surrender in the Mudros Armistice of 1918. Kurdish communities, however, “failed to build a united front”, and thus allowed the new states being formed around them to absorb their territory.

One reason for the Kurds’ failure to attain autonomy was the “rise of **Mustafa Kemal Atatürk** in Turkey. As a former ‘Young Turk’, he exploited both his popularity and the “factional division among the Kurds” in order to “strengthen his [own] political and military position”, stressing “either the fraternity between Kurds and Turks” or the “conflict with a foreign occupation force” (in this case either France or Britain).²⁰² In short, he did what other bourgeois nationalists would do later in the twentieth century, seeking to unite the disparate population of a determined area in order to successfully oppose an external enemy (while strengthening an internal minority).

Also at Global Research, Gilles Munier speaks of how the **1920 Treaty of Sèvres** “made provision for “local self-rule” of territories “where the Kurdish element was dominant””. However, the elite Kurdish delegation in Sèvres asked for far too much land, which was “totally unacceptable for the big powers of the days”, both from Europe (France and Britain) and the Middle East (Turks, Arabs, and Armenians). Encouraging a compromise, the British suggested setting up “a Kurdish kingdom in the north of the Mosul Vilayet only” (i.e. where the Kurdish Regional Government of northern Iraq was officially recognised in 2005). Thinking about its own interests, the colonial power had intended this kingdom “to undermine the Turks”, but it eventually decided to create the diverse, unified state of Iraq instead, after “the north of Iraq had revealed huge oil resources”.

Within the Ottoman Empire, there had been a number of “Kurdish principalities... more or less dependent on the Sultan in Istanbul”, but they had essentially “covered a very small part of Kurdistan”. In reality, the majority of Kurds had a relative amount of freedom to live their lives as they saw fit. As a result, it was primarily Kurdish elites who believed that pushing for an independent Kurdish state was in their best interests, while most normal Kurds did not see the benefit of doing so. Although one Kurdish king, Sheikh Mahmud Berzendji, led a short-lived rebellion in 1922 (which would soon be “crushed in a heavy-handed manner by the British”), Kurdish communities generally went about their business as usual, or supported Atatürk in his quest to build a united Turkish state.²⁰³

The Birth of Turkey

In the **Treaty of Lausanne of 1923**, the state of Turkey was officially created. Having successfully manipulated Kurds into supporting his nationalist campaign, however, Atatürk now felt “no need to keep his promises”, and he subsequently launched an “offensive against the Kurds”. Considering the “Kurdish national movement” to be “a real threat to the new Turkish republic”, he did “whatever [was] necessary to crush the Kurdish resistance” to his increasing authoritarianism. Perhaps due to the fact that there had been “no Kurdish representative at the Lausanne Conference”, meanwhile, the “international consideration of the Kurdish question” was officially “terminated” when the treaty came into effect in 1924.

²⁰² <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-kurdish-national-question/21608>

²⁰³ <http://www.uruknet.info/?p=22749>, <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/01/360626.html>, and <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-great-kurdistan-threat/2320>

Seen simply as Muslims rather than Kurds, Kurdish envoys had played “no role in the presence of non-Muslim minorities... within Turkey” during the negotiations at Lausanne, and had essentially been swindled by both Atatürk and the European colonial powers.²⁰⁴ In 2013, Counterpunch’s Conn Hallinan would speak of how, “for almost a century, the Kurds... [had] been deceived and double-crossed, their language and culture suppressed, their villages burned and bombed, and their people scattered”.²⁰⁵ In short, the Treaty of Lausanne destined Kurdish communities to suffer many decades of oppression and discrimination.

Atatürk’s “promises of Kurdish autonomy” in Turkey were soon broken, with the Kurdish National Assembly being dissolved, Kurdish schools being abolished, and the Kurdish language being outlawed. Far from having their unique culture recognised, Kurds were now simply labelled “Mountain Turks”. Western powers, meanwhile, decided not to intervene, believing it was better to gain Atatürk “as an ally rather than an enemy”, especially considering that he had already forged a friendship with the USSR and was already “receiving military and financial help from Moscow”. This Turco-Soviet alliance had become official in 1921, when the USSR began to give “diplomatic support” to the Turkish national cause, “as well as arms, ammunition, and money” to help Atatürk’s forces “fight against the Greek army in the west and the Armenians in the east”. Salah Bayaziddi summarises this coalition by insisting that “both the Kurds and Armenians were the first victims of the Bolshevik policies” regarding Turkey.

Although Britain in particular feared the spread of communism in the Middle East through Atatürk, however, it had very little to worry about in reality. The new Turkish leader was essentially a pragmatist more than anything, having shown with the Kurds that he was driven principally by his own interests rather than any commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusivity. In the early years of his movement, he had even emphasised the importance of “the Islamic religion” in Turkey, only then to implement thoroughly secular policies once the Turkish state had officially been created. In other words, his increasing “military and political alliance with the Bolsheviks” had helped him to accumulate enough power to “break up his enormous enemies”, and to betray both the Kurdish and Muslim sectors of the Turkish population that had previously supported him.

At the start of the twentieth century, Kurds in the Ottoman Empire (who had been “a united entity for almost 400 years”) were caught off guard. In the aftermath of the First World War, Ottoman Kurdistan was now “about to be divided among three new national states” (Persian Kurdistan would remain part of Iran).²⁰⁶ The regimes of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey – given great control over diverse populations – would now set about creating what they called ‘national unity’, though this would be dictated ‘from above’ and, more often than not, through the use of force. Kurdish communities, however, would not remain submissive for long. In the next section of this chapter, I will explore the numerous Kurdish rebellions that took place during the following decades, and the repressive measures used to crush them.

B) Kurdish Rebellions

Unrest in the Newly-Created States

In 1931, Sheikh Ahmed Barzani led a rebellion in the north of Iraq, which would soon be crushed when the RAF “shelled his HQ”. When the small **Republic of Mahabad** was temporarily formed in 1946, meanwhile, Sheikh Ahmed’s brother Mustafa “went to Iran with over a thousand fighters” to support it. Originally supported by the USSR, the republic

²⁰⁴ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-kurdish-national-question/21608>

²⁰⁵ www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com and <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/29/ascent-of-the-kurds/>

²⁰⁶ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-kurdish-national-question/21608>

“fell less than a year later”, after being deserted by its northern ally. Mustafa Barzani then fled to the Soviet Union, and only returned to Iraq after the Iraqi Revolution of 1958. Having received promises from Qasim of “national rights” within the “Iraqi entity” and the freedom to publish Kurdish newspapers, Barzani even “branded himself “Qasim’s Soldier””.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Arab nationalists opposed to Qasim’s alliance with left-wing forces tried to rise up against the government on numerous occasions and, on one occasion, Barzani helped to repress a revolt in Mosul (in what would turn out to be “a bloodbath”). Gilles Munier speaks of how, at one point, “Kurdish militias and the “People’s Resistance Forces”” even massacred four hundred followers of the coup leader whilst they were in a mosque. Meanwhile, Barzani also helped to keep Kurds in line, lending “a hand to the Iraqi army in quashing a revolt of [Kurdish] chiefs”, which caused “more than 24,000 Kurds [to flee] to Turkey and Iran”.

Barzani Joins the Fight against Qasim

When Qasim decided to “evict the Iraqi Communist Party from power”, however, the USSR signalled to Barzani that it “did not appreciate” the move. Consequently, the Kurdish leader began to wage war on Qasim’s forces in 1961, though he expressed fairly mild demands, including the opening of schools, “agricultural and industrial development”, and “the recognition of the Kurdish language”. In other words, there were no requests related to “self-rule or borders” at this point.

Only after the Ba’athist coup of 1963 did Barzani finally hand over “a list of claims” to the government in Baghdad, including a “demand for self-rule” and a “share-out of the oil income among Arabs and Kurds”. While these calls were ignored, the new regime did agree to a certain “decentralisation” in Iraq. The KDP’s Jalal Talabani, however, asked for the “replacement of Iraq by a bi-national State” – a request that was seen by Arab nationalists as a provocation. After Nasserists pushed the Ba’athists out of power, though, tensions diminished, and Barzani’s “claims suddenly became less urgent”. Nonetheless, Talabani was persecuted by supporters of Barzani, and eventually “had to run away to Iran”. The seeds for a split within the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq had now definitively been planted.

According to Munier, Barzani managed in 1964 to control “a mountainous territory” in northern Iraq thanks to “the financial and military assistance” of a “secret alliance with the Shah of Iran”, the USA, and Israel (which all sought to undermine the Nasserist regime in Baghdad). Talabani, meanwhile, growing unhappy with the actions of the Barzani clan, “sided with Baghdad and took part” in a battle against Idris Barzani and 1,700 of his Peshmerga fighters. Four years later, when the Ba’athists retook power, they “decided to support Jalal Talabani” in his fight against Barzani and his supporters, who they saw as friends of imperialist and Zionist powers.

In 1970, Baghdad agreed that “**self-rule would be granted, within four years**”, and that the “Kurdish language [would] become one of the official languages [of Iraq] along with Arabic”. Reflecting the ‘progressive’ measures implemented by those in charge of the Iraqi Ba’ath Party at the time (aimed at creating a united front with Iraqi left-wingers and attracting Soviet support), this seemed like an immense step forward. However, the Ba’athists soon encouraged Arab migration to the north of the country, in an attempt to reduce the number of areas over which the Kurds would have majority control when the self-rule plan was finalised in 1974. The regime argued that it could not justify “granting territorial rights to Kurds” in “regions where [Kurds] did not compose the majority of inhabitants”. While some places genuinely did not have majority Kurdish populations,

though, areas which did were specifically targeted by Baghdad for Arab resettlement. In essence, this tactic was similar to what Zionists had done in Palestine decades before, using mass migration to strengthen their claims on Palestinian land.

The Alliance between Barzani and the West

The Ba'athist scheme mentioned above gave Barzani's KDP an excuse to criticise the deal that had been made. At the same time, though, the bourgeois nationalist leader also "feared that [such] autonomy would jeopardize the power of the feudal chiefs which the peasants served", as he "did not favour the implementation in Kurdistan of the agrarian reform carried out in the rest of the country". In spite of his previous friendship with the USSR, Barzani was now beginning to show that he was not really committed to the type of land reforms carried out by such regimes. Ba'athists, meanwhile, insisted that the "State [had] to treat all regions equally in terms of development" and, when it nationalised the IPC in 1972, its desire to implement 'progressive' measures became clear.

Like other bourgeois nationalist governments, the regime in Baghdad was seeking to replace dependence on Western imperialists with a system run by the national bourgeoisie (with the working population's support obtained through economic concessions). As seen in the previous chapter, the USSR saw these moves as progressive, and sought an alliance with Ba'athist Iraq as a result. With the Soviet Union now officially pitted against Barzani's tribal nationalism, which was threatening to derail the 'top-down' progressive measures of the government, the KDP now had to seek other outlets of support.

From May 1972, Munier says, "the CIA covertly financed [Barzani's] activities" in Iraqi Kurdistan, as a consequence of the fact that the Ba'athists' "modernisation plan for Iraq... was a serious concern for the United States and their great ally Israel".²⁰⁷ The CIA's Pike Report, for example, makes it very clear that there was "**US covert aid to the Kurds in Iraq from 1972 to 1975**".²⁰⁸ In an interview with the Washington Post, meanwhile, **Barzani said he would "serve the US policy in the region"**, taking "control of the Kirkuk oilfields and [entrusting] their exploitation to a US company". With these words, Barzani was showing that he had found a new ally in the USA, which would be happy to fuel his war against the Ba'athist regime.

Although there were other reasons for KDP opposition to the Ba'athist 'self-rule' plan for Iraqi Kurdistan (as detailed above), it is almost certain that Barzani's alliance with the USA played a significant part in his denunciation of the scheme. In 1974, for example, just as the KDP was receiving support from the USA and its allies, Barzani "dispelled" self-rule, at a point at which it was finally being granted to Iraqi Kurdistan. More revealing, however, is the fact that, later on, he would even acknowledge that "Israel, the Shah of Iran and the United States had strongly convinced him to refuse the agreement", believing that Kurds would subsequently launch "guerrilla warfare" against the Iraqi state and thus "weaken" the 'anti-imperialist' Ba'athist regime.

In **1975**, however, Barzani's allies effectively abandoned him, with the Western-backed Shah of Iran signing the **Algiers Agreement** with the Iraqi Ba'athists, in which both countries "secretly agreed to stop supporting their respective opposition groups". The KDP's conflict soon collapsed, with the Barzanis fleeing to Iran and Jalal Talabani setting up a breakaway social democratic movement in Damascus called the **PUK** (which would prove to be more prepared to deal with the Ba'athist regime than the KDP). Barzani, meanwhile, died in exile,

²⁰⁷ <http://www.uruknet.info/?p=22749>, <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/01/360626.html>, and <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-great-kurdistan-threat/2320>

²⁰⁸ https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter98_99/art07.html

while KDP groups (under the leadership of Mustafa's son **Masoud Barzani**) ambushed and killed PUK forces on a number of occasions between 1976 and 1977.

The KDP subsequently sought other allies, having been abandoned by both the USSR and the West. In 1981, Munier claims, it sought collaboration with the ICP (which had finally declared its own opposition to the Ba'athist government) in repressing its PUK opponents. Two years later, meanwhile, when the tide was turning against Saddam Hussein's regime in the Iran-Iraq War, the KDP made a tactical alliance with Iran, in the hope of pushing Ba'athist forces out of Kurdistan. In response, Saddam ordered the murder of thousands of men from the Barzani clan, and would eventually punish ordinary Kurds too, with the genocidal 1988 chemical attacks on Halabja.

Nonetheless, Kurdish nationalists in Iraq would actually benefit from Saddam's military actions in the region, with what Munier calls an "illegitimate free-zone" being set up in Kurdistan in April 1991, after the Iraqi army had been routed in Kuwait. Barzani and Talabani, he says, "were [now] free to do as they pleased for the next 13 years". After contributing to the US-led Invasion of Iraq in 2003, meanwhile, the KDP and PUK militias, "trained, armed and supported by the Americans and the Israelis", found themselves in the position to demand 'legitimate' autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁰⁹

Kurdish Forces in Turkey

While the KDP (and the PUK) dominated the Kurdish movement in Iraq, Kurdish resistance in Turkey only intensified in the late 1970s. With an oppressive Turkish nationalist regime in charge in the early 1980s, however, this struggle turned into a ferocious civil war. As the Iran-Iraq War ravaged Turkey's neighbours, "the Turkish government was burning Kurdish villages and scattering refugees" (allegedly in an attempt to crush the Marxist-Leninist PKK (or Kurdistan Workers' Party)). The PKK, as I will discuss in Chapter Nine, was not as focussed on nationalism as the KDP in Iraq, even if some of its members were. Instead, it was motivated by a desire for a distinctly socialist revolution, which would simultaneously ensure greater self-governance for Turkey's subjugated Kurdish population.

Around "45,000 people - mostly Kurds - lost their lives" in the "long-running conflict" between the powerful, Western-backed Turkish State and the PKK, which would only end when Turkey's Islamist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan finally accepted the PKK's offers for peace negotiations in early 2013. Erdoğan, however, who sought to attract Kurdish support for his "push to amend Turkey's constitution and give [himself] another decade in power", would soon reveal his lack of commitment to the peace process. In particular, his regime would be increasingly "tarnished by [its] unpopular support for the Syrian [Islamist] insurgents" after 2011, along with its "increasingly authoritarian internal policies". Nonetheless, after many years of horrific violence, "most Kurds [wanted] to end the fighting", though they would not give up their struggle altogether without significant concessions.

The main demands of the Turkish Kurds in the twenty-first century were mainly for "parliamentary representation and the right to educate Kurds in their own language". Slow progress under the unenthusiastic Erdoğan, however, meant that Kurds were "growing impatient", and this sentiment would intensify in 2014 as a result Turkey's alleged complicity with Islamist attacks on Kurds in neighbouring Syria. Essentially, in the absence of a solution to the "Kurdish Question" in sight, Turkey's Kurds were "on a knife's edge", and the Erdoğan regime would need to grant "Kurdish language rights and cultural autonomy" if this situation was going to change. [Between Chapters Nine and Twelve of this

²⁰⁹ <http://www.uruknet.info/?p=22749>, <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2007/01/360626.html>, and <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-great-kurdistan-threat/2320>

book, issues relating to the PKK, Turkey, and Syrian Kurdistan will be discussed in much greater depth.]

Kurds in Syria

In Syria, the state “stripped citizenship rights from 20 percent of its Kurdish minority” in the early 1960s, creating “between 300,000 to 500,000 stateless people” and convincing many Kurds that Damascus had “abandoned the northern and eastern parts of the country”. Syrian Kurds, however, led no significant rebellions until the twenty-first century, partly because of the strength of the Ba’athist military regime, but also because of Ba’athist support for the PKK’s efforts in Turkey. After the state abandoned the PKK in the late 1990s, though, the state’s continued failure to resolve the issue of “restoring citizenship” for Syrian Kurds only contributed to rapidly increasing activism in Kurdish communities. By the time the question was finally dealt with (after the deterioration of the civil conflict in Syria after the Arab Spring), it was already too late for the Assad regime to save its reputation.

At the start of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian Kurds (influenced heavily by the political philosophy of the PKK) sought to “walk the hazardous path between their desire for autonomy... [and] not taking sides in the... civil war”. While they wanted to exercise autonomous rule over their own affairs, they also knew that, as “most of Syria’s oil reserves are in the Kurdish region”, any system they set up would end up being “a fleeting thing” if they openly waged war on the Arab territories surrounding them. Knowing that both Ba’athists and Islamists would eventually seek to exert control over Kurdish land if they won the civil war, Syria’s Kurdish communities focussed on self-defence and self-rule rather than actively taking the fight to their external enemies.

According to Conn Hallinan at Counterpunch, there is some speculation that Kurds “cut a deal with Assad” early on in the Syrian Civil War, in which they promised to “help drive the insurgents out” of their region “in exchange for greater autonomy” if the Ba’athists eventually won the war. Whether this is true or not, their decision to avoid participating directly in the conflict, and to focus on defending and governing themselves, would appear to have been an intelligent decision, ensuring that Syrian Kurdistan largely escaped the horrendous bloodshed experienced elsewhere in Syria. The strategy would also see the country’s Kurds achieve the autonomy that they had been increasingly seeking since the Ba’athists betrayed the PKK over a decade before.

Upon attaining this autonomy, however, Syrian Kurds (influenced significantly by the PKK) gained an enemy in the Turkish government. Shocked at the appearance of a self-ruling Kurdish region on its border (after years of bloody conflict aimed at preventing the same from happening on Turkish soil), the Erdoğan government condemned Syria’s Kurdish communities for staying out of the civil war and called on them to join the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army. In spite of the state’s claim that they were terrorists and collaborators with the Ba’athist dictatorship (neither of which had any justification), however, “any direct intervention by the Turks to block autonomy for Syria’s Kurds would [have] put Ankara in the middle of a civil war”, while at the same time risking an increase in internal resistance to the already unpopular Erdoğan regime. [Between Chapters Nine and Twelve of this book, I will analyse in greater depth Turkey’s opposition to both the PKK and to autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan.]

C) The Achievements of Kurdish Nationalists in Iraq

Kurds in Iraq Step Closer to Autonomy

Having gained experience in the 1990s under the protection of a US-established “no-fly zone over northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War”, Kurdish nationalists in Iraq were determined to take even greater autonomy when George W. Bush decided to overthrow the Ba’athist regime in the country in 2003. They quickly “seized three oil rich northern provinces, set up a parliament, established a capital at Erbil, and mobilized their formidable militia, the Peshmerga”, all to the benefit of their Western allies. Nonetheless, the subsequent ten years also saw Iraqi Kurdistan go from “one of the poorest regions in Iraq to one of the most affluent”. As with other bourgeois nationalists, the KDP and PUK enriched themselves and their allies (thanks to alliances with capitalist powers and “energy sales to Turkey and Iran”), whilst also given certain concessions to the Kurdish people in order to keep them on side.

The Current Situation

Conn Hallinan insists that, “because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Syrian civil war, and Turkish politics”, **Kurdish communities “have been suddenly transformed from pawn to major player in a pivotal part of the Middle East”**. In other words, he says, the increasing political importance of the “25 to 30 million” Kurds in the region, who “have long yearned to establish their own state”, has been due in large part to the weakening of their “traditional foes... by invasion, civil war, and political discord”. Although post-invasion Iraqi leader Nouri al-Maliki was “outraged by the Kurds’ seizure of oil assets” after the start of the Arab Spring, for example, he was just too busy trying to deal with “a sectarian-led bombing campaign against Shiite communities” to react in a meaningful way. Partly as a result of the USA’s “dismantling of Saddam Hussein’s army”, Hallinan argues, Baghdad simply did not “have the capabilities to take on the Peshmerga” any more.

At the same time, there could no longer be effective cooperation between Turkey and Iraq against their respective Kurdish populations, largely as a result of Turkey’s self-interested alliance with Iraqi Kurdistan. Drooling over its lucrative oil deals with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the Turkish regime was not interested in the fact that Baghdad claimed ownership of all Iraqi oil and accused the KRG of stealing it. At the same time, Turkey’s “support for the Sunni extremists” in Syria (the same type that was “massacring Shiite supporters of the Maliki government”) added to the tensions between Ankara and Baghdad, effectively destroying the collaborative attitude that had previously seen both countries work together to repress their respective Kurdish populations.²¹⁰

How Barzani’s Kurdish Nationalism Has Flourished in Post-Ba’athist Iraq

Having been well-placed alongside the imperialist invaders when Saddam Hussein was overthrown in 2003, Masoud Barzani’s KDP soon became the principle political force in Iraqi Kurdistan. Al-Maliki, meanwhile, insisted increasingly on treading the fine line between maintaining US support and courting Iran, whilst entering into conflict with both Kurds and Sunni Arabs (who were being marginalised by his sectarian Shiite government). In September 2014, as ISIS jihadists were beginning to exploit these divisions, the University of Arizona’s Christian Sinclair reported on how the Iraqi central government and the KRG had “long been engaged in local disputes over oil sales and revenues”, as mentioned above.

With Baghdad “withholding the KRG’s share of oil revenues” (amounting to “US\$7bn for 2014 alone”), Kurdish troops were ordered in July 2014 to seize “oil fields near Kirkuk after Maliki [had] allegedly ordered the destruction of oil pipelines there”. Genuine political grievances, from both the past and the present, were leading the Kurdish nationalist government to become more and more daring, just as the weakened sectarian government of

²¹⁰ www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com and <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/29/ascent-of-the-kurds/>

al-Maliki was increasingly powerless to do anything about it. This oil crisis, along with other “geopolitical plot twists”, says Sinclair, “could very well be a catalyst that reshapes the region”.

In June 2014, a tanker containing Kurdish oil “departed from Ceyhan, Turkey”, after being sent through a “newly constructed pipeline that runs directly from Kurdistan, bypassing the old pipeline from fields in Iraq proper”. This act of defiance from the KRG subsequently led to a standoff with the Iraqi regime, which made sure that the tanker that had left Turkey would not be accompanied by others any time soon. The ship that had already set sail, meanwhile, would be left “sitting in the Gulf of Mexico doing \$100m donuts for more than two months waiting to be “sold in the United States””. While the Kurds had been key US allies back in 2003, the superpower had now shown that it was not prepared to validate the KRG’s attempts to exert its independence from the Iraqi central government. If the USA had not toed the line, it could have risked the Shiite regime moving closer to the Iran, which would have undermined its whole anti-Iranian political strategy in the region. At the same time, it wanted to assert that it was in favour of a strong Iraqi nation without internal divisions, and supporting unilateral Kurdish actions would have undercut this objective.²¹¹

Although the Kurdish nationalists in Iraq had previously been used by the USA (when convenient) as a counterweight against the Ba’athist regime, the imperialist power had never been committed to the creation of an independent Kurdish state. In 1975, the USA had even forbidden American officials “from having any open contact with Iraqi Kurdish groups”, causing Mustafa Barzani to lament “once having trusted the U.S.”.²¹² Although both the KDP and the USA used an alliance to their favour when it was in their interests, each was ultimately most bothered about their own political aims, believing that they could only really trust in themselves.

In May 2014, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said, regarding the transferral of oil to Turkey, that there was “no going back”. When Mosul fell to ISIS two months later (with the Iraqi army essentially falling apart), KRG President Masoud Barzani even “announced plans for a referendum on independence for Kurdistan”, disregarding explicitly the will of the US government (that the KRG and Iraq sort their problems out and remain united). Essentially, the nationalists of the KRG were showing their determination to take advantage of the deterioration of the Iraqi regime’s legitimacy, and its powerlessness in the face of ISIS advances.

If the USA had allowed the Kurdish oil in the Gulf of Mexico to be “offloaded and sold” in America, it would almost certainly have been seen as “tacit approval by the U.S. of Kurdistan’s bid for independence and the abandonment of its long-standing policy of Iraqi unity”. The tanker’s delay, therefore, was key to both weakening the KRG’s independence efforts and assuring the USA’s allies in Baghdad that it wasn’t going to support the fragmentation of Iraq. At the same time, however, Israel was a lot less sure about supporting the Iraqi government over the KRG. Opposed to both Arab nationalism and Iranian-style Shia Islamism (as a result of their historical opposition to Zionism), the Kurdish nationalists were the least hostile option to Israel in Iraq and, consequently, the party that Israel was always most likely to support. [Israel’s support for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan will be discussed in more detail later in this section, and also in Chapter Eight.]

For Baghdad, the Kurdish oil in the Mexican Gulf was “stolen property that the KRG had no right to export or try to sell” – an attitude that was never going to facilitate a resolution to the oil crisis. As a result, it got a US law firm to “issue a seizure order... for the more than 1,000,000 barrels of Kurdish crude on the tanker”. The USA, however, could not seize the oil

²¹¹ <http://www.sismec.org/2014/09/08/oil-for-sovereignty-america-iraq-and-kurdistan/>

²¹² <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saddam/kurds/cron.html>

because the tanker was still “outside of U.S. jurisdiction”, and a judge later emphasised that it was “not a matter for the U.S. courts to tell... the governments... of Iraq who owns what”. The KRG’s London-based attorneys, meanwhile, managed to make some progress with the case, forcing the Iraqi government to refile its lawsuit in September. While there was “no official U.S. ban on Kurdish oil” during this period”, however, its “diplomatic sway” managed to “prevent sales of Kurdish crude that [were] not sanctioned by Baghdad”, under the guise that such actions would be “bad for a united Iraq”.

Oil and the Capitalist Quest for ‘Stability’

US interference in Middle Eastern politics is determined entirely by ‘US interests’ in the region, rather than humanitarianism or democracy (as is sometimes claimed), and one of the biggest of these interests is the oil industry. An independent Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, would be positive for the US elites in the short term, as it would create greater political stability in the oil-rich region. At the same time, however, such a Kurdish state would almost certainly, in the long run, strengthen the cause of Kurds elsewhere – especially in Syrian Kurdistan (or Rojava), where autonomy was declared in 2012. The consolidation of the libertarian socialist government there would undoubtedly affect capitalist interests in the Middle East, assuring that profits from natural resources went to the People instead of corporations.

One reason for the West’s inaction against Wahhabi jihadists in Syria for so long was probably its fear about what was happening in Rojava. It is also no coincidence that the USA only began to talk of intervention against ISIS when the group began to take control of oil fields and weaken US allies in Iraq. Following such a pattern of intervention, however, is only delaying the inevitable. In the long term, the only realistic political outcomes in the region either lie in the creation of a sectarian, authoritarian regime (like that which ISIS would create), or the creation of a secular, directly democratic, and socialist system. The choice is therefore between either the reactionary former, which would perpetuate instability in the region, or the revolutionary latter, which would end it. Either way, though, imperialist control of natural resources is unsustainable.

Although far from ideal for capitalists, the reality is that the revolutionary option is much more desirable than having oil completely in the hands of a hostile group of quasi-religious extremists. Nonetheless, the world’s ruling elites believe that there is third way – one that they hope to construct themselves. They delude themselves by thinking that the capitalist system can attract sufficient support if it portrays itself to be democratic and benevolent, much like it has with the puppet regime of Baghdad or the Kurdish nationalists of the KRG. As long as both keep up a democratic façade, they believe, whilst in reality allowing foreign companies to exploit their workers and natural resources, they imagine that they can forge an environment in the Middle East that will protect the capitalist interests there. In reality, however, peace can never grow from injustice. From the latter, only conflict can emerge.

Whilst holding back support for Kurdish independence in Iraq, the USA managed to encourage reform in the Baghdad regime. It knew that al-Maliki’s incompetence had played a formidable role in fuelling the rise of ISIS, and made sure that a new Prime Minister and President were elected in Iraq. Its tightrope diplomacy also managed to push the KRG into announcing the postponement of its referendum plans and into “helping form a new government in Baghdad”.²¹³ Judging on past performance, however, it looked unlikely that the Iraqi central government would suddenly treat all Iraqi inhabitants as equals. In fact, it was the very hierarchy of the state apparatus that ensured that there would always be

²¹³ <http://www.sismec.org/2014/09/08/oil-for-sovereignty-america-iraq-and-kurdistan/>

marginalised and oppressed citizens, and thus that popular resistance would continue indefinitely.

As far as the tanker crisis was concerned, however, the replacement of Nouri al-Maliki with Haider al-Abadi, along with US pressure, helped to push the Iraqi regime into compromising with the KRG. Baghdad “reached a deal with the Kurdish government” in early December 2014, for example, in which the latter promised to “exchange oil” for “the 17 per cent of the state budget that [was] supposed to go to the Kurdish region” (which had previously been withheld by central government as a result of the KRG’s provocative commercial actions).²¹⁴

In short, both the KRG and Baghdad essentially still had the USA on their side, and would subsequently be able to retain the monopoly of force needed both to fight off ISIS advances and keep their own citizens in line. Such dependence on foreign assistance, however, would inevitably weaken government attempts to convince Iraqi citizens that their leaders represent their interests and not those of multinational corporations. And, while US support may keep the KRG from calling for independence, at least for the time being, it will not be able to silence the voice of the voiceless forever and, ultimately, there will either be popular reaction or popular revolution.

Israel Backed the KDP

Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz suggested in 2004 that Yasser Arafat was “adamantly opposed to the Kurdish efforts to end their occupation and establish their state”, in spite of the fact that, in his opinion, “the case for ending the occupation of Kurdistan and establishing an independent Kurdish state is at least as strong... [as] the case for ending the occupation of the West Bank [Palestine] and establishing a Palestinian state”. Seeking to expose an alleged hypocrisy between those criticising Zionist occupation of Palestinian land but not criticising Iraqi (or Iranian, Turkish, and Syrian) occupation of Kurdish land, he claims that the Kurdish cause may have been ignored for so long because “those who occupy and oppress the Kurds have access to oil”, or because the voice of the Arab World had simply been much louder.

The suggestion that oil played a role in Iraq, Iran, or even Syria is perhaps justifiable, especially when we consider that the bourgeois nature of the nationalist Kurds in Iraq and Iran ought to have made the Kurds natural allies for Western regimes. In Turkey, however, the reason for Western opposition to Kurdish independence was principally the fact that the Kurds there (under the leadership of the PKK) were a left-wing force that threatened the West’s economic interests and anti-communist efforts in the region. This is clearly a fact that Dershowitz ignores in his article.

Using the justifications above, the professor insists that “there is no legitimate basis for opposing the end of the occupation of Kurdistan and the establishment of a Kurdish democracy, while supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state”. In this sense, I agree with his suggestion that all people deserve to have control over the land upon which they work and live. However, he clearly ignores the fact that colonial powers (Britain, France, and then Zionists) arbitrarily drew the lines that confined Palestinians and Kurds to statelessness in the first place. Therefore, he also fails to emphasise that Israel was the force that had created Palestinian resistance, while the nationalists in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran were not directly responsible for Kurdish resistance (an accurate assessment would be that colonial powers created the issue of Kurdish subjugation in the region). A comparison between the creation of a Jewish state and a Kurdish state, meanwhile, is also unsound

²¹⁴ <http://www.ctvnews.ca/business/iraq-reaches-oil-deal-with-kurdish-region-1.2128526>

primarily because Zionist forces were foreign to the land they would subsequently claim as their own, while Kurdish regions had been populated by Kurds in a largely uninterrupted way for many centuries – making their claim much more rational than that of Zionists.²¹⁵

The main interest for Israel in supporting the creation of a Kurdish state is the negative effect the establishment of Kurdish independence would have on the often sectarian states of Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Zionists have an interest in weakening the power of both Arab Nationalism and Islamism, mainly because they are both fundamentally anti-Zionist forces. Kurds, meanwhile, seldom fit into either of these two camps, with the KDP having rarely, if ever, supported an anti-Zionist cause. Essentially, Kurdish activist Dilar Dirik says, the system set up in Iraqi Kurdistan is “based on [a] chauvinist, empty nationalism, and complete dependency, by being a puppet of foreign powers”.

The “statehood-obsessed mentality” of KDP supporters, Dirik insists, even led them to praise Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “for his support for Kurdish statehood in June” 2014, just a month before he launched his genocidal attack on Palestinians in Gaza. She argues that Kurds ought to “understand the suffering of the Palestinians under the apartheid fascist occupation of the state of Israel very well”, but that, under the leadership of Kurdish nationalists like Masoud Barzani, “the dogma of the state... defines morality in terms of interest, leading to the odd conclusion of having to ally with Israel”. Fundamentally, she stresses here the importance of solidarity between all oppressed peoples: for an alliance not between Kurds and Israelis, but between Kurds and Palestinians.²¹⁶

Unlike Barzani, PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has gradually moved further and further away from nationalism, and “has made anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist statements” on numerous occasions. In fact, as Turkey was “Israel’s long-time friend”, the PKK has even made tactical alliances with both Ba’athist Syria and Palestinian resistance groups, both of which have long been anti-Zionist forces. Essentially, the group’s struggle against authoritarian nationalism in Turkey made an alliance with forces fighting against Turkey’s allies a logical decision. Perhaps more poignantly, however, Öcalan stressed in 2005 his hopes that his supporters would “prevent Kurdish nationalism [in Iraq] from becoming the second Zionism”.²¹⁷ [Further analysis regarding the influence of Zionism in the Middle East will be considered in the following chapter.]

Imperialist Alliances and Nationalist Autonomy

Saddam Hussein’s genocidal Al-Anfal campaign (“cruelly named... after a verse in the Koran”) saw “between 50,000 to 180,000” Kurdish civilians killed in the late 1980s, while the international community stood by and watched. Only after Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait, and his subsequent suppression of a Kurdish rebellion in 1991, did a US-led coalition “intervene to set up a “safe zone” for Kurds in part of Kurdistan”. Thanks to this protection, Kurdish militias were soon able to “expand the zone [and] ...set up a government with de facto autonomy”, which would finally be formalised in 2005. According to Zack Beauchamp at Vox, this semi-autonomous Kurdish government would soon demonstrate that, in practice, it enjoyed “even more autonomy than [it had] on paper”. In fact, asserts risk analyst Kirk Sowell, it was actually “significantly more autonomous than an American state”, boasting of “its own military, foreign policy, etc.”.

In spite of having both autonomy and significant oil resources, however, Iraqi Kurdistan cannot yet declare independence, argues Sowell. One big reason, he says, is that Iraqi Kurds

²¹⁵ <http://www.kurdmedia.com/article.aspx?id=9748>

²¹⁶ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/islamic-state-sengal-how-pkk-ygp-taught-barzani-independence-really-means/>

²¹⁷ <http://www.meforum.org/3838/israel-kurds>

“don't yet produce enough [oil] to be economically self-sufficient”, and “don't have legal authority to sell it directly on the market”. Since 2003, the agreement was that Baghdad would “handle Kurdish oil sales”, divvying up proceeds “among the different regions” of Iraq. Although Kurdistan was “supposed to get 17 percent of the nation's oil sales”, however, Kurdish leaders have said “they're given less than that”. The region's leaders also “lack the infrastructure to export enough oil to make independence financially advantageous” and bring in more than “the roughly \$1 billion a month they get from Baghdad”. Sowell insists, nonetheless, that “four years from now [i.e. in 2018]” Kurdish independence “will be viable”. At the same time, though, he claims that, as Turkey has “effectively turned Kurdistan into a colony” under Erdoğan, the current nationalist leaders “would be just as dependent [on Turkey] as they are on Baghdad”.

The Peshmerga, meanwhile, though “far more competent than the Iraqi central military..., aren't that well-armed”. According to Sowell, their “army surplus... weapons from former Soviet states” were nowhere near enough in 2014 to fight off jihadists with “captured US-made Iraqi army equipment and heavy weapons acquired in Syria”. The 80,000-240,000 Peshmerga soldiers also have the problem of politicisation to deal with, as “every Peshmerga unit is headed by a member of the politburo of [either] the PUK or the KDP”. The national security adviser, for example, is “Masrur Barzani, the son of the president”, Sowell notes.

Nonetheless, with the Kurdish-dominated city of Kirkuk being seized by the KRG in June 2014, and international arming and support for the KRG in late 2014, the weaknesses of the Peshmerga and the nationalist government of Iraqi Kurdistan looked set to have a much diminished influence on their chances of success in the intensified fight against ISIS. Standing “next to an oilfield that contains an estimated 10 billion barrels of oil” and “currently exports about 400,000 per day”, the taking of Kirkuk, (which the Kurdish government had “long argued” was “part of Kurdistan”), was an important victory for the Kurdish nationalists. Iraq's attempts to keep it out of the control of the KRG, in order to “keep all of the oil revenue” for itself, had effectively been unsuccessful, and it was unlikely that the KRG would let it fall back into Iraqi hands without a fight. Along with increasing US support in the fight against ISIS, Kurdish control of Kirkuk could be a key element making “independence far more viable”, insists Beauchamp.²¹⁸

The USA's Balancing Act in Iraqi Kurdistan

According to Rick Noack at The Washington Post, the KRG is “one of the parts of the Middle East most well-disposed to the United States”, and it may therefore be in the country's best interests to “more directly back the Kurds” amidst the disintegration of the Iraqi central government and the advances of Wahhabi jihadists. Taking a look at the USA's historical stance towards the Kurds in Iraq, Noack speaks of how, “after the end of World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire..., President Woodrow Wilson supported the idea of autonomy for non-Turks” in the territories formerly belonging to the empire. Nonetheless, the young superpower did not pressure its imperialist counterparts in Europe to ensure that this happened. Effectively, its capitalist alliances with Europe and its distance from the Middle East meant that, as a general rule, it refrained from interfering in the region until after the Second World War, when the anti-colonial zeitgeist saw communist influence spread rapidly across the globe.

With the USA expanding its imperialist efforts in the Middle East in the second half of the twentieth century (as seen Chapters Two and Three), it sought to encourage Iraqi Kurds to cooperate with its own interests in the region. After the US-backed coup in Iraq in 1963, for

²¹⁸ <http://www.vox.com/2014/8/12/5991425/kurds-iraq-kurdistan-peshmerga>

example, “Washington advised Kurdish Iraqis “to support the newly installed central government led by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party””. The Ba’athists’ return to power in 1970, meanwhile, saw “an agreement... reached between the Kurdish Democratic Party and the central government” regarding increased Kurdish autonomy. When the USA’s former Ba’athist allies became “a threat in the eyes of the U.S. government”, however, due in part to the Ba’athists’ “Friendship and Cooperation” treaty with the USSR, “President Nixon and Iran's shah [began] to fund the Kurdish Peshmerga guerrillas and support their claims for autonomy”. With the USSR now having abandoned the Kurdish cause in favour of cooperation with the Ba’athists, the KDP saw the USA’s offer of support as a blessing.

The USA’s betrayal of the Kurdish nationalists after the “surprising Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq” in 1975, however, led to the “fragmentation of the opposition and an increased vulnerability” of the KDP to the Ba’athists’ “renewed attacks”. Seeing Iran’s deal with Iraq as a sign that Ba’athist Iraq was not as much of an enemy as it had previously thought, the USA broke off “all official relations to the opposition it [had] previously backed”, fuelling an increase in the prominence of left-wing and anti-imperialist currents within the Kurdish political movement in the late 1970s (such as the PKK in Turkey). The Kurdish nationalists, meanwhile, would only return to action in the 1980s when they were used as proxy forces in the Iran-Iraq War.

After the ‘safe haven’ in Iraqi Kurdistan had been set up following the Gulf War (mostly to protect northern oil reserves), Kurdish nationalists allowed the USA to use Kurdish territory as a base to train the opposition Iraqi National Congress (INC), which had been founded in 1992. In 1996, however, two years after the KDP and the PUK had begun to fight against each other in a series of ferocious confrontations, the KDP attacked the PUK and INC in Erbil “with the help of Saddam's army”, and many rebel fighters were “captured and executed by the attackers”.²¹⁹ Although the USA launched ‘Operation Desert Strike’ as a response to the assault, striking Ba’athist air defence targets in southern Iraq, it refused to engage the Iraqi army directly, partly due to the fact that major divisions within the INC had made it largely ineffective. Between 1994 and 1998, “as many as 5,000 Kurds”, both soldiers and civilians, would be killed in the civil war.²²⁰

In the run-up to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, the KDP and the PUK actually joined together, fighting “alongside U.S. troops against Saddam's government”. Two years later, they formed a “regional Kurdish parliament”, and “oil discoveries” soon afterwards began to stoke fears in Baghdad “that the Kurdish autonomous region could try to secede” from Iraq. At the same time, US ally Turkey still felt entitled to enter into northern Iraq to attack PKK guerrillas there. According to Noack, relations between Turkey and the KRG eventually improved, though the “sudden success of the Islamic State might be changing the calculus” in the Middle East. Amidst these developments, the US would find itself stuck between the possibility of ISIS conquering swathes of oil-rich territory or supporting Kurdish nationalists “in a fight that might lead to their independence” (and subsequently irritate the regimes in both Ankara and Baghdad).²²¹ In late 2014, it appeared that the superpower had definitively chosen the latter.

The Dangerous Democratic Façade of Kurdish Nationalism

Kamran Matin, professor at Sussex University, spoke in 2008 about the role of Kurdish nationalists in the “American imperial project in the Middle East”. The strengthening of the Kurdish national struggle, he says, “directly undermines the state-classes of Iran and Syria where [the] US seeks further ‘regime-change’”, and is thus beneficial for the superpower.

²¹⁹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/08/07/the-long-winding-history-of-american-dealings-with-iraqs-kurds/>

²²⁰ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/LB20Ak02.html

²²¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/08/07/the-long-winding-history-of-american-dealings-with-iraqs-kurds/>

“The traditional Kurdish nationalist political parties”, meanwhile, and even “the ordinary Kurdish people”, are inevitably tempted “to seize this moment and side with the American project” after years of oppression and marginalisation. Nonetheless, Matin insists, the legitimate Kurdish struggle for rights and autonomy also presents “radical-secular and progressive-emancipatory tendencies”, presenting “a unique geo-political platform” for achieving peace and justice whilst “undermining western neo-imperial projects in the region”.

In the twentieth century, Matin asserts, when “post-colonial nation-building” projects began under “the new Arab, Turkish and Persian ruling elites”, the Kurds suffered from “ethnic-denial” (in Syria and Turkey), “grudging acknowledgement accompanied by severe suppression” (in Iraq), and “ethnic-assimilation” (in Iran).²²² Their history of “inclusion and regional leadership” in the Muslim World, however, meant that it was not easy to immediately set them against their neighbours. In fact, even the eagle on the Egyptian flag (which is also “a pan-Arab symbol”) is actually “the emblem of the great Kurdish leader Saladin”, and this historic unity with the peoples of the Middle East was not easy to destroy.²²³

According to scholar David McDowall, “the Kurds only really began to think and act as an ethnic community from 1918 onwards”, having not previously focussed on the differences between them and the ethnic groups surrounding them.²²⁴ Matin, meanwhile, argues that it was the destructive period of post-Ottoman division that led foreign ideas about national identity to enter into the dialogue of Kurdish elites. Nevertheless, the “deep and pervasive communalism of Kurdish tribal-nomadic... life” meant that it was much more difficult for nationalism to mobilise Kurds than their “largely sedentary” ethnic neighbours.

The “‘modernisation’ projects” of the new Middle Eastern regimes, Matin says, “tended to minimally include Kurdistan in their developmental programmes on self-created security grounds”. As a result, the “national plight of the Kurds was now augmented by the socio-economic collateral [damage caused by] uneven internal capitalist development”. Meanwhile, a “violent but indirect ‘primitive accumulation’ was set in motion which forced millions of Kurdish peasants to leave their homes and emigrate to the capital and other major cities seeking a living in the fast growing construction and textile sectors fuelled by oil and tourism”. This migration soon turned Istanbul into “the city with the largest Kurdish population”, for example.

Although, in reality, the Kurdish struggle for self-rule was initiated by “traditional ruling elites and the emerging bourgeoisie” of Kurdish territories, who sought “to achieve political and economic parity with the ruling elites of the dominant ethnic groups”, it also took on traditional bourgeois nationalist features. For example, nationalist leaders sought to attract the support of Kurdish citizens by promising them the rights that were being denied to them by the oppressive regimes ruling over them. Essentially, therefore, a “democratic dimension to the Kurdish nationalist parties” was introduced almost “by default”, asserts Matin.

The democratic rhetoric of the nationalists initially helped them to form a “nexus with the nation-wide leftist movements” but, with “the emergence of the indigenous Kurdish socialist and communist forces from early 1970s onwards...”, the shallowness of these democratic pretences [soon became] evident”. As a result of its diminishing power and influence, the KDP in particular grew closer to the government of the USA. Another reason for this alliance, however, was the fact that regional “secular-nationalist and leftist forces... traditionally shied away from the Kurdish question”, subordinating it “to democratic or

²²² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2008/05/23/the-kurds-and-american-neo-imperialism/> and www.kamranmatin.net

²²³ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/no-friends-but-the-mountains-washington-seeks-to-ensnare-kurds/5346859?print=1>

²²⁴ <http://www.vox.com/2014/8/12/5991425/kurds-iraq-kurdistan-peshmerga>

anti-imperialist struggles". Secular nationalist rivals, for example, often adopted an "ultra-nationalist discourse", which "echoed their respective central governments' accusations of [Kurdish] separatism and subservience to foreign powers" (pretexts which were used to brutally suppress Kurdish nationalist movements). In other words, rather than having a moderating impact on Kurdish nationalists, quasi-left-wing forces in the region instead pushed them into the arms of the USA (and Israel).

According to Matin, the "disappointing legacy" of the region's left-wingers "led many Kurds to view the secular and leftist trends with... distrust and suspicion", and subsequently "played into the hands of the reactionary Kurdish nationalist forces", who exploited "the opportunities offered by international and regional geopolitical rivalries rather than the power and agency of the masses of Kurdish people". **With the collapse of the USSR, Matin insists, the "last vestiges of social-democracy were unceremoniously removed from the Kurdish nationalist discourse and an outright authoritarian tribal-nationalism has since become their modus operandi concealed under a liberal discursive veneer"**.²²⁵ For Missouri State University Professor David Romano, the PUK (supposedly a social democratic alternative to the KDP), actually "came in practice and behaviour... to resemble the KDP so much that the average Kurds were often unable to specify a single policy or ideological disagreement between the two".²²⁶ Therefore, in the KDP-controlled north and the PUK-controlled south of Iraqi Kurdistan, the differences in political stances remained minimal.

For Matin, **the "Kurdish people's struggle for citizenship and human rights is not reducible to the narrow and practically reactionary policies of Kurdish nationalist parties"**. The latter have, "thanks to the aforementioned wider socio-historical and political circumstances", been "able to rally a significant section of the Kurdish people around their myopic political strategy", but in reality **the interests of the people do not lie with nationalist elites**. It is therefore an urgent task, Matin argues, for "Arab, Iranian and Turkish leftists", along with "western radical-democratic and socialist forces", to support left-wing Kurdish groups "and strengthen their position within the Kurdish society", in order to "disarm the reactionary Kurdish nationalism of its most potent political slogan" - that of Kurdish autonomy. By assuring Kurds "of their unequivocal support for a fundamental, just and permanent solution to their national oppression in the form of the right of self-determination", the international Left can encourage them to "disengage from the [nationalist-backed] American strategy in the region". It can also encourage them to "bind their political future in solidarity with, and not isolation from, **the broader struggles for democracy and social justice" in the region which, according to Matin, "cannot... be delivered by American neo-imperialists"**.

Matin argues that the Left must clarify to Kurds that, if the form of Kurdish political autonomy espoused by nationalists is achieved, the "economic conditions of an overwhelming majority of the Kurdish people will deteriorate much further". Under nationalists like the KDP, he says, Kurdish regions will be turned into "geo-political springboards for the US and Israel in their war against Iran and Syria", which will in turn "eliminate any possibility for economic interaction with these countries" and condemn the majority of Kurds to "further economic hardship". Only Iraqi Kurdistan could survive under this model, he says, thanks to its significant oil resources, while elsewhere the lack of decent economic infrastructure would force Kurds to survive on the "insecure geo-political rents its ruling nationalist parties [would] be obtaining from the US".

As a hopeful note, Matin speaks of how, in 2008, he saw in Iraqi and Iranian Kurdistan an increasing focus on bringing "socio-economic issues... to the fore" so that they "dominate

²²⁵ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2008/05/23/the-kurds-and-american-neo-imperialism/> and www.kamranmatin.net

²²⁶ <http://www.vox.com/2014/8/12/5991425/kurds-iraq-kurdistan-peshmerga>

the political agenda". Kurdish workers, he says, have demonstrated their frustration "with the deepening class-divisions, socio-economic inequality, arbitrary rule and wide-spread corruption", especially in Iraqi Kurdistan. "Workers and students' protests in Arbil, Suleimaniyeh, Halabja and Kalar", meanwhile, "demonstrate the seriousness of the situation", he insists. While the Left "faces a difficult task", he argues, it also has "a real opportunity to challenge the Kurdish authoritarian nationalism [of the KDP] and deal the American Middle-East strategy a severe blow".²²⁷ As will be seen from Chapter Nine onwards, the progressive Kurdish movements in both Turkey and Syria have been taking this opportunity more and more in recent years, and have thus been increasing the possibility of an effective challenge to both imperialism and nationalism in the Middle East.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how Kurdish nationalism, led primarily by tribal leaders from the Barzani clan, dominated Kurdish politics for much of the twentieth century. Through a number of pragmatic alliances, the Barzanis managed to make progress towards autonomy in Iraq and, therefore, achieve what had not been achieved in Kurdish communities elsewhere. However, they had no firm political ideology, and their main aim seemed to be ensuring their own personal economic interests and their own role as supposed leaders of Kurdish society. Any concessions or promises made to Kurdish workers were simply intended to guarantee support for the KDP elite (just as occurred under the bourgeois nationalist regimes referred to in Chapters Two and Three). With the rise of the PKK in the 1980s, however, the Barzanis had a challenger for the hearts and minds of the Kurdish public. Although the PKK initially followed a more authoritarian Marxist model, it nonetheless sought profound socio-economic reforms based on socialist principles, rather than nationalist concessions. With the changes in the party in the new century, meanwhile, a more libertarian socialist ideology would make the PKK and its allies in the region even more popular in Kurdish communities and more convincing as a force for peace, justice, and democracy. I will focus more on this progressive Kurdish movement between Chapters Nine and Twelve.

In Iraq, "an autonomous Kurdish area is a reality", and the best way for the Iraqi central government to deal with this phenomenon is to discuss a "deal to share oil and gas revenue" equally between Kurds and Arabs in the country. Iran, meanwhile, was yet further away from finding "a peaceful resolution of long-standing grievances" with its own Kurdish population in the early twenty-first century, especially with issues like "sanctions and threats of war" at the top of its agenda. At the same time, insufficient steps towards inclusion in Turkey and Syria have led to increasing steps towards grassroots autonomy in Kurdish communities. Essentially, analysis of the 'Kurdish Question' makes it very clear that, without "recognition and autonomy" for Kurds and their culture, all countries with significant Kurdish populations (Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria) will all be destined to face continuing "war and instability", either as a result of resistance from reactionary Kurdish nationalists or revolutionary Kurdish socialists.²²⁸ As the resistance of the latter could be seen as a beacon of hope for both the Middle East and the wider world, I will examine it in much greater depth in Part Three of this book.

²²⁷ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2008/05/23/the-kurds-and-american-neo-imperialism/> and www.kamranmatin.net

²²⁸ www.dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com and <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/29/ascent-of-the-kurds/>

Part Two: Imperialism and Islamism

5) Imperialism and the Islamist Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Throughout my investigations, I have found that there are four main types of imperialist operations abroad. The first type includes the explicit and unashamed funding of groups that consistently represent the interests of imperialism and are more of less 'respectable' forces in the eyes of the international community (such as so-called 'democratic' capitalist movements which claim to respect human rights and freedoms). The second type involves the secretive funding of anti-democratic groups which protect the interests of imperialism, but which also commit crimes against humanity (like Saudi Arabia, Israel, or the Contras in Central America during the Cold War). The third type comprises of the clandestine backing of groups that will fight for the interests of imperialism in the short term, but which in reality have independent goals (i.e. Iraqi Ba'athists in the 1960s and Deobandi/Wahhabi jihadists in Afghanistan in the 1980s). The fourth type, meanwhile, consists of giving secret support to (or being complicit in) the actions of groups which, in the short term, are fighting against a stronger or larger force that is opposed by imperialism but that, in the long term, represent a threat to imperialist interests (such as left-wing forces like the Kurdish PJAK in Iran).

The type of operation chosen at any given moment depends on the respective geopolitical situations in play, and the imperialist priorities at specific points in time. In my opinion, the likelihood of these different operations is graded, with the first type being a preference and the final type being a last resort. In the Middle East, 'democratic' capitalist movements are few and far between, primarily because of the immense damage that capitalism has caused in the region, and the authoritarian means that are therefore necessary to ensure the system is preserved. Israeli political parties would perhaps fall into this group if it wasn't for their general support of continued colonial repression of Palestinians (which essentially places them in the second group). Because of the difficulty that 'democratic' capitalist organisations face in the region, the majority of US allies there are actually regimes which consistently commit abuses against the human rights and freedoms of their citizens. Their crimes (and US support for them), however, are mostly hidden from the mainstream press in the West, as media moguls no doubt support the measures as necessary in order to ensure that independent anti-imperialist regimes do not spring up in the Muslim World. Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, Bahrain, and other Gulf States are good examples of nations which have repressive pro-Western regimes, and thus conform to the second type of imperialist operations abroad.

As seen in the Third Chapter of this essay and, to a lesser extent, in the Fourth, the third type of imperialist operation occurred at a number of points in the twentieth century, leading to the backing of Islamist groups, anti-Soviet/anti-Nasserite nationalists, and Kurdish nationalists. While the former arguably turned out to be the most reactionary force that the USA had supported, the latter was perhaps the least reactionary, though each group was definitely more committed to achieving its own goals than serving US imperialism. The fourth type of intervention, meanwhile, is very uncommon, but will be considered towards the end of this chapter. Far from being the ideal choice of imperialist elites, the type of organisation supported in this kind of operation is generally a 'progressive' force – but one that is fighting in the short term against a larger enemy of imperialism. We could speak here of the USA's détente with China in the early 1970s, for example, in which the imperialist power sought to create an unlikely alliance against the USSR. However, temporary cooperation with non-state progressive groups has also occurred, like with the PJAK in Iran or, to a certain extent, with Syrian Kurdish forces under assault from ISIS. In the latter case, however, the limited support given would have more of a propaganda role for the USA, as

the superpower could not be seen to allow jihadists to capture territory on the border of a NATO ally in full view of the world's media. [More on these events will be discussed in Chapter Twelve.]

In this chapter, meanwhile, I will focus on the West's support for repressive monarchies and dictatorships in the Middle East, and how this strategy helped to create the reactionary and anti-imperialist Shia Islamist movement which eventually took control of the Iranian Revolution after 1979. I will also evaluate the role that Zionist crimes in the Middle East played in sparking the growth of militant Shia Islamist movements like Hezbollah (which were mostly backed by nominally 'anti-imperialist' states such as Iran). Perhaps most importantly, however, I will explore the role that Saudi Arabia (as a strongly anti-Shia state) increasingly played in the radicalisation (or Wahhabisation) of sections of the Muslim World from the late seventies onwards (especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan).

A) The Historical Dynamics of Western Imperialism and Islam

Stanford University Professor Jane Collier asserts that, with Islamic extremism seemingly coming to "replace communism as the principal perceived threat" to the West, it is important to "analyze the historical processes" that have seen Islamic law and Western law come into conflict. A lack of such analysis, she argues, will "contribute to media stereotypes of Islamic law as regressive and feudal and of Islamic political activists as religious fanatics". According to Columbia University Professor Edward Said, she says, it is important to understand the "shared history" of "Western imperialist powers and the places they colonized and dominated" in order to "counteract the divisive and destructive forces of contemporary movements to rediscover "essential" cultural values".

An 'Intertwined' History

While condemning Westerners for "misunderstanding the role of imperial conquests in shaping their culture", Said also criticises "dictatorial leaders of successful national liberation movements for putting national security above the goals of human liberation and democratic participation". Essentially, he believes that Western imperialism, movements like Ba'athism, and regimes like that of the Iranian Revolution all deserve a share in the blame for injustices in the Middle East. An analysis of history without its imperialist context, he insists, fuels "dangerous stereotypes of Western law as dynamic (whether progressive or decadent) and Islamic law as conservative (whether pure or backward)". The reality, he stresses, is more nuanced.

For Said, Islamic law is "a complex, multi-stranded set of ideas and practices that Islamic peoples molded and modified as they resisted and accommodated Euro-American imperialist ventures". The spread of capitalism "over the past two centuries" had a profound impact on "modern Islamic legal systems", he argues, with modern Western law being put forward as the "pinnacle of human achievement". Those living under alternate systems, meanwhile, were perceived in the West (and within pro-Western circles) as "slaves to despots, custom, or biology". With the fading of the Ottoman Empire, Muslim societies gradually fell under the influence of Western powers which "were eager to provide "law and order" for those deemed to lack these benefits". There were indeed territories that managed to maintain their independence from the West, but "Western imperial powers had, and continue to have, the control over communication technologies and the military might to define [their] legal system as the goal of human development".

Collier speaks of how have been "three moments in the recent intertwined histories of Islamic and Christian peoples, a first moment before European imperialism, a second moment of imperialism and the development of resistances to it..., and a third... moment of

ethnic or essentialist revival". In the second, she says, there were "struggles among and within imperializing powers, modernizing elites, and traditionalists who often defined modernizers as sell-outs and heretics". Meanwhile, colonial powers "required [colonized societies] to become readable, like a book", and therefore sought to portray previous institutions as "backward and disorderly". The outcome of these struggles, Collier argues, helps us to understand the third moment.

Clearly, such all-out attacks on deep-rooted beliefs were bound to cause reaction, and that is precisely what happened. In Turkey, for example, where "secularizing and Islamicizing elites [had] been contesting state power for more than a century", there were "almost no traces of Islamic legal structures and little interest in pursuing Islamic solutions to conflicts" in the 1960s. By the late 1980s, however, "increasing numbers of Turks believed it was impossible to be both a good Muslim and a good citizen of the secular Turkish state", demonstrating a resurgence of Islamic thought in the wake of decades of pro-Western rule.

Ottoman Westernisation

In reality, Collier insists, "Islamic and Christian polities" have a "long history of opposition to and borrowing from one another", with Renaissance Europeans, for instance, borrowing "scientific ideas, statecraft, and military strategies from imperialist Islamic states". Ottoman rulers, in turn, "borrowed from imperialist European republics", with the military leading a "revolution from above" in the early nineteenth century in an attempt to "strengthen the Ottoman Empire against its Western European and Russian enemies without and to obtain Western arms and help for conquering rebellious groups within". Exploiting gaps in sharia law, meanwhile, Ottoman bureaucrats "founded technical military schools, instituted military conscription, replaced tax farming with fixed taxes, paid salaries to officials to discourage corruption, sent students to France to learn European languages, and (under pressure from European imperialists) established secular commercial courts".

At first, the Ottoman modernisers "avoided direct challenges to Islamic power holders by setting up alternatives to Islamic schools and courts rather than replacing them", but Europeans subsequently pressurised them into establishing in 1858 "a criminal code based on the Napoleonic code of 1810", which "abolished Islamic punishments, treated all citizens of the Empire as equal regardless of ethnicity or religion, and allowed appeal to higher courts". Further reforms came in 1876, meanwhile, when a new constitution was introduced which was "modeled on the Belgian Constitution of 1831, establishing a constitutional monarchy with an elected chamber of deputies". The Ottoman transition to Western liberalism was now in full swing.

Reaction came two years later, though, when the sultan was pushed by Islamic leaders to suspend the constitution and close parliament, **forcing many 'reformers' to flee to Europe**. Whilst there, **they were influenced by the concept of nationhood** and adopted "increasingly nationalist rhetoric", creating "the idea of a Turkish people and a Turkish nation, **in contrast to the idea of a multiethnic, hierarchical, Islamic empire** ruled by a sultan who combined secular and religious offices". Having gradually made their way back into power in the early twentieth century, the more liberal of these reformers followed Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in his search to establish a Turkish nation, an objective they would achieve in 1923. Their new, secular state subsequently "curbed the power of Islamic leaders, required children to attend secular schools, strengthened the system of secular courts, put Islamic courts under the Ministry of Justice, adopted a Roman script for Turkish, advocated Western dress, and gave women the vote in 1930".

The new Turkish leaders had effectively led a significant and abrupt (if not arguably 'progressive') attack on the Islamic culture of the region, which would gradually alienate the

population from its government. In fact, Collier suggests that there was “a misfit between the legal system” (imported from the West by budding nationalists) and “the values of the local population”.²²⁹ For her, the increasing power of Islamist groups in Turkey since the 1970s is a good example of this division, demonstrating also how Atatürk’s bourgeois democracy (in which “all people... have certain freedoms”, like the power to vote now and again, but in which the government “fundamentally represents the interests... of the bourgeois class” rather than the working population²³⁰) increasingly “encouraged the development of political parties seeking the Islamic vote”. In the following decades, these essentially reactionary groups would challenge their “secular rulers” more and more, and today’s AKP government (which will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter Nine) is, in many ways, a culmination of their struggle.²³¹

What is Shariah Law?

In 2013, Omar Sacirbey at The Huffington Post described ‘Shariah’ as a broad term, “encompassing both a personal moral code and religious law”, which is rooted in both the Quran (‘the word of God’) and the “Sunnah” (‘the word of the Prophet Muhammad’). While the latter are considered to be ‘divine’ or ‘unchangeable’, the interpretation of Shariah, Sacirbey says, is a dynamic process (known as ‘fiqh’ or ‘Islamic jurisprudence’). The fact that Islamic law consists of both Shariah and fiqh, therefore, means that its nature can change fairly significantly depending on who is undertaking the ‘interpretation’. Shariah alone, Sacirbey insists, is not simply “a legal system”, and in fact “covers personal and collective spheres of daily life”, containing “three components – belief, character, and actions”. Here, he stresses that “only a small portion of the “action” component relates to law”, with “only about 80 of the Quran’s 6,236 verses” referring specifically to “legal injunctions”.

Sacirbey explains how, according to Shariah, “actions relating to God (as well as belief and character) are between an individual and God”, and only a certain number of actions (those “relating to other humans... such as marriage, crime, and business”) can actually be “regulated by the state”. Due to the rule of authoritarian political regimes, however, and their corruption of Shariah for their own purposes, “some Muslim-majority countries” have also “criminalized violations of the belief, character, and action components of Shariah” (which should not involve the state).

Within two or three centuries of Muhammad’s revelations, Sacirbey affirms, Shariah had been “systematized”, and its “core components... had been exhaustively debated... by the end of the 10th century”. Nonetheless, “changes in Islamic society” have periodically seen scholars “look at Shariah anew, with new interpretations expressed in fatwas (religious edicts) and legal opinions”. Their interpretations would “divide human behavior into five categories: obligatory, recommended, neutral, discouraged, and forbidden”.

According to Professor Jan Michiel Otto of the Leiden University Law School, the legal systems of Muslim countries could be divided in the early twenty-first century into “three categories: classical Shariah systems, secular systems, and mixed systems”. The former, he explains, give Shariah “official status or a high degree of influence on the legal system”, allowing it to issue verdicts on “personal beliefs, including penalties for apostasy, blasphemy, and not praying”. The latter, meanwhile, are “the most common in Muslim-majority countries”, he says, with Shariah generally only covering “family law”, leaving “everything else” to secular courts. Finally, secular systems (in place in a number of African countries and former Soviet countries) see Shariah play absolutely no role. Apart from in states based totally on Shariah, therefore, many Muslim nations follow (to varying extents)

²²⁹ <http://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/collier.html>

²³⁰ <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/b/o.htm>

²³¹ <http://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/collier.html>

the scholarly opinion that “true Islamic belief cannot be coerced by the state, and therefore belief in Shariah should only come from the individual and not be codified by the state”.

The harsh elements of Shariah often mentioned by critics, Sacirbey argues, “have been taken out of context, abrogated, or require a near-impossible level of evidence to be carried out”. For example, he speaks of how, in order to convict a person of adultery, “there must be four witnesses to the act, which is rare”. At the same time, someone who steals may indeed have their hands amputated, but “not if the thief has repented”. According to some Shariah scholars, meanwhile, corporal punishment “can only be instituted in a society of high moral standards [i.e. of decent education] and where everyone’s needs are met (thereby obviating the urge to steal or commit other crimes). In other words, such sentences could only be implemented in a place where social justice and equality are present. Nonetheless, both the oppressive Saudi Arabian dictatorship and the reactionary regime of Iran ignore this attitude, and frequently subject their citizens to corporal punishment.²³² [More on both of these countries will be seen later in this chapter.]

A Fight between ‘Tradition’ and ‘Modernity’

In Upper Yemen, which fell under Ottoman rule after 1872, there had long been a debate between “two schools of shari`a jurisprudence”. Ottoman reforms, however, transformed this discussion into “one between “tradition” and “modernity””, or between “Islamic theocracy and Western secularism”. The subsequent attempt at officially codifying Shariah soon turned it “from God’s plan for the Muslim community... to a cumbersome and obscure source of law”. Theocratic rule would eventually be restored in 1919, but many Ottoman “innovations” would remain. Islamic punishments were reinstated and Ottoman schools were closed, but instruction in mosques was now transformed by the Imams (religious leaders) “providing salaries for teachers, sending teachers out to rural districts, and organizing students into graded classes based on passing examinations”.

In 1962, the ‘modernising’ elites who took power again sought to ensure that Shariah was simply “one source of Yemeni law among others”. Thirteen years later, this principle would be enshrined in legislation, which said that Shariah would appear “in the form of modern codified laws appropriate to the spirit of the age and its requirements”. In other words, Yemeni law had transformed from “an imagined hierarchy established by God, in which it was the duty of the educated to guide the ignorant”, into “an imagined nation of equal citizens, each of whom [had] the duty to know and obey the law”. Whilst moving towards further legal secularisation, the government had skipped over the scholarly belief that Shariah could only be implemented in a just and equal society. The official rulers of the country may have changed, along with the legal system guiding their citizens, but society had not. And such was the pattern throughout the Muslim World, with the regimes of many countries adjusting regulations from above whilst leaving deep-rooted socio-political problems untouched. In the fight between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, they had effectively arrived at a fusion of both which, in reality, changed very little on the ground.

‘All Cultures Are Involved in One Another’

For Edward Said, it was the interaction of “**Euro-American imperialism**” with the Muslim World that helped to spread “static notions of cultural identity” there. As a result, he insists, they “**may not have invented the idea “that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’..., but they propagated it**”. Emphasising societal differences thus rapidly “became a hallmark of [both] imperialist cultures [and the cultures] of those resisting imperialism”. While Said asserts that “no one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations,

²³² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/29/sharia-law-usa-states-ban_n_3660813.html

national languages, and cultural geographies”, he underlines that there is essentially **“no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness”** as Western imperialists did. For the survival of the human race, he argues, it is essential that we recognise and focus on what unites people from different parts of the planet rather than what divides us. “Because of empire”, he stresses, “all cultures are involved in one another” and “none is single and pure”. For him, “all are hybrid”.

According to Said, Euro-American achievements in the last two centuries have fostered a “sense of superiority”, leading some in the West to see “democratic aspirations as derivative of Western models”. Although imperialism has undoubtedly left its mark on the world, he admits, such self-obsessed viewpoints “miss not only the inventiveness of non-Western peoples but also their contributions to world culture”. **Only “by exploring our intertwined histories”**, he insists, **“can we hope to counteract the destructive power of essentialist thinking that pits “us” against “them””** (and insists that different ethnic groups have innately distinct natures).

Political scientist Timothy Mitchell, meanwhile, follows on from Said, arguing that the creation of an identity different from that of dominating powers is ultimately beneficial to (self-interested nationalist) movements seeking self-government. While in the eighteenth century, for example, European liberals sought to “govern themselves rather than submit to divinely ordained kings” (largely ignoring cultural differences in the process), Napoleon’s demonstration of a dictatorial alternative to monarchies the following century saw liberals stress their “cultural and racial distinctiveness”, in an attempt to “demand self-government from both kings and Napoleons” (though for themselves and not for ordinary citizens). Mitchell asserts that this logic “continues to inform national liberation movements” today, emphasising that “the more clear-cut the distinction between “us” and “them,” the easier it is for political leaders to argue that we cannot allow them to participate in determining the rules that govern us”. In other words, the more differences rather than similarities are emphasised, the harder it is to coexist and cooperate (as the world has seen with Zionism, Nazism, Arab nationalism, and even Kurdish nationalism).

In the late twentieth century, the arrogant triumphalism of capitalist powers after the Cold War led them to argue that anyone not submitting to their socio-economic and political systems was backwards. By subsequently rejecting meaningful democratic pluralism and asserting the dominance of the capitalist order, they did precisely what national liberation movements often did – insisting on their own superior nature and inevitably creating conflict with those they claimed to be ‘inferior’. In reality, meanwhile, development appeared “increasingly illusive” in formerly colonised nations, even in spite of their implementation of Western-backed neoliberal capitalist measures (such as reducing trade restrictions and regulations, cutting government spending, and privatising state assets). The subsequent increase in popular opposition to both private and state capitalism has seen political leaders who “aspire to operate the machinery of government” portray themselves as proponents of a ‘third path’. In the Muslim World, such figures have adopted Islamist rhetoric, promising to “restore [the] illustrious heritage” of the region in order to mobilise political support.

Applying Religious Principles in the Political Sphere

For many centuries of Ottoman rule, Islamic schools and courts were not particularly religious institutions. Only when reformers set up secular alternatives did these places really become “realms where future generations could look to find their supposedly authentic traditions”. While in the past they focussed on “advocating religious values in opposition to reason or science”, they are now “engaged in dynamic and ongoing discussions among scholars and politicians over how to use reason and science in the task of applying the

shari`a" to modern life. This shift was necessitated in part by the establishment "of parliamentary governments over divinely ordained kings" in the West, which transformed the theological and philosophical conflict between Christianity and Islam into a "cultural opposition between types of religion: those that recognize the separation of church and state and those that do not". In the nineteenth century, there were even anti-religious debates in Britain and the USA about the "role of religious and moral values in political life", resulting from the "alliance between Methodism and the developing working class" which had been forged, along with the increasingly apparent "amoral character of unfettered capitalist development". In such a context, it was very much in the interest of capitalist elites to ensure the separation of church and state.

At the same time, it was also in the interest of Western colonial powers to portray Islamic rulers as "despots", their punishments as "barbaric", and their Shariah courts as "irrational". Such views could clearly help elites in the West to "simultaneously muster public support for their wars abroad and discredit their enemies at home" (who were influenced in large part by their own religious principles). An example of this strategy is how Britain claimed it was on the side of women in India and the Muslim World in order to question and undermine the power of the men in government in these places. British elites constructed false "understandings of Western women's liberties", comparing "'oppressed" Islamic women and "free" Western ones during the nineteenth century", just as "industrialization was transforming adult women from productive members of family enterprises into economic dependents of wage-earning husbands".

Essentially, capitalism was transforming the role of women in Western society (in generally negative ways), and condemnation of the treatment of women abroad was a simply a tool used by ruling elites to convince Western women that the changes they were experiencing were for their own good. In other words, images of "oppressed Islamic women, who could neither marry for love nor develop intimate relations with polygamous husbands", no doubt "played a crucial role in constructing images of Western women as consenting to their disempowerment within increasingly privatized and confining homes" (in which marriages "were increasingly difficult to distinguish from prostitution as the devaluation of women's work left women only "love" to offer in return for the money they and their children needed to survive").

Fundamentally, Collier argues, the demonization or misunderstanding of the ethnic, cultural, or religious 'other' hinders both coexistence and cooperation between humans. Summarising the role of Islam in human society, she emphasises the imaginative reworking of the "rich cultural heritages" of Islamic territories amid the onslaught of Western imperialism. Having "selectively borrowed Western ideas" in an attempt to "retain control over their persons and properties", she says, they effectively created new concepts. Nonetheless, she stresses, this process inevitably raised concerns within religious communities, and had an impact on the growth of violent quasi-Islamic fundamentalism. Such ideologies have indeed emerged, she says, "as the antithesis... of Western reason and democracy", but only because "Western imperialists and resisting Islamic peoples... have constructed it that way".²³³

In other words, just as the West hypocritically portrayed Islamic cultures to be backwards and anti-democratic, resisting inhabitants of the Muslim World (whether Arab nationalists and Islamists) have sought to portray Western politics and philosophies as the forces responsible for destruction, division, and injustice in their communities. With the 'us and them' dynamic long since established, it has simply been difficult to break out of the cycle and realise that there are universal dynamics (both local and international) that have

²³³ <http://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/collier.html>

prevented societies in the region from advancing towards a functioning system of justice. As such, neither imperialism, nationalism, nor Islamism are realistic solutions to the injustices suffered by citizens in Muslim nations. As stressed previously in this section and in this book, only non-sectarian self-government (focussed on direct democracy, social justice, and cooperation) can truly give Muslims (and people throughout the world) a chance to escape from the endless cycle of violence, oppression, and exploitation perpetuated by hierarchical regimes (whether religious or secular). In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will show why fundamentalist religious administrations took over in a number of Islamic nations in the twentieth century, and why they are essentially negative forces in the region.

B) Saudi Arabia, Western Allies, and Religious Chauvinism

As seen in Chapter One, Saudi Arabia became one of West's biggest Middle Eastern allies fairly early on in the twentieth century. After the Second World War, however, the oppressive Saudi regime was soon turned into a bulwark of Western anti-communist interests, and a key force for counterrevolution in the Muslim World. As the region was "among the most important Third World regions for Soviet foreign policy and national security", partly because of its "shared boundaries" with Muslim nations (like Iran and Turkey), the USSR increasingly found itself challenging the USA for influence in the oil-rich region. Additionally, a number of the "ethnic, religious, and language groups" present in the area were also "represented on the Soviet side of the border", so there was an extra incentive to create a positive relationship with Muslim neighbours.

Above all, however, the "oil resources and shipping lanes" in the Middle East "were of significant interest" to the USSR, and the "main Soviet goal" after World War Two was thus to "minimize the influence of the United States" in the region. At the same time, this was also the policy of the USA, whose primary objective was to reduce Soviet influence in Muslim nations whilst expanding its own. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union would give "large-scale support to a group of radical Arab states", in the hope of ousting "all vestiges of Western influence in the region". In contrast, the United States would support reactionary forces and repressive regimes in the region, hoping to prevent the implementation of progressive measures inspired by the USSR. In this section of the chapter, I will look at how the USA's alliance with Saudi Arabia in particular played a significant role in winning the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and how it has also fuelled the rapid growth of an extremely discriminatory form of Islam in a number of Sunni Muslim communities.

I) The Duality of the Saudi Dictatorship

Former MI6 agent Alastair Crooke said in late August 2014 that Saudi Arabia's "ambivalence" to the threat of ISIS jihadism in the region was a sign that the country's "ruling elite [was] divided". While some applauded the jihadists for "fighting Iranian Shiite "fire" with Sunni "fire"" and seeking to create a "new Sunni state" inspired by a "strict Salafist ideology", others were "more fearful" that ISIS could spark a revolt (like that of the Ikhwan (the religious militia of Wahhabism) in the late 1920s), having brought "aspects of Saudi Arabia's direction and discourse" into question. The fact is, Crooke insists, that there is an "**inherent (and persisting) duality**" that lies at the core of the Kingdom's doctrinal makeup and its historical origins".

As I outlined in Chapter One, one "dominant strand to the Saudi identity" is Wahhabism (a "radical, exclusionist puritanism" that the House of Saud adopted in order to propel itself into power). A "second strand", however, has its roots in "King Abd-al Aziz's... shift towards statehood in the 1920s", which was characterised by "his curbing of Ikhwani violence" in an attempt to consolidate Saudi Arabia's "diplomatic standing as a nation-state

with Britain and America". By making this pragmatic move (which was uncharacteristic of the traditionally dogmatic Wahhabism), and institutionalising the "original Wahhabist impulse", the Saudi political elites eventually managed to capitalise on the "opportunistically surging petrodollar" in the 1970s.

The new oil income the regime gained during the Cold War, Crooke argues, helped it to "channel the volatile Ikhwan current away from home towards export". By focussing on "diffusing a cultural revolution" abroad, "rather than violent revolution", it sought to indoctrinate people in Wahhabism (and thus appease the ideological establishment of Saudi Arabia) whilst avoiding open acts of discriminatory violence itself (which could put its important alliance with the West at risk). Although the former was much more acceptable for Western regimes, the so-called "cultural revolution" was far from being "docile reformism", Crooke says. In reality, he stresses, it was a "call to purge Islam of all its heresies and idolatries", driven by "Abd al-Wahhab's Jacobin-like hatred for... putrescence and deviationism".

What is Wahhabism/Salafism?

To understand Saudi Arabia, therefore, we must understand Wahhab, and how he saw the decadent "Egyptian and Ottoman nobility" as "imposters masquerading as Muslims". Whilst responding to unjust conditions, however, he did so in a very reactionary and hateful manner. Criticising the Bedouin Arabs around him for their "honoring of saints" and "erecting of tombstones" (calling them "bida" (or "forbidden by God")), he harked back to the "period of the Prophet Muhammad's stay in Medina" as "the ideal of Muslim society", which "all Muslims should aspire to emulate". While in themselves these viewpoints could simply be seen as traditionalism or conservatism, the way in which Wahhab sought to spread his philosophy is what gave it a much more sinister character.

Inspired by medieval Sunni Islamic philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah (who had argued, in response to the Mongol invasion of the Middle East, that Muslims had an obligation to wage jihad on (or resistance against) the un-Islamic invaders), Wahhab claimed that war should be declared on "Shi'ism, Sufism and Greek philosophy", and that the idolatry of Prophet Muhammad should be vehemently opposed. For him, "any doubt or hesitation" towards his school of Islamic thought should "deprive a man of immunity of his property and his life". In other words, his dogma sought to prohibit (through violence) freedom of 'belief, character, and action' (the majority of which was, according to Shariah law, a matter of concern only for the individual and God).

"One of the main tenets" of Wahhabism, Crooke says, is the "idea of **takfir**", which is the ability to "**deem fellow Muslims infidels**". As a result of this practice, anyone who encroached "on the sovereignty of the absolute Authority" (i.e. the monarch representing God on earth), "honored the dead, saints, or angels", or "detracted from the complete subservience towards God" could legitimately, in the words of Wahhab, "**be killed, their wives and daughters violated, and their possessions confiscated**". In short, he "demanded conformity", and encouraged the murder of those Muslims not pledging "their allegiance to a single Muslim leader", such as "Shiite, Sufis, and other Muslim denominations". According to Crooke, there is "nothing here that separates Wahhabism from ISIS". The "rift" between the two, he says, "would emerge only later" on, with the institutionalisation of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia (and the perceived complicity of Wahhabi religious leaders with the country's corrupt political elites).

Upon the creation of the nation state of Saudi Arabia, the monarchy sought to turn Wahhab's three pillars of "One Ruler, One Authority, One Mosque" into law, determining the former as the Saudi King, the second as "the absolute authority of official Wahhabism",

and the latter as Wahhabism's "control of "the word" (i.e. the mosque)". Groups like ISIS, asserts Crooke, which conform "in all other respects" to Wahhabism, differ from the Saudi regime because they deny the aforementioned pillars. Consequently, such jihadist organisations actually pose "a deep threat to Saudi Arabia" (or the continuing rule of its monarchy), as they consider its dictatorship to be a traitor to Wahhabi doctrine (for having forged a close alliance with the West and thus not stayed totally loyal to Wahhabism's discriminatory dogma).

The First and Second Surges of Wahhabism

In 1741, Wahhab was expelled from his own town for his chauvinist beliefs, and he only found refuge with the tribe of Ibn Saud, who saw the philosophy as an effective "means to overturn Arab tradition and convention", and a "path to seizing power". The Saudi clan subsequently ransacked villages and, under the "banner of jihad", reintroduced "the idea of martyrdom in the name of jihad". A few communities were overrun in this period, and their inhabitants were given the choice to convert to Wahhabism or die. By 1790, Crooke says, "the Alliance controlled most of the Arabian Peninsula and repeatedly raided Medina" (the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad), along with territories inside modern-day Syria and Iraq. The fear instilled by the invaders succeeded in forcing a number of communities into submission, and the massacre of "thousands of Shiites, including women and children" in 1801 simply added to their fame as an extremely barbaric gang. In 1803, the Wahhabi jihadists finally took Mecca (the holiest place in Islam).

In late 1803, a "Shiite assassin killed King Abdul Aziz", but it was only in 1812 that Ottoman rulers finally "pushed the Alliance out from Medina, Jeddah and Mecca". In 1814, the king's second successor was "taken by the Ottomans to Istanbul, where he was gruesomely executed", being humiliated, hanged, and then beheaded. The following year, meanwhile, Egyptians crushed Wahhabi forces in what would be a "decisive battle". When the Ottomans "captured and destroyed the Wahhabi capital of Dariyah" in 1818, however, the "first Saudi state was [officially] no more". According to Crooke, "the few remaining Wahhabis [subsequently] withdrew into the desert to regroup... for most of the 19th century".

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed after the First World War, the "ethos of 18th century Wahhabism... roared back into life". The House of Saud, Crooke explains, which was led by the "politically astute Abd-al Aziz", once again focussed "on uniting the fractious Bedouin tribes", before then launching "the Saudi "Ikhwan"". The militia quickly "succeeded in capturing Mecca, Medina and Jeddah between 1914 and 1926", but Abd-al Aziz had "wider interests", which he thought the "revolutionary "Jacobinism" exhibited by the Ikhwan" could threaten. When the Ikhwan disagreed with his perceived reformism, they revolted, and a civil war lasted until the 1930s, when the "King had them... machine-gunned".

With Britain and the USA "courting" Abd-al Aziz as a result of recent oil discoveries, the new king sought to convince the foreign powers to back him over Sharif Husain as "the only legitimate ruler of Arabia". To achieve this, however, he knew that he "needed to develop a more sophisticated diplomatic posture" than Wahhabism could offer. The ideology was thus "forcefully changed", in an attempt to make the Saudi monarchy seem more attractive and reliable than Husain. It was now simply considered, by both the ruling elites and foreign powers, to be "a movement of conservative social, political, theological, and religious da'wa [proselytism]", which would provide the justification for "loyalty to the royal Saudi family and the King's absolute power".²³⁴

²³⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

According to Crooke, it was “a maverick British official”, Harry St. John Philby, who helped to guide Saudi Arabia to its position as an accepted nation state. After resigning from his post, he became a “close adviser” to the king, remaining “a key member of the Ruler’s Court... until his death”. As an ‘Arabist’ and a Wahhabi convert, he did his best “to make Abd al-Aziz... the ruler of Arabia”, and would soon even be “known as Sheikh Abdullah”. Aware that Britain “had pledged repeatedly that the defeat of the Ottomans would produce an Arab state”, the two conspired to make Aziz that state’s new ruler. Philby subsequently “encouraged King Aziz to expand”, even though he was “ordered to desist” with his provocations by his superiors back in Britain. In his attempt to “entrench the al-Saud as Arabia’s leaders”, however, he planned to spread Wahhabism among the region’s Muslim population. He also knew, though, that this could only happen if Britain and other imperialist powers gave their consent.

Eventually, Philby succeeded in completing a “momentous pact” between the House of Saud and the West, agreeing that the “**Saudi leadership would use its clout to “manage” Sunni Islam on behalf of western objectives**” and, “in return, **the West would acquiesce to Saudi Arabia’s soft-power Wahhabisation of the Islamic ummah** [community of believers] (with its concomitant destruction of Islam’s intellectual traditions and diversity and its sowing of deep divisions within the Muslim world)”. The deal was, Crooke argues, an “astonishing success... in [both] political and financial terms”. The big problem, however, was that it was “always rooted in British and American intellectual obtuseness: the **refusal to see the dangerous ‘gene’ within the Wahhabist project** [and] its latent potential to mutate, at any time, back into its original bloody, puritan strain”.

Up until after the Cold War, signs of the “dangerous ‘gene’” of Wahhabism could be kept largely out of the mainstream Western media. Although creating “something resembling statecraft” in Saudi Arabia was “never going to be easy” (with “puritan morality” doomed to fight a constant war with “realpolitik and money”), the monarchy effectively managed to keep these internal contradictions under control for a number of decades. The watershed for this shift towards statesmanship had come when “Abd al-Aziz tried to restrain his militia” from expanding across “the border of territories controlled by Britain” in the early twentieth century. The Ikhwan, “already critical of his use of modern technology (the telephone, telegraph and the machine gun)”, had been “outraged by the abandonment of jihad for reasons of worldly realpolitik”, and “refused to lay down their weapons”. In 1929, however, their rebellion would be crushed.

Saudi Arabia would not remain totally stable, though, and Aziz’s son Saud would be “deposed from the throne by the religious establishment” in 1964. His son Faisal, meanwhile, was “shot by his nephew in 1975” for his “ostentatious and extravagant conduct”. The perception was that Faisal had allowed the “encroachment of western beliefs and innovation into Wahhabi society”. In other words, the balancing act of the Saudi establishment was very fragile and, while the alliance with the West was valued, care had to be taken not to move too close to the allies culturally.

The “problems of accommodating the “modernity” that statehood requires”, says Crooke, have actually “caused “the gene” to become more active” over the years, “rather than... more inert”. In 1979, this became very apparent when Juhayman al-Otaybi led up to 500 members of a revived Ikhwan in the “seizure of the Grand Mosque” in Mecca. With “tacit support” from Wahhabi clerics, these rebels asserted that “the ruling al-Saud dynasty had lost its legitimacy because it was corrupt, ostentatious and had destroyed Saudi culture by an aggressive policy of westernisation”. In fact, for a number of years, Juhayman’s followers had preached their Ikhwani message “without being arrested”, and they were only “held for questioning in 1978” (after being considered “no more than traditionalists”, however, they were deemed not to be a serious threat, and were soon released).

The new Ikhwanis had been “far from marginalized from important sources of power and wealth”, and “Juhayman [had actually been] able to obtain weapons and military expertise from sympathizers in the National Guard”, along with “the necessary arms and food to sustain the siege” (which “were pre-positioned, and hidden, within the Grand Mosque”). Wealthy individuals, meanwhile, had been called upon to “fund the enterprise”. Saudi Special Forces took the mosque back after two weeks, killing Juhayman in the process, but the precedent for violent Wahhabi opposition to Western influence had now been set.²³⁵

The Oil Boom and the Spread of Wahhabism

With the arrival of the twentieth century “oil bonanza”, Saudi efforts to spread Wahhabism and “Wahhabise Islam” (i.e. by “reducing the “multitude of voices within the religion” to a “single creed””) were strengthened. The Saudi regime sought to hit the popularity of secular Arab nationalism and communism hard and, with the support of its Western allies, it invested “billions of dollars” in a powerful “manifestation of soft power”. The monarchy’s apparent “willingness to manage Sunni Islam... to further America’s interests” turned it into a treasured pro-Western associate in the region, but it also saw the regime embed Wahhabism “throughout the lands of Islam”. At the same time, the West’s “policy dependency on Saudi Arabia” since the end of the Second World War blinded it to dangerous consequences that the spread of Wahhabism would have. Its elites allowed themselves to be fooled by the “apparent modernization” of the country, or at the very least focussed their attention primarily on the value of having an ally that “professed leadership of the Islamic world”.

ISIS, Crooke asserts, is “deeply Wahhabist”, but is also essentially “a corrective movement to contemporary Wahhabism” (opposed to the pro-Western behaviour of the Saudi regime and its powerful position in the Sunni Muslim world). While the House of Saud sought to push its ‘cultural revolution’ on Muslim communities, it had not succeeded in destroying the violent side of Wahhabism. In short, the massacre of militia members at the end of the 1920s had not killed the “Ikhwan approach to Islam” (which effectively “maintained its hold over parts of the system -- hence the duality that we observe today in the Saudi attitude towards ISIS”). In fact, it even expanded its influence as the wealth of the ruling elites rapidly increased in the “oil age”, and a violent “Ikhwan message gained [the] support of many prominent men and women and sheikhs”²³⁶ (including Osama Bin Laden, who came from an affluent and well-connected family which had been building “an industrial and financial empire” ever since the foundation of Saudi Arabia).²³⁷

In summary, the **“collaborative management” of the Muslim World “by the Saudis and the West** in pursuit of the many western projects (countering socialism, Ba'athism, Nasserism, Soviet and Iranian influence)” has been **key to the spread of Wahhabi jihadism**. While “western politicians have highlighted their chosen reading of Saudi Arabia (wealth, modernization and influence)”, they have conveniently chosen “to ignore the Wahhabist impulse” (in the public sphere at least). In private, Western regimes have even exploited the fundamentalist violence fuelled by Wahhabism, with “Western intelligence services” perceiving “more radical Islamist movements... as being more effective in toppling the USSR in Afghanistan -- and in combatting out-of-favor Middle Eastern leaders and states” elsewhere. In other words, **it is impossible to ignore the West’s complicity with the spread of Wahhabi extremism**.

²³⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-aim-saudi-arabia_b_5748744.html

²³⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

²³⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/who/family.html>

Inside the Wahhabi State

In November 2001, PBS interviewed Ahmed Ali, a Shia Muslim who had grown up in Saudi Arabia. Ali spoke about how “the religious curriculum” in Saudi schools taught children that “people are basically two sides: Salafis [Wahhabis], who are the winners, the chosen ones, who will go to heaven; and the rest”. The latter can, however, be split into sections, such as “kafirs, who are deniers of God”, ‘mushrak’, who put other gods “next to God”, and “enervators”, or those who undermine or weaken Islam by, for example, celebrating Mohammed’s birthday. “All of these people”, Ali insists, “are supposed to be hated, to be persecuted, [and] even killed”. In his opinion, “the American media did not really care much” about Wahhabism “when it was a local problem”, and it was only after 9/11 that the spotlight was finally brought down on the ideology.

Although princes in Saudi Arabia “condemned bin Laden” after the terrorist attacks in the USA, Ali says, they essentially “did not condemn [the] message” preached by the Al-Qaeda leader (i.e. Wahhabism). The reality, he stresses, is that Bin Laden learned his beliefs in Saudi Arabia, where the same ideas were still taught long after 9/11. A continuation of such educational policies, Ali argues, would simply allow many more Bin Ladens to be created in the world. As an example of the warped religious teachings in Saudi schools, he speaks of a book designed for fourteen-year-old boys which speaks of how “the day of judgment will not arrive until Muslims fight Jews”.

According to anthropologist Mai Yamani, the “fundamentalist nature” of Wahhabism “can be easily manipulated, so that people would, for example, become violent or extremist”. Especially “after the Gulf War”, she says, “**neo-Wahhabis” in Saudi Arabia sought to use religion “to legitimize political, economic, [and] social behaviour”**, having “been brought up in a country where Islam [or, more accurately, Wahhabism] legitimizes everything”. For her, there is indeed a “problem with dogma” in the Saudi State, but **the real problem “lies with the political systems that use religion”** (which consequently give people “the excuse” and “the platform” to “go ahead and express themselves in Islamic language to suit their purpose of political ends”).

According to American Muslim spokesman Maher Hathout, “no two [true] Muslims [would] argue about [the] creed” of Islam (the “belief in one God, the belief in the oneness of his message, the oneness of the human family”, and the belief that “devotion to God should be expressed in human rights, good manners, and mercy, peace, justice, and freedom”). Interpretations and approaches, however, “should change from time to time”, he insists, emphasising that, “when you freeze it at a certain period or at a certain interpretation, problems happen”. Criticising the arrogance of Wahhabi scholars, Hathout emphasises that “there should be no theological hierarchy” in Islam. As such, he says, the close relationship between the Saudi royal family and Wahhabism shows that such a hierarchy has been created in Saudi Arabia. As a result, the hypocrisy of puritanical Wahhabi clerics (who have criticised women for driving cars whilst ignoring the trips of Saudi elites to Las Vegas and other ‘unvirtuous’ destinations) is revealed for all the world to see.²³⁸

II) The Saudi Kingdom and Wahhabi Terrorism

Saudi Arabia and ISIS

Given the history of the Saudi regime and its guiding ideology, Crooke believes it is very unlikely that the West genuinely thought that encouraging the intervention of Saudi Wahhabis in the Syrian Civil War would truly “create moderates” there. Governed on the

²³⁸ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html>

principle of “One leader, One authority, One mosque: submit to it, or be killed”, he says, Saudi Arabia was never going to have “moderation or tolerance” on its agenda. In fact, Crooke even insists that “Prince Bandar’s Saudi-Western mandate to manage the insurgency in Syria against President Assad” actually fuelled the growth of the “neo-Ikhwan type of violent, fear-inducing vanguard movement” represented by the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham’ ISIS.²³⁹ [The latter will be discussed in much greater depth in Chapter Seven.]

In the internal contradictions of the Saudi regime, Crooke argues, lie the seeds for its own demise. Wahhabi extremists may be supported abroad, but at home their opposition to the pro-Western monarchy is not publically tolerated. With ISIS military successes, however, a real “potential for destruction” was created, he affirms, with the group threatening to reveal the fissures within the Saudi political system and to cause the “implosion of **Saudi Arabia as a foundation stone**” of the **pro-Western, pro-capitalist Middle East**. The jihadists, Crooke asserts, could easily delegitimise the Saudi monarchy as a Wahhabi power, with their “deliberate and intentional use... of the language of Abd-al Wahhab” giving leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi increasing credibility among Wahhabis around the world.

In the “areas under ISIS’ control”, Crooke maintains, Wahhabi writings and commentaries were “widely distributed”, telling citizens that no-one could be a “true believer” unless they “actively denied (and destroyed) any other subject of worship”. In other words, Wahhabism is a key part of the ISIS jihad and, through using Wahhabi rhetoric and texts, the group has been “knowingly lighting the fuse to a bigger regional explosion”. In fact, just like the first and second surges of Wahhabism, ISIS’s “real target”, argues Cooke, is the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia or, more specifically, the “seizure of Mecca and Medina” (which lie within the territory). Taking these holy sites, Crooke stresses, would help to confer legitimacy on ISIS as the “new Emirs of Arabia”.

The Seeds of Saudi Arabia’s Demise

Wahhab’s “idealistic, puritan, proselytizing formulation”, says Crooke, is the “gene” for Saudi Arabia’s own “self-destruction”. Although the ideology was essentially watered down to please Western allies, the Saudi monarchy has never renounced Wahhabism, and has in fact continued to claim its religious authority and legitimacy through the philosophy. As a result, it has foolishly allowed the official state ideology to challenge its own power, by not doing enough to stop its ultra-conservative internal opponents from resurrecting the extreme intolerance of Wahhabism.

The “deep schism... between the modernizing current... and the “Juhayman” orientation” of which bin Laden, and the Saudi supporters of ISIS and the Saudi religious establishment are a part”, is present “even within the Saudi royal family itself”, according to Crooke. In July 2014, a Saudi opinion poll even showed that 92 percent of respondents believed that ISIS conformed “to the values of Islam and Islamic law”, showing clearly that the group’s Wahhabism represented very well what the country’s citizens had been taught at school. Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, reflecting on the fact that up to 4000 Saudi fighters were thought to be fighting alongside ISIS, spoke of them as “angry youths with a skewed mentality and understanding of life and sharia”. Consequently, he claimed, it was necessary to “look inward”, and “correct the mistakes of our predecessors” (an apparent call for the abandonment of the discriminatory philosophy of Wahhabism).

Some mild reforms (of which Wahhab himself would have never approved) have already been undertaken by the Saudi monarchy, however, with King Abdullah having “curbed the influence of the religious institutions and the religious police”, and “permitted the four

²³⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-wahhabism-saudi-arabia_b_5717157.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

Sunni schools of jurisprudence [even that of Shiites in the east] to be used". And the result of these changes has been Wahhabi reaction, with many followers of the doctrine seeing them as a "provocation" and "another example of westernization" in Saudi Arabia. In short, by failing to reject Wahhabism altogether or embrace it whole-heartedly, the Saudi monarchy simply risks being overthrown (especially with the country "engulfed by the ISIS fervor").

Having justified authoritarianism by imposing an extremist, chauvinist logic throughout the majority of the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudi monarchy could never have realistically expected to "reform" without making enemies. As a result of its strategy of Wahhabi reform, it has not only made enemies of the Saudi people by not making attempts to seriously transform society, but also of Wahhabi purists, who believe it has sullied the name of Wahhabism with the changes and concessions it has made. In other words, the latter believe that, as "early beliefs and certainties" have been "displaced by shows of wealth and indulgence", the monarchy that once helped them to conquer so much territory no longer truly represents them. At the same time, however, the popularity of Abdullah's limited reforms managed to weaken ordinary citizens' desire for rebellion. While the monarchy may be able to survive the most recent bout of Ikhwani jihadism through such reformism, though, its participation in aerial attacks on ISIS may also "inflare and anger domestic Saudi dissidence even further".

For Crooke, the ISIS insurgency is not something that directly threatens the West, but it is something that does threaten important Western allies in the Middle East. And losing Saudi Arabian oil and influence is simply not something that the West is prepared to let happen. While it was happy to see jihadists tear Syria apart, and not bothered enough about the sectarianism of the increasingly pro-Iranian Iraqi regime to step in immediately, it seems that **the risk posed to Saudi Arabia** of a surprisingly successful Wahhabi insurgency **could well have been the trigger for Western intervention against ISIS**. In summary, with its most important ally in the region potentially at risk of collapse (from a destructive gene that has always been at the centre of its ideological framework), the West now understood that it could not hope for a compliant Middle East in the future if it did not step in to save the Saudi monarchy.²⁴⁰

Bandar bin Sultan and the USA's Terror List

The arguments above have shown why the West's relationship with Saudi Arabia is so treasured and, considering the importance of this alliance, it is perhaps totally logical that the country does not appear on the USA's "List of State Sponsors of Terrorism". However, in order to accept such logic, we need to admit that **the governing regime of the USA is hypocritical**, and that **its denomination of countries as sponsors of terrorism is driven entirely by political interests and not by objective analysis**. In fact, says Richard Edmondson at Global Research, the US ruling elites "no longer even care that they look like hypocrites". One reason for these assumptions is that, with "head-chopping terrorists" (of both ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra) committing "unspeakable atrocities in Syria against civilians", evidence has surfaced that Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan was involved in "sponsoring and backing" these groups. Saudi Arabia, however, did not appear on the USA's terror list, which instead included nations like Cuba, Iran, and Syria, which had no links to such Wahhabi jihadists.

Retired Binghamton University Professor James Petras reveals why the USA displays such hypocrisy, insisting that the "family dictatorship" of Saudi Arabia has "all the vices and none of the virtues of an oil rich state like Venezuela", tolerating no opposition and severely punishing human rights advocates and political dissidents. "Hundreds of billions in oil

²⁴⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/isis-aim-saudi-arabia_b_5748744.html

revenues”, he says, which are controlled by “royal despotism”, fuel “speculative investments the world over”, and all of this is made possible by Western arms and US military bases. In other words, as long as there is no risk to the flow of cheap Saudi oil, Western elites are happy to overlook all sorts of human rights violations.

In Wahhabism, however, the Saudi regime actually “finances the most fanatical, retrograde, misogynist version of Islam”, says Petras, perceiving “threats and dangers from all sides, overseas, secular, nationalists and Shiite ruling governments; internally, moderate Sunni nationalists, democrats and feminists; within the royalist cliques, traditionalists and modernizers”. In order to defend its interests, the government has “turned toward financing, training and arming an international network of Islamic terrorists”, which focuses on “attacking, invading and destroying regimes opposed to the Saudi clerical-dictatorial regime”. The mastermind of this strategy, Petras asserts, is **Bandar bin Sultan**, who “has longstanding and deep ties to high level US political, military and intelligence officials” and was “trained and indoctrinated at Maxwell Air Force Base and Johns Hopkins University”.

Bandar moved from the post of Saudi Ambassador to the USA (1983–2005) to Secretary of the National Security Council of Saudi Arabia (2005–2011), before then taking on the post of Director General of the Saudi Intelligence Agency (2012–2014).²⁴¹ “Close to presidents Reagan and both Bushes”, he contributed significantly to the USA’s counter-revolutionary foreign policy in the Muslim World.²⁴² For example, he became “deeply immersed in clandestine terror operations working in liaison with the CIA” and, in the 1980s, he “channelled \$32 million dollars to the Nicaragua Contras”.

After the attacks of 9/11, Bandar “actively engaged in protecting Saudi royalty with ties to the... bombing”, overseeing the “sudden flight of Saudi Royalty following the terrorist act... despite a high level national security lockdown”. After finally returning to Saudi Arabia, his “wealth of experience and training in running clandestine terrorist operations, derived from his two decades of collaboration with the US intelligence agencies”, was used to organise a “global terror network” to defend the interests of the Saudi monarchy. According to Petras, he essentially helped to transform Saudi Arabia “from an inward-looking, tribal based regime totally dependent on US military power for its survival, to a **major regional center of a vast terror network**, an **active financial backer** of rightwing military dictatorships (Egypt) and client regimes (Yemen) and military interventor in the (Persian) Gulf region (Bahrain)”. At the same time, though, he also oversaw the repression of “Al-Qaeda adversaries in Saudi Arabia”, while “financing Al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere”. Considering all of this experience, he inevitably became a “long-term asset of the US intelligence services”.

Bandar’s ‘Independent Course’

More recently, with the rapprochement between Obama and Rouhani in Iran, Bandar began to take an “independent course”, reflecting the divergence of Saudi regional interests from those of the USA. In spite of the Saudi regime’s “longstanding enmity toward Israel”, Bandar sought to develop “a “covert understanding” and **working relation with the Netanyahu regime**, around their common enmity toward Iran”. In North Africa, he poured “billions of dollars” into Tunisia and Morocco to “bolster the rightwing pro-Islamic regimes” after the Arab Spring and ensure “mass pro-democracy movements” were “repressed, marginalized and demobilized”. Largely coinciding with the interests of the USA and France, Bandar encouraged Islamic extremists to “back the “moderate” Islamists in

²⁴¹ <http://richardedmondson.net/2014/02/07/hypocrisy-run-amuck-saudi-arabia-not-on-list-of-state-sponsors-of-terrorism/> and <http://www.globalresearch.ca/global-terrorism-and-saudi-arabia-a-retrograde-rentier-dictatorship/5364556>

²⁴² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/16/prince-bandar-saudi-intelligence-syria>

government by assassinating secular democratic leaders and socialist trade union leaders” but, in Libya and Egypt, their interests differed.

In Libya, “Saudi financial backing for Islamist terrorists” was generally “in-line with the NATO air war” against Gaddafi but, once the “NATO-backed client regime made up of neo-liberal ex-pats” took control, they had to face off against “Saudi-backed Al-Qaeda and Islamist terror gangs” (among others). These groups eventually became “self-financing” and “relatively “independent” of Bandar’s control”, and soon murdered “the US Ambassador and CIA operatives in Benghazi”. Nonetheless, Petras says, the extremists were then “bankrolled to extend their military operations to Syria”.

In Egypt, meanwhile, Bandar sought, with Israeli cooperation, to undermine “the relatively independent, democratically-elected Muslim Brotherhood regime”, giving financial backing to “the military coup and dictatorship of General Sisi”. Saudi elites had not felt at all comfortable having such a government on their doorstep, threatening the absolute authority of Saudi Wahhabism, so they felt compelled to back the Egyptian military instead. Although the USA favoured “a power-sharing agreement between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military regime, combining popular electoral legitimacy and the pro-Israel-pro NATO military”, Bandar essentially “provided the Egyptian military a financial lifeline and economic immunity from any international financial reprisals”, by offering the regime a “\$15 billion aid package and promises of more to come”. The Brotherhood (financed by Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabi competitor Qatar) was subsequently crushed, and its elected leaders were jailed or threatened with execution, while sectors of the “liberal-left opposition” were also outlawed. Effectively, Bandar had succeeded both in eliminating “a rival, democratically elected Islamic regime” and in securing “a like-minded dictatorial regime” in power.

The Syrian Civil War, however, was the crowning glory of Bandar’s time at the head of the Saudi Intelligence Agency, argues Petras. Giving “long-term large scale financing, arming, training and transport of tens of thousands of Islamic terrorist “volunteers” from the US, Europe, the Middle East, the Caucuses, North Africa and elsewhere”, he also oversaw the construction of “training bases with US and European instructors and Saudi financing... in Jordan, Pakistan and Turkey”. More importantly, though, **he “financed the major rebel Islamic terrorist armed group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant**, for cross border operations”, according to Petras.

Meanwhile, as Hezbollah were beginning to support the Assad regime from Lebanon, Bandar sought to foment “a new civil war” between the group and the Lebanese army, directing “money and arms to the Abdullah Azzam Brigades in Lebanon to bomb South Beirut, the Iranian embassy and Tripoli”, and sending “\$3 billion to the Lebanese military”. In this way, he “assumed the leading role and became the principle director of a three front military and diplomatic offensive against Syria, Hezbollah and Iran”. The hope was, Petras claims, that this “Saudi-Israeli-US offensive” would isolate Iran through an “Islamic takeover in Syria” and a subsequent “Islamic Syrian invasion... [of] Lebanon to defeat Hezbollah”.

At the same time, Iraq was also a target for Bandar, even though the USA was “committed to backing the rightwing Maliki regime”. According to Petras, Bandar gave “political, military and financial” support to ISIS there, whilst buying support to “sabotage US negotiations with Iran”. He had now clearly “**moved beyond his original submission to US intelligence handlers**”, and Petras says he even helped to turn Turkish President Erdoğan “from a NATO ally supporting moderate armed opponents... into embracing the Saudi backed Islamic State”, thus securing “support for the easy transit of large numbers of Saudi

trained terrorists to Syria and probably Lebanon". Petras even claims that Bandar "strengthened ties with the armed Taliban" during this period.

"Whenever an Islamic terror network emerges to subvert a nationalist, secular or Shiite regime", Petras asserts, "it can count on Saudi funds and arms". Bandar's "adventurous" large scale overseas operations", however, soon came into "conflict with some of the ruling Royal family's "introspective" style of rulership". According to Petras, Saudi elites generally like to be "left alone to accrue hundreds of billions collecting petrol rents, to invest in high-end properties around the world, and to quietly patronize high end call girls in Washington, London and Beirut", and they dislike attracting too much media attention. While Bandar was "careful to pay his respects to the ruling monarch and his inner circle", therefore, his "solicitous behavior to overseas Al-Qaeda operations [and] his encouraging Saudi extremists to go overseas and engage in terrorist wars" soon disturbed "monarchical circles" a little too much.

The "billionaire elite", Petras says, knows it "is very vulnerable on all levels", and that it has "little popular support and even less legitimacy", depending heavily "on overseas migrant labor, foreign "experts" and US military forces". While Bandar pleased Wahhabi clerics by supporting extremist Wahhabis abroad, therefore, the "domestic foundations of rule" in Saudi Arabia were "narrowing". In the end, "one too many provocative civilian bombings by his Islamic terrorist beneficiaries" effectively led to "an international crisis" in 2014, which threatened to expose Saudi Arabia's violent policies abroad. As a "protégé and successor of Bin Laden", argues Petras, Bandar had "deepened and systematized global terrorism", overseeing the murder of "far more innocent victims than [under] Bin Laden", and he had to be reined in.²⁴³ Saudi Arabian elites would now have to deal with the consequences of Bandar's actions, but his legacy continued to ravage a number of nations in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia Was Founded on Terrorism

In August 2014, Washington's Blog and Global Research quoted former US congressman Joe Scarborough as saying that, "even if the Saudi government backed the 9/11 attacks - Saudi oil is too important to do anything about it". Referring to how Wahhabism had been taken on by the House of Saud in the eighteenth century as a political tool for domination, the article points out that Wahhab had "cut a deal" with Ibn Saud, promising him "political legitimacy and regular tithes from [his] followers" if Saud provided them with military protection. It also speaks of how the first surge of Wahhabism had seen "circumstances of peculiar cruelty", and how the "historian of the first Saudi state" even proudly documented a massacre committed by Ibn Saud in Karbala in 1801. Finally, it emphasises that Wahhabis "demolished historical monuments and all the tombs and shrines in their midst" when they entered Mecca in 1803, essentially destroying "centuries of Islamic architecture near the Grand Mosque".

The article stresses that the turning point for Saudi Arabia was 1945, when the USA was in desperate need of "oil facilities to help supply forces fighting in the Second World War", and "security [was] at the forefront of King Abd al-Aziz's concerns". As a result, President Roosevelt met with the king in the Suez Canal, and they signed a secret oil-for-security pact, with the Saudis being promised "military assistance and training" and the building of the Dhahran military base. The United States, meanwhile, would ensure itself a constant supply of cheap oil.

²⁴³ <http://richardedmondson.net/2014/02/07/hypocrisy-run-amuck-saudi-arabia-not-on-list-of-state-sponsors-of-terrorism/> and <http://www.globalresearch.ca/global-terrorism-and-saudi-arabia-a-retrograde-rentier-dictatorship/5364556>

Following on from this historical background, British-Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid speaks of how “the House of Saud has exported this very pernicious form of militant Islam [Wahhabism] under U.S. watch” and, when problems have arisen, **the “United States comes in repeatedly to attack symptoms... without ever addressing the basic issue”**. The real issue, Ed Husain says at The New York Times, is that, “for five decades, **Saudi Arabia has been the official sponsor of Sunni Salafism... across the globe**”, with “emissaries... who proselytize for Salafism” being sent “to its embassies in Muslim countries”. It is **no coincidence**, he argues, that “**Al Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram, the Shabab and others are all violent Sunni Salafi groupings**”. In fact, even Hillary Clinton knew that “entities in Saudi Arabia were the “most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide””, and that “Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qa’ida, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan] and other terrorist groups”. In spite of the fact that Saudi Arabia is “responsible for much of the mayhem in the Muslim world”, it is not placed on the USA’s terror list principally because it plays a “**pivotal role in OPEC**”, assuring that “crude oil prices don’t rise above a certain level”. At the same time, it is a “**key purchaser of American weapons**” and, as is basically a motto of capitalism, ‘profit trumps everything else’.

One final factor regarding the USA’s double standards towards Saudi Arabia was the hijacking of the Iranian Revolution by Shia Islamists. According to The Independent, Bandar bin Sultan told the former head of MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, that “the time is not far off in the Middle East... when it will be literally ‘God help the Shia’”, saying that “more than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them”. With Iran proving to be a thorn in the side of US and Israeli interests in the Middle East since its Revolution, Saudi Arabia’s opposition to anything Shiite would prove to be a significant reason for keeping the oppressive state sponsor of terrorism on side.

Dearlove speaks of how, with “substantial and sustained funding from private donors in Saudi Arabia and Qatar” having reached Wahhabi insurgents in Syria (and played a central role in the ISIS surge), it appears that state authorities in the former countries, at the very least, “turned a blind eye”. Moreover, as “tribal and communal leadership in Sunni majority provinces” in Syria and Iraq is “much beholden to Saudi and Gulf paymasters” (and it is unlikely that there would have been cooperation with ISIS “without their consent”), it seems more and more **likely that the Wahhabi powerhouses encouraged submission to ISIS**.

For Dearlove, Saudi “strategic thinking” is “shaped by two deep-seated beliefs or attitudes”. One, he says, is that there “can be no legitimate or admissible challenge to the Islamic purity of their Wahhabi credentials”. The other, meanwhile, is that, resulting from their belief that they “possess a monopoly of Islamic truth”, they are “**deeply attracted towards any militancy which can effectively challenge Shia-dom**”. Essentially, therefore, the Wahhabi backlash that hits the country’s allies in the USA is merely a secondary concern.

The fact is that “15 out of 19 of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, as was Bin Laden and most of the private donors who funded the operation”. And this attack, though partially a reaction to US military and political interference in the Muslim World, was essentially facilitated by the very fact that the USA supports an authoritarian and anti-egalitarian regime in Saudi Arabia (as it was wealthy members of Saudi society who funded the attack on the United States). Fundamentally, then, if the country’s wealth was distributed more equitably, and if there was greater access to high-quality education and democratic governance, there would be much less funding available for extremist groups.

As things stand, however, US elites can only truly ensure their own economic interests in Saudi Arabia if its economic and political system remains deeply undemocratic. After 9/11, Dearlove says, the “then head of Saudi General Intelligence” asserted that “what these

terrorists want is to destroy the House of Saud and remake the Middle East". Far from linking the chauvinist philosophy of his state to Wahhabi extremists, therefore, he (and others) sought to encourage the West that a continuation of their dictatorial regime was the only way to protect Western interests in the region (when in fact the opposite was true). Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's "dual policy", of "encouraging the jihadis as a useful tool of Saudi anti-Shia influence abroad but suppressing them at home as a threat to the status quo", began to fall apart with the rapid spread of ISIS.

For The Independent, it was not Maliki's failings in Iraq that were truly responsible for the disintegration of the Iraqi state, but the takeover of the Syrian Civil War by Wahhabi jihadists "sponsored by donors in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates". In reality, Iraqi politicians had actually warned the West at the beginning of the conflict that, if there was no intervention in Syria, it was "inevitable that the conflict in Iraq would restart". The West's naïve fixation on getting rid of Assad, however, meant these warnings fell on deaf ears, and NATO ally Turkey even provided a "vital back-base for Isis and Jabhat al-Nusra" (by keeping its border with Syria open), driven by the national and regional interests of its own elites. [From Chapter Nine onwards, I will analyse Turkish policy in the Middle East in much greater detail.]

In summary, the USA is to a significant extent responsible for the rise of Wahhabi terrorism, having sought to ensure its own economic interests for a long time by backing "the radical [Saudi-funded] "madrassas"" around the world "in which Islamic radicalism was spread", and "backing the most radical Muslim terrorists in the world: the Salafis" (through its support for Saudi Arabia).²⁴⁴ Any media source or politician, therefore, that claims the self-interested foreign policy of the USA's economic elites is not at least partly responsible for the growth of Wahhabi extremism in the world is shamelessly turning their back on the facts.

C) Afghanistan and the USA's Historical Alliance with Islamists

When the Saur Revolution brought Pro-Soviet communists into power in Afghanistan in 1978, Saudi Arabia was crucial for the USA's plans to derail the experience. During Ronald Reagan's time in office, **the CIA "secretly sent billions of dollars of military aid to the mujahedeen in Afghanistan in a US-supported jihad against the Soviet Union"**. According to journalist Steve Coll, this covert operation "**led to the rise of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda**". Nonetheless, Dick Cheney would claim years later that "it was the vision and the will of Ronald Reagan that gave hope to the oppressed, shamed the oppressors and ended the evil empire", in spite of the fact that US intervention under Reagan had actually taken hope away from the oppressed and bolstered oppression. Apart from turning reality on its head, figures like Cheney (along with those in the corporate media) "failed to mention... the Reagan administration's role in financing, arming and training what was destined to become America's worst enemy".

With "**the CIA, the KGB, Pakistan's ISI and Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Department all [having] operated directly and secretly in Afghanistan**", it was eventually the USA and its allies that would triumph in Afghanistan. Having given "Afghan factions allied to the US... cash and weapons, secretly trained guerrilla forces, funded propaganda and manipulated politics", however, the anti-communist alliance would eventually (and inevitably) give rise "to the oppressive Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda".

I) US Intervention in Afghanistan

²⁴⁴ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/why-does-the-u-s-support-saudi-arabia-a-country-which-hosts-and-finances-islamic-terrorism-on-behalf-of-washington/5398408>

How the Operation Worked

Anti-communist activity in Afghanistan had begun in 1979 under US President Carter, but “really swelled between 1981 and 1985”. Under director Bill Casey (1981-1987), “the CIA created a three-part intelligence alliance to fund and arm the Mujahadeen, initially to harass Soviet occupation forces”, but eventually aimed at “driving them out”. The Saudi intelligence service was officially the first to provide money to the cause, though US congress “would secretly allocate a certain amount of money to support the CIA’s program” each year. After this approval, says Coll, the US Intelligence liaison would “fly to Riyadh”, where “the Saudis would write a matching check”.

In addition to financial support, the USA’s role in the Afghan conflict “was to provide logistics and technological support”, while the **Saudis “collaborated with... ISI”** (Pakistan’s ‘Inter-Services Intelligence’ agency) **“to really run the war on the front lines”**.

Consequently, it was the Pakistani army and the ISI that really “picked the political winners and losers” in Afghanistan, which were (unsurprisingly) the “radical Islamist factions”. Fearing “ethnic Pashtun nationalism” in the country, and its general lack of compliance with US imperialists, the Pakistani regime had essentially set about “pacifying Afghanistan”, using a violent, chauvinist form of Islam as an “instrument of [its] regional policy to control Afghanistan”.

In its desire to “drive the Soviets out”, the USA quickly “acquiesced” to Saudi and Pakistani tactics in Afghanistan. According to Coll, it “didn’t really care about local politics”, and many CIA officers (“scarred by their experiences” in Vietnam) actually “operated under a mantra of no more hearts and minds for us”. As they had not been successful at winning people over to their cause in eastern Asia, with their direct military presence having failed miserably, they accepted that they just weren’t “good at picking winners and losers in a developing world” conflict. As a result of its new stance, the US regime simply ignored warnings that “many of America’s favorite clients were fundamentally anti-American in their outlook”, blinded as it was by its fervent anti-communist ideas. Nonetheless, it was only really towards the end of the 1980s that these ‘clients’ clearly showed themselves to be “vehemently anti-American”, beginning to “explicitly turn their propaganda pamphlets... against the United States as well as against the Soviet Union”.

Coll insists that there were soon “individuals inside the US bureaucracy [who] began to warn that the United States needed to change its political approach”, pushing their superiors to get “involved in the messy business of Afghan politics”. Their recommendations were that the government ought to “start to promote more centrist factions..., negotiate compromise with the Soviet-backed communist government..., [and] prevent Islamist extremists from coming to power”. This advice, however, would be “largely ignored”. The short-sighted elite desire to defeat communism in Afghanistan meant that radical Islamists, however hostile to the USA, were still the biggest ally the imperialists had in the fight to push the USSR out of the country (and deal it a fatal blow in the process).

This thoughtless, self-interested policy, however, would have effects much further afield than Afghanistan. When Soviet troops finally withdrew from the country in 1988, for example, the ISI and the Pakistani army soon rolled out the same model of jihadi rebellion in India, pouring in “support for Islamist factions” when “a spontaneous indigenous rebellion against corrupt Indian rule began in Kashmir in 1989”. Essentially, these forces would take over the Kashmir rebellion and turn it into an “instrument of Pakistan’s national policy”. Safe in Afghanistan, meanwhile, Bin Laden “began to... develop his global ambitions and his global organization”, receiving “indirect and sometimes direct support from the Pakistan army” in the process. In short, he and his followers in Kashmir would serve Pakistan’s desire to liberate what they saw as “an occupied territory”, whilst also managing to “tie

down the Indian army" in the territory (the "cross-border Islamist jihad", which had been practised in Afghanistan, would soon necessitate the presence of "600,000 Indian troops").

According to Coll, "the British and United States have supported right wing or religious... groups covertly or sometimes overtly" on numerous occasions in order to "stop modernist governments such as Nasser in Egypt or Gandhi in India as well as leftist oriented governments in the region". He suggests there was even a "real belief" among some elite sectors in the West that support for "religious networks and organizations against soviet-supported... leftist governments was not only good tactics", but was also part of a "righteous... battle of the faithful against the godless". As an example, he speaks of how Britain "certainly supported the Muslim Brotherhood as an instrument of challenge against Nasser", and how, during the 1980s, "the Israelis supported Hamas covertly" in order to "create a rival movement within the Palestinian community against the [progressive] PLO".

In summary, while "Reagan often used the terminology of... noble freedom fighters" to describe rebels in Afghanistan and elsewhere, "complexity and ethnicity and tribal structures" were "generally not part of American public discourse". Thanks to such an oversimplification of the issue, however, Republican-led covert action in Afghanistan actually "attracted bipartisan support" in the USA (with the Soviet occupation "generally regarded as unjust across the developing world", it was a lot harder for Democrats to withhold their support, even if it would have been the right thing to do). Essentially, opponents of the Reagan regime in the USA were happy to join the administration's efforts in Afghanistan as long as it left the ISI to "run things on the front lines".²⁴⁵

The Biggest State Sponsor of Terror

According to Lt. General William Odom, who was director of the National Security Agency (NSA) under Ronald Reagan, **the USA has "a long record of supporting terrorists and using terrorist tactics"** and, for precisely that reason, the country's anti-terrorism rhetoric since 9/11 has understandably seemed completely "hypocritical to the rest of the world". In fact, when the US Senate sought to "pass a law against international terrorism" in the late 1970s, lawyers insisted that, in each version of the law drafted, the USA "would be in violation". Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was National Security Advisor at the time, would openly reveal later on that the United States had actually "organized and supported Bin Laden and the other originators of "Al Qaeda" in the 1970s to fight the Soviets". CIA director and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, meanwhile, would also confirm that the USA had "backed the Mujahadin". In other words, it is common knowledge, as revealed by key government officials, that the USA supported Islamic extremists during the Cold War.

According to Gates's biography, Bin Laden "was running a front organization" by 1984, "known as Maktab al-Khidamar - the MAK - which funneled money, arms and fighters from the outside world into the Afghan war". One thing he "fails to specify", however, is that "the MAK was nurtured by... ISI, the CIA's primary conduit for conducting the covert war". The US-led anti-communist intelligence networks simply found that religious zealots "were easier to "read" than the rivalry-ridden natives" of Afghanistan, and their opposition to the secular USSR meant that they were considered ""reliable" partners of the CIA". For Western capitalists, communism was evil (for some, because it was atheist but, for most, because it criticised and threatened the sacred covenant of capitalism). Economic elites would therefore do anything to avoid losing their influence in the developing world and, in Afghanistan, this meant setting religious extremists on Soviet forces. In fact, this tactic was "pivotal... in the downfall of the Soviet Union", and was thus justified shamelessly by a number of US officials.

²⁴⁵ http://www.democracynow.org/2004/6/10/ghost_wars_how_reagan_armed_the

In 1998, Brzezinski revealed that the USA had “started backing Al Qaeda’s forefathers even before the Soviets” entered Afghanistan in order to protect its allies there.²⁴⁶ While the superpower “didn’t push the Russians to intervene”, he said, it “knowingly increased the probability that they would”. For him, it was “an excellent idea..., giving to the USSR its Vietnam War” and bringing about “the demoralization and finally the breakup of the Soviet empire”.²⁴⁷ Gates, meanwhile, stated that **“American intelligence services began to aid the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan 6 months before the Soviet intervention”**, even though the “official version of history” says CIA aid to the extremists began only in 1980. In July 1979, he insisted, President Carter “signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul”, **in full knowledge that “this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention”**.

Driven by “the fantasy that Islam would penetrate the USSR and unravel the Soviet Union in Asia”, Gates claimed, the USA’s “alliance with the Afghan Islamists” actually “had its roots in CIA activity in Afghanistan in the 1960s and in the early and mid-1970s”, long predating the communist government and Soviet intervention. For Brzezinski, we should ask ourselves “what is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire?” Although he is right that the fall of the USSR had a greater impact on twentieth-century history than the Taliban, he does not consider the impact that increasing Islamist extremism would have on the world in the twenty-first century. US realpolitik, however, which was focussed on practical rather than ethical concerns, saw the choice between supporting religious extremists (who offered no political alternative to capitalism) and allowing a pro-Soviet regime (which contained ideological elements which challenged capitalism) to exist as a no-brainer. Simply speaking, capitalist elites in the USA saw the former as a necessary action in order to maintain their economic and political hegemony throughout the world.

In other words, says veteran journalist Robert Dreyfuss, the USA and its allies saw “Muslim fundamentalists on the far right”, who were “fierce anti-communists”, as “convenient partners in the Cold War”. In fact, he asserts, the superpower had “found itself in league with Saudi Arabia’s Islamist legions” ever since the late 1950s, as a result of its attempts to defeat “the secular forces of progress in the Middle East and the Arab world” (which were becoming more and more influential at the time). Dreyfuss even claims that **“choosing Saudi Arabia over Nasser’s Egypt was probably the single biggest mistake the United States has ever made in the Middle East”**.

Nonetheless, US imperialists logically preferred compliant allies, however extreme or oppressive they were, to forces which were in favour of political and economic independence. This choice, however, would place the USA on a slippery slope towards economic and political deterioration, from which it would become increasingly difficult to return. According to Dreyfuss, the “second big mistake” of the United States in the Cold War was that they “supported or acquiesced in the rapid growth of [the] Islamic right” in the 1970s, “from Egypt to Afghanistan”. He outlines how US ally “Sadat brought the Muslim Brotherhood back” into Egypt, how the “United States, Israel, and Jordan supported the Muslim Brotherhood in a civil war against Syria”, and how “Israel quietly backed Ahmed Yassin and the Muslim Brotherhood in the West Bank and Gaza”, eventually “leading to the establishment of Hamas”.

After the Iranian Revolution, says Pakistani nuclear scientist Perez Hoodbhoy, “Saudi legitimacy as the guardians of Islam was under strong challenge”, and making “the Afghan Jihad their central cause” became crucial to the survival of their oppressive, discriminatory

²⁴⁶ <http://www.washingtonblog.com/2012/09/sleeping-with-the-devil-how-u-s-and-saudi-backing-of-al-qaeda-led-to-911.html>

²⁴⁷ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/al-qaeda-and-the-war-on-terrorism/7718>

regime. With “an increasing number of Saudis... becoming disaffected by the House of Saud” (and angry about “its corruption, self-indulgence, repression, and closeness to the US”), the war in Afghanistan “provided an excellent outlet” and distraction for militant Wahhabi extremists in Saudi Arabia. Hoodbhoy speaks of how this “Great Global Jihad... funded by Saudi Arabia, and executed by Pakistan”, was supported by the CIA, which paid for adverts to be “placed in newspapers and newsletters around the world offering inducements and motivations to join the Jihad”.

Universities in the USA, meanwhile, “produced books for Afghan children that extolled the virtues of jihad and of killing communists”, which were “underwritten by a USAID \$50 million grant to the University of Nebraska in the 1980s”. **Rather than seeking to counterbalance Marxism with logic**, Hoodbhoy asserts, **the USA had sought instead to do it by “creating enthusiasm in Islamic militancy”**. Still “widely available in both Afghanistan and Pakistan”, the books mentioned above “exhorted Afghan children to “pluck out the eyes of the Soviet enemy and cut off his legs””. At the same time, the “chief of the visa section at the U.S. consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia (J. Michael Springmann)” was encouraged by the CIA to issue visas to Afghans “so they could travel to the U.S. to be **trained in terrorism in the United States**”, before then being “sent back to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets”.²⁴⁸ In other words, the USA had, through its Cold War efforts, become the biggest state sponsor of terror in the world.

The Transforming Goals of the USA in Afghanistan

The University of Ottawa’s Michel Chossudovsky quotes Steve Coll as insisting that the war was definitively ‘stepped up’ in 1985, with Reagan making it “clear that the secret Afghan war had a new goal: to defeat Soviet troops in Afghanistan through covert action”. There was subsequently a “dramatic increase in arms supplies”, Coll says, with 65,000 tons being sent annually by 1987. There was also a “ceaseless stream” of CIA and Pentagon specialists who travelled to the secret headquarters of Pakistan’s ISI... to help plan operations for the Afghan rebels”.

Meanwhile, the USA “supported Pakistani dictator General Zia-ul Haq in creating thousands of religious schools from which the germs of the Taliban emerged”. The “predominant themes” in these Madrassas, Chossudovsky affirms, “were that Islam was a complete socio-political ideology, that holy Islam was being violated by the atheistic Soviet troops, and that the Islamic people of Afghanistan should reassert their independence by overthrowing the leftist Afghan regime propped up by Moscow”.

Chossudovsky speaks of how the extremists in Afghanistan were “motivated by nationalism and religious fervour”, and “were unaware that they were fighting the Soviet Army on behalf of Uncle Sam” (rebel leaders, for example, “had no contacts with Washington or the CIA”). Instead, it was the Pakistani ISI that was built up for the purpose of directing the fighters, and soon “developed into a “parallel structure wielding enormous power over all aspects of [the Pakistani] government””, employing around 150,000 workers. As explained in Chapter One of this book, the ousting of Bhutto in Pakistan had seen “relations between the CIA and the ISI” grow “increasingly warm”, to the point that, during the Afghan war, **“Pakistan was more aggressively anti-Soviet than even the United States”**. An example of this sentiment was that General Zia “sent his ISI chief to destabilize the Soviet Central Asian states”, even before the CIA agreed to the plan in October 1984. Although the CIA wanted to be “more cautious”, however, **both the USA and Pakistan privately agreed “that military escalation was the best course”** (in spite of holding the “public posture of negotiating a settlement”).

²⁴⁸ <http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2012/09/sleeping-with-the-devil-how-u-s-and-saudi-backing-of-al-qaeda-led-to-911.html>

The war in Afghanistan, Chossudovsky claims, received a “significant part of [its] funding... from **the Golden Crescent drug trade**”, which was “**intimately related to the CIA’s covert operations**”. Before the conflict, for example, “opium production in Afghanistan and Pakistan was directed to small regional markets”, and “there was no local production of heroin”. Mujahedeen guerrillas, however, “ordered peasants to plant opium” and, two years later, “the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands became the world’s top heroin producer, supplying 60 per cent of U.S. demand”. Effectively, therefore, US drug consumers would actually help to fuel the USA’s covert war in Afghanistan.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, “Afghan leaders and local syndicates under the protection of Pakistan Intelligence operated hundreds of heroin laboratories”, in what would be a “**decade of wide-open drug-dealing**”, with the “U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency in Islamabad [failing] to instigate major seizures or arrests”. This “strategic hub” of the drugs trade, Chossudovsky argues, would eventually produce “multi-billion dollar revenues” and, following the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, would represent “more than one third of the worldwide annual turnover of the narcotics trade”.²⁴⁹ In summary, Reagan’s second term in office was not only about explicitly seeking to push Soviet forces out of Afghanistan, but about overseeing a transformation of the socio-economic make-up of the country (in an entirely reactionary and regressive manner).

II) The Extension of the Afghan War

Bin Laden and the Taliban

According to Jason Burke at The Guardian, bin Laden benefitted significantly from imperialist intervention in the Afghan war. As a young Saudi logistics specialist, Burke says, bin Laden arrived in Afghanistan in 1979, and soon after settled in “the Pakistani city of Peshawar”, where he used his “experience of the construction trade, and his money, to build a series of bases where the mujahideen could be trained by their Pakistani, American and, if some recent press reports are to be believed, British advisers”. **Bin Laden**, the paper asserts, “**was effectively funded by the Americans**”, though “it is impossible to gauge how much American aid he received” because “most American weapons... were channelled by the Pakistanis to the Hezb-i-Islami faction of the mujahideen led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar”. Although bin Laden was “only loosely connected with the group”, however, his “Office of Services, set up to recruit overseas for the war, [definitely] received some US cash”.

According to one US official, the USA “created a whole cadre of trained and motivated people who turned against [them]” in what could be considered “a classic Frankenstein's monster situation”. Nonetheless, the claim asserted earlier in this section, that the United States did not know how to pick the winners or losers of conflicts in the developing world, has been echoed by Pakistani defence analyst Kamaal Khan, who suggests that the “bulk of American aid” actually “went to the least effective fighters” in Afghanistan. Most of the fighting, Khan insists, was actually done by Afghans, with whom the USA did not have much contact. The “military contribution of the ‘Arabs’, as the overseas volunteers were known, was relatively small”, he says. America’s Saudi and Pakistani allies, however, who received significant US support during the war, had much more success in backing the ‘most effective fighters’.²⁵⁰

In spite of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (completed in 1989), the civil war in the country “continued unabated”, with a group called the Taliban being “supported by the Pakistani Deobandis and their political party, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI)”. When the

²⁴⁹ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/al-qaeda-and-the-war-on-terrorism/7718>

²⁵⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jan/17/yemen.islam>

JUI gained influence in the Pakistani government in 1993, says Chossudovsky “ties between the JUI, the Army and the ISI were established”, which facilitated JUI influence in Afghanistan. The Taliban, created in around 1991, would gain power in Afghanistan just three years after the JUI’s rise to prominence in Pakistan. According to Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, the links between the two groups became ever more apparent when, upon taking power, the Taliban “handed control of training camps in Afghanistan over to JUI factions”. In fact, with the “support of the Saudi Wahabi movement”, he insists, the JUI subsequently also “played a key role in recruiting volunteers to fight in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union”. The Taliban “largely served US geopolitical interests”, however, according to K. Subrahmanyam, and Washington therefore “closed its eyes” to the group’s “blatant derogation of women’s rights..., closing down of schools for girls..., dismissal of women employees from government offices and... enforcement of “the Sharia laws of punishment””.

The Afghan War Extends into Europe

At the same time, the Bosnian Muslim Army and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in the Balkans also served US interests, with “CIA-sponsored Mujahideen mercenaries” even being involved in assaults on Macedonia at the time of the September 11th attacks in the USA in 2001. Quoting the International Media Corporation, Chossudovsky insists that this covert support was part of an attempt “to bring the Yugoslav Government into line with US policy”, as it was “the only state in the region to have failed to acquiesce to US pressure” after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Kosovo meanwhile, the KLA was armed and trained by both the US Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the MI6, along with the support of “three British and American private security companies”. Military instructors also came from Turkey and Afghanistan, “financed by the “Islamic jihad””, and the “CIA and Germany’s Secret Service, the BND”.

Frank J. Cilluffo, Deputy Director of the Global Organized Crime Program at the Center for Strategic International Studies in Washington, spoke to the US Congress in 2000 about how, with Albania and Kosovo lying “at the heart of the “Balkan Route” that links the “Golden Crescent” of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the drug markets of Europe”, the conflict in the Balkans had a direct link to the drugs trade. The route, he said, was “worth an estimated \$400 billion a year”, and handled “80 percent of heroin destined for Europe”. Interpol’s Ralf Mutschke, meanwhile, emphasised around the same time that the KLA had been, according to the US State Department, “financing its operations with money from the international heroin trade and loans from Islamic countries and individuals, among them allegedly Usama bin Laden”. In other words, the KLA had gained a significant amount of its resources from the drug trade.

In spite of links between Al Qaeda and the KLA, however, Senator Jo Lieberman stated in 1999 that “fighting for the KLA is fighting for human rights and American values”. In Macedonia, this US-Islamist cooperation even continued in 2001, with the “US government and the “Islamic Militant Network”” being accused of “working hand in glove in supporting and financing the... National Liberation Army (NLA)”. In other words, the United States “had been supporting the Islamic brigades barely a few months prior to the 9/11 attacks”.

Jihadism in Chechnya

Meanwhile, the “main rebel leaders” in Chechnya (Russia’s “renegade autonomous region”) were “trained and indoctrinated in CIA-sponsored camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, says Chossudovsky. Far beyond just “supplying the Chechens with weapons and expertise”, he insists, the ISI and its “radical Islamic proxies” were actually “calling the shots” there. One reason for covert Western support for the latter conflict, he asserts, was that “Anglo-

American oil conglomerates" would be set to gain "control over oil resources and pipeline corridors out of the Caspian Sea basin" if Russian forces were pushed out, as the country's "main pipeline route transits through Chechnya and Dagestan".

Shamil Basayev, leader of one of the two main Chechen rebel armies, had apparently received "intensive Islamic indoctrination and training in guerrilla warfare" in Afghanistan in 1994, courtesy of the ISI. Leading the assault against Russia in the First Chechen War in 1995, Basayev also had "extensive links to criminal syndicates in Moscow", to "Albanian organized crime", and to the KLA. According to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), "Chechen warlords" even "started buying up real estate in Kosovo" between 1997 and 1998.

In the former Soviet Union, Muslim societies had developed a "strong secular tradition", but the conflict in Chechnya began to "undermine secular state institutions", with a "parallel system of local government, controlled by the Islamic militia" being set up "in many localities in Chechnya". With state institutions "crumbling" under "IMF-sponsored austerity measures", it was much easier for the rebel forces to displace the existing institutions in their territory, even in the face of "strong opposition [from] the civilian population". Another advantage the Wahhabi-inspired rebels had was the financial aid which had been sent to them "from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States", which was made "conditional upon the installation of the Sharia courts" after their victory.

The Chechen conflict was therefore essentially a takeover by the Wahhabi movement, which did all that it could to replace "traditional Sufi Muslim leaders" with pro-Wahhabi figures. The Chechen Sufis, known for being moderate traditionalists open to change, actually joined together with secular forces in Dagestan, managing to push back the Wahhabi extremists. They claimed the latter was a "very tiny but well-financed and well-armed minority", which had been trying to "create a state of confusion in which... their own harsh, intolerant brand of Islam... [would be] able to thrive". Wahhabism, they insisted, did not enjoy widespread support in the region.

Increasing Jihadi Influence in India and China

Elsewhere, "Pakistan-based rebel groups... covertly supported by... ISI" carried out "terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament" in December 2001, bringing India and Pakistan "to the brink of war". This event, Chossudovsky insists, along with the "ethnic riots in Gujarat" the following year, was the "culmination of a process initiated in the 1980s, financed by drug money and abetted by Pakistan's military intelligence", to "replicate in Kashmir" the "holy war" that had brought the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. And with "members of the Pakistani and Kashmiri communities in England", along with "Wahabi sympathizers in the Persian Gulf", sending "millions of dollars a year" in support of this strategy, extremism soon seized control of the conflict in Kashmir.

Meanwhile, the ISI also supported Wahhabi insurgencies in western China, within both the Turkestan and Uighur movements there. Certain separatist groups even "received support and training from... Al Qaeda", supported "by various Wahabi "foundations" from the Gulf States". Just as the West had done with the former Soviet Union, Chossudovsky argues, "political destabilization and fracturing" in China was now in the interests of Western economic elites. With the "militarization of the South China Sea and... the Taiwan Straits", and the establishment of US "military bases in Afghanistan and in several of the former Soviet republics, directly on China's Western border", it was becoming clearer that the West was seeking to destabilise and weaken the increasingly powerful Chinese regime.²⁵¹ And Wahhabi-inspired Islamism would be the chosen tool for this process.

²⁵¹ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/al-qaeda-and-the-war-on-terrorism/7718>

III) 'Blowback' and US Reaction

In 1999, The Guardian's Jason Burke reported on how, according to American officials, **"12,500 foreigners" had been trained between 1985 and 1992 in "bomb-making, sabotage and urban guerrilla warfare in Afghan camps the CIA helped to set up"**. After the fall of the pro-Soviet government in 1992, Burke says, "another 2,500 are believed to have passed through the camps", which were soon to be "run by an assortment of Islamic extremists, including Osama bin Laden". Veterans from the war "now linked to bin Laden", he insists, had "been traced by investigators to Pakistan, East Africa, Albania, Chechnya, Algeria, France, the US and Britain".²⁵² In other words, Al Qaeda was a force which had managed to attract Wahhabi sympathisers from across the world.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, the "extensive military-intelligence apparatus (the ISI)... was not dismantled" after the end of the Afghan conflict. Instead, it "served as a catalyst for the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of six new Muslim republics in Central Asia". With ISI's help, Washington's Blog reveals, Wahhabi missionaries from Saudi Arabia "established themselves in the [new] Muslim republics, as well as within the Russian federation", thus undermining secular opposition to imperialism in the region. In short, Wahhabi-inspired reactionary Islamism was now rapidly becoming the main form of 'anti-imperialist' resistance in the Muslim World.

Consequences on US Soil of the Afghan Intervention

In 1993, the bombing of the World Trade Center was the first sign of blowback resulting from US interference in Afghanistan. New York District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau spoke of how "intelligence services could and should have stopped" the bombing, while investigative journalist Robert I. Friedman would speak in 1995 about how Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman (whose 1980 fatwa against Anwar Sadat was thought to have been responsible for his assassination) was thought to have inspired the attack. Rahman, who had been sent to Peshawar in the 1980s with CIA funds "to preach to the Afghans about the necessity of unity to overthrow the Kabul regime", was essentially a prime asset for US elites. In 1990, for example, he was given a one-year visa into the USA, and "jihad offices" (set up "across America with the help of Saudi and American intelligence" after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan) would soon be visited by "veterans of the Afghan conflict", who would "tell their inspirational war stories" to impressionable or sympathetic ears in the USA in order to earn "millions of dollars for the rebels at a time when they needed it most".

In 1990, "an ultra-right-wing Zionist militant" was murdered by a man named El-Sayyid Nosair. When his house was searched in the aftermath of the attack, "thousands of rounds of ammunition and hit lists" were found, along with "classified U.S. military-training manuals". In response, the FBI claimed "Nosair was a lone gunman", though Morgenthau would soon insist that Bureau officials "[could not] be trusted to do the job" of untangling terrorist connections because of their relationship with such networks. Three years later, when the FBI arrested suspects for the World Trade Center bombing, Morgenthau thought they "would lead back to Sheikh Abdel Rahman", but that the "U.S. government was protecting the sheikh for his help in Afghanistan". Saudi intelligence, meanwhile, "contributed to Sheikh Rahman's legal-defence fund".

Even US Congressman Peter Deutsch would later reveal that "some Afghan groups that [had] had close affiliation with Pakistani Intelligence [were] believed to have been involved in the [1993] New York World Trade Center bombings". The US government had been

²⁵² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jan/17/yemen.islam>

“officially warned” about Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, for example, who had previously been “showered... with U.S. provided weapons” by Pakistani intelligence, “just days before” the 1993 attack. Having been “enthusiastically backed by the U.S.”, however, and “among America’s most valued allies”, he was predictably not implicated.

September 11th, 2001

By the late 1990s, Wahhabi-inspired Islamism had gone “into overdrive” because President Reagan had “feted jihadist leaders” over a decade before, while the “U.S. press [had] lionized them” accordingly. Such wilful ignorance within the US establishment would be conveniently forgotten, however, when the tables turned after 9/11, and the previous support the country’s economic and political elites had poured into extremist causes in the 1980s would be brushed under the carpet in an attempt to save face. In much the same way that immigration discussions in the USA avoid the historical context (that the USA funded right-wing dictatorships and mercenaries throughout Latin America during the Cold War), the media actively sought to leave context out of its coverage of the ‘War on Terror’ after 9/11 (showing yet again that the corporate media serves the interests of the ruling economic elites and not those of the People).

The Pakistani madrassas (which had been “funded and supported by Saudi Arabia and [the] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency”, and which had encouraged students “to join the Afghan resistance”) would be criticised after 9/11, but the involvement of the USA in their creation would be conveniently left out. In 2004, for example, the 9/11 Commission report claimed that “some of Pakistan’s religious schools or madrassas served as “incubators for violent extremism””. Pervez Hoodbhoy, however, insists that “there may well have been no 911 but for [the] game-changer” of US support for radical Islamists in Afghanistan. While “every religion, including Islam, has its crazed fanatics”, he says, they are “few in numbers and small in strength”, and their voices only became louder thanks to the backing of the USA and its allies.

According to Newsweek, the New York Times, and other media outlets, “an FBI informant hosted and rented a room to 2 of the 9/11 hijackers in 2000”. In fact, former “counter-terrorism boss” Richard Clarke even “theorizes that top CIA brass tried to recruit the hijackers and turn them to our side, but were unsuccessful”. After failing, he says, “they covered up their tracks”, with the FBI refusing to allow the informant mentioned above to be interviewed by the Congressional Joint Inquiry into the terrorist attacks. According to professor emeritus Peter Dale Scott, it is “generally admitted that Ali Mohamed” (a terrorist also known as Abu Mohamed ‘al Amriki’ (‘the American’)) “worked for the FBI, the CIA, and U.S. Special Forces”. Although he had “trained most of al Qaeda’s top leadership - including Bin Laden and Zawahiri”, he “lived as an American citizen in California, applying for jobs as an FBI translator” until his arrest in 1998. In summary, he was allowed to be an FBI informant even though he was “one of al-Qaeda’s top trainers in terrorism and how to hijack airplanes”.

More importantly, though, “9/11 was foreseeable”, reports Washington’s Blog. According to “a high-level military intelligence officer”, whose unit was “tasked with tracking Bin Laden prior to 9/11”, the said unit was actually “pulled off the task” early. Its warnings about new attacks on the USA, meanwhile, were “ignored”. In the words of former FBI translator Sibel Edmonds, Osama Bin Laden even “worked for the U.S. right up until 9/11” (a fact that was “covered up because the US [had] outsourced terror operations to al Qaeda and the Taliban for many years”). In short, the September 11th attacks were both foreseeable and

preventable, though the official policy of US elites (in supporting Wahhabi-inspired terrorist attacks around the world) meant that little was done to foresee or prevent them.²⁵³

The USA's War on Terrorism

According to Michel Chossudovsky, **the key to any "war propaganda" is to "fabricate an... outside enemy"** and, in the wake of 9/11, this enemy became Osama bin Laden. In the case of the USA, the idea that the country was "under attack" was pushed to the extreme in both political and media spheres, in a clear attempt to portray America as a victim rather than an attacker. The context of US crimes abroad, therefore, was ignored, while the fact that the "outside enemy" was "a creation of the CIA" played absolutely no role in the coverage of the mainstream media. In the run-up to a supposed "pre-emptive war" in Afghanistan to "defend the Homeland", **history was effectively 'disappeared'**, like social activists in Latin America under US-backed dictatorships.

To make matters worse, "disinformation" was fed into the news just as the "economic and strategic objectives behind the war in the Middle East" were being hidden behind talk of "self-defense" and "just war". The government's propaganda apparatus, seeking to make terror warnings seem completely genuine, sought to "to erase the history of Al Qaeda, drown the truth and "kill the evidence"". The "largest covert operation in the history of the CIA", which had started in Afghanistan in 1979, was now to be wiped from the collective memory of US citizens. The "35,000 Muslim radicals from 40 Islamic countries" which had "joined Afghanistan's fight between 1982 and 1992", along with the "tens of thousands more [who] came to study in Pakistani madrasahs", had simply never existed (according to media and political elites). Washington's attempts to "deliberately trigger a civil war" (which eventually lasted "for more than 25 years"), meanwhile, was to be totally omitted from US history books.

As I have already shown in this chapter, the USA gave covert support for Wahhabi jihadists from Pakistan to Bosnia, from Kosovo to Chechnya, and from Dagestan to western China. In these places, says Chossudovsky, the "significant development of "radical Islam", in the wake of the Cold War in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East is consistent with Washington's... view to destabilizing national societies and **preventing the articulation of genuine secular social movements**". Claims that the USA's foreign policy was "geared towards curbing the tide of Islamic fundamentalism", therefore, were simply lies. **The superpower may well oppose to its own interests being attacked by Wahhabi extremists, but wherever they have served US interests, they have long been welcome allies.** By creating and manipulating "social and ethnic divisions", Wahhabi extremists essentially undermine "the capacity of people to organise against the American Empire". The "opposition to Uncle Sam" which it propounds, meanwhile, generally "does not constitute any real threat to America's broader geopolitical and economic interests".

The fact that "a major war in the Middle East and Central Asia, supposedly "against international terrorism", was launched in October 2001" by the USA means very little. Because the country had long been "harboring international terrorism as part of its foreign policy agenda", the idea that it had now turned against the extremists with whom it had "never severed its ties" was very suspicious. In reality, Chossudovsky argues, American citizens were "deliberately and consciously misled by their government", and Al Qaeda was immediately targeted "without supporting evidence", with the "decision to go to war with Afghanistan [being] taken on the evening of September 11 and [being] formally announced the following morning".

²⁵³ <http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2012/09/sleeping-with-the-devil-how-u-s-and-saudi-backing-of-al-qaeda-led-to-911.html>

NATO's declaration of war, meanwhile, was "based on the principle of "self-defense"", and "was taken within 24 hours of the September 11 attacks". According to Chossudovsky, that was a time frame rarely seen before in world history. (Note here that Israel's invasions of Palestinian territory work on much the same principle: after years of interference sowing injustice and oppression, when the imperial/colonial power finally reaps hostility from sectors of the population it oppresses, it suddenly claims, ignoring all historical context, that it is acting 'in self-defence'.) Chossudovsky argues, based on the fact that "one does not plan a war in three weeks", that "the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan had been planned well in advance of 9/11".

Fear, Misinformation, and Deception

For Chossudovsky, the idea of "blowback" (that the USA naively supported rebel forces that would later turn against their unsuspecting sponsors) was simply a "fabrication", albeit one that was commonly repeated in the media. In fact, he claims, there was another reason why the USA wanted to initiate a new global military offensive abroad. According to "former US Central Command (USCENTCOM) Commander, General Tommy Franks, who led the invasion of Iraq in 2003", an imagined scenario of a "terrorist attack on American soil" would lead to the "suspension of the Constitution and the installation of military rule in America". Such a situation, Chossudovsky stresses, would allow the economic elites of the USA to act with even fewer limitations (by eliminating the freedom of speech that leads to political dissent).

Popular fear of another terrorist attack, Chossudovsky insists, would "galvanize US public opinion in support of a military government and police state", thus facilitating "a major shift in US political, social and institutional structures". For such a strategy to pay off, however, **the ignorance of the American people to the causes of injustice and conflict in the Middle East is crucial**. Without an understanding of their government's role in the ruin of the region, they give their elites the ability to manipulate them with the idea of an unreasonable foreign enemy that has come straight from hell and is entirely detached from any sort of historical context. In summary, ignorance leads to a lack of empathy, and that leads to fear, hatred, and conflict.

The "triggering of "war pretext incidents"", Chossudovsky says, has been "an integral part of US military history", with "Operation Northwoods" in 1962, for example, having planned to "deliberately trigger civilian casualties to justify the invasion of Cuba". In that particular operation, there were suggestions of blowing up a US ship in Guantanamo Bay and blaming Cuba, developing "a Communist Cuban terror campaign in the Miami area, in other Florida cities and even in Washington", and subsequently publishing "casualty lists in U.S. newspapers [to] cause a helpful wave of national indignation". While US manipulation did eventually lead people to support over fifty years of aggressive rhetoric and economic sanctions on Cuba, however, the presence of the USSR essentially meant that a direct military invasion of the island never really materialised after the Bay of Pigs invasion.

After the July 2005 London bombings, Dick Cheney spoke of a "contingency plan", in which preparations would be made "for a major military operation against Iran" (which had not been at all involved in the attacks). Pressure, meanwhile, would also be "exerted on Tehran in relation to its (non-existent) nuclear weapons program". Cheney's plan "did not in the least focus on preventing a Second 9/11", though, and was primarily "predicated on the [fairly absurd] presumption that Iran would be behind a Second 9/11", and that "punitive bombings could immediately be activated... prior to the conduct of an investigation". Again, the ignorance of US citizens to the fact that Iran was opposed to Wahhabi extremism would be essential for such a plan to work, as a scared population, together with "9/11-type

terrorist attacks”, were considered entirely “appropriate means of legitimizing wars of aggression against any country selected for that treatment”.

The Western media, according to Chossudovsky, **has cooperated dutifully with the policies of the ruling elites**, “increasingly pointing towards “preemptive war” as an act of “self defense””, all in the hope of building “public acceptance for the next stage of the Middle East “war on terrorism” which is directed against Syria and Iran” (as the last perceived bastions of national independence in the Middle East). Meanwhile, the “911 narrative as conveyed by the 911 Commission report is fabricated”, Chossudovsky insists, with the Bush administration having been “involved in acts of cover-up and complicity at the highest levels of government”. **Revealing the misinformation and outright lies of the political and economic elites of the West**, he argues, **is the only way to “undermine the legitimacy of the “war on terrorism””**. For, without 9/11, he says, “the war criminals in high office do not have a leg to stand on”.²⁵⁴

D) The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War

A significant factor in the USA’s decision to intervene in Afghanistan in the 1980s was the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The fact that Iran’s revolution was proclaimed Islamic, however, was never the problem for the West. As I have already shown in this chapter, the USA and its allies have supported both Islamist governments and militants on numerous occasions in the past. For example, when Pakistan became an Islamic Republic in 1956, the West didn’t seek to isolate it. Meanwhile, Western elites were not particularly worried about the increasing authoritarianism of the new government in Iran either. As already seen in this book, they supported more than their fair share of brutal dictatorships throughout the twentieth century, and beyond. In fact, in the same year as Iran’s revolution, as the USA funded anti-communist Islamists in Afghanistan, it was supported in its campaign by its tyrannical Wahhabi allies in Saudi Arabia and the oppressive right-wing dictatorship of Pakistan.

Essentially, the political philosophy of Islamism was never committed to a comprehensive plan of nationalisations and redistribution of wealth (like that of communists or progressive nationalists). The Iranian Revolution, therefore, was not a worry for the West because of the participation of Islamists. What worried it the most was that there were initially left wing currents participating in the Revolution, and even conservative Islamists were expressing anti-imperialist sentiments. In fact, it was so popular at the start that the USA could not really have actively resisted the revolutionary regime even if it had wanted to. When US hostages were taken, however, the United States were given an excuse to oppose the process, and a way of getting ordinary Americans behind government action to resolve the situation.

In this section, I will explore the reasons for the Iranian Revolution, and the characteristics it adopted once Islamist factions had hijacked the process. I will also look at the opposition the new regime faced from Saudi Arabia, which became increasingly worried about the anti-imperialist rhetoric of Iran’s leaders and the effect this could have on its own citizens. Subsequently, I will detail the West’s support for Iraq during its war against Iran, and the destructive effect this had on the region. Finally, I will explain why the Iranian Revolution has essentially become a reactionary process, and how Iranian citizens (and the Kurds in particular) have resisted it.

I) The Nature of the Iranian Revolution

²⁵⁴ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/al-qaeda-and-the-war-on-terrorism/7718>

As seen in Chapter One, a key event in Iranian history was the “US-British coup in 1953, which overthrew [Iran’s] democratically elected Prime Minister Mosaddegh”. According to Reza Fiyouzat at Counterpunch, **the country’s “clerical classes”, led by Ayatollah Kashani (“mentor to Ayatollah Khomeini”) actually “sided with the coup and against the democratically elected Mosaddegh”**. In turn, this strategy meant siding with “the project of the US imperialists” in Iran, and destroying a democratic system “for which many of [the country’s] best minds had given their lives and for which hundreds of thousands had fought so hard”. The coup, Fiyouzat insists, “could not have been orchestrated by [the] foreign powers if there [had been] no internal social forces to carry it forward”, but the clerics turned out to be one of those internal forces that chose to side with the USA and Britain. In short, they knew very well that “their interests placed them on the side of the imperialists and not the socialists, progressive nationalists, true liberals and democrats who supported Mossaddegh’s party”.²⁵⁵

After the Iranian Revolution, figures like Fidel Castro (who themselves had reacted to excessive US interference) emphasised the role of the USA in creating Iranian anti-imperialist sentiment, saying that “the people had already overthrown the shah once but, just like it did in Guatemala, the CIA... re-established him in the government”. Castro continued, stressing that, “despite the fact that the shah had the most powerful army in the region”, and had “assassinated hundreds of thousands of Iranians”, the Iranian people overthrew him “with great bravery” and “almost without weapons”. The “marked rejection of U.S. policy” after the Revolution, meanwhile, was simply a result of previous US interference in the country.

The fact that the shah was subsequently allowed into the USA, however, made matters even worse, sparking mass protests in Iran and leading soon after to the hostage crisis. The United States then responded with “a number of mistakes”, asserts Castro, including the confiscation of “thousands of millions of dollars that the Iranian state had deposited in U.S. banks”. The superpower’s subsequent search to “resolve the problem in Iran through force and surprise”, meanwhile, “complicated the problem” further. With Cuba also having suffered from a US-led economic blockade, Castro showed sympathy with Iran amidst the Iran-Iraq War, but also asserted that “we must also work in order to put an end to the conflicts between our Iraqi and Iranian brothers”.²⁵⁶ The dogmatic and reactionary nature of both the Ba’athists and Shia Islamists, however, meant that such an accommodation was not possible.

The Iranian Revolution Compared with Others

In 2009, London School of Economics professor Fred Halliday insisted that “the revolution of Iran [could] be seen as part of a series of such transformations that had overturned regimes in three continents in the previous two centuries: France (1789), Russia (1917), China (1949), [and] Cuba (1959)”. In his lecture, he goes on to declare “six broad points of comparison”, outlining at first how, like in the other revolutions mentioned above, “**a broad coalition of opposition forces came together [in Iran] to overthrow a dictatorial regime, building on longstanding social grievances but also energising nationalist sentiment against a state and ruler seen as too compliant to foreign interests**”. In Iran, he says, this meant the unity of “liberal and Marxist to conservative and religious forces”, representing “a classic populist alliance”. In other words, it would become a form of bourgeois nationalism, trying to unite all citizens against subservience to US-led imperialism while exploiting real grievances in order to gain the popular support needed to change the nature of the existing power structure.

²⁵⁵ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/24/the-iran-us-tango/>

²⁵⁶ <https://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/archive/castro/1980/05/01.htm>

The second point Halliday makes is that “the victory of the revolution” (in each case mentioned) depended on the “**state’s weakness of leadership and internal divisions**”. In the case of Iran, the Shah “was ill”, and “his advisers and generals were uncertain”, making conditions for rebellion ripe. The next factor characteristic of Halliday’s revolutionary processes was a “quality that distinguishes mere coups d’etat or rebellions from major revolutions” – that of being “not just political”. For Halliday, these transformations in reality “had profound and ongoing social and economic consequences”, creating “a new social order and a new set of social values”. In Iran, the change in the status quo was driven by “a new revolutionary elite, an Islamic nomenclature, united by ties of power, business and marriage”, which would soon find itself in control of state revenues. Effectively, power had shifted from one elite to another, but there were nonetheless significant changes as a result,

Halliday’s next assertion is that the core ideology of each revolution was “supplemented by pre-existing ideas that were crucial to sustaining domestic support (above all nationalism...)”. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini “at first... denounced secular nationalism as an insult to Islam” but, after Ba’athist Iraq invaded in 1980, “he and other leaders adopted the Iranian version” of what “French revolutionaries in the 1790s [had called] la grande nation” (which had sought to bring together different regions under the banner of a ‘greater France’). According to Halliday, the multi-ethnic nature of Iran made such nationalism necessary, and there were subsequently “profound reverberations on the relations between the Iran’s different national components”. However, the actions of the Shia Islamist regime often “led not to [an] era of fraternal cooperation and solidarity... but to [one of] conflict and war”. Just as “a revolt at the heart of a plural country” had previously encouraged citizens to resist new authoritarian regimes in Turkey, Russia, and Ethiopia, Iran’s Kurds would be those to have their hopes dashed the most after the Revolution of 1979.

The final (and perhaps most important) idea that Halliday insists on is the “**explosive international consequences**” that each transformative revolution had. In particular, he refers to the “persistent attempts to export the revolution”, and the “intensified regional rivalries” that these created. In Iran, he says, such promotion of ‘state interests’ actually “acquired resemblances to a reviving empire - with traces of France and Russia in particular”. The **Iran-Iraq War**, meanwhile, strengthened Iranian nationalism and gave the ruling regime an excuse to repress dissent (or make ‘difficult wartime decisions’ to ensure unity was not ‘undermined’). For Halliday, the conflict “shaped the politics, defined the state institutions, and steeled the will of the Islamic Republic (just as the civil war of 1919-21 was formative for the Bolshevik regime)”.

A Revolution like Few Others in the Twentieth Century

Through President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), Halliday says, fighters involved in the “terrible war” of the 1980s sought in the twenty-first century “to revive the revolutionary discipline and spirit of those years”. For the professor, this strategy echoed “similar attempts by Joseph Stalin in the 1930s, Mao Zedong in the 1960s “cultural revolution”, and Fidel Castro in his 1980s *rectificación*” – all aimed at revitalising a wartime spirit of unity and resistance. While these attempts all failed in the end, he insists, the “regimes themselves lasted” nonetheless.

One distinctive aspect of the Iranian Revolution, Halliday argues, was that “secular radicalism” was not the driving force, even though “the programme and actions of Ayatollah Khomeini and his associates [had] much in common with other modern social upheavals”. For example, the clerics: appealed “to the mass of poor people... against the corrupt, foreign-linked, elite”; demonstrated the “cult of the leader”, with Khomeini in particular being referred to as “leader of the revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic”; mobilised “nationalist sentiment”; used national income (“albeit in a chaotic and

inefficient way" in Iran) for "egalitarian social programmes in city and countryside"; and analysed the world "in terms of a just struggle of oppressed peoples against a dominant power" (whilst using in Iran the Qur'anic term "istikbar i jahani (global arrogance)" instead of 'imperialism'). Just like in other bourgeois nationalist revolutions, the idea that Islamist leaders were superior and that everyone in Iran was 'in it together' helped the 'revolutionary' elite in Iran to "crush not only their opponents but all dissidents within the regime", and to impose "a new and even more exacting and intrusive authoritarian regime". In fact, Halliday says that he himself was "a witness" in the summer of 1979 of "the brutal repression visited by the new state on its former, now discarded, liberal and socialist allies".

In general, however, Halliday speaks of three different ways (not related to religion or oppression) in which the Iranian Revolution was unique. Firstly, he insists that the revolution "relied not on force, military insurrection or guerrilla war, but on politics". The "**mass mobilisation of people** in the streets (in the Iranian case, the largest such opposition demonstrations ever recorded anywhere [in 2009])", he says, along with "**the political (as opposed to industrial) general strike** (which, from October 1978, paralysed the economy and foreign trade)", was crucial for the success of the Revolution. Essentially, then, it was through acts of **popular civil disobedience**, rather than military violence, that the Iranian people managed to topple the Shah's regime. As such, claims Halliday, this process "was the first modern revolution", a fact that the professor considers both the "most paradoxical and original aspect" of the Iranian revolution".

Another way in which the uprising was different from others was the fact that the state had not suffered "defeat in war or by invasion, or via the withdrawal of support from an external patron". The Shah, Halliday asserts, was "backed by the US (as also by China) to the end", and his army "had not been defeated in war". At the same time, "**no outside state gave any support to the revolutionaries**". Far from causing "rivalry between great powers, Russia, China, Europe and the US were [all] united against [the Iranian Revolution]", a fact which made the victory of the protesters all the more impressive. In short, **it was the power of the masses that defeated the state**.

Halliday's final point about the Iranian Revolution is that it was "**well organised**", **but not by a revolutionary vanguard party**. Instead, it was put into motion "through a network of mosque and local committees". In fact, attempts to create a "ruling party" (the Islamic Republican Party) failed miserably. Consequently, says Halliday, "the post-revolutionary climate is far freer and [more] diverse than that seen in any other revolution", with "a wide range of opinions and interpretations of the revolution itself and its programme [being] heard - even if violence, cruelty and intimidation are never far away". For all intents and purposes, therefore, Iran's political system is probably better than that of many other countries in the Middle East (even though the country's elites have ultimate political and economic control, aspire to both "regional and military power", and promote their own ideology abroad).²⁵⁷

Iran Is Not a Progressive Anti-Imperialist Power

Reza Fiyouzat, speaking from an Iranian socialist perspective, refers to Antonio Gramsci's assumption that "**a revolutionary situation simultaneously creates counter-revolutionary conditions**", insisting that this was the case with the Iranian Revolution. Although there was a "democratic mass movement and... uprising that overthrew the Shah's regime in February 1979", he says, there was also a "counter-revolutionary backlash". This counter-revolution, he argues, "brought out the most organized (the mosque, a de facto political organization) and simultaneously the **most reactionary forces of [Iranian] society into open class warfare**

²⁵⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/iran-s-revolution-in-global-history>

against the people and the working classes". As a result, the "revolutionary demands of the people and their organizations" were "ultimately crushed", with Islamist reactionaries firmly establishing themselves in power.

In order to crush the revolution, however, reactionary groups had to "expropriate some of the revolution's slogans regarding foreign policy", and especially the **anti-imperialist aspect**. The latter, however, was not adopted in its pure form, Fiyouzat stresses, and was instead "**dressed in right-wing garb** and exploited to excite the xenophobic (in this case, anti-western) sentiments of the lumpen classes [the "outcast", "degenerated", or criminal elements of society which were susceptible to counter-revolutionary manipulation²⁵⁸], who the reactionary forces needed as foot soldiers".

The counter-revolutionary nature of the regime, Fiyouzat affirms, was perfectly exemplified by its secret "negotiating for arms with Americans and Israelis and providing money to the CIA to be funneled to the Nicaraguan Contras", all while it hypocritically emitted "anti-American populist propaganda for the internal consumption of [its] loyal masses". Another example was how the government "kept intact the reactionary system of a rentier capitalist state" in Iran, without truly transforming the exploitative and oppressive socio-economic makeup of the nation.²⁵⁹

According to Danish historian Torben Hansen, who witnessed "the bloody battles between the Iranian left-wing groups and Khomeini's fascist street fighters" after the revolution, spoke about how, when he tried to arrive in Tehran, Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards were "busy cutting the throats of Azerbaijani separatists". Although there was initially a lot of hope and freedom of speech after the uprising, Hansen says, the Revolution was nonetheless "beginning to devour its own children". In March 1980, he asserts, the "Islamic Republican Party of Khomeini... won the election... by means of violence and electoral fraud", even though left-wingers could not see "any tangible connections between Khomeini and the religious fascists on the street who did not hesitate to beat, maim and kill people". He insists that "no one back then understood or expressed the idea [that] it was he who was primarily responsible for the street terror".

Khomeini had promised to bring "freedom, democracy and pluralism" to Iran, and these promises "even endeared him to some on the Iranian Left", together with the fact that he was a "humble man". Revolutionaries desperately wanted to end corruption in the country, and they believed Khomeini would contribute to achieving this aim. However, his "minority [soon] began to exert its power over the majority through systematic terror", just as had happened after the Stalinist takeover of the Russian Revolution. "Khomeini's followers", Hansen affirms, soon "smashed any opposition from the liberals to the Marxists and the Trotskyists". For him, "the embassy occupation" (1979-1981) was simply a smokescreen for this process, being "planned in detail" to satisfy the anti-imperialist sentiments of many revolutionaries at a time when the other hopes they had held were slowly being destroyed.

"Once imperialism was removed", Hansen says, the belief among many Iranian revolutionaries was that "capitalism would follow". According to actor Farshad Kholghi, "each day began with chants of death to the USA, Israel, the West and the Soviet Union". Many Iranian women who had previously lived abroad, meanwhile, "thought that women's liberation was also taking place in Iran and that oppression of women was the fault of capitalism" (and would therefore stop when imperialist influence had been pushed out of the country). Although "there were some nasty attacks on female demonstrators in the spring of 1980", Hansen and others believed that, while there would always be 'some mullahs around', "religion would soon be a thing of the past" and was therefore not

²⁵⁸ <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/l/u.htm>

²⁵⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/24/the-iran-us-tango/>

something to really worry about. Later in the year, however, he would witness Khomeini's supporters, the Hizbollah, attacking and severely injuring their opponents, shouting "there is only one party, God's party, and that is us, Hizbollah". In short, it was becoming clearer and clearer that neither socialist economic measures nor women's rights would be implemented under the revolution's new leaders.

Today, Hansen insists, **left-wingers should not cooperate with Islamists in the belief that "all evil is due to private property and capitalism"**. Khomeini, he says, "set an agenda" for political Islam, which was to weaken democracy, freedom, and secularism in Iran. The legacy of that strategy, he asserts, will not be shaken off "for many years" and, if the West continues to interfere in the politics and economies of the Middle East, the region's Islamists are only likely to grow stronger and stronger.²⁶⁰ In other words, such groups gained strength and consolidated their control over the Iranian Revolution precisely as a result of popular hatred for a USA that had interfered in Iranian politics for so many years (and had decided to support dictators like Saddam Hussein in its fight to undermine the Iranian Revolution). Western elites, taking measures they hoped would stop Khomeini's brand of anti-imperialist Islamism from spreading to other nations in the Middle East, were apparently ignorant to (or unconcerned about) the fact that even more Western interference would simply make matters worse by bolstering the position of Iran's new theocratic elite.

Like Hansen, Fiyouzat heavily criticises the voices on the Western left which have in recent years praised Iran as a progressive anti-imperialist power. By "stirring up hysteria... of "imminent military attacks" to be unleashed by the US against the Iranian regime", he says, they helped to throw "a thick cover over the internal oppressions committed against, and the rights denied [to], the Iranian people". In spite of this tension, he stresses, such an attack never came, and Iran's apologists on the left had failed to point out why the West had really been opposing Iran in the first place.

Western political elites, Fiyouzat asserts, had been threatening Iran because they claimed the country wanted to bomb the West and its allies with nuclear weapons (which were not being built). Social injustice and oppression in Iran, meanwhile, languished at the bottom of their list of priorities. In reality, argues Fiyouzat, the main problem for the West was that Iranian elites were fuelling the country's independence from Western capitalists. If the Islamist regime had favoured Western interests (like many oppressive states throughout the Middle East did), he stresses, it is very unlikely that any fuss would have been made.

Iranian socialists, Fiyouzat says, knew that "no such attacks would materialize", and insisted that the world focussed "more attention [on] the miseries and injustices meted out daily to the Iranian people not just by imperialist outsiders... but by the internal theocracy choking the Iranian people". For Fiyouzat, **this theocracy was "in fact the embodiment of imperialism in Iran"**, with the IMF (a "quintessential imperialist institution of record if ever there was one") consistently giving Iran "decent grades". Such truths reveal, he asserts, that "this regime is actually not disliked by imperialist powers".

There is a "long list of definitely eager corporations willing to stand in line to get to do business with this regime", Fiyouzat affirms, with "multinationals and international finance institutions" having seen "how effectively Iranian state has privatized state assets, and how much more privatizing can still happen". In other words, it is clear "how willing the regime is in sticking it to the poor", as can be seen by the "cutting of subsidies of all kinds, which actually started with Ahmadinejad's administration and [would continue] under the current administration of Rouhani". In fact, **the Iranian government "is prolific"**, Fiyouzat claims, **"at legislating... anti-labor laws"**, while providing companies with the "additional bonus of

²⁶⁰ <http://www.trykkefrihed.dk/khomeini-and-the-blindness-of-the-left.htm>

a robust legal system promoting anti-women, puritanically anti-communist, [and] anti-dissent... laws”.

An example of the regime’s oppression of dissent is the fact that, following “the millions-strong uprising of the Iranian people across the country after the sham elections of 2009”, senior clerics spoke of how “**the Iranian regime receives its legitimacy not from the people but from God**”. In other words, elections in Iran were “merely a way to find out whether or not the people [were] in line with God’s will”, much like elections in the West are simply a test of which type of capitalism voters want. If citizens were to express their “misalignment” with ‘God’s will’ too loudly, however, “as was the case in 2009, divine punishment [would be] meted out on a mass scale”.

In short, Iran’s theocracy ensures a similar kind of corrupt system to that run by capitalist or state capitalist (whether Stalinist or nationalist) regimes. And in such a system, citizens “who believe, or act like they believe that the ruling clerics are God’s representatives on earth get to have more rights than non-believers”, while “non-believers (or those caught pretending) can be and regularly are subjected to any number of violent punishments”. The crimes in Iran, Fiyouzat says, can “range from what somebody wears to what somebody thinks”. Nonetheless, these tangible issues were not the West’s priority, being covered (if at all) much more quietly than the issue of Iran’s non-existent nuclear weapons. Human rights issues, therefore, such as citizens receiving public lashings, public hangings, torture, or “what the security forces categorize as “corrective rape”, or threat thereof”, are effectively brushed under the carpet. This effective cover-up, Fiyouzat argues, is undertaken so that, if Iran chooses to open its arms to Western economic elites and tone down its foreign policy rhetoric, it can easily enter into the Western fold of exploitative and oppressive nations.

The Real Reason for Western Opposition to the Iranian Regime

The fact that the “US puppet regime” in post-2003 Iraq, which was criticised by “most anti-imperialist analysts”, was also “a most-favored government for the Iranian mullahs”, Fiyouzat says, requires much greater analysis. While apologists of the Iranian regime on the left describe “the reactionary nature of, say, the Saudi state (which it is)”, they do not apply the same language when talking about Iran (though the latter’s government is also reactionary). On the contrary, Fiyouzat stresses, some anti-imperialists actually praise “the progressive nature of the Iranian state (which it certainly is not)”. **Keen to provide a black-and-white view of global politics**, he asserts, **a number of so-called ‘anti-imperialists’ frequently portray US imperialism as the only enemy of the world’s working class, whilst almost invariably portraying any forces fighting against it as the ‘good guys’.**

For Fiyouzat, we need to ask ourselves why, if Western and Iranian elites share a number of interests, there has been such harsh Western rhetoric directed towards Iran. The answer, he says, can be seen in the fact that, “eleven years on” from the aggressive post-911 rhetoric surrounding the invasion Iraq”, the US and Iran can still “stand the sight of each other in Iraq”. Here, he argues, the USA showed very clearly that it was not committed to destroying oppressive sectarian rule, and simply wanted such a system to work for its own interests rather than against them. **The “real negotiation”, therefore, “between the western powers and Iran”, according to Fiyouzat, “is not... over the Iranian regime’s nuclear program” but “over the terms and conditions of the [Iranian] status quo” being “tolerated... in the region”.** In other words, the country’s “theocratic regime” could easily be considered “an acceptable part of that status quo”, but only as long as “the Iranian mullahs... adjust their manners accordingly”.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/24/the-iran-us-tango/>

In summary, the elites controlling Iranian society are a reactionary force, worried not about socio-economic justice or equality but about ensuring their own political hegemony. While they use anti-imperialist rhetoric and actions in an attempt to unite Iranians against an external enemy, their ideology poses no real danger to imperialism. In short, a truly progressive model for the Middle East cannot grow out of the current political system in Iran. At the same time, however, this reality does not make Iran any more reactionary than Saudi Arabia or other dictatorships in the region. In fact, if anything, the latter are much bigger threats to the achievement of a better future in the world. In the next two sections, I will analyse the way in which the conflict between the West, its Saudi allies, and 'revolutionary' Iran affected the Middle East (and the world) from 1979 onwards.

II) An Islamist Cold War

While Sunni scholars "historically differentiated between political leadership and religious scholarship", Shia ayatollahs were always considered by their followers as "the guardians of the faith". As a result, Ayatollah Khomeini began in 1979 to "implement his vision for an Islamic government ruled by the "guardianship of the jurist" (velayat-e faqih)". He went beyond the traditional scholarly view in Shiism, however, arguing that "clerics had to rule [politically] to properly perform their function". In doing so, he challenged the legitimacy of Sunni political regimes in the region, which remained separated from the religious establishment (even though in some cases, like Saudi Arabia, the latter had immense power). As a result, he gained enemies in a number of Sunni governments in the Middle East.

Furthermore, while Khomeini preached about Muslim unity in the world, he actually "supported groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bahrain, and Pakistan that had specific Shia agendas". Consequently, many Sunni Islamists rejected his leadership, "underscoring the depth of sectarian suspicions" that existed in the region at the time. These tensions, meanwhile, were not helped by the fact that Saudi Arabia had already been increasing the influence of Wahhabism in the Muslim World throughout the 1970s (preaching discrimination and anti-Shia hatred). Perhaps reacting to this Wahhabisation of militant Islamism, Iran became "an overtly Shia power after the Islamic revolution". In turn, Saudi Arabia began "to accelerate the propagation of Wahhabism", helping to revive "a centuries-old sectarian rivalry over the true interpretation of Islam".²⁶²

Western Support for the Saudi Side of the Islamist Cold War

According to The American Muslim, Wahhabism had been "pressed into service by the Saudis and the Americans" in order to "counter the influence" of the "fiercely anti-Western, anti-Saudi and anti-monarchical Islamic Revolution in Iran". As a result, the ideology's leaders immediately sought to convince Sunnis worldwide that the Revolution was nothing more than a "Shia plot", and that Shias were "non-Muslim apostates and 'enemies of Islam'". As shown in Sections B and C of this chapter, this Wahhabi campaign would see "all manner of right-wing Sunni Islamist movements and outfits in large parts of the world [receive] generous Saudi funding" after 1979.²⁶³

At the same time, Reza Fiyouzat insists, the Iran-Iraq War "could have ended" after "Iranian military and volunteer Basij forces had beaten back Iraq's military forces to the internationally recognized Iran-Iraq border" in 1982. Empowered by the momentum their forces had gained in the conflict, Iran's leaders had now "tapped into a perfect system of using the war as an excuse for crushing internal dissent of the social forces not willing to give up on the demands of the revolution". Like the Saudis, meanwhile, their regime also had an "expansionist nature...", with the Hezbollah militia forces just brought online in

²⁶² <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/>

²⁶³ http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/wahhabism_in_the_service_of_western_imperialism_the_politics_of_a_fatwa/

Lebanon". They were now beginning to react more than ever to the increasing Wahhabi influence on militant Islam, and believed that continuing the war with Iraq would be the "perfect vehicle for unifying the religiously oriented social forces". In short, they saw it as an opportunity "to expand [the] Iranian mullahs' theocracy to Iraq and beyond".

Khomeini even claimed prophetically that "the road to Jerusalem is paved through Najaf and Karbala" (Iraqi cities to the south of Baghdad which are two of the holiest sites in Shia Islam). The ultimate aim of the war, this comment suggested, was to free Palestine from Israeli occupation (a cause whose popularity no doubt attracted many thousands of Iranian citizens to the war effort). While it may have been popular among many citizens in the region to talk about attacking Israel, though, it was also rhetoric that would see Iran face heavy Western opposition. The USA, for example, could not be seen to allow its Zionist allies (so important to elite interests in the region) to be placed at risk. As a result, the superpower significantly stepped up its support for the Ba'athist regime in Iraq.²⁶⁴

While the USA and its allies supported Saddam Hussein in the war, Saudi Arabia suppressed Shia movements at home which were "inspired or backed by Iran". As it fuelled the spread of Wahhabism in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, it would also support both the Ba'athist regime and Sunni militants in their fight against Iran, thus significantly increasing its influence in the country.²⁶⁵ At the same time, however, Fiyouzat insists that blame for the extension of the Iran-Iraq War until 1988 cannot simply be placed on imperialist, Ba'athist, and Wahhabi forces. A significant amount, he argues, also needs to be placed on the Iranian regime, whose dogmatic zeal and "expansionist desires" at the time left little room for compromise. In other words, imperialist forces were not the only 'bad guys' in the Iran-Iraq War.

The Twenty-First Century, Shia Islamist Interests, and Imperialism

In the US-led assault on Iraq in 2003, the Shiite Badr brigades (who were opposed to Saddam Hussein's regime and had been "hosted by the Iranian government") would see themselves "involved in the initial land invasion". According to Fiyouzat, such participation suggests that "the US military high commands must have... coordinated with the Iranian military high commands to coordinate not shooting at each other" in these advances. While US-Iranian relations were still poor, the fact is that there was now a "**confluence of interests**" between the two countries regarding Iraq. Although Saddam's dictatorship was bad, says Fiyouzat, it "actually looked like progress" compared to the "Iranian clerical regime" of "medieval reactionaries".

Nonetheless, the Ba'athist regime had made the "reckless mistake of disobeying the rules" of the West by invading Kuwait in 1990, and had thus become public enemy number one in the region for the USA and its allies. As a result, it was suddenly viewed with much greater mistrust and hostility than Iran was. At the same time, Saddam's independence from both Western and Iranian models meant that "both [these] states had a long term interest in the destruction of [Ba'athist] Iraq, and its refashioning according to their own blueprints". The fact that, after the 2003 invasion, each power was "reasonably happy to live with... a fragmented weak state ruled by sectarian Shiite politicians" essentially showed the alignment of their interests in Iraq.²⁶⁶

Meanwhile, Iran's "regional influence" would swell, with Shia groups consolidating power in Iraq and Hezbollah proving itself as a competent "militia and political movement" in Lebanon (the latter had actually become the country's "strongest political actor" by the early

²⁶⁴ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/24/the-iran-us-tango/>

²⁶⁵ <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#!/>

²⁶⁶ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/24/the-iran-us-tango/>

twenty-first century). However, former Ba'athists were now beginning to use "Sunni rhetoric to mount a resistance to the rise of Shia power" in Iraq, and Sunni 'fundamentalists', no doubt funded by Saudi Arabia, were responding to these calls, flocking to Iraq and "attacking [both] coalition forces and many Shia civilians". Iran and its allies would not remain quiet, though. After absorbing "thousands of deaths", Shia Muslims in Iraq began "fighting back with their own sectarian militias" (which were supported by the Iranian regime).

In Syria, meanwhile, where the Alawi Shia minority governed over the Sunni majority, a proxy conflict was always going to be on the cards after the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, just as it was in Bahrain. As a result, anti-Ba'athist protests in Syria were soon exploited by Wahhabi powers in the region which sought to increase "sectarian tensions" and reduce Shia influence in the country. Inevitably, Syria soon became "the staging ground for a vicious proxy war between the region's major Sunni and Shia powers", while largely Shia Bahraini protesters were crushed mercilessly by the Saudi military, which had stepped in to defend the oppressive Sunni monarchy.

Events in Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere in the Muslim World after the Arab Spring served to amplify sectarian tensions "to unprecedented levels". According to the Council on Foreign Relations (a conservative US think tank), Syria's civil war was actually attracting "more militants from more countries than were involved in the conflicts in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia combined". In other words, **Syria was becoming even more of a breeding ground for Wahhabi-inspired extremism than the previous champions of chauvinist Islamism had been.** While "sectarian rhetoric dehumanizing the "other" [was] centuries old", the organisation insisted, its "volume [was now] increasing".

Effectively, the Islamist Cold War between Saudi Arabia and Iran was growing closer and closer to direct military conflict, fuelled significantly by increasing imperialist interference in the Muslim World after 9/11. In fact, May 2014 saw "leaders in Riyadh and Tehran... establish a dialogue for settling disputes diplomatically", showing clearly their "concern... about the consequences of [sectarian] escalation".²⁶⁷ In short, the power games of the two Islamist powers (egged on by imperialist interests) were now 'getting out of hand', and putting each nation's stability increasingly at risk. Nonetheless, what had truly set this collision course in motion had been the Iran-Iraq War, which was a watershed moment for the Islamist Cold War. I will look more closely at the impact this conflict had on Iran in particular in the following section of this chapter.

III) Ethnic Relations in Iran

Persians "comprise the largest ethnic group in Iran", representing around 61 per cent of the country's population, but they share their nation with a number of ethnic minority communities. The most sizeable groups are those of the Azeris and the Kurds, which represent 16 and 10 per cent of the population respectively. Smaller groups include the Lur (6 per cent), the Baluchi, Arabs, and Turkic tribes (each two per cent). While the vast majority of the country's population practise Shia Islam (89 per cent), and generally the 'Twelver Ja'fari School' of Shiism, "most Kurds, Turkmens, Baluch and some Arabs are Sunni". There are also over 300,000 members of the Baha'i religion, up to 35,000 Zoroastrians, and around 25,000 Jews in Iran. According to MinorityRights.org, though, most of these communities "tend to express their identity in ethnic terms" rather than religious ones.

²⁶⁷ <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/>

The Iranian Revolution was a massive political event, and was a clear demonstration of the desire of Iranian citizens to have a political system independent of Western imperialism. However, although it was originally a popular movement, its gradual takeover by authoritarian Shia Islamists meant that it did not bring about the comprehensive reforms that it had promised at first. Essentially, the previous order of ethnic Persian economic and political domination was left intact and, in this sub-section, I will look at how ethnic discrimination continued after Iran's 'revolution'.

Persian Nationalism and Discrimination

Gypsy communities, known as the Dom, have been in the region since "as early as the sixth century", but they are "among the most marginalized peoples of Iran: not counted in any official statistics". Often "deprived of employment and education because they lack identity cards", they are sometimes even "fenced off" in ghettos. According to Minority Rights, "many of the thousands of street children in Tehran are Dom". Afro-Iranians, meanwhile, whose families had been forcibly taken to work on plantations in the south-west of Iran since the seventeenth century, have not yet been recompensed for their forced removal from Africa, even though slavery was abolished in 1928.

Since the creation of Persia in the sixth century BC by the Achaemenids, there have been "alternating phases of political coherence and regional disintegration" in the country. MinorityRights.org insists, however, that "ethnic differences in Iran only began to acquire political importance... when the state had the means to enforce centralization" after Reza Khan's seizure of power in 1920. Khan, trying to create a strong state, made efforts to "forge the disparate peoples of Iran into a single nation", much like Atatürk would in Turkey at roughly the same time. He sought to initiate a "transition towards modernization and nationalism", and part of this strategy was to make Persian, a language spoken by only 45 per cent of the population, the country's official language. It would subsequently be used for "all administrative and educational purposes", and publication in other languages would be banned. Western clothing, meanwhile, was forced upon the population, and attempts were made to "settle nomadic pastoralists, by force where needed". These measures, according to Minority Rights, "created a sharp sense of difference among those peoples which did not belong to the dominant Persian community". When Khan's son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, took control of Iran, this differentiation would increase even further.

Since the 19th century, Iranian politics had been "heavily influenced by the French system of governance", with Persian students even being "sent to European universities to study". Amidst Pahlavi's "rush to industrialize and modernize" in his White Revolution of 1963, inequality between different ethnicities became increasingly apparent. While the level of urbanisation in the Persian-dominated Central Province had grown to over 80 per cent by 1976, that of "Kurdish and Baluchi regions, at opposite ends of the country, was less than 25 per cent". Statistics regarding literacy and electrification of homes, meanwhile, "followed similar proportions". The "non-Persian periphery" of Iran thus began to feel that "it was subsidizing the industrialized core", and this apparent "economic discrimination fueled community self-awareness" as a result.

In particular, Pahlavi's focus on the "pre-Islamic nature of the Iranian state" increasingly created a feeling of marginalisation among the country's population, which had held a "strong Shi'a tradition" since the Safavid dynasty adopted the religion in the sixteenth century. Essentially, the Western-backed monarchy had seriously "underestimated the ability of the Shi'a clergy to mobilize popular disapproval and dissatisfaction", which played a key role in the success of the Iranian Revolution.

Inequality Under the 'Islamic' Revolution

After 1979, "all ethnic minorities, except the Azeris, sought autonomy, hoping that Tehran would be unable to maintain its grip on the periphery". The country's new leaders, however, "feared that conceding autonomy to one community would lead to the disintegration of the state", so it cracked down on all of these localised movements. Ayatollah Khomeini, for example, claimed that "ethnic autonomy violated the universalism implicit in Islam", though in reality his "highly centralized government" simply hoped to enforce total political and cultural control over the country. All forms of autonomy were opposed and, when "some rebellions and attempts to claim autonomy" occurred in the "early revolutionary period", ethnic communities (and the Kurds in particular) soon "paid a heavy price".

The new 'Islamic' constitution barred all non-Shias from running for president, and defined Twelver Ja'fari Shiism as the official state religion. Female participation in politics, meanwhile, would suffer significantly, with questions soon being raised internationally regarding the "fairness and transparency of the vetting procedures". An example of this discrimination could be found in the 2013 elections, before which "all 30 female candidates running for presidential office... were disqualified".

Religious minorities such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians were "formally recognised" in the constitution, being "free to perform their religious rites and ceremonies, and to act according to their own canon in matters of personal affairs and religious education". However, the regime was "less tolerantly disposed towards Protestant evangelical churches, and has been vehemently hostile to the Bahá'í" community. In fact, "no recognition" was given to the latter, even though it was the "largest non-Muslim religious minority community" in Iran. According to one UN Special Rapporteur, the "persecution of Bahá'í was 'systematic', in terms of "family law provisions..., schooling, education, [and] security".

As in many nations, the sometimes progressive words of the Iranian constitution did not necessarily represent reality. Officially, "all people of Iran, whatever the ethnic group or tribe to which they belong, enjoy equal rights", and "colour, race, language and the like, do not bestow any privilege". On the ground, however, "discrimination on the basis of [both] religion and ethnicity [was] rife", with "minority languages [being] suppressed and many minorities [being] disadvantaged politically, socially and economically". Azeris, who live in the north-west of Iran, receive the "greatest acceptance" among the Persian-dominated regime, primarily because Ayatollah Khamenei is an ethnic Azeri, though they do experience some discrimination, as they are "denied education in their mother tongue".

At the same time, government attempts to stem Azeri nationalism have seen Azeris suffer both "linguistic and cultural discrimination", while the state's treatment of Kurds has depended significantly on "the latest encounter between Kurdish political activists and government forces" (though, on occasions, there would be a certain "tolerance of Kurdish expression"). Discrimination on religious grounds against evangelical Christians and Bahá'í, meanwhile, would be constant, with pre-Revolution intolerance and persecution remaining "largely intact".

With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad taking power after 2005, "official harassment of Sufis... increased", and the president "forcefully promoted the country's majority Persian and Shi'a Muslim identity" (demonstrating very clearly his brand of religious nationalism). In spite of the text of the Iranian Constitution, and the country's international commitments, there was a significant "crackdown on ethnic and religious minorities" in 2007, with "police repression, discrimination in education, and state media campaigns" all taking place. The

following year, Ban Ki-Moon also “highlighted the regime's abuses against women and minorities”. Meanwhile, after the president’s disputed re-election in 2009, the so-called ‘Green Revolution’ was “harshly suppressed”, with “dozens of deaths” occurring and “allegations of torture and sexual abuse” coming to light.

Suppression of Minority Groups

Iran’s Kurdish communities, mostly in the north-west but also in the north-east of Iran, felt a certain backlash as a result of the increasing autonomy of Kurds in neighbouring Iraq after the US-led invasion of 2003. Fearing “the establishment of a Kurdish state that would make claims on Iranian territory”, the Islamist regime embarked on campaigns of “regular repression”. Kurdish prisoners, for example, were prevented from contacting groups outside of Iran, and five were charged in 2012 for “‘contacting the office of the Special Rapporteur’ and ‘reporting prison news to human rights organisations’”.

Many Baluchis, meanwhile, who are Sunni Muslims found on the Iranian-Pakistani border, live in Iran’s “poorest region” – Sistan-Baluchistan. They experience the “highest rates of infant and child mortality as well as the lowest rates of life expectancy and literacy in Iran”. According to the UN, they are “subjected to systematic social, racial, religious, and economic discrimination”. They also suffer “linguistic discrimination”, with publications in their language being “banned by the state”, and are “denied equal representation within government”.

At the same time, government relations with Ahwazi Arabs in the Khuzestan region have been affected by the instability of neighbouring Iraq, but also by “high poverty rates”, an insufficient share of national oil revenues (the province produces 90% of Iran’s oil), and “discrimination on cultural-linguistic grounds”. With the regime seeking to expropriate land in the region (for “agricultural and other purposes”), local Arabs “experience forced evictions and expulsion from their ancestral lands”, while those belonging to the Sunni faith are “not allowed to practice their faith publicly, or construct a single Sunni mosque”.

The Baha’i, meanwhile, receive “some of the worst government abuse” (primarily because they believe “other prophets followed Muhammad”). Their religion is unrecognised, and they are “barred from public worship or contact with co-believers in other countries”. In 2008, seven Baha’i leaders were arrested, and they were sentenced two years later to “20 years in prison – the longest prison sentence for any prisoner of conscience in Iran”. Then, in 2011, the Iranian government “raided the homes of 30 Bahá’í administrators or educators of the Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) - an informal postsecondary-level educational institution created and developed... in 1987”. As Baha’i citizens were “systematically denied access to all universities and colleges throughout the country”, this institute was effectively the only “alternative higher education opportunity” they had.

Even ‘recognised’ religious communities would suffer “intimidation, arrest and detention”, though, with over 300 Christians being arrested between 2010 and 2014.²⁶⁸ In fact, in 2012, two “independent United Nations human rights experts” expressed “deep concern” about such detentions, condemning the “climate of fear in which many churches operate, especially protestant evangelical houses of worship”. One Christian convert, for example, “‘spent three years in prison apparently for practicing his religion,” a right guaranteed in Iran’s Constitution and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the country ratified in 1975”.

²⁶⁸ <http://www.minorityrights.org/5092/iran/iran-overview.html>

According to the UN experts, the “right to conversion” needed to be considered as “an inseparable part of freedom of religion or belief”. Nonetheless, the convert mentioned above was arrested in 2009 and “sentenced to death” the following year for “apostasy and evangelism”. The “guarantees of due process of law had [allegedly] not been properly applied”, though, and in 2012 “Iranian judicial authorities” reduced the charge, freeing the convert soon afterwards. For the experts, though, “at least 41 individuals [had been] detained for periods ranging from one month to over a year, sometimes without official charges” during Ahmadinejad’s second term in office. Churches, meanwhile, had reported “undue pressure to report membership, in what [appeared] to be an effort to pressure and sometimes even detain converts”.²⁶⁹

In summary, the theocratic state of Iran denies its minorities both linguistic and religious freedom – even when these groups are theoretically protected by the country’s constitution. Essentially, the ruling elite apparently believes that the best way to create religious and national unity is through intimidation and repression. At the same time, however, it is important to emphasise that there are many other states around the world that commit such crimes but do not face as much criticism as Iran does. In short, the reason for this lack of balance in the international community is that Western nations oppose the anti-imperialist aspect of the Islamic Revolution (which is perhaps one of the most positive aspects of the Iranian regime). The most negative aspect, meanwhile, as shown throughout this sub-section, is that the politicised brand of Shia Islamism which governs the nation is chauvinistic in character, both ethnically and religiously. Although criticism aimed at this elite is necessary, we must, at the same time, remember that Iranian discrimination against minorities is nowhere near as extreme as that of politically-charged Wahhabi groups.

IV) The Resistance of PJAK in Iran

In 2007, independent journalist Reese Erlich spoke at Democracy Now about how the “Kurdish people of Iran face a great deal of oppression”, how they are “not allowed to learn in their own language in the schools”, and how they are “a great deal poorer than the rest of Iran”. As a result, he says, they have “very legitimate grievances against the government in Tehran”. Due to state repression, however, many Kurdish dissidents have to operate and organise from Northern Iraq, where they form three main groups: the KDPI (the Democratic Kurdish Party of Iran); Komala (the Kurdish Communist Party); and PJAK. The first two, he asserts, are “long standing organizations” which “carry out political organizing” and “have Peshmurga guerrilla groups”. In the University of Sulamani, for example, each party has its supporters, who organise “house meetings and various kinds of political activities”.²⁷⁰ The final group, though, which has been perhaps the most active group in recent years, is the one I will focus on this sub-section of the chapter.

Iran’s Kurds and the Islamic Revolution

In 1980, journalist Miruk Siamand spoke of how “Iran’s five million Kurds [were] at war”, and how the country’s “Islamic regime [was] stifling them”. He says that Kurds there regard themselves “as Kurds first, Iranians second, and Moslems only a poor third”, which was not a good mix in an Iran increasingly emphasising the importance of citizens seeing themselves “as Moslems first, Moslems second, and Moslems third”. Kurds were clearly “culturally different” from the governing regime, though, and with God becoming a “highly political figure in the Middle East” in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Kurdish statement of ethnicity over religion was effectively a “political declaration”. In short, Kurds were saying that, “if Islam was going to be a veil for the destruction of Kurdish culture and nationality, the Kurds would rather have nothing to do with it”.

²⁶⁹ http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=42938#_VCBWXhaGcSF

²⁷⁰ http://www.democracynow.org/2007/3/27/report_u_s_sponsoring_kurdish_guerilla

Siamand argues that “the ruling Islamic clergy are no Persian chauvinists”, referring to how the last two shahs had tried “to assimilate the minorities by stifling their languages and belittling their separate heritage”. In fact, the mullahs’ nationalism “of a religious kind” was actually “aimed against Persia’s national identity”, focussing instead on a desire to create “a Moslem nation spreading from Morocco to Indonesia”. Seeking to weaken “all the symbols of Persian identity surviving from pre-Islamic times”, their nationalism was aimed at creating a homogenous Shia Muslim identity. As Azeris belonged “to the dominant Shi’ite sect of Iran”, many of them could “identify more easily with the [new] political and military hierarchy”, and thus didn’t rise up significantly against the new regime. The Kurds, however, did resist, perhaps because of their weaker focus on religious identity or their “remoteness from the centres of power in the Middle East”.

Foreign rule over Kurds had long been “nominal” before the twentieth century, with stories of “local heroes who fell resisting foreign invaders” filling Kurdish literature. When Iran’s shahs tried to exert control over Kurdish territories, the Kurds resisted, and they were not about to stop resisting when reactionary Islamists took power. So while Turkomans were largely “subdued after some ghastly atrocities committed by [the] Revolutionary Guards”, and Arabs saw “a considerable number of their guerrillas executed” in the early phase of the Revolution, the Kurds continued to fight (though they would have little success). Although other groups, like the “Baluchis and the Ghashghais”, were also “involved in minor clashes with Government forces”, none of the uprisings were enough to stop the revolution from “fast falling into the lap of the clerical hard-liners”.²⁷¹ In fact, “by 1983 the government had largely asserted its control over most of the Kurdish area” of Iran.²⁷²

The Founding of PJAK

In 1990, after “the execution of 17 Kurdish activists”, thousands of Kurds demonstrated “in seven Iranian towns and more than 500 [were] arrested”. As a response, rebel armed forces mounted a number of attacks against the government, some of which came from safe-havens in Iraq. In 1991, however, Iranian forces simply crossed over into Iraq to counterattack (a pattern which would continue throughout much of the early 1990s).²⁷³ With the gradual retreat of the traditional Kurdish resistance groups to Iraq, however, a space would open up for PJAK, as a new group, to gain support.

According to “founding members of PJAK”, the party “began in Iran around 1997 as an entirely peaceful student-based human rights movement”, which had been “inspired by the success of Iraq’s Kurdish autonomous region and by the PKK’s struggle in Turkey”. Its main aim was to “maintain and build a Kurdish national identity” in Iran, whilst trying to “thwart the Iranian government’s attempts to re-brand Iranian Kurds as ethnic Persians or Aryans”. In essence, it was an independent movement influenced by the nationalist and Marxist-Leninist groups operational elsewhere in Kurdistan.

Iran’s “imperial” past [had] resulted in ethnic Persians... holding disproportionate power, wealth and influence”, making the active resistance of disadvantaged populations inevitable. The country’s “neglected and often resentful Kurdish, Azeri and Arab minorities”, for example, had taken up arms against Tehran on a number of occasions. According to The Jamestown Foundation’s James Brandon, writing in 2006, these groups would be crucial for defeating the reactionary elites of the Islamic Revolution, and would “increasingly play a key role in global events”. With the emergence of PJAK, in particular, the idea of replacing “Iran’s theocratic government with a federal and democratic system,

²⁷¹ <http://newint.org/features/1980/09/01/kurds/>

²⁷² <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/kurdistan-iran.htm>

²⁷³ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/469f38a5c.html>

respectful of human rights, sexual equality and freedom of expression” was thrust into the political environment of Iranian Kurdistan.

In 1999, “after a series of government crackdowns against Kurdish activists and intellectuals”, **PJAK’s leadership was forced to move to “the safety of Iraqi Kurdistan”**. Settling in “the area controlled by the PKK on the slopes of Mount Qandil – less than 10 miles from the Iranian border”, they began “operating under the PKK’s security umbrella”, whilst not immediately becoming part of the same organisation.²⁷⁴ According to PJAK “founding member Akif Zagros”,²⁷⁵ who died in 2006 and had previously been a PKK member, “we formed a military force to protect ourselves..., protect our movement..., [and] avenge the blood of our martyrs”.

Soon, PJAK also “**adopted many of the political ideas and military strategies of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan**, whose theories had initially inspired PJAK’s founders while still in Iran”. The party thus transformed itself “from a civil rights movement to a more ambitious and multi-directional independence movement, aided by the transfer of many seasoned PKK fighters of Iranian origin into PJAK”.

Armed Protection of Political Activists

In response to the “heavy-handed” government crackdowns against Kurdish activists in Iran, in which “Iranian security forces fired on a Kurdish demonstration killing 10 people”, PJAK launched its “first armed attack” in 2004. The group’s origins as a non-violent movement remained, however, and are reflected in the fact that **the Iranian government “has never accused them of attacking civilians”**. Even when they “kidnapped groups of Iranian soldiers in 2003 and 2004”, the soldiers “were released unharmed after being tried and acquitted for crimes against the Kurdish people by ad hoc PJAK courts in Iranian Kurdistan”.²⁷⁶

When, in 2010, “a series of assassination attempts in the Iranian capital... resulted in the injuring and killing of several Iranian nuclear scientists”, PJAK leader Abdulrahman Haji Ahmadi insisted that PJAK had not been involved. The organisation, he asserted, was “not involved in this and does not know who is involved in this matter”.²⁷⁷ Essentially, the ultimate aim of PJAK’s attacks was not “to defeat Iran militarily, but instead to complement and protect PJAK’s political activists..., reinforce Kurdish national pride”, and to “explicitly avenge the death of Kurdish activists and civilians”. The movement also hoped to gain enough strength “deter any crackdown against Kurdish civil activists”, though the Iranian regime’s authoritarian approach and military might meant that such a prospect was always going to be unlikely.

PJAK soon employed “hit-and-run assault tactics against Iranian forces”, using “small arms and grenades” before melting “back into Iranian society or [re-crossing] the border into Iraqi Kurdistan”. Despite accusations (which will be analysed more at the end of the following section of this chapter), “there is no evidence of any foreign funding” for PJAK, and operations were believed to have been sponsored mostly by “Kurdish immigrant communities in Europe and Kurdish businessmen in Iran”.

In 2006, “a cycle of Kurdish demonstrations, Iranian repression and Kurdish counterattacks developed in Iranian Kurdistan” after ten demonstrators were “killed by police in the city of Maku”. According to Zagros, PJAK “responded with “three attacks against two [Iranian] bases”. In retaliation, Iranian troops “fired nearly 100 artillery shells at PJAK positions near

²⁷⁴ [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=805&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeI0smmXjd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=805&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeI0smmXjd)

²⁷⁵ <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-pkk-pjak-and-iran-implications-for-u.s.-turkish-relations>

²⁷⁶ [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=805&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeI0smmXjd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=805&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeI0smmXjd)

²⁷⁷ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/3/irankurd723.htm>

Mount Qandil and [even] briefly crossed the Iraqi border”, with the Iraqi Ministry of Defence claiming troops had “reached five kilometers into Iraqi territory before they withdrew”. Up to 10 PJAK fighters were killed in the cross-border attack, and a number of civilians were also affected, but the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq (along with its US allies) “barely responded”.²⁷⁸

The Increasing Legitimacy of PJAK Forces

Although PJAK took “responsibility for killing a number of Iranian border guards and soldiers” in the years running up to 2014, Vera Eccarius-Kelly insists that “Iran's brutality has provided PJAK with a level of legitimacy among younger Kurds”. As the only Kurdish group in Iran “still waging an armed struggle”, PJAK is an anomaly, she claims. Furthermore, while “Iran’s Kurdish regions remain among the country’s poorest and least developed”, the state has done little to improve Kurdish lives. As a result of the fact that they are “profoundly repressed” and have “few opportunities for political or cultural expression”, Eccarius-Kelly asserts, their desire for resistance is strong. The fact that “the Iranian regime tortures and executes Kurdish activists”, meanwhile, makes violent confrontation with the marginalised population even more likely.

A key element in the shift of popularity towards PJAK, however, is that “Kurdish-Iranian youth” became disappointed “with the traditional Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran and the Kurdish brand of the Iranian Communist party, Komala”. According to Jordi Tejel, from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, when the “traditional Kurdish parties... left Iranian territory in the 1980s to take refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan” (being “forced to renounce attacks against the Iranian military to avoid possible reprisals against Iraqi Kurdistan”), Iranian Kurds were effectively left to fend for themselves. For Tejel, this “created a vacuum that was filled by PJAK”.

PJAK’s Links to the PKK

Abdullah Öcalan’s arrest in 1999 saw the PKK hold a meeting, in which the party decided “to diversify in every Kurdish territory and to create new parties linked to the PKK”. As a result, the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party was created in Iraq in 2002, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in 2003, and PJAK in Iran in 2004 (though members of the latter had already been active for a number of years). While this move was welcomed by many civilians, some Iranian Kurds began to worry about PJAK’s actions encouraging Tehran’s belief that there was only a “military solution to ethnic challenges”. And these were not unfounded concerns, with Iran eventually deploying “5,000 soldiers in the northwest of the country along its common border with Iraq’s Kurdistan Region where PJAK operates”.²⁷⁹ At the same time, however, Ahmadi insisted in 2011 that PJAK was “prepared to negotiate with Iran”, and that “Kurdish issues [needed] to be solved through “peaceful means””.²⁸⁰ This stance was echoed in late 2013, when Öcalan reportedly said that “PJAK should try to resolve the Iranian Kurdish question through political negotiations with Tehran”.²⁸¹

When James Brandon wrote in 2006, the PKK and PJAK were still only allied groups, rather than parts of the same unified Kurdish movement. In his opinion, however, PJAK’s close relationship with the PKK had allowed it to gain “instant respect among the region’s Kurds”, along with the benefit of receiving “the PKK's military expertise”. Nonetheless, Iran claimed that PJAK attacks were simply “being carried out by the PKK”, in an attempt to sow confusion about the still independent nature of PJAK. At the same time, the Iranian regime “adopted the successful Turkish system of employing rural Kurds as “village guards” in an

²⁷⁸ [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=805&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeJ0smmXjd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=805&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeJ0smmXjd)

²⁷⁹ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/23012014>

²⁸⁰ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/8/irankurd771.htm>

²⁸¹ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/23012014>

attempt to force PJAK into fighting its own people". PJAK's urban focus, though, along with its "independent and non-state sources of funding and well-established underground network", effectively meant that Iran would inevitably "struggle to defeat either PJAK" or the values it advocated. According to Brandon, the Iranian regime's attempts to defeat PJAK would become even more futile as a result of the fact that the group had now become "self-reliant, flexible and open to compromise", focussing mainly on "reforming Iran's political system" and creating "a coalition of all democratic and Kurdish parties" in the country.²⁸² In short, it was no longer standing for a purely Kurdish cause, but for one that was also of interest to exploited and marginalised Iranians throughout the country.

As previously mentioned, PJAK was "formally institutionalized" in 2004, and five PKK affiliates, including Ahmadi, were selected "to serve as PJAK leaders". Essentially, though, the Iranian group remained independent in many ways from the PKK. In 2006, the two groups "shared many of the same facilities and resources", but their "precise relationship [was still] obscure". An Iranian attack on the Qandil Mountains in 2007 (which caused "massive material damage" and constituted a "full-scale war"), however, was a key factor in the increasing unity of PJAK and PKK frameworks that would follow a year later.²⁸³

In 2008, PJAK finally came under greater PKK control, though there was not always complete harmony between the two organisations. One armed wing of PJAK, for example, called "the East Kurdistan Defense Forces", was found to have been "acting independently in Iran". The high command of the PKK, however, allegedly "intervened and recalled them to northern Iraq". Meanwhile, the unity of the two groups pushed the USA into placing PJAK on its 'terrorism' list, freezing "any assets the PJAK [had] under U.S. jurisdiction" and prohibiting "American citizens from doing business with the organization".²⁸⁴

PJAK's Aims and Solidarity with Other Repressed Ethnic Groups

With the USA designating PJAK as "a terrorist organization" in early 2009, "along with other militant groups targeting Iran" (such as Baluchi militant group Jundallah), the superpower was apparently making a "diplomatic gesture to Iran amid the backchannel talks between Washington and Tehran".²⁸⁵ Although PJAK and Jundallah had "no connection whatsoever", according to Ahmadi, the existence of the latter was a logical consequence of the oppression suffered by minority groups in Iran. "Until the Baluchi people achieve their right of self-determination, and while injustice and oppression is still being imposed on [them]", stressed Ahmadi, they "will support Jundallah, and Jundallah will retain its strength". This particular statement was in reference to the capture and execution of Jundallah founder and leader, Abdolmalek Rigi, in 2010, and showed that PJAK sympathised with other minority groups fighting for their rights in Iran.

In 2011, Ahmadi said (in the context of the Arab Spring) that "the Iranian government will not fall just by the Kurdish people revolting... but, if all the nations in Iran start a revolution together, then they will be able to bring the Iranian government down". Accusing Iran of "trying to undermine the prosperity and stability of the Kurds in the south of Kurdistan [Iraqi Kurdistan] by every means possible", he also insisted that the KRG itself had "an important responsibility to make sure it [stayed] free from any unwanted meddling by other countries or powers". His talk of 'nations' here suggested that his ideology still included a certain element of nationalism, and his apparent belief in the capacity of the ruling nationalists in the KRG for change is also of some concern (if his group's followers were to correctly form an objective political consciousness).

²⁸² [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=805&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeI0smmXjd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=805&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeI0smmXjd)

²⁸³ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pjak.htm>

²⁸⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/04/idUSN04297671>

²⁸⁵ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-factors-behind-rebellion-in-iranian-kurdistan>

Speaking about the possibility of peaceful activism in Iran, meanwhile, Ahmadi claimed that the fight of the PKK in Turkey was different from that of the PJAK in Iran, principally because the two countries had “two totally different systems”. While Turkey, he said, “is a semi-democratic country” where “it is not impossible to have dialogue and correspondence”, Iran “is a totalitarian dictatorship”, where such actions are “virtually impossible”. In other words, the fight of PJAK was essentially destined for the time being to be an underground movement persecuted by the state.²⁸⁶

Nonetheless, the system pursued in the twenty-first century by PJAK was (just like that pursued by the PKK) a “democratic and highly federalized system which would effectively grant self-rule not only to Kurds, but also to Azeri, Baloch and Arab regions” of Iran. At the same time, though, many PJAK members were still said to hope in private “for the amalgamation of all Kurdish areas into a single fully independent Kurdish republic”. The official party line on military operations, meanwhile, was that they were “merely complementing [the organisation’s] wider effort to build a new Kurdish national identity among the four million Kurds who make up seven percent of Iran’s population”. The approximately “3,000 troops based in northern Iraq”, therefore, would only be called into action at points when Kurdish communities in Iran faced particular repression. The party’s main struggle, Brandon asserts, is that of “tens of thousands of activists working inside Iran to promote a Kurdish identity, democracy and women’s rights”. As such, PJAK is effectively one of the main left-wing resistance groups in Iran fighting against the reactionary Islamist regime.

According to the head of the women’s branch of PJAK (Yerjerika (YJRK)), who was previously a PKK member, “45 percent of PJAK are women” and “the daughters of our movement play a part in all our operations”. In short, PJAK (much like the PKK and others within the progressive Kurdish movement) sees “women’s freedom as a core part of a Kurdish identity”, and points to “the relative equality enjoyed by Kurdish women historically”. At the same time, it also draws inspiration from the “Cold War socialist revolutions, Iran’s own 1979 revolution” (before it was hijacked by reactionaries), and “the experiences of Iraqi and Turkish Kurds”. For Zagros, “the first stage” of PJAK’s revolution was “to spread our ideas amongst the people”, and the second was “to organize people underground in schools, universities and in civil society”.²⁸⁷ Essentially, therefore, PJAK’s main objective was educate and mobilise people in Iranian Kurdistan, in order to eventually create a freer, fairer, and more democratic society.

Ultimately, I believe that, whilst imperfect, the ideas advocated by PJAK in Iran are those that are most likely to improve the political and economic system of the country. Change may seem far away for Iranian citizens, but through education and unified mobilisation, exploited and oppressed Iranians will gradually be able to forge a better future at a grassroots level and thus defeat the reactionary and authoritarian elites currently running society. From Chapter Nine onwards, I will look in much greater detail at the actions and ideas of PJAK’s allies in Turkey (the PKK) and Syria (the PYD), who are also fighting against the odds to democratise and bring justice to their respective communities.

E) Western Support for Ba’athist Iraq in its Fight against Iran

As seen in Chapter Three of this essay, the Iran-Iraq War was an extremely important moment in the recent history of the Middle East. Whilst revealing the West’s hypocrisy regarding its previous criticism of Iraq’s Ba’athist regime, the conflict also had a profound impact on the nature of the Iranian Revolution. By supporting Saddam Hussein in the conflict, Western governments had helped to engrain anti-imperialist thought in the minds

²⁸⁶ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/3/irankurd723.htm>

²⁸⁷ [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=805&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeJ0smmXjd](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=805&tx_ttnews[backPid]=181&no_cache=1#.VGeJ0smmXjd)

of Iranian citizens, whilst also cementing the strong-handed rule of their Shia Islamist political leaders.

With the rise to prominence of Ayatollah Khomeini and his anti-imperialist rhetoric (and the fall of the Shah), the West had lost a key ally in the region. Iraq's 1980 attack on Iran, therefore, was seen by governments in the West as a blessing in disguise, which could have helped to return the previous pro-Western regime to power. In short, they now believed they had a chance to destabilise Iran's 'revolutionary' regime. As a result, their "relations with Iraq warmed throughout the war" (even in spite of the fact that "Iraq's principal arms source was [initially] its long-time ally the USSR"). Several Western nations, "including Britain, France, and the US", soon "supplied weapons or military equipment to Iraq", and American agencies in particular "shared intelligence with Saddam Hussein's regime". In other words, the conflict became a proxy conflict, in which almost everyone wanted Iran to lose.

I) From 'Terrorist' Nation to Key Western Ally

Iraq No Longer on the American 'Black-List'

As seen in Section B, the USA's list of nations supporting terrorism has long been primarily a political tool to punish countries exerting certain independence from Western economic domination. Beginning in December 1979, the list initially included Libya (until 2006), South Yemen (until 1990), and Syria (until the present day [2015]), and it soon added Cuba (from 1982 to the present day), North Korea (from 1988 to 2008), and Sudan (1993-present). Iraq, having been on the list since the start, was taken off in 1982 as a sign that the USA wanted to cooperate with Saddam in his war against Iran (though his country would be conveniently returned to the list between 1990 and 2004, after its military efforts no longer coincided with the interests of US elites).²⁸⁸

However, Saddam's removal from the list ignored the fact that he still "continued to play host to alleged terrorists", showing that the move was purely political.²⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Iran was placed on the list in 1984 (where it remains today), in the same year that US diplomatic relations with Ba'athist Iraq ("severed since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war") were finally re-established.²⁹⁰ Essentially, therefore, 1984 marked a key turning point in the USA's strategy in the Middle East, showing that Iraq was now considered a friend and Iran was now an established enemy.

According to Michael Dobbs, writing at the Washington Post in 2003, then "private citizen" Donald Rumsfeld was "instrumental in tilting U.S. policy toward Baghdad" in the early 1980s, attending a 1983 meeting as a "special presidential envoy" (at which he "paved the way for [the] normalization of U.S.-Iraqi relations"). Subsequently, there would be "large-scale intelligence sharing, supply of cluster bombs through a Chilean front company, and [a] facilitating [of] Iraq's acquisition of chemical and biological precursors". This strategy, Dobbs says, was followed principally to **prevent "the fall of pro-American states such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and even Jordan"**, which could have occurred if Saddam's forces had not been strengthened in their fight against the 'anti-imperialist' regime of Iran.

The USA's Commitment to Ba'athist Iraq

Although Iraq was not an ideal partner for the USA, supporting it was considered to be necessary in order to stop the deterioration of Western influence in the region in its tracks.

²⁸⁸ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/western_support.stm

²⁸⁹ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

²⁹⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/western_support.stm

The Ba'athist armed forces, therefore, were routinely referred to by US diplomats as “the good guys,” in contrast to the Iranians, who were depicted as “the bad guys” . In reality, “nobody in Washington [had been] disposed to intervene” at the start of the conflict, believing that, “as long as the two countries fought their way to a stalemate”, Western elites had nothing to worry about. Iranian victories, however, soon forced the USA to take a more active interest in the conflict.

By 1982, “Iraq was on the defensive, and Iranian troops had advanced to within a few miles of Basra, Iraq's second largest city” . Now, Western elites worried that further such breakthroughs could lead to the destabilisation of Kuwait, other Gulf States, and even Saudi Arabia – thus threatening US oil supplies. In the end, therefore, it was whatever ensured the flow of oil (and capital) that determined how much the West would intervene in the war, with the US government committing itself in the ‘National Security Decision Directive 114’ of November 1983 to doing “whatever was necessary and legal” to prevent Iraq from losing the war.

This ‘necessary’ action would involve ignoring Iraq’s use of outlawed chemical weapons (or ‘CW’) in their “attempts to hold back the Iranians” (a fact that “ranked relatively low on the scale of administration priorities”). Although “intelligence reports showed that Iraqi troops were resorting to “almost daily use of CW” against the Iranians”, the Reagan regime had already committed to supporting Iraq and was not planning on turning back. As usual, then, **the USA would only discuss human rights issues if it wanted to look better in front of its own citizens, while doing its utmost to hide the scale of the horrors it actually supported.** Donald Rumsfeld, in fact, would later claim that he had “cautioned” Saddam about the use of chemical weapons in a meeting when, in fact, “declassified State Department notes of his 90-minute meeting with the Iraqi leader” showed no mention of such a comment. It would subsequently turn out that he had only mentioned the issue “largely in passing” to Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz as “one of several matters that “inhibited” U.S. efforts to assist Iraq”.²⁹¹

The USSR’s Relationship with Ba’athist Iraq

The Soviet Union’s relationship with Iraq had begun under Qasim, as described in Chapter Three, and arms transfers simply continued after the Ba’ath Party took control. In fact, trade “increased [even further] after the signing of the Soviet-Iraqi Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972”, a year in which the USA and its allies became increasingly worried about the direction the Iraqi Ba’athists were taking. The latter's relationship with the USSR, however, “became strained in the late 1970s”, when the Ba’athist regime claimed to have discovered “an Iraqi communist party plot to overthrow the leadership” (in what was essentially a purge of one of the Ba’athists’ key partners in government). Soviet support for “Ethiopian attempts to suppress the Iraqi-supported Eritrean insurgency”, meanwhile, also got in the way of previously ‘constructive’ relations between the two countries.²⁹²

At the same time, the Soviet Union was split over what to do regarding the increased militarisation of Iraq under the Ba’ath Party. In fact, when it was approached about the sale of “a plant to manufacture chemical weapons”, it refused the request. Consequently, however, Iraq began “courting the West”, where it “received a much more favourable response”, with the American Pfaulder Corporation supplying the Ba’athists “with a blueprint in 1975, enabling them to construct their first chemical warfare plant”. Having now begun to bypass Soviet support, and undertake a rapprochement with the West, the Iraqi regime now began to purchase the plant “in sections from Italy, West Germany and

²⁹¹ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

²⁹² http://www.mongabay.com/history/soviet_union/soviet_union-iran_and_iraq.html

East Germany”, assembling them all at Akhashat, in north-western Iraq.²⁹³ The USSR, meanwhile, was becoming increasingly aware that it was losing a valuable partner in the Middle East.

In the “mid- to late 1960s”, Ba’athist ambitions of reuniting Iraq with Iranian and Kuwaiti territories led the Shah of Iran to sign “arms agreements with the Soviet Union” and preserve “cordial relations” with the superpower, even though he maintained his country’s membership of the CENTO (the anti-communist Baghdad Pact). After Ayatollah Khomeini’s return to Iran in 1979, the USSR tried to convince him that they shared a common enemy, and even “made overtures to Iran” after the Iranian Revolution. “Efforts to improve relations with Khomeini failed”, however, and Moscow would see its allies in Iran increasingly persecuted by the new Islamist regime.

When Saddam Hussein took control of Iraq in 1979, he continued to “acquire Soviet arms and military equipment in exchange for oil”. Meanwhile, the USSR’s failed advances towards Iran led it to do its best to salvage its lucrative trade deals with Baghdad, choosing not to throw away its cooperation with Iraq in the hope that the new Iranian regime would become more responsive. The Soviet-Iraqi relationship, however, was primarily economic, and was based significantly on the fact that the pre-existent ‘Treaty of Friendship’ committed the USSR to supporting Iraq. In order to demonstrate to other Arab and Third World nations that it was dedicated to supporting its friends, therefore, the superpower was essentially forced to stand by Ba’athist Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War.

In summary, there were considerable tensions between Iraq and the USSR in the late 1970s, with Saddam Hussein condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Soviet Union temporarily halting arms shipments to Iraq when it invaded Iran in 1980 (thus forcing Iraq even further into the private arms market).²⁹⁴ Although bilateral relations were restored in 1982, this was principally a result of practical concerns, such as the fact that the superpower’s “main... goal in the region was [still] to minimize the influence of the United States” and its allies.²⁹⁵ With Moscow realising that it was being replaced by Western companies as Iraq’s main arms supplier, it tried hard to bring Iraq back into its political sphere of influence by reinitiating the arms trade. In spite of the competition between international powers for Iraqi business, Saddam was not interested in following the politics of either the USSR or the USA. Essentially, he would be bolstered by the support of both Cold War superpowers (which sought to defeat the independent Islamist reactionaries of Iran), but was at the same time opposed to both of them.

The West’s Sale of Arms to Saddam

In 1975, the US government “approved the... sale by the Karkar Corporation of San Francisco of a complete mobile telephone system” to Iraq, which would be “used by the Ba’ath Party loyalists to protect the regime against any attempts to overthrow it”. During the Iran-Iraq War, meanwhile, it “supplied Saddam with satellite pictures of Iranian positions”, as France sent him “extended-range Super Etendard aircraft” and “Mirage-1 aircraft”. At the same time, British company Plessey Electronics “supplied Saddam with an electronic command center”, with Westland sending him “Gazelle and Lynx helicopters”. In short, there were a large number of Western arms sales to Iraq between the mid-seventies and 1991.

In 1976, Jacques Chirac approved a deal in which Saddam bought a uranium reactor, promising a “transfer of expertise and personnel”.²⁹⁶ (Note here that, in 1981, one French

²⁹³ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/040.html>

²⁹⁴ http://www.mongabay.com/history/soviet_union/soviet_union-iran_and_iraq.html

²⁹⁵ <http://countrystudies.us/russia/88.htm>

²⁹⁶ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/040.html>

nuclear reactor in Iraq “was destroyed in an air raid by the Israelis”, who were taking advantage of the Iran-Iraq War to target a weakened Iraq.²⁹⁷) Fiat subsidiary Snia Technit, meanwhile, would send “nuclear laboratories and equipment” from Italy. During the war, Western governments generally “supplied Saddam through the pro-West countries of Jordan and Egypt”, mostly in order to “overcome Congressional, parliamentary and press hurdles”, though it was “obvious to military experts that Jordan and Egypt had no use for the weapons in question”. Saddam nonetheless managed to “set up his own weapons buying offices in the West”, though, such as ‘Matrix Churchill’ in Britain, all “with the knowledge of the host governments”. In short, the freedom of arms manufacturers had trumped the interests of human rights that Western regimes talked so much about.

Another Western technique employed to arm Saddam was the provision of “massive credits” to his regime, which could then be used “for military purposes”. The Banco di Lavoro in the USA, for example, gave him “US\$4 billion worth of credits”, which were subsequently “diverted to buy weapons with the knowledge of everyone involved”. In Britain, meanwhile, the “Export Credit Guarantee department kept increasing his credit”, and “much of the money went to the direct purchase of arms”. At the same time, the French government “guaranteed US\$6 billion worth of loans to French arms makers” so they could sell Saddam whatever he needed.²⁹⁸

In order to get Western citizens on board with support for Ba’athist Iraq, US Secretary of State Alexander Haig told the Senate foreign relations committee in 1981 that “Iraq was concerned by “the behaviour of Soviet imperialism in the Middle Eastern region””. Such comments, coming amidst the decades-long hysteria generated by irrational Cold War rhetoric, were always going to get ignorant and fearful civilians on side. The reality of the matter, meanwhile, was that the Soviet government “had refused to deliver arms to Iraq as long as Baghdad continued its military offensive against Iran”, and was “unhappy with Hussein’s vicious repression of the Iraqi Communist Party”.²⁹⁹ In other words, there was very little to do with Soviet imperialism going on in Iraq.

II) Western Support for Saddam’s War Crimes

Defeating Iran’s “Human Wave” with Chemical Weapons

By 1982, the Iranians had “held the [initial] advance” by Iraqi armed forces, and “were striking back with human wave attacks”.³⁰⁰ Iran had now “succeeded in driving Iraqi forces from its territory” and, in June, its paramilitary volunteer militia the Basij (or the ‘Organization for the Mobilisation of the Oppressed’) officially “went on the offensive”.³⁰¹ The militia, consisting “mainly [of] children and youth”, was “sent to clear minefields or to serve as cannon fodder in mass attacks against Iraqi lines”, and thousands of them died as a result.³⁰² Indoctrinated by ideas of martyrdom and patriotism, these youngsters effectively committed suicide, but they also played a key role in pushing back Iraqi forces and giving Iran the upper hand in the conflict.

Previously happy to remain neutral in the war, the USA and its “conservative Arab allies” now “scrambled to stem Iraq’s military setbacks” and Iran’s advances. Through “its allies in the Middle East, Washington funnelled huge supplies of arms to Iraq”, with “covert transfers... to Baghdad in 1982-83” coming from “Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait”. There was also a “conscious effort to encourage third countries to ship US arms or acquiesce

²⁹⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3324053.stm

²⁹⁸ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/040.html>

²⁹⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

³⁰⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3324053.stm

³⁰¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

³⁰² <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/1594.htm>

in shipments”, with President Reagan allegedly asking Italy’s Prime Minister “to channel arms to Iraq” in 1983.³⁰³

Iraq was known, by 1983, “to have used chemical weapons to stop” the human wave attacks mentioned above. A US State Department memo at the same time, however, suggests that Donald Rumsfeld (like other key US political figures) was unconcerned about such a strategy, telling “Saddam that the US and Iraq shared interests in preventing Iranian and Syrian expansion” and in “stopping Iranian oil exports”.³⁰⁴ While Rumsfeld was in Baghdad in 1984, meanwhile, UN experts reported that “mustard gas laced with a nerve agent [had] been used on Iranian soldiers”. In fact, even “US intelligence officials had “what they [believed] to be incontrovertible evidence that Iraq [had] used nerve gas in its war with Iran and [had] almost finished extensive sites for mass producing the lethal chemical warfare agent””.

Nonetheless, US officials were “satisfied with relations between Iraq and the US”, and “officially restored diplomatic relations” later in 1984. In short, they were not only ignoring Saddam’s war crimes, but were allowing the CIA to “secretly supply Iraq with intelligence... that was used to “calibrate” [such] mustard gas attacks on Iranian troops”. At the same time, in what was a gargantuan act of hypocrisy and insincerity, “senior officials of the Reagan administration publicly condemned Iraq’s employment of mustard gas, sarin, VX and other poisonous agents”, though their regime “never withdrew [its] support for the highly classified program” to aid Saddam. Just like with the World War Two attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the ends were apparently considered to justify the means for US economic and political elites.

Overt Western Support for Iraq

With bilateral relations re-established, Saddam “was now eligible for US economic and military aid, and was able to purchase advanced US technology that could also be used for military purposes”. Saddam’s “US-endorsed military spending spree”, however, was said to have begun “even before Iraq was delisted as a terrorist state”. At the same time, the Ba’athist regime was protected in a number of other ways. To stop Iraqi revolts, for example, which could occur due to “the food shortages caused by the massive diversion of hard currency for the purchase of weapons and ammunition”, the USA gave Saddam massive food loans, for which “the US taxpayers would have to cough up” the necessary cash if it turned out he could not repay them within three years,. In 1983, “US\$402 million in agriculture department loan guarantees for Iraq were approved” and, by 1988, this figure had reached \$1.1 billion. In fact, around “\$2 billion in bad loans, plus interest, ended up having to be covered by US taxpayers” by the end of the 1980s. In other words, the war had helped to line the pockets of both US farmers and the banking sector while the US people, in much need of public services, had to pay for something that did not benefit them at all.

Between 1985 and 1990, meanwhile, “the US government approved 771 licenses [only 39 were rejected] for the export to Iraq of \$1.5 billion worth of biological agents and high-tech equipment with military application”. These exports included “70 shipments of the anthrax bug and other pathogenic agents..., plans for chemical and biological warfare facilities and chemical warhead filling equipment”. In fact, the “commerce department often did not submit exports to Hussein’s Iraq for review”, or simply “approved them despite objections from other government departments”. German firms “even sold Iraq entire factories capable of mass-producing poison gas”, paid for mostly “with funds freed by the US CCC credits”.

³⁰³ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

³⁰⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3324053.stm

In 1989, FBI agents uncovered a “massive fraud involving the CCC loan guarantee scheme and billions-of-dollars-worth of unauthorised “off-the-books” loans to Iraq”.³⁰⁵

At the same time, Saddam was feeling untouchable thanks to all of the support he was receiving, building for himself the image of a war hero whilst in reality committing **US-bankrolled war crimes**. To make matters worse, the Western-fuelled accentuation of the negative aspects of Saddam’s character occurred at a time when the lives of ordinary Iraqis, Iranians, and Americans were getting worse. In short, the only people to really benefit from the war and the arms trade surrounding it were Ba’athist elites in Iraq and economic elites in the West.

According to Michael Dobbs, “U.S. intelligence and logistical support played a crucial role in shoring up Iraqi defenses against the “human wave” attacks” of Iran. In the process, both Presidents Reagan and Bush “authorized the sale to Iraq of numerous items that had both military and civilian applications, including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological viruses, such as anthrax and bubonic plague”. At the same time, Iraq’s “charg d’affaires” in Washington, Nizar Hamdoon, would soon be recognised as “one of the most skilful lobbyists in town”, amidst his “diplomatic charm offensive-cum-arms buying spree”. He was “particularly effective”, Dobbs quotes Middle East specialist Geoffrey Kemp as saying, “with the American Jewish community”, which had become more and more worried about the anti-Zionist rhetoric of Iran’s Islamist elites. Essentially, donors were convinced by Hamdoon that an “Iranian victory over Iraq would result in “Israel becoming a victim along with the Arabs””.

While German and British companies sold weaponry to the Iraqi Ba’athists, the USA gave them “military intelligence and advice”, along with “cluster bombs” through Chilean company Cardoen which “could be used to disrupt the Iranian human wave attacks”. The USA tried to avoid selling weapons to Iraq, but it did export ““ dual use” items such as chemical precursors and steel tubes that [could] have military and civilian applications”. It also sought to “cut off supplies to Iran” with ‘Operation Staunch’, in which it encouraged other nations to stop sending arms to the country.

In a 1994 Senate investigation, it was revealed that “dozens of biological agents [had been] shipped to Iraq during the mid-’80s under license from the Commerce Department, including various strains of anthrax, subsequently identified by the Pentagon as a key component of the Iraqi biological warfare program”. The department had also “approved the export of insecticides to Iraq, despite widespread suspicions that they were being used for chemical warfare”. In fact, “an Iraqi military spokesman effectively acknowledged their use” in 1984, saying “the [Iranian] invaders should know that for every harmful insect, there is an insecticide capable of annihilating it... and Iraq possesses this annihilation insecticide”.³⁰⁶ Such dehumanisation of Iranians was clearly acceptable to the USA, though, as the superpower continued to provide support for Ba’athist Iraq in spite of such horrific comments.

The Iran-Contra Scandal

When the Iran-Contra scandal broke in late 1986, it became clear that the USA had been helping to extend the war, in an attempt to prevent Saddam’s forces from becoming too strong and to weaken the Iranian regime through extended warfare. The covert sale of arms to Iran, “in the hope of securing the release of hostages held in Lebanon”, inevitably “caused friction between the US and Baghdad”.³⁰⁷ The proceeds of the sales, meanwhile, had been

³⁰⁵ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

³⁰⁶ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

³⁰⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/western_support.stm

“secretly funding the Nicaraguan Contras”, a “murderous militia funded, armed, and trained by the United States with the express purpose of destabilising Nicaragua”.³⁰⁸

Like the Iranian Revolution, the Nicaraguan Revolution was a great worry for the US regime, and was much closer to home. Knowing that, as a result of its support for Iraq, giving arms to Iran would be unlikely to have a significantly negative impact on Western interests in the war, the Reagan Administration felt no shame about the top-secret deal. After all, the prolongation of the war and human suffering was not an important issue for the US regime, which was concerned primarily with getting hostages released and funding right-wing counterrevolutionaries in Central America and elsewhere.

As seen in Chapter Three of this essay, the Iran-Iraq War only really came to an end after the two countries “turned their military power on commercial oil tankers in the Gulf”, something considered unacceptable by the oil-dependent governments of the West. US, British and French warships were consequently sent to the region, with the tanker war seeing US warships destroy “a number of Iranian oil platforms” and shoot down “an Iranian airbus carrying 290 civilians”.³⁰⁹ There would still be time, however, for yet more war crimes to take place.

Halabja

Towards the end of 1987, “the Iraqi air force began using chemical agents against Kurdish resistance forces in northern Iraq that had formed a loose alliance with Iran”, all as part of a ““scorched earth” strategy to eliminate rebel-controlled villages”. Although the tactic provoked harsh rhetoric from the USA, the Reagan regime was not outraged enough to do “anything that might seriously damage relations with Baghdad”. In fact, Assistant Secretary of State Richard W. Murphy wrote in a 1988 memorandum that “the U.S.-Iraqi relationship is... important to our long-term political and economic objectives” (i.e. continued economic and political domination in the Middle East). “Economic sanctions”, he said, would “be useless or counterproductive to influence the Iraqis”.³¹⁰

The above argument may have helped members of the government to sleep at night, but it did not stop them from imposing such sanctions on a number of other nations at the same time (and soon even on Iraq). Such hypocrisy showed very clearly that sanctions were only imposed when the economic elites of the USA could benefit from debilitating a regime or when there was no significant incentive not to do so. As was the case of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, however, the interests of these elites (in defeating Iran) lay with Ba’athist Iraq, so the (justifiable) argument that sanctions were useless and counterproductive was employed.

In 1988, “US-supplied choppers” were allegedly used in a “chemical attack on the Kurdish village of Halabja, which killed 5000 people”.³¹¹ In the wake of the attack, the “Reagan Administration tried to prevent criticism of the atrocity”, and the US regime “provided diplomatic cover by initially blaming Iran for the attack”.³¹² In fact, four months later, “the US giant Bechtel corporation” even won a contract “to build a huge petrochemical plant that would give the Hussein regime the capacity to generate [even more] chemical weapons”. Meanwhile, when the US Senate “passed the Prevention of Genocide Act, which would have imposed sanctions on the Hussein regime”, the Reagan Administration “announced its opposition to the bill”, stalling it in the House of Representatives and eventually refusing to implement it.³¹³

³⁰⁸ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/a-marxist-history-of-the-world/16699-the-nicaraguan-revolution>

³⁰⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/02/iraq_events/html/western_support.stm

³¹⁰ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

³¹¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

³¹² <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/040.html>

³¹³ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

Support for Saddam Right up to His Invasion of Kuwait

Later on, President Bush “authorised new loans” for Saddam, saying an alliance with Iraq would increase US exports and “put us in a better position to deal with Iraq regarding its human rights record”. The latter comment was clearly disingenuous, however, as the US Department of Commerce actually “licensed the export of biological materials – including a range of pathogenic agents – as well as plans for chemical and biological warfare production facilities and chemical-warhead filling equipment – to Iraq until December 1989, 20 months after the Halabja atrocity”.³¹⁴ In fact, the USA’s support for Iraq was so profound that, when UN weapons inspectors entered into Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, “they compiled long lists of chemicals, missile components, and computers from American suppliers..., which were being used for military purposes”.³¹⁵

In 1989, Bush signed “the top-secret National Security Decision 26”, which declared that the USA “should pursue, and seek to facilitate, opportunities for US firms to participate in the reconstruction of the Iraqi economy”. The following year, officials were “pushing to deliver the second instalment of the \$1 billion in loan guarantees, despite... evidence that Iraq had used the aid illegally to help finance a secret arms procurement network to obtain technology for its nuclear weapons and ballistic-missile program”. In fact, only on the same day that Saddam entered Kuwait “did the agriculture department officially suspend the [CCC loan] guarantees to Iraq”.³¹⁶

US air force intelligence officer Rick Francona, who “toured the Al Faw [Fao] peninsula in southern Iraq in the summer of 1988”, reported on how there had been signs of “widespread use of Iraqi nerve gas” in the process of recapturing the area. “The battlefield”, he insisted, “was littered with atropine injectors used by panicky Iranian troops as an antidote against Iraqi nerve gas attacks”. Essentially, this was just one of many pieces of evidence showing that the Iraqis had “continued to use chemical weapons against the Iranians until the end of the Iran-Iraq war”. Nonetheless, the “supply of U.S. military intelligence to Iraq actually expanded in 1988” and, although “U.S. export controls to Iraq were tightened up in the late 1980s, there were still many loopholes”.

In December 1988, for example, “Dow Chemical sold \$1.5 million of pesticides to Iraq” and, even “a week before the Iraqi attack on Kuwait” in 1990, Iraq was assured that President Bush “wanted better and deeper relations”. Joe Wilson, deputy US ambassador to Baghdad at the time, says that “everybody in the Arab world told us that the best way to deal with Saddam was to develop a set of economic and commercial relationships that would have the effect of moderating his behaviour”. If US elites really believed this was the correct approach, however, we must ask ourselves why it was not seen as the best way to deal with Iran (or any other authoritarian nation). In short, the answer is that **strategy was always determined by the interests of the West’s economic elites, rather than by any other consideration.**³¹⁷

III) From Hero to Villain

Iraq Dropped as a Strategic Ally

With Iran devastated after almost eight years of conflict, there was soon a “mellowing of the Iranian revolution”. Combined with Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, this change in

³¹⁴ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/040.html>

³¹⁵ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

³¹⁶ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

³¹⁷ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

Iran was the cue for the West to drop its strategic ally.³¹⁸ After the Kuwait invasion, even sympathetic voices like Fidel Castro insisted that Saddam Hussein had “got caught up in a chain of thought that led to a serious crisis”. The Cuban leader supported the UN’s condemnation of the attack, and advised Saddam to enter into negotiations, telling him that “Washington [would] deal a strong blow to Iraq” and “seek to consolidate its self-appointed role as international and Gulf gendarme”.

Castro also emphasised that “a clear Iraqi position” might “help prevent and frustrate the United States’... interventionist plans”, but Saddam carried on regardless, with his actions lacking both “a sound political justification and the support of the international community”. In other words, he had created “ideal conditions... for the hegemonic and aggressive plans of the United States”, according to Castro. The UN was “practically unanimous in its opposition to the methods used” by Saddam in Kuwait, and even the ‘Non-Aligned’ nations, which had previously sympathised with Saddam, were now becoming increasingly aware of his irrational behaviour.³¹⁹

The resulting Gulf War was seen to be necessary in the eyes of Western elites, because the replacement of compliant allies in oil-rich Kuwait with the unpredictable Saddam could simply not be allowed. Also, as a buffer nation between Western ally Saudi Arabia and Western enemy Iran, Kuwait was a guarantee that there would be no head-on military conflict between the two Islamist powers. In short, having an unreliable leader like Saddam in charge of Kuwait would have reduced this ‘stability’, whilst moving Kuwaiti oil away from pro-Western hands.

The Collapse of the Soviet Union

Throughout the Cold War, the Middle East had been a battlefield, over which both the West and the USSR sought influence. In fact, one of the only long-term Western allies that, at the same time, had maintained positive relations with the USSR was Turkey, which had received “extensive economic assistance” from both the Soviets and the Americans since its creation in 1923. As part of its rapprochement with the USA in the late 1980s, however, the Soviet Union began to seek “closer relations” with typically pro-Western allies like Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

In 1987, for example, the USSR “established consular relations with Israel”, and “protected Kuwaiti shipping in the Persian Gulf against Iranian attack”. Influence with its old allies Libya, Iraq, and the PLO, meanwhile, started to decrease. The dilapidated superpower even “supported the United States-led international effort to reverse Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait” in 1991. Nonetheless, it would subsequently be “marginalized by United States dominance in the region” in the wake of the conflict, becoming an increasingly insignificant player there.

The “independence of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics”, meanwhile, “put a geographical barrier between Russia and the states of the Middle East”. Additionally, some Russian democrats and ultranationalists claimed that “the Soviet Union’s involvement with Islamic states such as Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics had drained resources and harmed Russia’s economic and political development and stability”. They thus argued that Russia should seek to avoid confrontations or dealings with Islamic nations. Nonetheless, Moscow soon had to deal with “Islamic elements of a coalition government in Tajikistan” (which it suspected Iran would support) and, not long afterwards, would have to respond to the same situation in Azerbaijan. At the same time, however, relations between

³¹⁸ <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/51/052.html>

³¹⁹ <http://mltoday.com/the-letters-to-saddam-hussein>

Iran and Russia actually improved, with the former using “its relations with Russia to counteract United States-led international economic and political ostracism”.

The “prospect of arms sales and other trade” with nations formerly outside the Soviet sphere of influence was a “major factor” that influenced Russian policy in the 1990s. For example, the country approached “Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states in November 1994”, and “signed a trade agreement with Egypt” the following month. It also “moved to reestablish its earlier lucrative arms sales ties with Iran”, while “Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Algeria also made arms purchases in the early 1990s”, along with Egypt and Syria. Meanwhile, in spite of figures not matching those of previous decades, Russia “continued to observe international bans on arms sales to Libya and Iraq”.

The reduction in business in the Muslim World, however, may have been influenced significantly by the “poor performance of Russian equipment during the Persian Gulf War”, and the negative image that “Russia’s aggression against Chechen Muslims and its stance favoring Serbia against Muslim Bosnia” had caused. The latter, however, while a sign that Russian elites were looking after their own interests, was also (consciously or not) a refusal to enter into the Western game of backing Wahhabi extremists. In fact, it had backed Arab-Israeli peace talks in 1992 precisely “as a means of reducing the threat of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism”.

Soon, Russia’s “contracts to build nuclear power plants and to share nuclear technology with Iran” would become “a major international issue”, with Russia beginning to form part of a non-Western trade bloc. In an attempt to avoid alienating itself from other global powers, however, the Russian government insisted that “international law permitted such deals and that the reactors would be under full safeguards of the International Atomic Energy Agency”. In 1996, though, Russia’s membership of the new alternative power bloc and its anti-Zionist credentials were consolidated when the state condemned “Israeli attacks against militant Arab Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon”.³²⁰

In other words, while the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, Moscow was still pursuing an ‘unconventional’ (by Western standards) foreign policy, and was still supporting forces that made Western elites feel uneasy. The post-1991 attempts to weaken the allies and influence of Russia, therefore, may well be considered as Western attempts to ensure that a force as powerful as the Soviet Union could not arise again.

Ba’athist Iraq Becomes the USA’s Number One Enemy

Norm Dixon at Counterpunch reminded readers in 2004 that the Reagan Administration had “covertly provided “critical battle planning assistance”” to Saddam Hussein whilst helping his regime to “develop its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs”. It was therefore “extreme cynicism and hypocrisy of President George Bush II’s administration”, he insists, to cite “terrible atrocities... which were disregarded [during the Iran-Iraq War] by Washington” in order to “justify a massive new war against the people of Iraq”.

According to Dixon, the same “politicians and ruling class pundits who demanded war against Hussein” in 2003, like Donald Rumsfeld, had previously sought to “cultivate, promote and excuse” him. Even right-wing New York Times columnist William Safire had said in 1992 that there had been a shameful, “systematic abuse of power” by Western leaders in their quest to secretly finance the arms build-up” of Saddam.³²¹

³²⁰ <http://countrystudies.us/russia/88.htm>

³²¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2004/06/17/how-reagan-armed-saddam-with-chemical-weapons/>

After the ousting of Saddam in 2003, the BBC's Paul Reynolds reminded readers that "a trial of Saddam Hussein" would act as a "forum to remind the world that he once had his supporters outside Iraq", and that such a trial would not be beneficial to the USA. Reynolds argues that Saddam could have played "to the gallery of Arab opinion" by raising the question of why the West "once supplied him with technical, military and diplomatic muscle" but now vilified him. And here is where a final summary of the relationship between Iraq and the outside world is necessary.

France had been a "major supplier" to Iraq (perhaps a reason for the country's critical perspective in the run-up to the 2003 US-led invasion). In fact, during the 1980s, "40% of France's arms exports went to Iraq". Saddam still "owed billions of dollars" to Russia, meanwhile, for the arms he had purchased from the Soviet Union. The "United States, Britain, West Germany and Italy", meanwhile, had "also helped Iraq with equipment and expertise, both civilian and military, and with finance".

States like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which "saw revolutionary Iran as a threat", also "poured money into Baghdad" during the Iran-Iraq War, all with the diplomatic support of the USA, which "had been humiliated by the seizure of its embassy and the holding of its staff as hostages for more than a year" in Iran after the Revolution. Only when Kuwait itself (as part of the pro-Western authoritarian bloc in the Middle East) was attacked, however, did the strategic alliance between the West and Iraq have to be broken. While Saddam and the Iraqi Ba'athists had temporarily represented the interests of Western elites, it was clear now that they had never been fully under the control of the latter. For this reason, their arguments against sanctions on Iraq were contradicted by arguments in favour. As seen in Chapter Three, this shift in imperialist strategy weakened the Ba'athist regime, led ultimately to the US-led invasion of 2003, and sowed the seeds for the sectarian chaos which would engulf Iraq in the following years.³²² At the same time, however, we must remember that continued Western support for Wahhabi Saudi Arabia (and other dictatorships in the region), along with attempts to undermine the more independent Shia Islamism, also bore a lion's share of blame for the deterioration of post-2003 Iraq (and the Middle East as a whole).

IV) New Ways of Undermining Iranian Elites

As seen briefly in Chapter Four, there is "a wide spectrum of ideas, opinions, political ideology, and perspective amongst the Kurds of Iran and all Kurdish peoples". Partly for that reason, the USA sought to prevent "a genuinely democratic government taking power in Iraq" (which it feared may have happened "if Saddam Hussein were to be removed from power prematurely after the Gulf War in 1991"), whilst reinitiating support for bourgeois nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan. The superpower thus looked away when Saddam repressed popular rebellions in Iraq in 1991 (as described in Chapter Three), while at the same time assuring that Kurdish nationalists, who appeared to be more compliant than both Iranian Islamists and Arab nationalists, would gradually take control of northern Iraq (or 'South Kurdistan'). When the civil war between the KDP and PUK ended in 1998, and each nationalist party took control of the north-west and south-east of Iraqi Kurdistan respectively, the new, more cordial relationship between them facilitated their alliance with the USA in the run up to the 2003 invasion (which subsequently helped them to ensure the de jure autonomy of Kurdish territory).

Although the most active Kurdish group in Iran at the same time (PJAK) was more socialist than nationalist (making them less appealing to the USA and its allies), there were soon accounts of US (and even Israeli) support for the group in its resistance against the

³²² http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3324053.stm

oppressive Iranian regime. In this sub-section, I will take a look at the accounts of such support in greater detail, thus expanding on the information given about PJAK in Section D of this chapter.

Alleged US Support for PJAK

In 2006, Global Research reported on journalist Seymour Hersh's claim that "clandestine activities" by the United States and Israel had been staged in Iran "for half a year already". In particular, Hersh had asserted that the "cross-border forays into Iran" by the Party for Free Life (PJAK) had been sponsored by the USA, as "part of an effort to explore alternative means of applying pressure on Iran".³²³ According to Hersh, "Israel and the United States [had] been working together in support of [PJAK]", with a "government consultant" apparently having informed him that Israel was "giving the Kurdish group 'equipment and training'", along with "a list of targets inside Iran of interest to the U.S.". American "combat troops operating in Iran", meanwhile, were apparently "working with minority groups in Iran... and giving away walking-around money to ethnic tribes, and recruiting scouts from local tribes and shepherds". In 2007, PJAK leader Abdulrahman Haji Ahmadi even "traveled to Washington... seeking financial and military support for his militia".³²⁴

Ahmadi, who was "based in Germany", was arrested in 2010 by German police, but was quickly released. According to Siena College's Vera Eccarius-Kelly, it was "obvious that he would never be sent" to Iran, given that he was "a German citizen and would face execution" if he was sent back to his home country. Eccarius-Kelly also suggests that "there may have been a deal between the German/European and US intelligence bureaucracies regarding PJAK and its activities inside Iran". While PJAK's ideology is theoretically opposed to imperialism, the USA has long proven itself to be prepared to support small resistance groups with ideologies not in line with those of US elites as long as they are fighting a larger power that refuses to submit to US hegemony.

The leader of PJAK, meanwhile, according to journalist Manuel Martorell, was "unlike the inflexible leaders of the PKK", and was pragmatically prepared to receive support from any world power as long as it was not asked to compromise on its political ideals.³²⁵ As suggested earlier in this chapter, Iran could easily stop Western support for resistance groups if it toned down its rhetoric and allowed the tentacles of US imperialism to enter into the country. As long as it refuses to do so, however, it is likely that the USA will support all groups, whatever their ideologies, which weaken the Iranian state.

According to former PKK and PJAK member Behrouz Tahmasbi, "the formation of PJAK... was about a political agreement between the PKK and the United States". After the CIA-backed arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, the PKK "could not face the US and take up arms". Therefore, "in order to reduce the pressure of the US", the group formed PJAK, "which was intended to fight against Iran". Former PKK leader Osman Öcalan, meanwhile, asserts that "the US ... gave the militant group its full support and prevented the government of Iraqi Kurdistan [from acting] against them" (as long as PKK-related groups acted against US enemies Iran and Syria and not against the KRG and Turkey).

Former CIA operative Robert Baer, meanwhile, told Spiegel that "I understand that the US provides intelligence to PJAK", though difficult relations with Iran (and Turkey's war with the PKK) meant both the CIA and PJAK had always kept relations "hidden, informal and even denied". Apparently, however, one leaked cable suggested that Turkish forces had "managed to take a film from one of PJAK and PKK's camps in the Qandil mountains where

³²³ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-exploits-kurdish-elements-against-iran/3940>

³²⁴ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pjak.htm>

³²⁵ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iran/23012014>

a number of US soldiers are handing [militants] food and ammunition". Another, from a meeting of KRG and US representatives in Iraq, saw the Kurdish official criticise the USA's "double standard" after the US official had asked the KRG to crack down on the PKK. The Kurd apparently reminded the American "of the US support of PJAK".³²⁶

In 2007, Reese Erlich insisted that, "on the one hand, the United States is very much opposed to the P.K.K.'s actions in Turkey", but on the other it supports attacks by PKK-related groups on Iran. This is a "very dangerous game", he says, though "typical of the clandestine efforts by the United States" throughout history. Speaking a year before the increasing of joint command structures between the PKK and PJAK, he asserted that there was, "at a minimum", very clear coordination between the two groups (if not total unity). Israel, he insists, was also "backing various Kurdish groups", with "Israeli security officials training the guards at the Arabial Airport in northern Iraq" and "training... special anti-terrorism squads" in the KRG. However, there was no proof of Israeli support for PJAK.

Referring to a BBC documentary that had "interviewed... former Israeli intelligence agents who [were] now allegedly working as private contractors" for the Kurdish nationalist government in the KRG, Erlich emphasises that Israeli cooperation with Kurdish nationalists was almost a certainty. At the same time, he cautiously claims "I think they're working with PJAK [too], although this is all denied by PJAK". The long term goal for Israel, he argues, is clearly to support the creation of an independent Kurdistan in Iraq controlled by Kurdish nationalists, which would provide a foothold "against the Sunni and the Shia... Arab parts of Iraq..., as well as the other neighboring Arab countries".³²⁷ In other words, Erlich essentially makes it clear that the presence of PJAK and other 'progressive' Kurdish groups in such an independent Kurdish state would not be in the interests of Israel, as these groups would be much more likely to criticise Zionism and cooperate with their neighbours.

The End of an Alleged Alliance

After years of suspected support, the USA officially branded PJAK as a 'terrorist organisation' in 2009, showing that it had either been influenced by the diplomatic pressure of its local allies, or that it wanted to make it clear that it did not openly support PJAK. The US government claimed it was "exposing PJAK's ...ties to the PKK and supporting Turkey's efforts" against the progressive Kurdish movement. This action could have come in the context of Turkey sending "thousands of troops over the border [into Iraq] to end the [PKK] incursions" in 2008,³²⁸ but could also have been the result of the fact that, "as of April 2008, PKK/KGK leadership controlled PJAK and allocated personnel to the group".³²⁹ In short, this explicit link between the two groups now meant that the façade of keeping the PKK on the terrorism list could not be kept up if an allied group was supported by the USA. In this case, either the PKK would have had to be delisted (which was not going to happen due to Turkey's membership of NATO) or that PJAK would have had to be placed on the list.

In summary, there may have been a temporary strategic alliance between the USA and PJAK, but it was never an ideological one. In the Middle East, the strongest forces are generally reactionaries (whether authoritarian Western puppets, semi-independent nationalists, or totalitarian Islamists), and left-wing forces (thanks to the USA's efforts in the Cold War) are a fairly weak minority. As described in the introduction to this chapter, however, these groups may all be supported by the realpolitik-driven USA, depending on elite interests at any given time. Such support, though, does mean that the ideology of the United States was ever in complete alignment with that of Saddam Hussein, with that of the Afghani mujahedeen, or (if the claims outlined in this section are true) with that of PJAK.

³²⁶ <http://www.habilian.ir/en/201305071774/Articles/pjak-uss-illegitimate-child-in-the-region.html>

³²⁷ http://www.democracynow.org/2007/3/27/report_us_sponsoring_kurdish_guerilla

³²⁸ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/02/04/idUSN04297671>

³²⁹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pjak.htm>

As could be expected, the USA and Israel long “denied supporting PJAK”, though WikiLeaks nonetheless revealed Israel’s “desire to spark a revolution” in Iran. Mossad chief Meir Dagan apparently claimed in 2007 that Israel “wanted to use Kurds and ethnic minorities to topple the Iranian government”, though the fact that Israel had the ‘desire’ to do so is not at all proof that it actually managed to fulfil that desire.³³⁰ PJAK, meanwhile, also “denied reports that its operations in and against Iran [have been] supported by Israel”. In fact, Ahmedi has insisted that “there [has been] an alliance between the U.S., Turkey and Iran to fight [against] the Kurdish rebels”. While US drones have given “surveillance information about Kurdish hide-outs” to Turkey (which would then be shared with Iran), he says, KRG President Barzani has asked the PKK and PJAK to leave Iraq in order to take away Iran and Turkey’s excuses for bombing the KRG.

The anti-PJAK alliance that Ahmedi spoke about was exemplified on a number of occasions, but one poignant example came in 2011. In that year, “more than 200 Iraqi Kurdish families” were forced “from their homes” by Iranian shelling but, instead of criticising Iran, Barzani’s nationalists actually sought to side with Iran and against the PKK and PJAK. In other words, even amidst Human Rights Watch claims that “Iran may have deliberately targeted civilians in its offensive against the rebels”, the KRG actually sided with the reactionary regime of Iran against the progressive (and fellow Kurdish) forces of the PKK and PJAK.³³¹

In short, US elites and their allies are prepared to support anyone whose interests coincide with their own (however temporarily). Not all of these forces are the same, however. Saudi Arabia has arguably caused a lot more damage to the lives of working people in the Muslim World than Ba’athist Iraq ever did. The latter, meanwhile, was perhaps responsible for more horrific crimes than the Iranian regime ever committed, while these were almost certainly to blame for more destruction than Kurdish nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan were. In turn, the likes of Barzani’s KDP have done more to damage the cause of justice in Kurdish territory than the PKK and its allies ever could.

If we consider the above scale carefully, the latter can easily be perceived as the most progressive forces in the Middle East. The fact that Iran at a certain point posed more of a threat to US elites than PJAK (and possibly justified a strategic alliance with the latter), therefore, does not necessarily take away the progressive characteristics of the group. Fundamentally, we should judge organisations on their actions rather than on who they may have received support from at any given time. Iraq’s Ba’athist regime, for example, was not reactionary because it received support from the West, but because it ensured the Iraqi people had no truly democratic voice (while brutally repressing those who fought for change). Iran’s Islamist system, meanwhile, was not reactionary because it received arms from the USA in the Iran-Contra Scandal, but because it suppressed the voice of hope and justice after 1979 (while sending children off to die in a suicidal and eventually pointless counter-offensive into Iraqi territory). The PJAK, which may or may not have received limited support from the USA at some point in time, has not committed such crimes, and judgement should therefore be withheld until a time when their actions display their true character.

F) Israeli Occupation and the Rise of Religious Anti-Zionism

The West’s support for Zionist occupation and colonialism in Palestine, and for Ba’athist crimes in the horrific Iran-Iraq War, made it so much easier for Iran’s Islamist leaders to claim that the fight against secular nationalism, Western imperialism, and Zionism was essentially the same struggle. The USSR had not helped matters either, with its own support

³³⁰ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2010/12/irankurd689.htm>

³³¹ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/10/irankurd802.htm>

for Iraq and intrusive presence in Afghanistan having shown that it was also happy to prop up unsavoury (if in some ways 'progressive') secular regimes.

Because the authoritarian bureaucratisation offered by the Soviet Union was rapidly becoming an unattractive alternative to the status quo, Islamism took the place of 'communism' (or the 'state capitalism' that was referred to as such) in the struggle against nationalism, imperialism, and Zionism in the Middle East. The reactionary ideology (which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Seven) was now perceived by many citizens in the region as a genuine replacement for the socio-economic system that had dominated politics for decades.

As shown in my essay on Israel's 2014 invasion of Gaza³³², Zionism and imperialism do indeed have an intimate relationship, though their methods and rhetoric may differ at times. Secular nationalism, however, was often opposed to both Zionism and imperialism, and could hardly be called a puppet of either (even when it temporarily acted in their interests). Soviet-style communists, meanwhile, had rarely been allowed enough time in government to show the progressive characteristics that actually lay behind their authoritarian exterior. Nonetheless, the propaganda of Shia Islamists in Iran did not distinguish between its secular and religious enemies. They were all therefore portrayed as aggressive forces seeking to attack the very essence of Iranian society (and destroy the supposedly 'organic' Islamisation of the 1979 Revolution). By extension, all of them had to be resisted.

Nevertheless, groups supported or influenced by Iran's Shia Islamists in the Muslim World did not necessarily represent the same intolerant and anti-democratic ideology often advocated by Iranian leaders. Hezbollah in Lebanon is an example of how Iranian-inspired Shia Islamism outside Iran has been able to adapt its views in order to gain support in a multicultural and semi-democratic society. In this section of the chapter, I will look at the reasons why Hezbollah became such an important power in Lebanese politics, and why it should not be considered as a puppet of Iran's ayatollahs.

I) Who Performed Terrorist Acts, and Who Did Not?

Why Hezbollah is on the 'Terrorism' List

While Iranian armed forces became the frontline fighters in the Shia Islamist resistance against imperialist-backed Iraq in the 1980s, other fronts soon opened up. When imperialist-backed Israeli forces began to invade Lebanese territory in 1978, for example Iranian-inspired Islamist groups began to spring up in Lebanon. In 1999, the USA would eventually place the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militias of the country on its terrorism list (under Zionist recommendation). However, Franklin Lamb, writing at Counterpunch in 2007, asserted that there was "considerable doubt among international lawyers [about] whether Hezbollah should ever have been classified as a terrorist organization".

The main reason for the above classification could be traced back to the simple fact that "a plurality (39%) of the organizations on the US Terrorism list represent Muslim groups recommended for inclusion by, among others, AIPAC [the American Israel Public Affairs Committee] and their friends in Congress". In other words, the Zionist lobby in the USA has long ensured that the majority of enemies of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land are treated like terrorists (whether that claim is justified or not). If any doubt remains as to the influence of powerful Zionists over US foreign policy in the Middle East, we should refer to former AIPAC Director of Congressional Relations, Steve Rosen, who once claimed that "AIPAC owns the 'T' list!"

³³² <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

Back in Lebanon, Hezbollah's classification by the USA as a terrorist group "limits the group's ability to raise funds and travel internationally", although "China, Russia, and member states of the European Union and the United Nations have refused US/Israeli demands to label Hezbollah a terrorist organization at all". The UK and Australia, meanwhile, "distinguish between Hezbollah's security and political wings". According to Lamb, however, the US State Department's definition of terror is "a broad one", described as "the deliberate and systematic murder, maiming and menacing of the innocent to inspire fear for political ends". Under this definition, the actions of Israel and many other US allies could easily be characterised as those of a terrorist force if the political will existed (which, of course, it doesn't).

In short, any group using violence to pursue its objectives could be referred to as terrorists according to the USA (a country which, if we followed its own definition, would no doubt be on its own terror list). The "political goal or ends" are not considered by the definition, so even "laudable ones such as national liberation or resistance to occupation" are ignored at the moment of defining the nature of a group. By this logic (or lack thereof), the Reagan Administration's claims that the mujahedeen in Afghanistan or the Nicaraguan Contras were 'freedom fighters' would have simply been ignored, and the USA would have had to put itself on its list of state sponsors of terror (which would clearly have been counterproductive to the interests of US elites).

Israeli Propaganda and Hypocrisy

In 2001, Hezbollah was actually removed from the terrorism list very briefly, as a result of the group's "strong condemnation of the 9/11 attack on America". In fact, it had been "one of the first to condemn the 9/11 operation" and other terrorist attacks as "crimes against Islam". Nonetheless, it would be quickly returned to the list after Dick Cheney claimed, without any evidence, that a "presumed Hezbollah operative" [had] *probably* met with an Al Qaeda representative". This quick about-turn, for Lamb, was clearly a representation of "Israeli-sponsored propaganda", and even Lebanese President Emil Lahoud insisted that "the media campaign, which is conducted by Israeli circles, seeks to exploit the September 11 attacks to slander the Lebanese resistance by stigmatizing it with the image of terrorism".

As a result of Lahoud's stance, Lebanon "continues to reject US/Israeli demands that [the government] freeze Hezbollah's bank accounts and force it stop providing social services". In fact, a "study undertaken at the American University of Beirut", relying on "research and surveys from a variety of international and Israeli human rights organizations", backed up this defiant position, asserting that "no fewer than 6,672 acts of Israeli state terrorism [had been] directed against Lebanon and Palestine between the years 1967-2007". In short, there was more than sufficient cause to reject Israel's hypocritical demands that Hezbollah (as a force of resistance against Zionist crimes) be shunned while the world maintained relations with the criminal Israeli regime. US elites, however, in the pocket of Zionist lobbyists as they were, did not put Israel on their terrorism list, and instead actually allowed the country's leaders to "determine who [would be placed] on it".

While Israel and the USA have accused Hezbollah of "a type of Islamist Terrorism similar to Al Qaeda", however, they have recognised that the group exists within a "context of National Liberation, just like Hamas". Lamb goes further, though, arguing that both Hezbollah and Hamas ("unlike al Qaeda, their enemy") should be considered to be "complex social and political movements". Al Qaeda, for example, tends to use suicide attacks, but the aforementioned resistance movements primarily "use different types of force, including guerrilla tactics which are legitimate under international law". At the same time, the Wahhabi group was said to be waging a "'global struggle' against the United States

with undefined objectives”, while the main aim of Hamas and Hezbollah was simply to “liberate Palestine and Lebanon” from Israeli occupation.

The Chaotic Early 1980s in Lebanon

One of the principal American arguments aimed at justifying Hezbollah’s inclusion on the terrorism list was that the group had allegedly been “involved in the attacks against Americans” in Lebanon in the 1980s. These assertions, however, are “consistently denied” by Hezbollah, whose foundation in 1985 came “years after the first attacks”. In 1982, for example, when Israel invaded Lebanon and “quickly routed much of the PLO resistance” there, “more than 30 local resistance groups formed” (some of them inspired by the Iranian Revolution). Taking advantage of “available political and physical training” from Iran’s new government, and receiving some arms “from the soon to depart PLO” in exchange for money or as gifts, these groups soon grew in power, seeking to “drive Israel and its foreign sponsors from Lebanon”. The fact that there was “no single force, power or obstacle [that] stood in their way”, meanwhile, facilitated their rise to prominence, and also resulted in a lack of coordination and the failure of any one group to dominate. It was even perfectly normal at the time for ‘operations’ to be “carried out by part of a group without the knowledge, participation or liability of the particular organization’s command”.

In 1980, a foreign assassin “tried to assassinate one of America’s most competent Ambassadors to Lebanon, John Guenther Dean”, and the “weapons used in the failed attempt were [eventually] traced to a shipment made from the US to Israel”. The ambassador had apparently been “getting too chummy with Yassir Arafat and his deputy Abu Jihad, who were helping Dean to get the American Embassy hostages released from Iran”, and had subsequently incurred the wrath of Zionist extremists. Five years later, meanwhile, there was a “CIA-funded attempt... to assassinate Sheik Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah”, Lebanon’s “most revered cleric due in no small measure to his scholarship, his three decades of social service work as well as his passionate defense of human rights”. Allegedly, the agency had “mistakenly thought Fadlallah was the spiritual leader of Hezbollah”, though he was in fact “quite independent of Hezbollah”.³³³ Fadlallah would even criticise Hezbollah openly on occasions, calling the group’s claim that voting for it in elections in 2005 was “a religious obligation” a ‘perverted practice’ which “would eventually delegitimize religious authority”. Additionally, the “extensive network of schools” under his control (which “enrolled 14,300 students in 2000”) was known for producing “its own religious textbooks rather than... those approved by Iran’s religious leadership”.³³⁴ The CIA’s ‘mistake’ would not be forgotten easily, though, having cost the lives of eighty people, wounded 256, and left the USA’s reputation in Lebanon even more in tatters than it already was.

According to a report by American researchers, around “100 Western detainees were taken, released, killed or exchanged” in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, and these abductions were carried out by “a staggering variety of groups”. In many cases, the kidnappings were not politically motivated, and some westerners were just “snatched for no other reason than [that] the ransom money was good”. In a number of cases, the kidnappers “would use the ransom money to start a legitimate business, pay for family needs such as medical care or their children’s tuition fees”, the report said. Meanwhile, “thousands [of Lebanese citizens] were kidnapped; many by Israel and their allies and hundreds are still unaccounted for”. Comparing the scale and severity of such cases, therefore, the acts of Israeli and pro-Israeli forces far outweighed anything that Lebanese groups did in the period. Hezbollah, meanwhile, “stayed out of the kidnapping game”, concentrating instead “on building its organization” after its formation in 1985.

³³³ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2007/04/06/why-is-hezbollah-on-the-terrorism-list/>

³³⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/07/06/the-sheikh-who-got-away-2/>

In short, it was precisely the climate of imperialist and Zionist terrorism in Lebanon that inspired a violent reaction from the local population. As seen above, however, reaction did not come from one unified group alone. In fact, Lamb quotes one Hezbollah supporter as saying that, in Lebanon during the early 1980s, resistance groups were not “neatly organised”, and compared the climate at the time to the early revolutionary period in the United States. Therefore, Hezbollah insists that, instead of painting all groups with one brush according to what some renegades or small groups did in the early 1980s, the West should “leave that period and concentrate on working together [with locals] to solve today’s problems in Lebanon and the Middle East”.

The 1983 Bombing of the American Embassy

In the 1980s, Lebanon’s Islamist groups were primarily devoted to “resisting Israel’s attacks”, and they “did not feel that their acts were nearly as reprehensible as the [USA’s] responsibility for what Israel was doing to their people and country”. At the same time, they “felt that their military actions... constituted legitimate self defense”, as they were “protecting Lebanon’s population from attacks by foreign forces”. When the American Embassy was bombed in 1983 by the ‘Islamic Jihad Organisation’, Hezbollah had not yet formed and, when it did two years later, it would “consistently [oppose] attacks on foreign civilians” (a view “based on the Koran’s prohibitions against harming innocent civilians”). In fact, even a “former member of Islamic Jihad” told American researchers in 2007 that “his group had nothing to do with Hezbollah during the Embassy operation or at any other time”.

In order to better understand the context surrounding the 1983 embassy attack, meanwhile, we must consider whether or not the building had “become a legitimate military target”. According to the ex-Islamic Jihadist mentioned above, “his associates knew in advance (soviet intelligence passed to Lebanon via Syria) that the eight CIA operatives assigned to Lebanon were holding meetings in the Embassy and using its diplomatic protection for cover for plotting assassinations and attacks on Lebanon”. The building was also allegedly “being used for feeding targeting information to the USS New Jersey”, which was “visible offshore”.

According to international law, “once an Embassy is used for aggressive military purposes, its protection collapses and it becomes what Donald Rumsfeld calls a “legitimate target of opportunity””. Whether the embassy was indeed a ‘legitimate’ military target or not, the fact is that its bombing was claimed by Islamic Jihad and not by the then non-existent Hezbollah. That the USA and Israel consider “organizations such as Islamic Jihad... to be synonymous with Hezbollah”, therefore, is a “clumsy and inaccurate conclusion designed to support political objectives”. Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, for example, has insisted that “it is absolutely incorrect that the Islamic Jihad is a cover name for Hezbollah”. For him, Hezbollah only remains on the US and Israeli terrorism lists “for purely political reason”, and to “punish the organization for its resistance to Israeli aggressions against Lebanon and... [US] plans for the region”.³³⁵

II) Hezbollah’s Rise to Prominence

Historical Divisions and Civil War

At Counterpunch in 2006, Jon Van Camp explained how “Hezbollah [had] gained growing support in the Middle East” as “the only entity which [had], through armed resistance,

³³⁵ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2007/04/06/why-is-hezbollah-on-the-terrorism-list/>

forced the Israelis to relinquish any territory” it had occupied. Lebanon, he says, as a country which had “always contained various religious communities”, had already been “fractured by civil war” in the early 1980s when Israel invaded. Hezbollah, therefore, was a result, rather than a cause, of such divisions. As seen in Chapter One, French colonialists encouraged ethnic division in the country in the early twentieth century by giving power to Maronite Christians, which would soon become “the most powerful community” there. While a 1943 pact saw Maronites given the presidency, Christians “a majority of seats in the parliament”, and Sunni Muslims the post of prime minister, **Shias were effectively left without a political voice** (although they were “soon to become the largest segment of the population”, they would only receive “the relatively powerless position of speaker of parliament”).

As Maronite leaders were “traditionally pro-Western and pro-Israel”, the power bestowed upon them helped to reduce the influence of Muslim leaders, who were generally “influenced by Arab nationalism”. This divisive dynamic, however, was bound to lead to conflict, which eventually broke out into a **civil war in 1975**, with Israel and the USA backing the right-wing in the conflict (which was “grouped around the Christian Falange”).³³⁶ In 1976, “the Maronite-dominated government asked for support from Syria”, in an attempt to calm Christian-Muslim tensions (which also existed in Syria). It also seemed possible that Israel would invade, or that “a radical, left-wing Muslim state” would be established in Lebanon “if the Lebanese National Movement won” the war. Hafez al-Assad, believing that he could “manipulate” the Maronite government, subsequently “sent in troops to strengthen” his ‘Christian’ allies, and he earned “the wrath of the Muslim world” as a result. Nonetheless, when the war ended with the Taif Accords of late 1989, Assad effectively gained “control over most of Lebanon in return for a promise to maintain internal stability”.³³⁷

The Murderous Israeli Invasions of 1978 and 1982

Israel’s interference in Lebanon, meanwhile, would intensify in early **1978**, after “a raiding party of Palestinian militants... from Lebanon evaded Israeli defences” and ended up killing “37 Israelis, most of them civilian” (whilst being killed themselves in the process). Two days later, “**some 25,000 Israeli soldiers crossed the Lebanese border**” in an invasion designed, in the words of Israeli Defence Minister Ezer Weizman, to “clean up once and for all terrorist concentrations in southern Lebanon”. The problem was, however, that “there were no such terrorist “concentrations””, with “bands of Palestinian gunmen and militants [being] spread throughout Lebanon”. Within three months, **2,000 people (almost all of them civilians) had been killed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in what had been “an astoundingly disproportionate response”** to the initial Palestinian attack. The character of this unbalanced retaliation was made even more sinister by the fact that Israel had claimed that, between 1973 and 1978, only “108 Israelis had been killed by PLO attacks”. In other words, **Israel had taken twenty times the number of lives it had lost in five years, but in just three months!**³³⁸

Israel’s seizure of a strip of territory in Southern Lebanon, meanwhile, rapidly shaped the anti-Zionist character of the civil war, with Muslims (generally opposed to Zionist occupation of Palestinian land) inevitably finding themselves opposing Israeli-backed forces. And when Israel “launched a **full-scale invasion**” in **1982**, with the aim of “installing a right-wing Christian government and driving out Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters based in the country”, the conflict deteriorated even further.³³⁹ Eventually, “some 20,000 Lebanese and Palestinians..., overwhelmingly civilians” were killed, and “much of

³³⁶ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/09/23/who-is-hezbollah/>

³³⁷ <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east-syria-lebanon/p7851>

³³⁸ <http://middleeast.about.com/od/lebanon/a/me080316b.htm>

³³⁹ <http://theweek.com/article/index/246786/hezbollah-the-middle-east-wild-card>

southern Lebanon and the capital city of Beirut” was destroyed.³⁴⁰ Soon afterwards, US marines entered Lebanon “as part of an international force to oversee the withdrawal of the PLO”, but both Israel and the USA were clearly more interested in securing the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the country (as its brand of Ba’athism was considered a threat to US-Israeli influence in the region) than in ending the war.

The Formation of Hezbollah

With US forces intervening “more and more openly on the side of the Lebanese right and Israel’s occupying force”, and Shia communities being those to suffer the most, anger among the latter approached boiling point. As the most numerous religious community in Lebanon, and “by far the poorest”, the Shiites occupied the “slums of Beirut’s southern suburbs and the villages in southern Lebanon directly in the path of Israeli attacks and invasions”. And with 1978’s offensive still in living memory, the Israeli onslaught of 1982 proved to be a tipping point, leading to the creation of a number of Shia military groups.

Unlike four years before, however, Shiites would now be offered funding and training from the Shia Islamist government of Iran. These militias, as previously explained, would be very “loosely connected”, but were referred to collectively as ‘Hezbollah’ (or the ‘Party of God’).³⁴¹ The official union of political and military groups known as Hezbollah, though, as stressed earlier in this section of the chapter, would only be established in 1985. Even Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak would later affirm that, “when we entered Lebanon, there was no Hezbollah”. In fact, he would admit that “it was our presence there that created Hezbollah”.³⁴²

As a result of the “several small but devastating attacks” by some of the Shiite militias formed from 1982 onwards (which included the “suicide truck bombing of [a US] Marines barracks in October 1983 that killed 241 Marines”), the Reagan Administration was forced to “withdraw [US] troops from Lebanon” with great speed. As already emphasised, however, these acts were not committed by the official Hezbollah. The latter, as expressed in its founding letter in 1985 (entitled an “Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World”), was primarily focussed on battling “for influence among Lebanese Shiites” and against Israeli occupation forces. As will be seen below, the first aim would soon lead to military clashes with Amal, a conservative Shiite movement which would find itself involved in the repression of Palestinian refugees (in what would later be known as the War of the Camps).

The War of the Camps (1985-88)

The presence of Palestinian Sunnis in Shia areas in southern Lebanon, along with Syria’s realisation that its Palestinian allies in Lebanon only held power in areas under Syrian control, saw tensions increase between certain sections of the Lebanese population and inhabitants of Palestinian refugee camps. Outside the territories controlled by the Syrian army, independent Palestinian organisations (like that of Yasser Arafat’s pro-Iraqi Fatah) held sway, and Assad’s Ba’athist regime thus sought to back anti-Fatah Palestinian fighters in Lebanon. Arafat’s allies, however, had gradually crept back into Lebanon after they had initially withdrawn in late 1982 (following the Israeli invasion). Over the next two years, Assad encouraged the Amal movement in particular to dislodge Arafat loyalists from Lebanon. As a consequence, the group’s militias “led a full-scale military attack” in 1985 on “various Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut including Sabra, Shatila and Bourj El Barajneh”, which resulted in “mass starvation” and a large number of refugee deaths.³⁴³

³⁴⁰ <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/199309--.htm>

³⁴¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/09/23/who-is-hezbollah/>

³⁴² <http://theweek.com/article/index/246786/hezbollah-the-middle-east-wild-card>

³⁴³ <http://electronicintifada.net/content/living-war-palestinians-refugees-lebanon/4961>

With both Amal and Lebanese army soldiers attacking the camps, which had tried to resist the assault, “over 3,500 people, most of whom were Palestinian”, were killed between 1985 and 1987.³⁴⁴ According to The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, the War of the Camps “claimed the lives of 3,781 people” between 1985 and 1988, “with close to 7,000 injured”.³⁴⁵ The conflict did not, however “pit Sunnis against Shiites”, and the “Shiites of Hezbollah [actually] stood against” the forces striking the refugee camps. “Iranian Shiite Sheikh Seyyed Issa al-Tabtabaei, the late Lebanese [Sunni] Sheikh Moharram Arifi and others”, meanwhile, even moved into one camp “to protest its siege by Amal fighters”.³⁴⁶

Hezbollah’s Rise to Prominence

Hezbollah soon “became predominant in the military resistance to the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon” and, while its “attacks did use suicide bombers” in its campaign, the balance had shifted by the 1990s “toward guerrilla operations directed at inflicting damage on the Israeli occupation force”. In fact, the group decided in the early 1990s to “take part in mainstream politics”, with its two-pronged efforts later being “credited with forcing Israel to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000”. Shebaa Farms, however, which represented “the last sliver of Israeli-occupied territory in Lebanon”, saw Hezbollah operations continue, and the capture of two Israeli soldiers in 2006 gave Israel a pretext for another disproportionate and destructive war. In a characteristically “indiscriminate bombing campaign”, Israel killed 1,191 Lebanese civilians, while only 44 Israeli civilians died as a result of the conflict.³⁴⁷

If the barbarity of the State of Israel was not already enough to lionise Hezbollah’s resistance in the eyes of both Palestinian and Lebanese people, the group even promised to “provide a year’s rent and a set of new furniture for every family whose house [had] been destroyed” in the 2006 war.³⁴⁸ As the group had also “organized relief efforts for southern Lebanon after the Israeli bombings of 1993 and 1996”, it had almost come to be expected that Hezbollah would be the agent of post-invasion aid. Therefore, its apparent social responsibility, along with its construction of “a network of schools, clinics and other services that many people [relied] on to fill the gap for what the Lebanese government [did not] provide”, did not come as a surprise to the inhabitants of Hezbollah-controlled territory. The group, which also controlled “an array of businesses” (including “a satellite television station and a radio station”), was now officially one of the most important, and most popular, political forces in Lebanon.

At the time of writing in 2006, Van Camp spoke of how Hezbollah was leading a “parliamentary bloc in which other forces, including secular parties and non-Muslim parties, [were] involved”. Such an alliance shows clearly that, although “Hezbollah gets aid and support – including military backing – from Iran and Syria...”, it is not a puppet of these governments”. In other words, the Shia Islamist theocracy of Iran may have “had decisive influence during Hezbollah’s early years”, but “the organization has since developed its own elected council and command structure to make [largely independent] political and military decisions”. In fact, mainstream political analyst Anthony Cordesman insisted after the 2006 war that “no serving Israeli official, intelligence officer or other military officer felt that the Hezbollah [had] acted under the direction of Iran or Syria” in the conflict.

In summary, Hezbollah is “viewed as a legitimate national resistance organization, among Shia and non-Shia, throughout much of Lebanese society”, with even “three-quarters of Lebanese Christians – the traditional base of the right – [having] identified Hezbollah as a

³⁴⁴ Roberts, R. (2010), “Palestinians in Lebanon: Refugees Living with Long-term Displacement”, London and New York: I.B.Tauris, p.86.

³⁴⁵ <http://www.wrmea.org/2006-march/from-massacre-to-militia-the-case-against-palestinian-disarmament-in-lebanon.html>

³⁴⁶ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jan-09/243527-palestinians-fear-war-with-hezbollah.aspx#axzz3K8hT2u15>

³⁴⁷ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/09/23/who-is-hezbollah/>

³⁴⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/aug/17/syria.israelandthepalestinians1>

legitimate group in challenging Israeli aggression".³⁴⁹ In 2014, meanwhile, amidst the ISIS advances in Syria and Iraq, the "Beirut Center for Research and Information (BCRI) found that two thirds (62.6%) of Lebanese Christians" felt that Hezbollah had "protected their country from its most determined enemies – Israel, IS (known locally as Da'ash), and Wahhabi-style terrorist groups linked to the Syria-Iraq conflagration". At the same time, Maronite Patriarch Beshara Boutros Rai "criticized states that had begun supplying arms to the [Wahhabi] terrorists gathering in Syria", saying in 2013 that there was "a plan to destroy the Arab world for political and economic interests and boost interconfessional conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites".³⁵⁰

Why Hezbollah's Islamism Is Not the Same as Wahhabi Islamism

For Van Camp, Hezbollah's Islamism was, whilst accepting of certain "prejudices against women", was "not as reactionary as, for example, the Wahhabists". Although the former are far from feminists, with women being "excluded from political and military leadership", female figures actually "lead many of Hezbollah's social service projects". Also, while there is a tendency towards traditional "anti-gay attitudes" in Hezbollah, and there have been accusations of some leaders using "anti-Semitic slurs", the group has shown that it is much more open to dialogue and debate (perhaps out of necessity) than other Islamist groupings in the Middle East.

One key difference between Hezbollah and their Islamist allies in Iran, Van Camp emphasises, is that "**Hezbollah does not have a goal [of] building [an] Islamic state**". In fact, Hassan Nasrallah himself has insisted that "Lebanon is a pluralistic country [and] not an Islamic country", while Van Camp underlines that the "main appeal" of Hezbollah in Lebanon is not "its Islamist ideology and the backward elements of its social and political program", but "its willingness to challenge Israeli aggression and U.S. imperialism" (much like such resistance attracts Gazans to Hamas). In short, unless a secular and libertarian left-wing alternative appears (and resists Israel in the same way that Hezbollah does), the group's brand of moderate (but essentially reactionary) Islamism will continue to dominate Lebanese politics.³⁵¹

To sum up, Franklin Lamb speaks of how "the evidence suggests that Hezbollah is on a "political list" called the "terrorism list" because Israel wants it there [and] not because there is proof that it engaged in terrorism against Americans 25 years ago". Claiming the group has been involved in "'kidnapping Americans' and 'terrorism' without proof", Lamb says, simply "adds to the international ridicule" of the USA's foreign policies. If the United States had any "respect for international law", he argues, they "ought to show their 'evidence' or [simply] remove Hezbollah from the list". The reason why such 'evidence' is not presented, however, is that it does not exist. In fact, a US government lawyer even admitted that "it's not that Hezbollah is terrorist per say, actually we know they are pretty clean..., but you must realize that they do associate with shady characters to their East, if you know what I mean".

In other words, the mere fact that Hezbollah has allied itself with theocratic Iran and Ba'athist Syria is seen by the US government as reason enough to keep the group on the 'terrorism list'. For Lamb, and many others in the Middle East and elsewhere, this is just not an acceptable excuse. He asserts that "it is [now] time for the [USA]... to present its case and prove what terrorism Hezbollah has actually used against the American people in the 1980's in light of US government admissions that since 1999 there is no evidence that Hezbollah has engaged in "Terrorism"". ³⁵² Judging by what I have outlined in this section of the chapter, it

³⁴⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/09/23/who-is-hezbollah/>

³⁵⁰ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/11/05/an-overwhelming-majority-of-lebanons-christians-believe-hizbullah-protects-their-country/>

³⁵¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/09/23/who-is-hezbollah/>

³⁵² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2007/04/06/why-is-hezbollah-on-the-terrorism-list/>

is clear that, fundamentally, any objective analysis of Middle Eastern politics must ignore almost anything that appears on official US blacklists, whilst also discarding all defamatory statements that come out of the mouths of US politicians (or their Zionist and dictatorial allies in the region), especially when it comes to groups like Hezbollah. In short, resistance, self-defence, and independence are not the same things as terrorism. And as long as the USA and its allies insist that they are, we should do our very best to simply stop listening to them.

G) Wahhabi Influence in South Asia

One of the closest ideologies to that of Wahhabism in recent decades has been Deobandism, which has had increasing success in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and notably with the Taliban in the latter nation. In this section of the chapter, I will analyse the impact that the official belief system of Saudi Arabia has had on both Deobandism and on Muslims in South Asia in general. In short, I will show that Wahhabism is not the only strict and discriminatory sect that has radicalised a number of citizens throughout the world.

The Early Years of Deobandism

Deobandism was initially, according to New York University's Luv Puri, "part of a series of revivalist movements that were sweeping British India" in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which may have been influenced to a certain extent by the migration of some Saudi theologians to India in the eighteenth century. Although a large part of the colony's population revolted against British forces in 1857, "Muslims in British India were the primary targets during the ensuing British crackdown", mainly because "the revolt was fought under the leadership of the Muslim Mughal emperor". When the British occupied religious sites, especially in the former Mughal capital of Delhi, it even "caused many ulama (religious clerics) to migrate to various locations, such as the northern Indian town of Deoband, to preserve their religious life and culture". Deoband in particular was an appropriate location due to the fact that it was not too far away from Delhi (in the Indian Himalayas), had long been "a center of Muslim culture", and many of its families "had served in the Mughal Empire".³⁵³

A madrasa (or Islamic religious school), known as Darul Uloom, was built in Deoband in 1867, and it brought together a number of "Muslims who were hostile to British rule and committed to a literal and austere interpretation of Islam". The Deobandi tradition, which emanated out from this school, sought to "purify Islam by discarding supposedly un-Islamic accretions to the faith", and regarded "Pakistan's minority Shiia as non-Muslim". Whilst the ideology "originated in the Sunni community", its followers were "not strictly Sunnis", and they believed they had "a sacred right and obligation to go to any country to wage jihad to protect the Muslims of that country".³⁵⁴ By 1967, "3,795 students from present-day India" had graduated from Darul Uloom, along with "3,191 from Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh", while another "8,934 Deobandi schools" had been built around the world.

Deobandi scholars had initially sought to "engage in dialogue with India's non-Muslim population" because of the country's religious diversity, and even debated with Christian and Hindu scholars in 1875 and 1876. During the fight for independence from colonialism, meanwhile, they "jointly fought with non-Muslims", participating in the numerous non-violent struggles across British India. Perhaps more importantly, however, the town of Deoband found itself in a majority Hindu district, so the Muslims there were all too aware of the importance of inter-faith dialogue and co-existence. In fact, Hindus even "reportedly contributed to [Darul Uloom's] operating expenses" at the beginning.

³⁵³ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-past-and-future-of-deobandi-islam>

³⁵⁴ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-deobandi.htm>

Popularity in Pashtunistan

In 1893, British colonialists “divided the [ethnic] Pashtun population” (in the areas now found within Afghanistan and Pakistan), drawing an imaginary border (known as the ‘Durand Line’) which demarcated the spheres of influence of the ruling Afghan and British regimes in the region.³⁵⁵ As the line cut right through the middle of the “Pashtun heartland”, however, the “mountainous borderlands” soon became a base for resistance against outside interference.³⁵⁶ “In the decades after” the arbitrary (and largely meaningless) partition, say Douglas Schorzman and Kiran Nazish at The New York Times, “Pashtun fighters waged a new jihad” in the hope of creating “an autonomous Pashtunistan”, fighting “first against the declining British Empire, [and] then against the Pakistani government”.³⁵⁷ And, while this anticolonial struggle raged on, the combative ideology of Deobandism rapidly became the “most popular school of Islamic thought” in Pashtun territories.

Elsewhere, the Deobandi movement “faced competition from other Islamic schools, primarily Barelvi Islam”, though the partition of India in 1947 would soon increase the popularity of the ideology. With “many leading Deobandi scholars [migrating] to Pakistan” after independence, for example, the sect experienced a significant boost in Pakistani territory. In the late 1970s, meanwhile, “Deobandi seminaries in the Pashtun belt [even] received state patronage” (in a government attempt to reduce the influence of progressive secularism in the region, and especially in Afghanistan). Enrolment in these schools, according to the World Bank, “increased after 1979, coinciding with the start of the Afghan jihad against the Soviets”. In particular, Pashtuns would play “a major role in the Afghan jihad”, with “a large number of... fighters [being] drawn from Deobandi seminaries”.

I) Wahhabis Co-Opt Deobandism

While Wahhabism “is usually known [for] its strict, literalist and puritanical approach to Islam”, Deobandism is primarily a “revivalist movement”, which “claims to be perfectly pure”. Followers of the latter believe in the guidance of Imam Abu Hanifa, while most followers of the former are “ghair muqallid, which means that they do not follow any imam for jurisprudence”. At the same time, while the intolerance of Wahhabis “stretches not only to non-Muslims but also to non-Salafis”, Deobandis were for a long time “quite tolerant towards non-Muslims and non-Deobandi”.³⁵⁸ One of the biggest connections between the two groups is that the founders of both were inspired by Middle Ages scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, who “advocated armed resistance... during the Mongol invasion of the Middle East and the Christian Crusades of the medieval period”, declaring that all Muslims had a duty to wage war against those who did not follow Sharia law.³⁵⁹

Wahhabi Influence during the 1980s

Being “the most popular Islamic school in the Pashtun belt” (which was key for entering into Afghanistan from Pakistan), Deobandism was targeted by Saudi Arabia at the start of the Islamist battle against the USSR in Afghanistan. In fact, it gave the movement far more attention than it gave to other sects which were actually more identical to its own official ideology. Although Deobandis shared many beliefs with the Wahhabis, the ‘Ahl-e-Hadith’ movement was actually much closer (ideologically speaking) to Wahhabism, and was thus a natural ally for the Saudis. Because the sect was very weak in Pashtunistan, however, it was simply not a realistic choice for the Afghan Jihad. Therefore, the Saudi regime “infused Deobandi seminaries with Wahhabi ideology” as much as it could, whilst also giving

³⁵⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/world/asia/Waziristan-Region-of-Pakistan-Has-Long-History-of-Rebellion.html?_r=0

³⁵⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/15/afghanistan-pakistan-obama>

³⁵⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/world/asia/Waziristan-Region-of-Pakistan-Has-Long-History-of-Rebellion.html?_r=0

³⁵⁸ <http://www.differencebetween.net/miscellaneous/religion-miscellaneous/difference-between-salafi-and-deobandi/>

³⁵⁹ <https://lubpak.com/archives/280211>

substantial financial support (along with the USA) to the Pakistani dictatorship, which was busy training militants to fight in Afghanistan.

According to Pakistan-based scholar Akbar Zaidi, “Deobandi Islam in Pakistan and Afghanistan... moved away from its roots in India” after the war in Afghanistan, and one of the factors in this change was “the influence of Saudi Wahhabism”. The majority of Taliban leaders and fighters, for example, had “studied in Deobandi seminaries, many of which [had been] influenced by Wahhabism”.³⁶⁰ In short, Deobandism (in Pakistan and Afghanistan at least) emerged from the Afghan Jihad as an altered movement, even less tolerant than it had been before the conflict.

Being “widely practiced in Pakistan” (with former military ruler Pervez Musharraf even allegedly having Deobandi sympathies), Deobandism’s Wahhabisation during the 1980s subsequently presented an intensified threat to the citizens and state of Pakistan. In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the majority of the Sunni Muslim population belonged to the Hanafi sect, but the divisions within that school would soon end in conflict. In 2000, for example, followers of Deobandism and Barelvism (both Hanafi) fought, “sometimes violently, for control over local mosques in Lahore neighborhoods”. Meanwhile, most of the Deobandi theologians “who were the founders of the Taliban” (and other radical groups) increasingly “espoused Wahhabi rhetoric and ideals”. In other words, by the end of the twentieth century Wahhabism had effectively “co-opted the Deobandi movement in South Asia” (or at least a significant part of it).³⁶¹

Saudi Arabia’s Missionary Offensive

According to Abdul Nishapuri, writing at Let Us Build Pakistan (LUBP) in late 2013, “peaceful and moderate Sunni Sufis/Barelvis” were “shrinking in various countries due to generous Saudi funding to Wahhabi Salafi mosques, clerics, charities and seminaries”. He insists that, “in last few decades, **Wahhabism has been used by global imperialist powers to promote their own agenda of divide and rule in Muslim communities and nations**”. For him, the ideology could be best described as a “**mutation**” of **Sunni Muslim teachings**, primarily because it stemmed “more from the medieval scholar Ibn Taymiyya” than from “the fundamental principles of [the] four imams of Sunni (jurisprudence) or [the] 12 imams of Shias”. While “the terms Wahhabi and Salafi and Ahl al-Hadith (people of hadith or Ahl-e-Hadith) are often used interchangeably”, he says, “Wahhabism has also been called “a particular orientation within Salafism””. Whatever its name or definition, however, it has had a poisonous effect on Muslim communities throughout the world.

Nishapuri speaks of how “the Saudis have spent at least \$87 billion propagating Wahhabism abroad during the past two decades, and the scale of financing is believed to have increased in the past two years”. This funding allegedly went into the construction of “1,500 mosques, 210 Islamic centres and dozens of Muslim academies and schools”. And such an advancement of Wahhabism is dangerous because, according to Freedom House, Wahhabi publications in mosques in the USA have included statements saying that “Muslims should not only “always oppose” infidels “in every way”, but [also] “hate them for their religion... for Allah’s sake””. Furthermore, such works also emphasise (in an incredibly reactionary way) that democracy (rather than capitalism and dictatorships) was “responsible for all the horrible wars of the 20th century”.

Wahhabis (whether in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere in the Middle East), Nishapuri says, have exploited the “large common ground” they have with “other Salafist or semi-Salafist movements, including [the] Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, [the] Deobandi militancy of

³⁶⁰ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-past-and-future-of-deobandi-islam>

³⁶¹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/intro/islam-deobandi.htm>

Sipah Sahaba in Pakistan, [and] Tablighi Jamaat and Jamaat Islami in South Asia”, in spite of their “minor differences”. Saudi money, he argues, “has done much to overwhelm less strict local interpretations of Islam” around the world, and so has Saudi control over Mecca and Medina. Throughout Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, he says, “**the Saudi Wahhabi movement has been able to recruit and subtly convert [a] large number of Deobandi Hanafi Muslims** to promote and implement [the] Wahhabi agenda”.

Just like Wahhabis, the Deobandis were “influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah” and, with the Darul Uloom madrassa in Deoband having become “the second largest focal point of Islamic teachings and preaching after the Al-Azhar University” in Cairo, Saudi Arabia increasingly sought to take advantage of their similarities in the late twentieth century. Thus, with around 65 percent of Pakistani madrassas being run by Deobandis, some fifteen per cent of the country’s population considering themselves Deobandi, and Wahhabi funding from the Arabian Peninsula on the rise, puritanical conservatism has been steadily gaining strength in Pakistan. Meanwhile, “about 600 of Britain’s nearly 1,500 mosques are run by Deobandi affiliated scholars, and 17 of the country’s 26 Islamic seminaries follow Sunni Deobandi teachings”.³⁶²

Diminishing Differences

According to Iranian-born academic Vali Nasr, who spoke to PBS in 2001, the “connection between the fundamentalism of the Taliban and the fundamentalism of the Wahhabi” ideology had “been growing very, very strong in the past 20 years”.³⁶³ Although Wahhabis had long promoted the Hanbali system of Islamic law, while the Deobandi Taliban followed the Hanafi system (which was less conservative), the reality was that the strict and discriminatory nature of both groups often made them natural allies. In the past, Deobandis “did not outrightly reject Sufism” while Wahhabis unashamedly expressed their hatred for it, but both have aimed to destroy “elevated graves” in their quest to stop anything approaching adoration of the dead (which is something they accuse Sufis of doing). In particular, Nishapuri considers that the “Mamati Deobandis” represent the worst of Deobandism, as they are a “pro-Wahhabi, violent and intolerant group”. He even says that “a lot of Salafis [actually] find the Mamatis’ views to be more in line with Salafism than with Hayati Deobandis”.

Deobandi scholars once criticised Wahhabism, however, with Husain Ahmad Madani, for example, saying that Wahhab had “preached ‘patent falsehood’ (‘*‘aqa’id-i batila*), killed numerous Sunni Muslims and forced many others to accept his ‘false’ creed (‘*‘aqa’id-i fasida*)”. Madani even called him “a ‘tyrant’ (*zalim*), ‘traitor’ (*baghi*), and ‘despicable’ (*khabis*)”. Deobandism has not escaped criticism itself, though. In fact, “in Pakistan and India, many Sunni clerics have issued [a] fatwa against [both] Deobandi and Wahhabi clerics and militants”, claiming they show “contempt and insult towards all saints” and are **Takfiris** (people who declare others to be ‘infidels’). According to one fatwa (or legal ruling), published by Muhammad Ibrahim of Bhagalpur, “Deobandis should be declared [a] non-Muslim minority” and, “just as Sikhs originated from Hinduism, but are not Hindus, and Protestants came from Roman Catholicism, but are not Catholics, similarly, **the Deobandi sect originated in the Sunni community, but are not Sunnis**”.

In short, Nishapuri argues, “**the Deobandi cult in Pakistan and India is the political continuation of the Saudi Wahhabi/Salafi cult**”. In spite of a “subtle difference of jurisprudence”, there is “not much difference between them... politically and practically”. And one crucial reason for this reality is that the “CIA-planned, Saudi-funded, ISI-executed Jihad in Afghanistan” in the 1980s saw “excessive funding and military training” go to

³⁶² <https://lubpak.com/archives/280211>

³⁶³ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saudi/analyses/wahhabism.html>

“students and clerics of Deobandi seminaries in Pakistan and Afghanistan”. The simultaneous “influx of Wahhabi Jihadist militants from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other countries”, Nishapuri insists, simply accelerated the “subtle conversion of [the] Deobandi cult to [the] Wahhabi cult”. In other words, the real, concrete differences between Deobandis and Wahhabis have been “fast diminishing” for a number of decades.³⁶⁴

Wahhabis and Deobandis on the Same Page

In early 2013, Stephen Schwartz and Irfan Al-Alawi at the Center for Islamic Pluralism wrote that “the fundamentalist Deobandi Muslim sect... resembles its ally, the Saudi Wahhabi clergy, in many ways”. Both, they say, “claim to “reform” the religion”, preaching of “a distorted utopia of “pure” Islam disrespectful of other faiths and condemning Islamic interpretations with which they differ”. They also share ideas that are “harshly restrictive of women’s rights”. At the start of Deobandism, however, the focus was on “peaceful revivalism”, as opposed to the “violent phenomenon” of Wahhabism. Being financed by Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, however, the “Pakistani-trained Deobandis” of the Taliban began “to abandon their nonviolent past”, imposing a “brutal, repressive regime, originally in Kandahar, that claimed a basis in Islamic law”.

Deobandism had not been entirely peaceful in its past, however, with “Deobandi depredations” being launched “against other Muslims... in the 1971 Bangladesh independence war, when the Deobandis and their jihadist allies [like Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI)] committed widespread human rights violations”. According to Schwartz and Al-Alawi, “the horrors in Bangladesh were perpetrated by Deobandis from then-“West” Pakistan”. They then say that, after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the Indian Deobandis, who had previously “adhered mainly to their past quietist attitude”, were increasingly “radicalized” by the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani Deobandis, with some of their leaders adopting “rhetoric justifying terrorism” (despite denunciations from other Indian Deobandi scholars). At the same time, Deobandis in the UK were actively seeking “ascendancy over Sunni believers” in the early twenty-first century, focussing on establishing mosques and taking over formerly Barelvi mosques, while in the USA they already dominated “Pakistani-American Sunni mosques”.

In the new century, Schwartz and Al-Alawi assert, “South Asian Deobandis... have grown more nihilistic in their outlook and practices”. In 2011, a prominent Wahhabi cleric (though somewhat criticised in Saudi Arabia) visited the Darul Uloom in Deoband, seeking to “reinforce amity between the sects and demonstrate that together, Deobandism and Wahhabism [were] expanding their influence in India”. According to Schwartz and Al-Alawi, the “identical motive behind the activities of Deobandi and Wahhabi “fatwa factories,” whether originating in medresas or websites”, was the “absolute direction over the lives of Sunni Muslims, and, by extension, over all Muslim relations with their non-Muslim neighbors”. In other words, they insist, “**the aim of “fatwa fanatics” is not religious”, but “political and totalitarian”**.”³⁶⁵

The Wahhabi/Deobandi Assault on Barelvism

Although the “non-Pakhtun population of Pakistan is predominantly Sunni Barelvi” (with its stronghold in the heavily-populated Punjab region), Nishapuri says, “state-controlled mosques are [increasingly] being given to Deobandi clerics”. In addition, the funding of Deobandi militias by Wahhabis (who are sympathetic because of the former’s “anti-Sufi, anti-Shiite doctrine”) has also had an effect on reducing the “Barelvi temperament” of the region. In summary, Nishapuri asserts, “**both Deobandi and Wahhabi schools, established**

³⁶⁴ <https://lubpak.com/archives/280211>

³⁶⁵ <http://www.islamicpluralism.org/2206/fatwa-fanatics-the-deobandi-wahhabi-lust-for>

only a couple of hundred years ago, **have radically mutated Islam**", focussing their followers on the enforcement of their beliefs upon "all people through the use of force".³⁶⁶

At The Guardian in January 2014, Jon Boone reported on how "the Sufi-influenced tradition of Barelvis" of Pakistan was coming "under an ideological assault from severe, Saudi-funded Wahhabism", with "radical itinerant preachers, a boom in hardline madrasas, and militant attacks on the shrines of holy men" apparently "driving adherents away from" the former. According to Barelvi leaders, Boone says, young people in poor areas of Pakistan were particularly "receptive to the messages of hardline sects, many with strong doctrinal and financial ties with the austere Wahhabism of Saudi Arabia" (which sees Barelvis as "little short of blasphemous").³⁶⁷

In response to Boone's article, Matthew Smith at Blogistan emphasised that Barelvis, named after Indian Shaikh Ahmad Raza Khan Barelvi, was not actually so innocent itself. Barelvi himself, for example, actually "declared a number of the early Deobandi scholars to be outside of Islam for supposedly insulting the Prophet", even though they had denied most of what they were accused of saying. Neither are Barelvis "immune from fanaticism", says Smith, being as they are "the strongest supporters of the Pakistani blasphemy law, despite abundant evidence of unjust convictions and its use to settle personal scores". He even suggests that, in part at least, the decline of Barelvis is "very likely [a] result of more, and better, education, Islamic or otherwise" in Pakistan, rather than simply an assault by anti-Barelvis.³⁶⁸

Boone, meanwhile, speaks of how 19-year-old Imtiaz Malik, who now identified with Deobandism, had taken to spending his time with "missionary organisation" Tablighi Jamaat. While Deobandism and Wahhabism have "a long way to go before finally usurping Barelvis", Boone asserts, their aim is (as one senior Tablighi Jamaat said) that "there will [eventually] be no Barelvis left". According to Waleed Ziad, from the World Organisation for Resource Development and Education (Worde), the Takfirism of the aforementioned ultra-conservative sects amounts to the "**ideological brainwashing of a country**", and the **rapid erosion of "Pakistan's social base"**. At the same time, though, it is clear that the 'moderate' Barelvis is not free from blame, with "rich shrine custodians who inherit [holy sites] often seeking to "cash in on the credulity of uneducated people". In the words of businessman Peer Mudassir Syed Nazar Shah, the religion itself was "not bad, but the shopkeeper is bad".

Certain 'Ahl al-Hadith' organisations, meanwhile, supported by Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia, have taken support away from the Barelvis by offering social services, says Boone. For example, they have treated people with eye operations, given "cash handouts to poor families", and provided "widows and orphans [with] money in exchange for their faith". One of these groups, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, even "successfully promoted itself as a high-profile national social welfare organisation" (before then being sanctioned by the UN "because of its links to terrorism, including the 2008 Mumbai attacks").

In short, Boone insists Barelvi mullahs simply "cannot compete with the financial resources gifted from Saudi Arabia", which allow Ahl al-Hadith organisations to build "gleaming new mosques and large madrasas", while rapidly expanding their spheres of influence. These groups, he stresses, also infiltrate existing mosques and madrasas, either by paying the salary of mullahs or "by mounting violent takeovers".³⁶⁹ Faced with such tactics, it is

³⁶⁶ <https://lubpak.com/archives/280211>

³⁶⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/15/islam-pakistan-barelvi-saudi-wahhabi>

³⁶⁸ <http://www.blogistan.co.uk/blog/mt.php/2014/01/17/wahhabis-are-not-the-only-fanatics>

³⁶⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/15/islam-pakistan-barelvi-saudi-wahhabi>

unlikely that Barelvīs will be able to resist Wahhabi groups for too long, with the latter apparently destined to continue growing in popularity in Pakistan.

Eurasia Review's Saneya Arif looked in November 2014 at why "Wahhabi movements [had] gained traction among the Muslim populations" of the world, analysing in particular the "Aligarh, Deoband and Barelvi" movements in the Indian subcontinent. The first group, she says, "saw modern scientific education to be the only ray of hope" after the 1857 Uprising, though the subsequent "fulfillment of the goal put a halt on the movement". The latter two, meanwhile, also fought against excessive colonial influence in the region, but also sought to "impart traditional education". For Arif, the "**Deoband and the Barelvi movements [thus] stand somewhat unwanted and irrelevant, as their preaching borders on the margins of intolerance and radicalism**".

Wahhabi missionaries, meanwhile, says Arif, have managed to take advantage of "the spread of education and advancements in communication systems", and also of the fact that Saudi Arabia has become 'less extreme' than it was "in the early years of the Wahhabi movement". In India, she stresses, "Wahhabism has a different face", with Shias and Sunnis co-existing peacefully in the country (principally because Wahhabi forces are far outnumbered in the country). All of these changes have contributed, she asserts, to an increasing perception of Wahhabism's 'relative openness' and 'acceptability', in India at least, and perhaps even contributed elsewhere to the support given to ISIS.³⁷⁰

II) The Wahhabi Connection in India

India's Ahl-e Hadith

According to Yaqub Shah, writing at The American Muslim in 2006, sections of the Ahl-e Hadith movement in India "have been the favourite recipients of Saudi largesse", receiving funds "from both official and private sources" which have "gone into the setting up of a number of mosques, madrasas and publishing houses by certain individuals and organizations connected with the Ahl-e Hadith". This movement denounces Shias as "heretics and 'enemies of Islam'", whilst frequently condemning "other Sunni groups, such as the Barelvīs, Deobandīs and the Jamaat-e Islami, for having allegedly deviated from the Sunni path". It has also produced "masses of propaganda material in praise of the Saudi rulers, parroting their claim of being the most committed defenders of Islam" and playing a "key role in promoting the interests of the Saudi monarchy" in the country.

Saudi funds, meanwhile, have also "benefited certain institutions or individuals in India associated with the Jamaat-e Islami and the Deobandi tradition", Shah claims, which have in turn promoted "the cause of Saudi Arabia's rulers by presenting them as model Islamic rulers". **Through financial support** to press outlets in India and other nations with significant Sunni populations, meanwhile, "**the Saudi rulers have sought to stamp out any vocal criticism of their internal and external policies, including the enormous corruption and untrammled despotism at home, Saudi Arabia's key role in sustaining and promoting American imperialism and, of course, the very un-Islamic institution of monarchy**".³⁷¹

In late 2014, Shahram Ali reposted an article by Yoginder Sikand on the LUBP website, in which the latter emphasised how Saudi Arabia prided itself "on being, as it calls itself, the only 'truly' Islamic state in the world". Its proselytising offensive on the Muslim World from the 1970s onwards, therefore, "was seen as a vital resource in order to gain legitimacy for the Saudi... monarchy". According to Sikand, India soon became an "important target of Saudi

³⁷⁰ <http://www.eurasiareview.com/24112014-understanding-attraction-salafi-wahhabi-movements-analysis/>

³⁷¹ http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/wahhabism_in_the_service_of_western_imperialism_the_politics_of_a_fatwa/

'Wahhabi' propaganda", and it is therefore relevant to look at "the impact of official and unofficial Saudi assistance to Sunni Muslim groups in India".

Monopoly-Seeking Sects and the Ahl-e Hadith

Before Saudi influence, he says, it was "the establishment of British rule in India [that] had momentous consequences for notions of Muslim and Islamic identity". There was a "widely shared perception of Islam being under threat" from the colonialists, and this subsequently "helped [to] promote a feeling of Muslim unity transcending sectarian and ethnic boundaries". At the same time, however, the period of British colonialism also saw "serious differences" emerge "within the broader Sunni Muslim fold", with the "**Deobandis, the Barelvis and the Ahl-i Hadith**" developing as "neatly-defined, and, on numerous issues, **mutually opposed, sect-like groups**". Each of these groups "**claimed a monopoly of representing the 'authentic' Sunni tradition...**", branding rival claimants as aberrant and, in some cases, even as apostates".

The Ahl-e Hadith "believed that... other Sunni groups... had strayed from the path of the 'pious predecessors' (salaf)", arguing that "the Hanafis, the dominant section among the Indian Sunnis, erred in blind conformity (taqlid) of the 'ulama of the Hanafi school even when their prescriptions went against the express commandments of the Qur'an and the Hadith". Most of the founders of the Ahl-e Hadith movement, meanwhile, had been "inspired by the example of Muhammad bin 'Abdul Wahhab and his companions", though not all of them had "approved of his reported claim that Muslims who did not share his beliefs were kafirs and fit to be killed". Nonetheless, "many Hanafi 'ulama saw the Ahl-i Hadith as a hidden front of the 'Wahhabis', whom they regarded as 'enemies' of Islam for their fierce opposition to the adoration of the Prophet and the saints, their opposition to popular custom and to taqlid, [or] rigid conformity to one or the other of the four generally accepted schools of Sunni jurisprudence".

After "the establishment of the All-India Ahl-i Hadith Conference in 1906", a large amount of "scholarly effort was expended by Ahl-i Hadith 'ulama on seeking to prove rival Muslim groups... as aberrant" (if not apostates). Their rivals, meanwhile, did the same, taking on the task of "fiercely denouncing" the group, partially because it "did not conceal its support for the Saudi state" in the early decades of the century. While it organised "a number of rallies to galvanise support for Ibn Saud and to oppose his detractors among the Indian Muslims", though, it avoided entering into an unwinnable battle against the Hanafi groups surrounding it, which had called on Muslims to "refrain from the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina till the 'Wahhabis' had been overthrown".

From the 1970s onwards, however, "**access to Saudi funds** and links with prestigious Saudi patrons **gave numerous Ahl-i Hadith leaders a new aggressive confidence to take on their Hanafi rivals** despite their continued minority status among the region's Muslims". The movement subsequently "came to present itself as a **carbon copy of Saudi-style 'Wahhabism'**, with nothing to distinguish itself from it and upholding this form of Islam as normative".

The Ahl-e Hadith and the Saudi Mission in India

While some Indian press outlets claimed that Saudi funds were aimed at converting poor Hindus to Islam, the majority of Arab and Saudi "financial assistance" around the world actually went "to establish mosques, madrasas and publishing houses". The "largest beneficiary of this largesse" may well have been the Ahl-e Hadith, but "the Jama'at-i Islami and the Deobandis [were] also said to have benefited to some extent". With Arab socialists, nationalists, and communists having gained prominence in much of the Muslim World by

the early 1970s, “voices of dissent and protest” had also emerged in Saudi Arabia, leading the Saudi monarchy to launch its campaign to reduce the influence of these forces (and soon also the forces of Shia ‘anti-imperialism’ after the Iranian Revolution). With “radical appeals emanating from Tehran” and elsewhere, “including anti-‘Wahhabi’ and anti-Saudi sentiments” which caught “the imagination of Muslims all over the world”, Saudi Arabian elites knew that they needed to act.

According to Sikand, the threat posed by **the Iranian Revolution was “a major catalyst in moulding Saudi foreign policy” from 1979 onwards**, and the “export” of Wahhabism played a key role in the country’s strategy. With a charismatic form of anti-imperialist Islam gaining popularity under Iranian leadership, the Saudi regime sought to stress its own “‘Islamic’ credentials” in order to stave off “challenges from internal as well as external opponents” (which were angry about its “corrupt and dictatorial ways and its close alliance with the imperialist powers”). And the US-stimulated Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 gave the Saudis the perfect opportunity to do so. Therefore, with American support, “millions of dollars” were soon pumped into “‘Wahhabi’-style schools and organisations in Pakistan in order to train guerrillas”. Essentially, though, Saudi interference in the **Afghan conflict** was no more than a “**thinly veiled guise for promoting the interests of the Saudi regime**”.

Saudi actions in Pakistan and Afghanistan, however, would also expand into India. After the Iranian Revolution (which was perceived as “a major threat” to the survival of the Saudi regime, whose claims of “championing Islam [had been] dismissed as hypocritical” by Iran), a “hugely disproportionate amount of Saudi aid to Indian Muslim groups” was “said to have gone to institutions run by the Ahl-i Hadith”. In this period, both Ahl-e Hadith and Deobandi groups wrote books (allegedly “paid for... by Saudi patrons”) which branded the Iranian regime “as a Shi’a, and, therefore, ‘anti-Islamic’, insurrection”, which branded “Khomeini as an ‘enemy of Islam’”, and which said “the Shi’a faith... [was part of] a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ to destroy Islam from within”.

At the same time, there was a “mushroom growth in the number of Ahl-i Hadith publishing houses in India”, with “low-priced books” (and later videos, CDs, and websites) produced by authors educated at Saudi universities being distributed throughout the country, all with the aim of attacking “rival Muslim, including Sunni, groups”. Inside the publications, there was often “fierce hostility [towards] local beliefs and practices”, which was “further exacerbated [by] the growing Saudi-Ahl-i Hadith nexus”.

Sikand argues that “the ‘**Saudi Arabisation**’ of Islam and **Indian Muslim culture**” promoted by Ahl-e Hadith (and to a certain extent Deobandi) groups contributed to a further **widening of “the cultural chasm between Muslims and Hindus”**, with some Ahl-e Hadith scholars even insisting “on the need for Muslims to have as little to do with the Hindus as possible”. Sufis, Shias, and Deobandis, meanwhile, were increasingly dismissed as “heretical”, both openly and indirectly, leading to “**heightened conflict between various Muslim sectarian groups in India**”.

At the same time, the numerous texts published since the late 70s tended to avoid talk of “the widespread dissatisfaction within Saudi Arabia itself with the ruling family”, the “rampant corruption in the country, the lavish lifestyles of the princes”, or the regime’s “close links with the United States”. Neither was there any mention of “Saudi Arabia’s key role in the Western-dominated global capitalist economy, and of its close financial and political relations with the United States and other Western imperialist powers”. All of these texts, Sikand claims, show clearly that “**Saudi-sponsored propaganda abroad is tailor-made to suit the interests of its ruling family**”.

The few Ahl-e Hadith moderates, meanwhile, who sought “to lessen tensions with other Muslim groups” by not always towing the discriminatory Saudi line, would effectively make no difference to the general momentum of the movement. In the end, they would prove to be “relatively powerless in the face of leaders who [had] access to Saudi funds and [had] a vested interest in stressing and reinforcing differences with other Muslim communities”. Paradoxically, however, Ahl-e Hadith groups would actually focus their attention on their Deobandi opponents (who represented, theoretically, the group closest to their own “commitment to strict compliance with the shari’ah” and eradication of ‘heresy’).

The Ahl-e Hadith’s Battle with Deobandism

The reason for the Ahl-e Hadith-Deobandi rivalry mentioned above was perhaps due in large part to the fact that the Barelvi and Shia communities in India (considered much more heretical by the Ahl-e Hadith) were much less “organised and influential” than the Deobandis (partially because they had not received the same kind of financial support that the Deobandis had received from Saudi Arabia in the 1980s). Also, the Deobandi movement had simply been “more effective in critiquing the Ahl-i Hadith than their other rivals”, and Ahl-e Hadith groups therefore recognised that they needed “to pay particular attention to the challenge they [faced] from the Deobandi front”.

Initially, Deobandis had opposed both the Ahl-e Hadith and the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia as heretical, perhaps because of “fear of British reprisal” (in a period of colonial repression of perceived ‘Wahhabis’) and “Deobandi-Barelvi rivalries”. For example, Barelvi scholars had “tried hard to dismiss Deobandis as ‘Wahhabis’” and heretics, so Deobandis felt that they had to act quickly so that “Indian Muslim opinion” did not turn against them. Sikand suggests that this fear may have led the Deobandis to declare in their early years that “Wahhab and his followers [were] outside the Sunni fold”. When the word ‘Wahhabi’ was used to refer to a commitment to eradicating what they considered ‘heresy’, however, they were often happy to accept the ‘Wahhabi’ label, with Muhammad Zakariya of the Tablighi Jama’at even saying once that he was “a more staunch Wahhabi than all of you”. In other words, it would have been more than possible for Deobandis and Ahl-e Hadith to “seek to work together for common purposes”, in spite of their small differences, if the political will had existed.

Only in the late 1970s, however, did the Deobandis really begin to move closer to Saudi Arabia, when they began to gain “new access to Saudi funding” after the Saudi realisation that “Deobandis were far more influential and had a far larger presence than the Ahl-i Hadith, in both Pakistan as well as Afghanistan”. When “Saudi funding began making its way to Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan”, it was clear that the “shared commitment” of the Wahhabis and Deobandis “to a shari’ah-centric Islam [had] made such assistance acceptable to both parties”. These “newly established links with Saudi patrons”, however, soon forced Deobandis, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan, to “reconsider their own position on ‘Wahhabism’ and the Saudi state”. One example of the newfound “flexibility that the Deobandis were willing to display” was a 1978 book titled “The Propaganda against Shaikh Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahhab and Its Impact on the True ‘Ulama’”.

The aforementioned book, coming “at a time when the Deobandis, in both India and Pakistan, were increasingly turning to Saudi patrons”, represented a “**thorough revision of the Deobandi understanding and presentation of Saudi ‘Wahhabism’** and of its founder”. While “several Deobandi elders had bitterly critiqued Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahhab, going so far as to declare him, for all practical terms, as ‘anti-Muslim’”, **the new relationship with Saudi patrons now “called for both an apology and an explanation”** of the previous Deobandi stance on Wahhabism. Receiving “the official approval of several leading Deobandi ‘ulama’”, the book of 1978 sought to ‘prove’ that there was “**actually no**

'difference of principle'... between the Deobandis and the 'Wahhabis', and that 'to a very great extent they [were] united'". Essentially, it hoped to "convince Arab readers, including possible patrons, that the Deobandis were not opposed to Muhammad bin 'Abdul Wahhab and his followers".

Inside the publication, the Saudi regime is presented "in glowing terms", says Sikand, and the Saudi state is proclaimed to be "based on 'Islam, obedience of the shari'ah and the sunnah'", and to be "the 'true heir' of the 'pure Islamic state' established by Ibn Saud". The Saudi king, meanwhile, is even described "as a model Muslim monarch". In short, there was clearly an emphasis, Sikand argues, on minimising "points of difference between 'Wahhabism' and the Deobandi understanding of Islam", while focussing "only on issues on which they are agreed, in order to argue that there were no fundamental differences between the two". In other words, "the fact that, in contrast to the 'Wahhabis', the Deobandis believe in the legitimacy of Sufism, although of a shari'ah-minded sort", was "conveniently ignored", along with other differences.

This deliberate attempt to "conceal the major differences between the Deobandis and the Saudi 'Wahhabis'", Sikand asserts, was a "**reflection of a growing 'Wahhabisation' of Deobandism** under Arab influence". Precisely because of the apparent Deobandi pandering to Saudi elites, however, the book was "met with a swift rebuttal by numerous Ahl-i Hadith scholars", who said there was a "sinister plot" to deliberately distort Deobandi views "in order to win Saudi support" and distract attention away from the 'real supporters' of Wahhabism. Essentially, this aggressive Ahl-e Hadith response to the book, Sikand stresses, was born from a fear that "Saudi assistance to selected Deobandi 'ulama and their schools in India and Pakistan" would lead to "a diminution in their own earnings from generous Arab patrons".

At the same time, Sikand suspects that "Saudi pressure" was actually "behind the escalation of Ahl-i Hadith polemical attacks on the Deobandis" from the 1990s onwards. When Saudi Arabia allowed US troops onto its soil after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, for example, stiff opposition had come from almost all groups in the Indian subcontinent, including the Deobandis. As a result, relations between the Deobandis and the Saudis had begun to "sharply deteriorate, resulting in a massive propaganda campaign conducted by the [Wahhabis] against the Deobandis of South Asia". In the late 1990s, a Pakistani Ahl-e Hadith scholar based in Saudi Arabia even wrote a book in Arabic (which was "widely distributed in Saudi Arabia") in the hope of turning "Saudi opinion, including that of the Saudi state and rich Saudi patrons, against the Deobandis". Openly calling the latter apostates and polytheists, it set a precedent which would be followed by many other "Indian and Pakistani Ahl-i Hadith scholars", and even "Saudi shaikhs", in the years to come.

Written in Arabic and Urdu, the texts mentioned above were allegedly "sponsored, directly or otherwise, by rich Saudi patrons", and claimed that all Hanafis, "including both Deobandis as well as Barelvīs, were not Muslims at all". In fact, some spoke of how they were "totally opposed to Islam", were "fully against the Qur'an and the Hadith", were "identical to the Jews", and had been "invented by Islam's 'enemies' to undermine it". Effectively, they aimed to encourage as many "Arab 'Wahhabi' 'ulama" as possible to reject state support for Deobandi groups.

The Deobandis quickly responded, though, fearing that "such virulent anti-Deobandi propaganda, particularly when conducted inside Saudi Arabia itself, could lead to a complete loss of valuable Saudi as well as other Arab patronage, besides greatly tarnishing the image of the Deobandis throughout the Muslim world". In a "powerful counter-attack", therefore, they churned out "massive quantities of literature to prove that the Ahl-i Hadith had, in actual fact, no liking at all for the 'Wahhabis' of Saudi Arabia and that their

profession of being followers of Muhammad bin ‘Abdul Wahhab was just a clever ruse to attract Saudi money”. The majority of these Deobandi rebuttals were written in Arabic and “directed at an Arab, particularly Saudi, audience”, in the hope of smearing the Ahl-e Hadith as “anti-Islamic”.

According to a leading Indian Barelvi scholar, the bickering of the two ultra-conservative groups was occurring simply because they were “lusting for the oil wealth of Arabia”, while “fighting to claim before the Arabs that each of them alone [represented] the true Wahhabi tradition and that the other [was] wrong”.³⁷² In short, the very nature of each ideology (based on discrimination, hatred, and the monopolisation of Islam according to what they believed was the ‘true path’) was being expressed for the whole world to see, and was threatening to undermine their common cause of violently repressing those who did not share their puritanical and anti-democratic cause.

Democracy Key to Beating Wahhabi Chauvinism

In 2010, Irfan Al-Alawi at the Gatestone Institute spoke of how India’s ‘democracy’ held the key for “moderate Muslims” to assert their rights “against the radical clerics who [had] gained status as representatives of the whole Muslim community”. Both “Saudi-financed Wahhabi radicals” and “Deobandi extremists from Pakistan”, he says, “have gained control of many public institutions relevant to Muslims’ lives”, taking power away from Barelvis (“theological conservatives” who “recognize the Muslim obligation to obey the laws of countries in which Muslims are not a majority”, who are “probably a majority among Indian and Pakistani moderate Muslims”, and who “account for a large share of immigrants in Britain”). Though traditionalists, Al-Alawi asserts, the latter “accept the political realities of modern life”, and are therefore opposed by Deobandi fundamentalists, who preach “violent hatred toward Barelvis and Sufis in general”.

Indian Barelvis, Al-Alawi stresses, have “already begun protesting Wahhabi and Deobandi usurpation of public institutions”, calling “for 10,000 madrassas, shrines, tombs, and other Islamic monuments in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (India’s largest, with a population of nearly 200 million) to be taken out of the hands of the “Wahhabis””. They have also “demanded that the Indian government assure that administrators of the countless religious facilities be named from the 80 percent of Indian moderate Muslims who maintain Sufi traditions”.

According to Al-Alawi, these actions represent the way in which “Muslims living in democratic states like India, Britain, and the U.S. have special **opportunities to expose the expansion of petrol-financed fundamentalism** and to assist those who have pledged to resist it among Muslim communities around the world”. Essentially, he argues, “**the battle for Islamic pluralism... strikes to the heart of Muslim spiritual life**, whether in America, Britain, India, or Pakistan”.³⁷³

III) The Future of the Wahhabi-Deobandi Nexus

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the BBC’s Roger Hardy spoke about how “the character of “Wahhabism”” was being debated with increasing frequency. He mentions in particular that the Russian media, which had already seen the impact of the ideology on separatists in “Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as in Russia itself”, was among the first news sources to talk about ‘Wahhabism’ (at a time when the West still focussed on the “vague and derogatory term [of] “Islamic fundamentalism””. Saudi citizens, meanwhile,

³⁷² <http://sunninews.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/wahabiahle-hadith-deobandi-and-saudi-connection/> and <https://lubbak.com/archives/327067>

³⁷³ <http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/1177/muslims-in-india-taking-back-islam-from-the-wahhabis>

would speak of themselves as “Unitarians” or “believers in one indivisible deity”, while their leaders supported similarly puritanical and discriminatory sects abroad.

In Afghanistan, Hardy insists, there were “some similarities between the Saudi interpretation of Islam and that of the ruling Taleban movement”. Also representing “an unusually strict form of Sunni Islam”, he asserts, their Deobandi movement in fact had “even tighter... restrictions on women... than in Saudi Arabia”. From the very start, he says, Deobandism had included both followers that wished to “remain aloof from politics” and those who were “politically militant”. As such, he stresses, **both Bin Laden’s Wahhabis and the Taliban’s Deobandis represented “a radical fringe, rather than the Sunni mainstream”**.³⁷⁴

Deobandism at a Crossroads

In 2009, New York University’s Luv Puri spoke about how important it was to understand Pashtun society, especially given that it was the “single largest community in Afghanistan, consisting of approximately 38% of the population”, and that it made up fifteen per cent of Pakistani society. As already seen in this section, Deobandism has long been “the most popular form of pedagogy” within the Pashtun community, and Puri asserts that “prominent Afghan and Pakistani Taliban leaders have [all] studied in Deobandi seminaries”. However, the partition of British India in 1947 effectively “severed the institutional links between Deobandi seminaries in Afghanistan and Pakistan and in India”, he says, making it increasingly “difficult for Deobandi scholars in the Pashtun belt to engage in dialogue with their counterparts in Deoband”.

Although “occasional meetings have occurred” between the divided Deobandis since independence, these “have required the approval of both the Pakistani and Indian governments”, and have thus been few and far between, especially as the Indian government has been particularly strict about allowing foreign students into the country since the increase of extremism in Kashmir in the early 1990s (due to its fear that “foreign students might radicalize young Indian Muslims”). Radicalisation is a particular worry for India considering that, with around 160 million Muslim citizens, it has “the third largest Muslim [population] in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan”.

Deobandi scholars in India, like those at Darul Uloom, have actually “taken a hard line in regard to terrorism” in recent years, Puri stresses, with the school in Deoband having even “declared a battle against the forces of religious extremism” in early 2008. At a conference of Islamic scholars at Darul Uloom, a fatwa (or religious edict) was passed “condemning all acts of terrorism in the name of Islam”, emphasising that “Islam has taught its followers to treat all mankind with equality, mercy, tolerance and justice”, and condemning sternly “all types of oppression, violence and terrorism”.

The school’s Maulana Adil Sidique insisted at the event that it was time to “take a stand against the men who wrongfully invoke the name of Deobandi Islam for committing acts of terror”. For Sidique, the Darul Uloom even had the capability to become a “constructive platform” for encouraging “debate, engagement and co-existence with non-Muslims”. One Afghan student at the school (though not from the Pashtun belt), meanwhile, suggested that presenting more Afghans with visas to study in India could actually equip the country’s Muslims with the skills needed to “confront elements that misinterpret Deobandi Islam”.

The reality, however, is that schools like the one in Deoband have much fewer resources at their disposition than those supported by Saudi capital, and depend primarily on

³⁷⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1571144.stm

“donations from the Muslim community”. In other words, the future looked set to be dominated not by the more tolerant Deobandis, but by those inspired by Wahhabism. According to Puri, though, this “ongoing ideological battle” was not over yet, and would “shape events in South Asia, particularly in the Pashtun belt, for years to come”.³⁷⁵

The Seeds of Renewed Extremism

In 2009, Professor Ishtiaq Ahmad of Quaid-i-Azam University wrote about how “the rise of [the] militant Wahhabi-Deobandi Taliban movement in Pakistan’s Afghan border regions” resembled “the growth of [the] violent Wahhabi-Ahle-Hadith movement in northern India at the start of the 19th century”. In *Al-Qaeda and their Taliban allies*, he says, “we see the reincarnation of the thought” prevalent at the start of that century. Both, he insists, found “a violent jihadi sanctuary... in a remote mountainous region with a conservative people sympathetic to the cause”, managing to use it “as a springboard for spreading religious radicalism elsewhere”. At the same time, he says, the movement’s leaders became ‘unique symbols’ of “Islamic resistance and resurgence” for many young ‘men of faith’.

As a result, a “**great majority**” of both groups consisted of “**poor, illiterate and unskilled young men**”, who were “trained and indoctrinated... almost invariably [by] mullahs, older and better-educated” than them. Although the Ahle-Hadith jihadis of nineteenth century India appeared eventually to be “discredited”, in reality they “continued to send their missionaries out into the towns, villages and military cantonments, preaching jihad” along the way. Consequently, this continued radical presence helped to lay the seeds of susceptibility to renewed extremism in the second half of the twentieth century.

According to Suroosh Irfani, Ahmad asserts, the “‘Arabist shift’ in Pakistan’s religious creed” can be traced to the “onset of the Indian Wahhabi movement in the early nineteenth century”. The “Wahhabi-Deobandi nexus” that is “the dominant force of Islamic orthodoxy in Pakistan and Afghanistan today”, meanwhile, has even led to the “radicalization of hitherto ‘moderate’ religious sensibilities”, including some Barelvi groups.³⁷⁶ Nonetheless, even the conservative Imam Ahmed Raza Academy of South Africa (linked to Indian Barelvi jurist Akhtar Raza Khan) condemned “Wahabi, Deobandi, Tablighi, [and] Salafi sects” as “the biggest threat to Islam” today. The “corrupt beliefs” of these groups, the academy said, proved that they had “no true love for the Holy Prophet” and were in fact his “greatest insulters”.³⁷⁷

Feeling “hemmed in by Deobandi and Wahhabi hegemony”, though, there was indeed a “Barelvi backlash”, taking the form of “the Sunni Tehreek – a militant movement that surfaced in 1992 for protecting Barelvi mosques and interests against the onslaught of the Deobandi SSP and the Wahhabi Lashkar-e-Tayyeba”. In the end, “the largest Barelvi religious-political party, the Jamiyat-e-Ulema-e-Pakistan (JUP) ended up doing what its more radical rivals had desisted from”, with its Secretary-General putting his name down “on Osama bin Laden’s fatwa of February 23, 1998, calling on Muslims to kill Americans and their allies “everywhere””.

In short, Ahmad asserts, Pakistan faces a “mortal danger” (as it has for decades) “from the very radical forces who had opposed its creation” and who still sought to “hijack its founding destiny as a progressive, tolerant and democratic nation”.³⁷⁸ In July 2013, however, Pakistani PPP Senator Faisal Abidi “criticised the Saudi Arabian monarchy... and other Salafist countries where discriminatory policies [had] been made against Sunni Barelvis and Shia Muslims”, showing that there were still forces in Pakistan committed to exposing

³⁷⁵ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-past-and-future-of-deobandi-islam>

³⁷⁶ http://www.ishtiaqahmad.com/item_display.aspx?listing_id=467&listing_type=1

³⁷⁷ http://www.raza.org.za/articles_wahabi_people.html

³⁷⁸ http://www.ishtiaqahmad.com/item_display.aspx?listing_id=467&listing_type=1

injustices committed by Wahhabis and their allies. In fact, he even said that a number of Pakistan's terrorist groups were actively supported by "some parties who [were] financed by [the] Kingdom of Saudi Arabia".³⁷⁹ Such links, however, require much more publicity than they currently receive.

Majority Sufis Weak Compared to the Wahhabi-Deobandi Nexus

In 2010, columnist Sadia Dehlvi interviewed academic Yoginder Sikand about how "the public face of Islam" was being increasingly associated "with the dry and literalist Wahhabi and Deobandi versions". According to Sikand, **this shift began "with the discovery of oil in Arabia", which proved "to be a curse for Muslims"**, seeing the Saudi State export Wahhabism around the Muslim World in an attempt to bolster its own legitimacy (which lacked popularity at home). The conversion of Indian (and other) migrants in the Gulf, meanwhile, also gave Wahhabism "a big boost", helping it to spread elsewhere when the workers returned home. At the same time, Sikand says, Saudi embassies often "act as centres to promote or outsource Wahhabism, funding local Wahhabi institutions, publications and propagandists".

He also emphasises, however, that "**the silent majority of Muslims are not Wahhabi at all**", with most still "associated with Sufi traditions in some way or the other", which he considers "authentic Islam". Even in Saudi Arabia, he stresses, Wahhabis have found it difficult to "stamp out Sufism", especially in the Hijaz area of the country. For him, the "alliance between the mullahs of the Wahhabi Al-e Shaikh and the rulers of Saudi Arabia, the Al-e Saud" is similar to "the oppressive nexus between the Christian Church and the monarchy in medieval Europe".

In part, Sikand says, Wahhabi prominence in the public sphere is rooted in the fact that, "**unlike the Wahhabis, the followers of Sufism are not well-organised**", do not "**have massive funds at their disposal**", and "**are not combative**". The latter simply "believe in moderation, not in aggressively converting others to their way of thinking", and refrain from branding "other Muslims as apostates" because of their belief that "it is for God to guide people". At the same time, Sikand insists, "Sufi khanqahs or hospices, which were for centuries centres of instruction and spiritual training, have largely disappeared", with only shrines remaining. In comparison, **Wahhabism and Deobandism have placed great emphasis on education**.³⁸⁰

In November 2014, the Shia Public Affairs Committee (ShiaPAC) spoke of how increasing support for ISIS in the world had been "abetted in no uncertain proportions by **well-funded Wahhabi and Salafi madrassas** that continue to proliferate in the West". For ShiaPAC, the problem facing the world was "not Islam the religion but fundamentalist Islam, which is an ideology". All of "the violent strands of Islam in today's world", the committee insists, "are invariably spun from the same ideology in various guises like Takfiri Salafism, Wahhabism, and Deobandism". The world, it says, needs to "stop tolerating such indoctrination of intolerance in our midst", and needs to **cut off the "ideological supply lines" of extremism, which are "mainly funded by Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arabs"**.³⁸¹

Wahhabi-Sponsored Madrassas and the Vacuum of Neoliberalism

For Ray Robison at The American Thinker, those who talk of "Islamic extremism" are usually referring to Wahhabism, though the latter also "carried its power and influence to

³⁷⁹ <http://www.shiiteneews.org/index.php/shiiteneews/pakistan/senator-faisal-abedi-says-salafi-wahhabi-deobandi-takfiris-are-remnants-of-lawrence-of-arabia>

³⁸⁰ <http://news.rediff.com/slide-show/2010/jun/01/slide-show-1-interview-with-sadia-dehlvi-on-sufism.htm>

³⁸¹ <http://ifut.org/2014/11/fundamentalist-islam-or-takfiri-fascism-of-deobandism-wahhabism-and-salafism-threatens-the-west/> and <http://www.shiapac.org/2014/11/18/fundamentalist-islam-or-takfiri-fascism-of-deobandism-wahhabism-and-salafism-threatens-the-west/>

Pakistan”, affecting the Deobandi movement there. During the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, he says, “many of the terrorist training madrassas in Pakistan [fell] under Deobandi influence”.³⁸² In 2005, the New Statesman’s William Dalrymple reported on these madrassas, speaking about how “tribal leader” and “wily lawyer” Javed Paracha had built “two enormous madrasas..., the first of which he [said had] produced many of the younger leaders of the Taliban”. According to Paracha, the books, food, education, and accommodation in his madrassas (**the “only form of education” in the “poor and backward area”** he lived in) were all free. “The government system is simply not here”, he insists, adding that “there are 200,000 jobless degree holders in this country” and that “people want radical change”. In his madrassas, he stresses, **students are taught that “only Islam can provide the justice they seek”**.

Dalrymple emphasises that the “madrasa-driven change in political attitudes” spoken about by Javed Paracha was “being reproduced across Pakistan”, with an Interior Ministry report revealing that there were “27 times as many madrasas in the country as there were in 1947”. Barelvism, he claims, “is now deeply out of fashion”, and has been “overtaken by the sudden rise of the more hardline reformist Deobandi, Wahhabi and Salafi strains of the faith that are increasingly dominant over swaths of the country”. The “sharp acceleration in the number of these madrasas”, he says, started under the regime of General Zia in the late 70s and 1980s, when it “was financed mainly by Saudi donors” and its CIA patrons.

Today, “an estimated 800,000 to one million students [are] enrolled in Pakistan's madrasas”, which represent a “free Islamic education system existing parallel to the increasingly moribund state sector, in which a mere 1.8 per cent of Pakistan's GDP is spent on government schools” (whose “statistics are dire”). Simply speaking, **Saudi-funded madrassas present overwhelming competition for underfunded state schools** in Pakistan (forty per cent of which have no running water and seventy-one per cent of which have no electricity).

With the country’s literacy at 42 per cent (“and falling”) when Dalrymple wrote, it was clear that **“many of the country's poorest people who want their children's advancement have no option but to place the children in the madrasa system where they are guaranteed a conservative and outdated, but nonetheless free education”**. As a result, madrassas in Pakistan had become “more dominant” than “anywhere else” in the world, though “the general trend” towards madrasa education was becoming “common across the Islamic world”, primarily due to IMF-backed austerity measures, government corruption, and the distribution of immense Saudi proselytising funds.

As “the terrifyingly ultra-conservative Taliban regime was unquestionably the product of Pakistan’s madrasas”, says Dalrymple, the system came under rhetorical attacks after 9/11, even though much of the regime’s leadership had been “trained at just one madrasa: the Haqqaniya at Akora Khattak”. Nonetheless, little was done to curb the power or presence of Wahhabi-funded madrassas in the Muslim World (partly because state schools would need to receive significant injections of money in order to replace such prominent institutions, and such funding would go against the creed of neoliberal political elites backed by the West).

Pakistan’s Reactionary Madrassas are not the Main Problem

In the run up to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, The Daily Telegraph and The Times claimed that Al-Qaeda was a “state-sponsored puppet... moving to the tug of Saddam's Ba’athist string-pulling” (an assertion that was completely false and not at all based on credible evidence).

³⁸² http://www.americanthinker.com/articles/2006/10/fallujah_baathist_and_wahhabis.html

French political scientist Gilles Kepel, meanwhile, insisted that the Wahhabi group was simply “a database that connected jihadists around the world via the internet”. The US-led ‘anti-terrorist’ coalition, however, chose to justify its actions by using the unsubstantiated nonsense uttered by the Western mainstream media (and most probably created by forces within the coalition itself). And by targeting the nations it considered to be “sponsors of terrorism” (a definition which this chapter has already shown to be motivated significantly more by politics than by facts), the West effectively turned itself “into al-Qaeda's most effective recruiting agency”.

Al-Qaeda’s more legitimate grievances, therefore, were pushed under the carpet, and its actions were said to be totally “unconnected to America's Middle Eastern policies” (in spite of Bin Laden’s 1996 declaration of war, which emphasised not a cultural or religious battle but a “very specifically political” one – against “US support for the House of Saud and Israel”). With reality largely concealed, erroneous arguments soon filled the vacuum. One of these was the “the idea that madrasas [were] one of the principal engines” of Wahhabi terrorism (an “assumption that begins to wobble when subjected to serious analysis”, according to Dalrymple).

Madrasas are indeed “fundamentalist in their approach to the scriptures”, says Dalrymple, tending as they do to subscribe “to the least pluralistic and most hardline strains of Islamic thought”. In fact, an estimated “15 per cent of Pakistan's madrasas preach violent jihad, while a few have even been known to provide covert military training”. However, “producing cannon-fodder for the Taliban and graduating local sectarian thugs”, he stresses, “is not at all the same as producing [a] technically literate al-Qaeda terrorist” capable of “horrifyingly sophisticated attacks”.

Quoting “a number of recent studies”, Dalrymple emphasises that “**there is an important and fundamental distinction to be made between most madrasa graduates - who tend to be pious villagers from economically impoverished backgrounds, possessing very little technical sophistication - and the sort of middle-class politically literate global Salafi jihadis who plan al-Qaeda operations around the world**”. In fact, most of the latter are actually said to have had “secular, scientific or technical backgrounds”, with very few having graduated out of madrasas.

The truth is, Dalrymple says, that the men who “planned and carried out” the attacks of 9/11 were actually “highly educated middle-class professionals” and, according to Kepel, “**the new breed of global jihadis are not the urban poor of the developing world**”, but “**the privileged children of an unlikely marriage between Wahhabism and Silicon Valley**”. The primary concern of graduates from the Deobandi madrasas, meanwhile, is not “opposing non-Muslims or the west - the central concern of the Salafi jihadis”, but “fostering what they see as proper Islamic behaviour at home”.

There is indeed cause for criticising many of the “depressingly narrow-minded Wahhabi-like” Deobandi madrasas of Pakistan, Dalrymple argues, but some (like the massive Darul Uloom madrasa in Karachi) are actually “surprisingly sophisticated places”, with the aforementioned school resembling “a cross between a five-star hotel and a rather upmarket, modern university campus”. Although it is puritanical, he insists, “it is clear that the Darul Uloom performs, as do many Pakistani madrasas, an important service - especially in a country where 58 per cent of the vast population, and 72 per cent of women, are illiterate and half the population never see the inside of a school at all”. In short, they “provide the poor with a way of gaining literacy and a real hope of advancing themselves” while, “in certain traditional subjects... the teaching can [even] be outstanding”.

As “has been repeatedly shown”, Dalrymple highlights, only “a small proportion [of madrassas] are obviously militant”. Therefore, closing all madrassas down without creating an educative alternative “would simply relegate large chunks of the population to illiteracy and ignorance”. At the same time, Dalrymple speaks of how some Deobandi madrassas have actually “effectively tackled both the problems of militancy and of educational backwardness”. In India, for example, such colleges “have no track record of producing violent Islamists, and are strictly apolitical and quietist”.

The Jamia Milia University in New Delhi, for instance, “at least 50 per cent of whose intake comes from a madrasa background, is generally reckoned to be one of India's most prestigious and successful centres of higher education”. Historian Seema Alavi, who has taught at the university, told Dalrymple about how there was “little difference between her students educated at secular schools and those educated in madrasas - except perhaps that those from madrasas [were] better able to memorise coursework, but [were] less practised at analysing and processing information”. In other words, **“it is not madrasas per se that are the problem, so much as the militant atmosphere and indoctrination taking place in a handful of notorious centres of ultra-radicalism** such as Binori Town or Akora Khattak”.

Finally, Dalrymple speaks of a conversation he had with education expert Pervez Hoodbhoy, who spoke about how, since joining the staff at Quaid-e-Azam University (“by far the most liberal... in Pakistan”) in the 1970s, “there [had] been a general decline in educational standards” and an increase in the normality of “beards, burkas and hijabs”. In his opinion, there had been a “mad, unthinking rush towards religiosity” in the country, and the **“only long-term solution” was to improve “secular government schools”**, as they were “so bad” in 2005 that “even where they [existed], no one [would] willingly go to them”. Most poignantly, however, he asserts that **“the biggest problem we have... is the US”, whose “actions in Iraq and Afghanistan have hugely strengthened the hands of the extremists** and depleted the strength of those who want to see a modern, non-fundamentalist future for this country”.³⁸³

Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, the government of the United States has no ability to claim any moral high ground in the Middle East, or anywhere else for that matter. With just a basic knowledge of its historic, self-interested interference in the region, we can see very clearly that its rhetoric (focussing on noble concepts such as freedom, justice, peace, or human rights) simply rings hollow. Its self-imposed role as the world’s police force and ideological leader is, in reality, not built on any of these principles, but on the principle of maintaining and expanding the economic hegemony of US elites in the world.

Islamism, meanwhile, whether in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia or Shia Iran, is not an alternative. Although the latter often displays anti-imperialist rhetoric, I have shown in this chapter that, essentially, it can only be considered a reactionary force at home and (to a lesser extent) abroad. If we talk in relative terms, however, Saudi-style Islamism must be recognised as a much more dangerous and reactionary ideology than that of Iran’s Islamists, with the state sponsors of Wahhabi evangelism having contributed to the creation of the most violent and discriminatory form of Islamism to exist in the world today. As I have previously demonstrated, however, the propagation of Wahhabism would not be possible without the continued support of the West.

In summary, the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis is not the biggest enemy of justice in the Middle East, but neither is it a progressive or truly anti-imperialist force. [More on the specific

³⁸³ <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/international-politics/2014/04/inside-islams-terror-schools>

arguments regarding the Syrian Civil War will be considered in Chapter 9.] The most powerful enemy of justice in the region (and the world) is imperialism, and the capitalist interests it represents. Although Saudi Arabia is not simply a lackey of Western imperialism, its system would almost certainly collapse if the West's support for it was taken away. Therefore, it cannot be considered the greatest threat to justice in the world, even though the chauvinist sectarianism it spreads through its Wahhabi missionary activities is indeed an incredibly toxic force in the Muslim World.

In Chapter Six, I will look in more detail at the effect that Wahhabism (and its imperialist benefactors) has had on the Middle East so far in the twenty-first century, in an attempt to prove yet again the reactionary role that Saudi Arabia has played in the region (and has continued to play since 9/11). In Chapter Seven, meanwhile, I will explain how the Saudi regime's participation in the radicalisation of the anti-Assad forces in the Syrian Civil War subsequently led to the growth of ISIS.

6) The 21st Century Imperialist Assault on the Middle East

With the events of 9/11, Western citizens were finally exposed to the phenomenon of Wahhabism (even if political elites chose to give it another name to protect the reputation of its Saudi allies). The mainstream media, however, would avoid discussing how important Wahhabi extremists had been to imperialist interests during the Cold War, partly because the US Republican government of George W. Bush was now committed to blundering into the Middle East to get rid of 'unfriendly' regimes there (which were not actually responsible for the terrorist attacks on US soil and had, in reality, gained power as a result of previous Western support, as a reaction to excessive Western interference in the region, or as a combination of both).

The Cold War may have been over, but "the brutal, blood-stained nature of Uncle Sam [went] back all the way to the so-called 'Founding Fathers'", and wasn't much closer to fading away. Even in 1818, for example, John Quincy Adams had spoken of the "salutary efficacy" of terror in dealing with 'mingled hordes of lawless Indians and negroes', in an attempt to defend "Andrew Jackson's frenzied operations in Florida which virtually wiped out the indigenous population" there.³⁸⁴ US leaders may have gradually learned to be more careful about the language they used (and especially about how they used the word 'terror'), in the hope that the world would believe they were advocates of the just principles of freedom and democracy, but they actually never stopped terrorising foreign populations in their search to secure the economic interests of the US bourgeoisie.

While the coalition invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the NATO intervention in Libya, and the Western-backed destabilisation of Syria were all officially 'democratic' and 'humanitarian' missions, only Afghanistan had been in the hands of a regime with a puritanical political philosophy similar to that of the perpetrators of the September 11th attacks. Saudi Arabia, however, as a state which had the same ideology as the terrorists, was not considered part of the axis of evil that supposedly had to be destroyed in order to ensure that no further attacks would occur on US soil. In fact, it even continued to be one of the USA's closest allies in the Muslim World, in spite of the US establishment's awareness of the links between Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and the Wahhabi terrorists of Al-Qaeda who were responsible for the deaths of almost 3,000 people in the USA.

Although Saudi Arabia's US-backed 'Wahhabisation' of Afghan Deobandis in the 1980s eventually led to the creation of the Taliban, there were actually very few links between the latter and Al-Qaeda. The two groups did organise "periodic alliances", but they essentially "resented each other and kept apart with a great deal of animosity". In fact, Taliban founder Mullah Omar even "opposed the international activities of Osama bin Laden".³⁸⁵ While the Taliban "publicly condemned the attacks" on the USA, however, it refused to hand Bin Laden over to the superpower, demanding first that it present "evidence... regarding Bin Laden's alleged involvement". In spite of the fact that Mullah Omar had "signalled that the Taliban were ready for talks", President Bush "remained resolute in its refusal to negotiate", simply asserting "we know he's guilty" (referring to Bin Laden). At the same time, British Prime Minister Tony Blair would assert (with no evidence) that the "Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda network [had] virtually merged", and that there was therefore "no negotiating with them".³⁸⁶

The invasion of Afghanistan (bolstered by popular anger and fear in the West rather than by evidence or reason) would effectively mark the start of a rapid deterioration in global politics, and a return to the climate of 'external enemies' which had reigned during the Cold

³⁸⁴ <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/SAN210A.html> and http://coat.ncf.ca/articles/links/richard_helms_october_2002.htm

³⁸⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/blake-fleetwood/the-taliban-is-not-al-qaee_b_5455252.html

³⁸⁶ http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/the_us_refuses_to_negotiate_with_the_taliban

War. Believing they were on a roll, and that there would be no significant opposition from their respective populations, Western elites then launched attacks (directly or indirectly) on other 'unfriendly' regimes in the Muslim World (which were actually opposed to the growth of Wahhabi extremism). In short, these interventions could only realistically be described as cynical attempts to use the momentum of the 'war on terror' to destroy as many opponents to Western hegemony in the region as possible. In this chapter, I will analyse the destructive impact that the senseless and self-interested actions of Western elites have had on the Muslim World since the start of the twenty-first century, and how they have actually contributed to the rise of Wahhabi extremism rather than to its destruction.

A) The Invasion of Afghanistan

How Did Deobandi Militants Take Control of Afghanistan?

As seen in Chapters One and Five, US interference in Afghanistan did not begin in 2001. Its interest in the country had increased significantly twenty three years before, when Soviet-style 'communists' rose to power in the Saur Revolution and threatened to provide an example that people in surrounding nations (which were generally under the rule of pro-US regimes) may have wished to follow. In the following years, the new regime would implement 'progressive' measures, which both alienated more conservative sectors of Afghan society and scared Western economic elites.

For example, an agrarian reform would see "679,567 hectares of land... distributed to 308,210 peasant families" by 1984 (most of which had been "taken from 7,000 big landlords who [had previously] possessed more than 40 hectares of land each, and from 28,000 petty landlords who [had] possessed from 6.1 up to 40 hectares each"). Also, peasant loans and mortgages would be exempted, water reforms implemented, peasant cooperatives established, and literacy programs launched (which "planned to eradicate illiteracy by the year 1986 in urban areas and by 1990 all over Afghanistan"). In spite of their authoritarianism and strategic failures, therefore, the ruling 'communists' had set about implementing some truly progressive reforms in the country.

The Saur Revolution, however, "found itself surrounded by imperialism and a variety of hostile countries from the Middle East and South Asia to Iran and China". In short, it was "simultaneously isolated and encircled within the geographical limits of Afghanistan and attacked from outside". When covert US action resulted in the Soviet invasion of the country in late 1979, "the US and its allies" began to channel "billions of dollars to... counterrevolutionary mercenaries", which happened to be Deobandis who shared many ideas with the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia (as seen in Chapter Five). The hope of this US-Islamist alliance was to "extinguish every left-wing force from the Afghan political scene once and for all", and not only the Soviet-backed communists in government. Even in 2013, says Global Research's Fraidoun Amel, "the West and their fundamentalist allies, fearing [a re-emergence] of the left", were financing "TV channels and other outlets inside and outside Afghanistan" that were "engaged in malicious propaganda against "communism"".

The USA's allies in Afghanistan were "Islamist fundamentalists and extremists from the Middle East and North Africa" (a number of whom "were convicted criminals" who had been released on the condition that they would fight against communists in Afghanistan). Its mercenaries also came from "madrassas run by the Pakistani ruling classes" and funded by Saudi Arabia. With quasi-religious zeal and a jihadi mentality, these fighters soon managed to exploit the fact that the "faction-ridden" leadership of the Saur Revolution "was based on a shaky unity of antagonistic trends". In fact, the strength of the Deobandi/Wahhabi resistance and the internal divisions in the Afghan regime meant that a "reactionary trend

within the bureaucratically centralized [government] was strong enough" in the mid-1980s "to assume leadership of the revolution".

The new elites of the Saur Revolution began to "retreat from the revolutionary course both internally and internationally", in the hope that they could preserve themselves from what now looked like an inevitable Islamist victory in Afghanistan. Their almost **complete dependence on Soviet assistance**, however, meant that the Revolution had now become "even more vulnerable" than it had been before. The "Soviet bureaucracy", meanwhile, "did not have a genuine internationalist foreign policy" (being built on more of a "chauvinistic basis"), and would soon leave the Saur regime and its supporters to fend for themselves (and face their foreseeable defeat alone).

Essentially, the Revolution's "spontaneous and healthy development as a popular mass movement" had been significantly undermined by its increasing "patron-client-like dependency... on the Soviet bureaucracy". Afghanistan's "oppressed masses", meanwhile, began to see their government as "something alien and foreign" because of its "**dogmatic attachment... to the official soviet ideology**". In fact, the regime had also become **bogged down in "patriotism and Afghan nationalism"**, fundamentally following "in the footsteps of Stalinism" by supporting a "two-stage theory of revolution". Calling itself a "national-democratic revolution", it now asserted that socialism was simply the "strategic goal to be achieved [in the] distant future only once the bourgeois-democratic stage had been accomplished".³⁸⁷

The Rise of the Taliban

Whatever the failures of the Saur Revolution may have been, however, the USA's Deobandi protégées would soon turn Afghanistan into a significantly more oppressive place. Emerging from the chaos caused by the US-backed insurgency, the predominantly Pashtun Taliban arose "in the early 1990s in northern Pakistan", and became prominent in Afghanistan "in the autumn of 1994". Having studied in Pakistani "religious seminaries" paid for with Saudi money, its leaders promised Pashtun inhabitants in Pakistan and Afghanistan a restoral of "peace and security" under their "austere version of Sharia, or Islamic law".

Afghans in Pashtun areas, meanwhile, were "weary of the mujahideen's excesses and infighting", and "generally welcomed the Taliban" because of its "success in stamping out corruption, curbing lawlessness and making the roads and the areas under [its] control safe for commerce to flourish". This popularity subsequently allowed the group to spread its influence, and it captured "the province of Herat, bordering Iran, in September 1995". Within a year, its militants had captured Kabul and, by 1998, were "they were in control of almost 90% of Afghanistan".

In power, the organisation soon introduced "public executions of convicted murderers and adulterers and amputations of those found guilty of theft". Traditional gender roles, meanwhile, were enforced, with men being "required to grow beards" and women being forced to "wear the all-covering burka". At the same time, music, films, and TV programmes were banned, and girls "aged 10 and over" were strongly discouraged from attending school. The regime also showed its intolerance for other religious groups in the country, destroying for example "the famous Bamiyan Buddha statues in central Afghanistan" in 2001. In fact, the international community constantly accused it of a number of "human rights and cultural abuses". Nonetheless, US allies Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE all

³⁸⁷ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/permanent-occupation-imperialism-in-afghanistan-past-and-present/5341442>

immediately recognised the Taliban government, and Pakistan would be “the last country to break diplomatic ties” with the group.³⁸⁸

The War Path of the US Government after 9/11

Irish political group Socialist Democracy (SD) says that, in spite of the apocalyptic rhetoric of the US government after 9/11, “**the cleavage between the post-September 11th world and that which existed before [was] not so profound**”. Far from being an unplanned response to terrorist aggression, it insists, the US invasion of Afghanistan simply represented “an **intensification of a long-term imperialist offensive**”. In other words, it was not merely a spontaneous response to the attacks on US soil and citizens.

The fact that President Bush’s “axis of evil” speech identified “Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as the prime enemies of the US”, meanwhile, although “none of these states were connected to the September 11th attacks”, showed clearly that the so-called “War on Terror” actually had “a much wider agenda”. In reality, the biggest similarity between the countries named by Bush was that they were “not under US control”, and were thus “examples of defiance to US power”. The War on Terror’s real aim, therefore, was to marginalise anyone who resisted US domination by exploiting the anger and fear of the US population in order to gain sufficient support. In other words, its purpose was to shore up the “dominant position” of the USA and its allies in the world by “eliminating any sources of opposition”.

Essentially, this imperialist onslaught would oversee “military penetration of the US into areas of the globe where it previously did not have a presence”, such as the “13 new military bases” built in Georgia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. As countries which had emerged from the former Soviet Union, these would be key allies if the USA really wanted to “erode Russian influence and gain greater access to Caspian Sea oil and gas resources”. Meanwhile, the establishment of a military presence in the area would work not only to push Russia out of the market, but also to get physically closer to China (as part of a containment policy that would be crucial if China were ever to resort to military means to get the USA to pay off its huge debts).

A Pentagon report (leaked shortly after the War on Terror began) revealed that “contingency plans for nuclear attacks on seven different countries” were being developed. On this list, China and Russia were the biggest targets, followed by Bush’s “axis of evil” (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea), and then by Libya and Syria. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, was not a target, and nor was any other pro-Western dictatorship in the Gulf. In short, **it was never terrorism that the USA and its allies opposed, but national sovereignty**. Amidst the development of global capitalism after the fall of the USSR, it was the latter that was truly an obstacle, and not the former.

According to SD, Lenin’s view of imperialism being driven by competition between capitalist states was now becoming outdated, and it was German Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky’s concept of “ultra-imperialism” that now seemed to be much more appropriate. With capital now moving throughout the world with great ease (thanks to the growth of the internet in the 1990s), the group insists, “the connection between capital and the nation state was [now] being broken down”. As a result, it argues, the “likelihood of conflict” between the world’s big capitalist states reduced significantly, while the prospect of war between global capitalist coalitions and states resisting imperialist hegemony increased.

In the second half of the twentieth century, SD asserts, the USA managed to achieve hegemony in the world by “making other capitalist states, particularly potential rivals,

³⁸⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11451718>

dependent upon its power". For example, it had "built up the economies of Western Europe and Japan after the Second World War", had "provided them with a military shield", and had "guarded their interests in strategic areas of the world such as the Middle East". Meanwhile, "the ruling class of many nations" turned to the USA as the "ultimate guarantor of security" in a capitalist world facing the threat of progressive measures from Soviet-style 'communist' movements. Effectively, a global capitalist front had been established, with the USA at its helm.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, "**the role of the US as supervisor of world capitalism [has been] increasingly challenged**", especially with the meteoric rise of state capitalism in China. In Europe, meanwhile, the EU project in the early 1990s sought greater continental integration and "the development of a distinct European political, military and economic position". The launch of the euro, for example, posed the "first significant challenge to US financial power since the 1920's when the dollar replaced sterling as the main international currency". Seeking the "enhancement of the power of centralised decision making bodies", and the absorption of neighbouring countries into the EU, the Nice Treaty had essentially laid "the basis for a common European security and foreign policy". For the USA, such concepts could have been dangerous for US hegemony in the world, and could eventually have led to the creation of an "alternative to dependence on the US-led NATO" (the need for which was seen during the Kosovo Crisis in the late 1990s).

The 2001 Invasion of Afghanistan

After the September 11th attacks in the USA, "there was no single European position" on what support should be given for a US-led invasion of Afghanistan, and "policy was determined at a national level", though in the end a number of countries backed the USA's military campaign. While Russia and China initially favoured the assault (as they were struggling to deal with their own Wahhabi-inspired opposition groups), they would eventually become much more critical of US actions, especially regarding what they saw as the "military encroachment on their borders".³⁸⁹

In spite of the longstanding US-Islamist alliance in the world (and particularly in Afghanistan just over a decade before), the Taliban were the first to be singled out for the September 11th attacks in 2001, being "accused of providing a sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda movement who were blamed for the attacks". Refusing to consider (or tell the American public about) the devastating effect that invading Afghanistan would have on both the region and the USA itself, the Bush regime went ahead with its invasion of the country, driving the Taliban out of power successfully by December 2001.

Being experienced themselves in guerrilla combat, Taliban leaders knew that it would be better for them to retreat quickly, and thus "limit their human and material losses and return with a vengeance" later on. The group's leader Mullah Omar, for example, who was "a village clergyman who [had] lost his right eye" in the fighting of the 1980s, was not caught by the US-led coalition. Together with Afghanistan's ancient tradition of anti-imperialist resistance, Omar's survival effectively meant that even an escalation in the number of foreign troops in the country could not stop the Taliban from steadily extending their influence and "rendering vast tracts of Afghanistan insecure" in the years that followed the invasion. Far from destroying Wahhabi-inspired Islamism in the country, therefore, the invaders had actually strengthened it, helped to justify its existence, and increased the popularity of militant groups like Al-Qaeda even more.

³⁸⁹ <http://www.socialistdemocracy.org/News&AnalysisInternational/News&AnalysisIntUSImperialismAfterAfghanistan.htm>

Although there is a lack of statistics, roadside bombs placed by Deobandis and Wahhabis (to resist NATO and its Afghan trainees) were said to have been “responsible for killing most of [the] 1,800 Afghan national police personnel who died in 2012”, along with “about 900 Afghan National Army soldiers”.³⁹⁰ Meanwhile, “as of February 2014, at least 21,000 civilians [were] estimated to have died violent deaths as a result of the war”, mostly as a result of coalition activity,³⁹¹ though The Guardian reported in 2002 that “as many as 20,000 people could have died as a direct or indirect result of the invasion” after only the first year of conflict.³⁹²

There were consequences of the military action elsewhere too, with India accusing Pakistan of orchestrating a “gun attack on its parliament by Kashmiri militants” in December 2001. The country “demanded that Pakistan disband the military groups that were based in its territory and hand over suspects or face military action”, just as Bush had demanded of Afghanistan. As such, it was up to the USA (which had set the precedent) to intervene to “put pressure on both sides to pull back” from the brink of war. While the United States were uncomfortable with other nations launching their own ‘wars on terror’, however, the fact was that they also had to protect Pakistan (as their “long term ally in the sub-continent”). Having already been weakened by its complicity with the US attack against the Taliban, a conflict with India would possibly have led to the collapse of the Pakistani regime (and subsequently to the weakening of the USA’s own position in the region). In other words, such a war had to be stopped in order to protect the interests of US elites.

Israel, meanwhile, was strengthened by the USA’s assault on Afghanistan, and exploited the Bush regime’s ‘terror’ rhetoric to “intensify the repression of Palestinians”, and even “compare Yasser Arafat with Bin Laden”. In its attempts to place its actions “within the bounds of the US campaign to defeat “terrorism””, however, the Zionist State simply intensified anger among the region’s Arabs. These events also had a negative impact on the country’s sponsors in the United States, and on “the pro-US Arab regimes like Egypt and Jordan”. In fact, even Saddam Hussein, as an outspoken critic of Israel, managed to “boost his standing in the Arab world” as a result, significantly reducing the likelihood of Arab states participating meaningfully in a Western invasion of Iraq.

B) The Invasion of Iraq

Anti-War Movements Fail to Stop the Invasion

When the USA and its allies finally invaded Iraq in 2003, there was predictably much less unity between the world’s capitalist powers. Many governments knew that deposing Saddam could “destabilise the Middle East even more”, leaving opportunistic Islamists (rather than Ba’athists and Arab nationalists) as the main opponents of pro-US and pro-Zionist regimes in the region. At the same time, the USA’s record in Afghanistan did not exactly instil faith in yet another aggressive invasion. The Taliban insurgency, for example, was increasing in strength, while the US-installed regime lacked legitimacy and suffered from “increasing factionalism” (with each warlord involved in overthrowing the Taliban now fighting “to extend his own power”). In short, the country was rapidly falling into a “new civil war”, and anyone with a decent knowledge of Iraqi sectarian dynamics could have easily predicted that the installation of a US puppet regime in Iraq would have had exactly the same impact as in Afghanistan (if not worse).

SD insists that the new imperialist assault (under the name of the “War on Terror”) could only have been stopped by a “powerful opposition movement”. However, while there were

³⁹⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11451718>

³⁹¹ <http://costsofwar.org/article/afghan-civilians>

³⁹² <http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/how-many-afghan-civilians-have-died-in-13-years-of-war-lkcu0v6Le>

giant marches against the invasion, they proved not to be enough to stop a number of Western regimes from supporting the USA's capitalist conquest. At the same time, the shadow of 9/11 in the United States (and the "patriotic fervour" that had been whipped up by the government in its wake) prevented a significant opposition campaign from emerging, allowing the Bush Administration to continue with its reckless, destructive activities abroad. According to SD, for "an anti-war campaign to maintain itself", it would have needed significant awareness of all the factors that had led to the war and of all the potential effects of military action. The anti-war movement, it argues, "should be [actively] developing alternative solutions to the ones proposed and imposed by imperialism", which could only happen if it has sufficient understanding of the roots of the conflict. In short, a serious challenge to the "ongoing imperialist offensive" would only be posed if the movement openly adopted socialist politics.³⁹³

A Deceitful and Humiliating Assault

In 2003, Indian writer and activist Arundhati Roy gave a talk in Washington, DC, in which she spoke about how the Invasion of Iraq had been "incinerating and humiliating" the "ancient civilization" of the country. In particular, she points out the ignorance of US soldiers by quoting one who had ignorantly said "I wanna take revenge for 9/11", as if Saddam had actually played a part in that terrorist attack. Even worse, she insists, is that, according to a New York Times/CBS News survey at the time, around "42 percent of the American public believed that Saddam Hussein was directly responsible" for the terrorist attacks of 2001.

Roy emphasises that "none of this opinion is based on evidence (because there isn't any)", and that it was fuelled by "outright lies circulated by the US corporate media". In fact, she says, a "**multi-tiered edifice of falsehood and deceit**" was "**coordinated by the US government and faithfully amplified by the press**". As there was a "manufactured frenzy about Iraq's [non-existent] weapons of mass destruction", she argues, established facts simply went out of the window, while "an ancient civilization [was] casually decimated by a very recent, casually brutal nation".

The brutality of the USA and its allies, Roy stresses, was shown in the fact that the invasion came after a "decade of war and sanctions" against Iraq (as seen in Chapter Three), in which "American and British forces fired thousands of missiles and bombs on Iraq", while shelling "Iraq's fields and farmlands... with 300 tons of depleted uranium". She reminds the world that "water treatment plants" were "targeted and destroyed" during this period, all in the full awareness that "they could not be repaired without foreign assistance". She also describes how there was "a fourfold increase in cancer among children" in southern Iraq, and how "civilians were denied medicine, hospital equipment, ambulances, [and] clean water" as a result of the quarrel between the West and Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.

In the run up to the 2003 invasion, Roy explains, "about half a million Iraqi children died as a result of the sanctions", all while "the corporate media played a sterling role in keeping news of the devastation of Iraq and its people away from the American public". Considering this context, she insists, the "**US invasion of Iraq was perhaps the most cowardly war ever fought in history**". For her, a "Coalition of the Bullied and Bought" had first used UN "economic sanctions and weapons inspections" to bring Iraq "to its knees", before then sending in their mercenaries to finish the country off. And to make matters worse, she says, "the corporate media gloated that the United States had won a just and astonishing victory".

³⁹³ <http://www.socialistdemocracy.org/News&AnalysisInternational/News&AnalysisIntUSImperialismAfterAfghanistan.htm>

The USA's Necrophilic Tendencies

After the invasion, Roy argues, the Iraqis waving US flags on the TV and “the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square” was all just a “carefully choreographed charade played out by a handful of hired extras coordinated by the US marines”. At the same time, when “American soldiers fired into a crowd of peaceful, unarmed Iraqi demonstrators” just days later (with fifteen people being killed as a result), the media was nowhere to be seen. Nor were there any reports on how “a secular country [was] being driven to religious sectarianism” by the assault.

The “safety and security of Iraqi people”, Roy insists, was not really the priority for those giving orders to the American and British soldiers. The only infrastructure that mattered, meanwhile, was that of the oil fields, which were ““secured” almost before the invasion began”, with Western elites showing a kind of “evangelical enthusiasm in reconstruction” there that had not been seen in Afghanistan. When American corporations claimed that “contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq could jump-start the world economy”, meanwhile, they “deliberately confused” their own interests, as they so often do, “with the interests of the world economy”. In effect, Roy says, the USA was saying that “Iraq can only have a representative government if it represents the interests of Anglo-American oil companies”. In other words, it was saying “**you can have free speech as long as you say what I want you to say**”.

The “world’s business community”, Roy asserts, “was tingling with excitement about the scale of money that the reconstruction of Iraq would involve”, comparing it to “the biggest reconstruction effort since the Marshall Plan rebuilt Europe after World War Two”.³⁹⁴ There were many obvious conflicts of interest, however, with former Secretary of State George Schultz (who had once referred to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua as a “cancer” that had to be removed from the American continent³⁹⁵) sitting on both “the Board of Directors of the Bechtel Group” and “the advisory board of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq”.

In the “feeding frenzy” approaching and following the invasion, Roy says, “governments around the world and the companies whose causes they [supported]” scrapped over who would participate in the reconstruction efforts. The UK, for example, which Roy calls “a co-murderer of Iraqis”, argued that “British companies “had a long and close relationship with Iraq and Iraqi business from the imperial days in the early 20th century until international sanctions were imposed in the 1990s””, and that it should therefore be an important player in the reconstruction of the country. In doing so, it glossed over both the crimes that the colonial regime had committed and the fact that “Britain had supported Saddam Hussein through the 1970s and 1980s”.

In short, Roy argues, **imperialism is like necrophilia**, killing and destroying in order to ensure their hegemony, before then demanding “the right to rape the corpse”. And the media followed the logic of Western political and economic elites, with news anchor Tom Brokaw saying at one point that, “in a few days, we’re going to own that country”. In other words, Iraq was “no longer a country”, but “an asset”. It was “no longer ruled”, but “owned”.³⁹⁶

The Fuelling of Sectarian Violence

In August 2014, as ISIS overran great swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory, reporter Eugene Robinson reminded readers at The Washington Post that it had been George W Bush and

³⁹⁴ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-us-invasion-of-iraq-the-most-cowardly-war-ever-fought-in-history/5387751>

³⁹⁵ <http://www.chomsky.info/books/unclesam08.htm>

³⁹⁶ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-us-invasion-of-iraq-the-most-cowardly-war-ever-fought-in-history/5387751>

Dick Cheney who “gave the world this cauldron of woe in the first place”. Their “foolish and unwarranted invasion [of Iraq] in 2003”, he asserts, destroyed “any vestige of the Iraqi state”, and was “directly responsible for the chaos we see today” (a point that I will explore in greater detail in the following chapter). Nonetheless, Cheney has hypocritically sought to blame Obama, claiming he should have left “a stay-behind force” in Iraq.

The USA, according to Cheney, had already “defeated al-Qaeda” when US troops finally pulled out of Iraq, and that Obama’s withdrawal therefore bore “much responsibility for squandering the peace and stability that the Bush administration [had] left behind”. It is very difficult to believe Cheney, however, when we consider that, if the Bush regime had indeed ensured (enduring) stability in Iraq, there should have been no reason for US troops to remain in the country. At the same time, Cheney ignored the fact that Post-Saddam Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had actually been the one who had “refused to negotiate a viable agreement [with the USA] to leave a residual force in place”, and not Obama. In other words, the latter may well have left a ‘stay-behind force’ if it had truly been an option.

According to Robinson, it “seems not to have occurred” to the imperialist invaders of Iraq that “long-suppressed resentments and ambitions would inevitably surface” after the fall of the Ba’athist dictatorship in 2003. Maliki, for example, “acted quickly and shamelessly to advance a Shiite sectarian agenda – and to marginalize Sunnis and Kurds”, predictably creating “anger and alienation among the disaffected groups” which would eventually lead nationalist Kurds to focus on “fortifying their semi-autonomy” and Sunni tribal leaders to embrace Wahhabi jihadists.

While Saddam was repressive, Robinson says, **the US-led invasion killed over a hundred thousand Iraqis and provoked chaos that cost hundreds of thousands more lives.** Meanwhile, the invaders’ choice to disband the Iraqi military (and create another professional army from scratch) was also a devastating move. Led by the “glorified sectarian warlord” Maliki, Robinson stresses, the country’s new armed forces did not serve what Cheney called a “coalition government”, and instead served to prop up the Prime Minister’s regime (pushing many Sunnis into the arms of ISIS in the process, rather than pulling them into democratic participation in the country’s new political system). In summary, Robinson emphasises, “it was our nation’s irresponsibility that put [Iraqi] lives at risk”.³⁹⁷

US Corruption after the Invasion of Iraq

In 2009, Patrick Cockburn quoted a US businessman “active in Iraq since 2003” as saying “I believe **the real looting of Iraq after the invasion was by US officials and contractors**, and not by people from the slums of Baghdad”.³⁹⁸ In his article, Cockburn refers to the investigations of the Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction (SIGIR) which, by October 2012, had resulted in “117 indictments for corruption by American contractors and military officers, 42 arrests, and 90 convictions for fraud amounting to \$220 million”.³⁹⁹ One example of such activity came from the US comptroller for south-central Iraq, Robert J Stein Jr, who had received \$57.8m illegally and had even “had himself photographed standing with the mound of money”. He was, however, just one of many responsible for such crimes, and “among the few US officials who [had been] in Iraq to be convicted of fraud and money-laundering”.

Cockburn speaks of how, “despite the vast sums expended on rebuilding by the US since 2003”, almost “no cranes [were] visible on the Baghdad skyline except those at work building a new US embassy”. One of the only “visible signs of government work on

³⁹⁷ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/eugene-robinson-paying-for-bushs-2003-invasion-of-iraq/2014/08/11/2eee77ac-218a-11e4-86ca-f03cbd15c1a_story.html

³⁹⁸ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/02/16/iraq-reconstruction-the-greatest-fraud-in-us-history/>

³⁹⁹ <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/when-officers-become-criminals/>

Baghdad's infrastructure", meanwhile, was the "tireless attention to planting palm trees and flowers in the centre strip between main roads", which would be "dug up and replanted a few months later". In other words, **the reconstruction efforts were focussed primarily on image rather than content**. And a number of Iraqi leaders were "convinced that the theft or waste of huge sums of US and Iraqi government money could have happened only if senior US officials were themselves involved in the corruption".

Although "tens of billions of dollars were spent on reconstruction", Cockburn says, very little of this money went into creating anything of use for the Iraqi people. Instead, "**well-connected Republicans were awarded jobs in Iraq, regardless of experience**", with one "24-year-old from a Republican family" even being "put in charge of the Baghdad stock exchange". The latter, perhaps unsurprisingly, eventually "had to close down because [the official] allegedly forgot to renew the lease on its building".

In what seems like a possible cover-up, meanwhile, a small-time US "arms dealer and contractor" called Dale C. Stoffel was murdered north of Baghdad in 2004 after being "granted limited immunity from prosecution after he had provided information that a network of bribery - linking companies and US officials awarding contracts - existed within the US-run Green Zone in Baghdad". He had previously claimed that "bribes of tens of thousands of dollars were regularly delivered in pizza boxes sent to US contracting officers".

At the same time, former finance minister Ali Allawi said that Iraq was "becoming like Nigeria in the past when all the oil revenues were stolen". This situation was, Cockburn affirms, was not helped by the fact that "several Iraqi officials given important jobs at the urging of the US administration in Baghdad were inexperienced". In fact, he stresses, many contractors "never started or finished facilities they were supposedly building". The subsequent "**failure to provide electricity, water and sewage disposal during the US occupation**", meanwhile, "**was crucial in alienating Iraqis from the post-Saddam regime**". And, although the SIGIR looked into cases of corruption, Cockburn insists that, up to 2009, the "US officers who [had] been successfully prosecuted or unmasked [had] mostly been involved in small-scale corruption".⁴⁰⁰ Other figures, responsible for much larger-scale fraud, were never punished. As a result, the real extent of US financial crimes in Iraq may never be completely revealed.

The Refusal to Understand the Enemy

In 2010, social activist Harry Belafonte reflected on the Vietnam War, insisting that, in the same way, "**the wars that we wage today in faraway lands are immoral, unconscionable and unwinnable**". The CIA, he emphasises, "tells us that the enemy we pursue in Afghanistan and in Pakistan, the Al Qaeda, they number less than 50". With this reality in mind, he asks, "do we really think that sending 100,000 young American men and women to kill innocent civilians, women and children, and antagonizing the tens of millions of people in the whole region somehow makes us secure?"⁴⁰¹ With this question, he had arrived right at the heart of the issues: that the wars abroad were not about 'security', but about the interests of US capitalists throughout the world.

Far from destroying Al-Qaeda in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the USA and its allies had made the group stronger. The emphasis of Western politicians and media outlets on the erroneous idea that it was simply a completely irrational organisation, meanwhile, had simply served to fool a large number of citizens in the West into supporting the attacks, letting their deceitful elites get away with murder (literally), and allowing the cycle of suffering in the world to intensify even more. The hidden truth, however, was that, just as

⁴⁰⁰ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/02/16/iraq-reconstruction-the-greatest-fraud-in-us-history/>

⁴⁰¹ <http://mltoday.com/on-harry-belafontes-speech>

anger against US and Israeli acts in the Middle East had led Wahhabi terrorists to attack the USA in the first place, the anger and fear of US citizens over 9/11 had now been magnified and misdirected by Western elites in a way that would ensure the continuation and amplification of global violence.

Fundamentally, the only way to truly destroy Wahhabi extremism is to understand it, rather than caricaturising it and misrepresenting it. However, when Osama Bin Laden released a new video in 2004, the Western media focussed primarily on the fact that the Al-Qaeda leader was essentially admitting responsibility for the September 11th attacks on the USA. It ignored, meanwhile, the **very clear reasoning outlined by Bin Laden** as to why they had taken place, thus keeping reality hidden and the minds of a large number of citizens misinformed.

In his message, for example, Bin Laden emphasises that Al-Qaeda was not opposed to freedom, but to injustices committed by the USA and its allies. Addressing the American people, he suggests that they ask themselves why, if the group hated freedom, countries like Sweden had not experienced terror attacks. In fact, he argues that his followers actually “want to restore freedom [read independence from the USA and its lackeys] to our nation”, stressing that, “just as you lay waste to our nation, so shall we lay waste to yours”. In short, he asks Americans to “recall that **for every action, there is a reaction**”, and that it had been the actions of US elites that had led Al-Qaeda to attack America in the first place.

“No one except a dumb thief”, Bin Laden insists, “plays with the security of others and then makes himself believe he will be secure” (referring to US interference in nations all around the world). A truly “thinking people”, he asserts, “make it their priority to look for [the] causes... when disaster strikes..., in order to prevent it happening again”. And, just in case Americans had not heard Bin Laden’s words in the interviews that he had given over the course of a number of years, he explains once again his reasons for deciding to plan an attack on US soil.

For him, it was only after the suffering and injustice in the Muslim World “became unbearable” that he felt compelled to act. Having “witnessed the oppression and tyranny of the American/Israeli coalition against [Muslim] people in Palestine and Lebanon”, he speaks in particular of the way in which “America permitted the Israelis to invade Lebanon” in 1982 (an event in which “many were killed and injured and others were terrorised and displaced”). He stresses that he “couldn’t forget [the]... blood and severed limbs, women and children sprawled everywhere”, and the “houses destroyed along with their occupants”. It was this spectacle, he claims, that “gave birth to a strong resolve [in him] to punish the oppressors”.

Subsequently, he sought to give American citizens a “taste... of what we tasted” in order “that they be deterred from killing our women and children”. The Bush regime, however, reacted not by analysing the causes of 9/11, he says, but by perpetuating them. In fact, he argues, its behaviour resembled that of “the regimes in our countries, half of which are ruled by the military and the other half which are ruled by the sons of kings and presidents” (and all of which were “replete with those who [were] characterised by pride, arrogance, greed and misappropriation of wealth”). Bush Senior, he claims, was “affected by those monarchies and military regimes” in the 1980s, and “became envious of their remaining decades in their positions, to embezzle the public wealth of the nation without supervision or accounting”. Consequently, the American leader “took dictatorship and suppression of freedoms to his son and they named it the Patriot Act”, Bin Laden insists, whilst importing “expertise in election fraud from the region’s presidents to Florida to be made use of in moments of difficulty”.

After seeing the disproportionate reaction of US forces to the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda then sought to emulate the tactics used in Afghanistan in the 1980s against the Soviet Union. Its “experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers”, Bin Laden says, had now influenced its policy of “**bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy**”. And, upon scrutinising the favourable post-2001 environment for Al-Qaeda, he stresses, it was clear that the group was not “the sole factor in achieving those spectacular gains”. The official US policy, he claims, which demanded “the opening of war fronts to keep busy their various corporations - whether they be working in the field of arms or oil or reconstruction”, had actually favoured Al-Qaeda (to the extent that “some analysts and diplomats” claimed “the White House and us [were] playing as one team towards the economic goals of the United States, even if the intentions [differed]”).

Emphasising the successful attrition tactics of Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden emphasises that, while his group had “spent \$500,000 on the event” (of 9/11), the United States had lost, between 2001 and 2004, “more than \$500 billion”. What was “even more dangerous and bitter for America”, however, was that Bush had been forced “to resort to emergency funds to continue the fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, which [was] evidence of the success of the bleed-until-bankruptcy plan”. At the same time, Bin Laden admits, “the Bush administration... also gained” (as was visible in the “size of the contracts acquired by the shady Bush administration-linked mega-corporations, like Halliburton and its kind”).

In short, the Al-Qaeda leader stresses, “the real loser” of the USA’s foreign wars was “the American people and their economy”. However, because “the darkness of the black gold” had blurred the “vision and insight” of Bush Junior and his regime, the US political elites chose to give “priority to private interests over the public interests of America” (a policy that would bleed the economy dry and see Bush become “embroiled in the swamps of Iraq”). Summarising his own remedy to this situation, Bin Laden insists that the US people’s security lay “not in the hands of Kerry, nor Bush, nor al-Qaida”, but in their “own hands”. For him, “**every state that doesn’t play with our security has automatically guaranteed its own security**”.⁴⁰²

As the head of Al-Qaeda, Bin Laden was without a doubt responsible for numerous horrendous crimes in the world. However, as with other groups mentioned previously in this book, **Al-Qaeda did not come into existence in a vacuum**. On the contrary, there were a large number of concrete reasons for the group’s creation (such as decades of Israeli occupation of Palestinian and Lebanese land, with US support). While Bin Laden and his organisation were and are a reactionary force (which, despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric, offers no real alternative to the oppressive capitalist order in the world), they have never been the most dangerous force in the Muslim World. That title has long been held by the invasive and oppressive occupying forces of the USA, Israel, and the former’s dictatorial allies in the region. In other words, as long as these forces perpetuate a system of violent subjugation, injustice, and exploitation, the seeds of reaction (from which Al-Qaeda grew) will continue to be sown.

Fundamentally, the arguments of the Al-Qaeda leader, although reactionary rather than revolutionary, were surprisingly coherent (for a figure who rightly deserved the title of mass murderer). He clearly understood what drove the political elites of the USA (i.e. money and power), whilst also realising that a full-on military conflict with the superpower could never be won. At the same time, his words followed an objective kind of logic, in saying that no-one playing ‘with the security of others’ could expect to be safe themselves, and that a sensible political position was to analyse the causes of disasters in order to stop them from happening again.

⁴⁰² <http://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>

In other words, Bin Laden was not the entirely irrational character that Western elites portrayed him to be. A reactionary, he certainly was, but one essentially created in a region plagued by decades of imperialist crimes. Therefore, comprehension of the roots of his movement (and the disregarding of those who overlook them) is the only way to truly defeat it. As with all political problems, the solution is simply to foster greater freedom, justice, and equality in the world, so that no-one is forced so far into desperation that they favour violent, discriminatory, or exploitative practices. Essentially, as I will discuss further in Chapter Seven, Wahhabi extremism and other reactionary ideologies can only be delegitimised (and therefore defeated) by overcoming the injustices bred by the global capitalist system, and the imperialist forces that protect it.

C) Liberalism and its Role in the Arab Spring

Starting in December 2010, the repressive and criminal actions of state forces triggered “a tidal wave of popular insurrections from North Africa to North America”. At ROAR Magazine, Jerome Roos spoke of how 26-year old Tunisian vendor Mohamed Bouazizi had helped to trigger off these popular rebellions. Bouazizi had been “robbed of his vending cart” by “a municipal officer”, allegedly being “humiliated and dishonoured” (slapped in the face and then spat upon) in the process. Although largely uninvolved in politics, the young vendor snapped, walking up to the “local governor’s office” and demanding “to speak to the governor himself”. After being sent away without seeing the official, Bouazizi “drenched himself in petrol”, set himself on fire, and eventually died the following month. Without knowing it, his act would subsequently light “the flame that would spark the Arab Spring and thereby unleash the Global Revolutionary Wave of 2011”.

In Tunisia, mass protests saw dictator Ben Ali toppled, while “the fire [also] spread to Egypt”, where “Western leaders finally began to realize that they could not turn the tide of popular indignation in the region”. As a result, the latter quickly sought to develop “a new narrative”, which would portray the uprisings “as a liberal call for freedom and democracy” (comparable to “the Eastern European uprisings against the Soviet regime”). In short, the neoliberal elites of the West hoped to convince the world that Arab rebels were aspiring to “a functional liberal democracy and integration into a global free market”, which was more what they themselves wanted. In reality, the “uprisings were as much a rebellion against Western imperialism and unchecked economic liberalization, as they were a rebellion against the violent and unaccountable dictators of the region”.

Upon the death of Nasser, as seen in Chapter Two of this essay, Egypt had fallen into the clutches of the capitalist global order, and subsequently suffered from “a crippling sovereign debt crisis” between 1982 and 1990. With the upsurge of the doctrine of neoliberalism, the country’s ruling elites decided to approach international creditors in the hope that they would help to restructure their debt. As a result, they soon had a “structural adjustment program” imposed on them by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) “as a condition for the disbursement of ‘emergency’ credit”, and thus had to “cut spending on social services, relax price controls, cut subsidies, deregulate and privatize industries, target inflation, and liberalize capital flows”.

Consequently, inequality grew, labour insecurity increased, and there was “a massive rise in youth unemployment”. In the early twenty-first century, this “rising social injustice” saw activists intensify their “process of organized resistance”, with a “planned strike” taking place “in the industrial town of El-Mahalla El-Kubra, on April 6, 2008”. Their “so-called April 6 Youth Movement – a loose coalition of revolutionary socialists and anarchists” –

would subsequently become a key player in the leaderless insurrection that toppled Mubarak in 2011.⁴⁰³

Although the uprisings looked promising at the start, the revolutionary tide soon began to turn, and left-wing groups were side-lined throughout the region as the interference of the West and its dictatorial allies in the region began to increase. Below, I will take a look at the influence of liberal activists (content to work within the capitalist system) on the Arab Spring, referring in particular to the works of Dr Mohammed A. Bamyeh and Dr Omar Kassem. Firstly, however, I will consider how University of London professor Gilbert Achcar described the causes of the Arab Spring.

I) The Role of Liberalism in the Arab Spring

A Longstanding Popular Struggle against an Oppressive System

In 2014, Counterfire's Sam Dathi reviewed Gilbert Achcar's book on the Arab Spring (entitled *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*) and, although he criticises Achcar's "non-opposition" to Western intervention in the region since 2011, he points out a number of useful points from the book. To begin with, Achcar speaks of how "Arabs did not suddenly awaken" in the 2011 uprisings in "the MENA (Middle East, North Africa) region", asserting that the events instead "represented a peak in longstanding popular struggles against a system which for too long had deprived the Arab people of bread, freedom and social justice".

The key point which Dathi picks out at the start of his review is how Achcar emphasises that the "**uprisings will not end simply by implementing Western style democracy**". Instead, Achcar says, they are the "beginning of a long-term revolutionary process that will take years..., [and which] **will not end until the root causes of the revolutions have been resolved**". And, for him, "only profound socio-economic transformations can do that".

According to Achcar, the rebellions in the Arab World were the result of "collisions between the relations of production and forces of production" (i.e. the exploitative relationship between capitalist owners and their employees), which were responsible for "bringing about a general blockage in the region's economic development". In particular, he argues, MENA nations have "experienced serious stagnation in economic growth" ever since their "neoliberal turn in the 1970s".

Neoliberalism, however, was not the only of the region's 'misfortunes' (as India, for example, actually experienced 'economic growth' after the introduction of neoliberal measures). The "record breaking levels of underemployment, particularly youth, graduate and female underemployment" (which lay "at the heart of the popular explosions" of 2011), Achcar asserts, were in reality caused more by a "sorry lack of investment in the MENA region, both public and private, over the last three decades". In fact, he stresses, the "low rate of growth and high underemployment" in the region was more a result of such underinvestment than it was of the global economic crisis of the early twenty-first century.

Achcar claims that a "very specific modality of capitalism... prevails in the region", and refers to its nations primarily as "rentier states" (because a "significant share of their revenues [came] from exports such as oil and gas"). As a result of this character, he says, Arab regimes were "less dependent on tax receipts", and thus much more "able to acquire significant economic independence from their people". In short, he affirms, "**the less governments depend on tax receipts, the less democratic they are**".

⁴⁰³ <http://roarmag.org/2012/05/jerome-roos-ovni-2012-revolution-21st-century/>

The majority of autocratic Arab regimes, Achcar insists, “exist on a spectrum ranging from patrimonial to neo-patrimonial”, with patrimonial regimes (like “the GCC monarchies, Libya and Syria”) being “absolute, hereditary and autocratic” and neo-patrimonial regimes (like Tunisia and Egypt) enjoying “some separation between state and regime” but “still [being] plagued by nepotism and corruption”. In fact, he argues, Western imperialists have sought to perpetuate “these archaic systems of governance... since the early twentieth century... in order to ensure the oil-rich states remain pliant vassals”.

Patrimonial governments, Achcar adds, appropriate the state as their “own personal possession”, while ensuring there is an “absence of an adequate legal framework” (in order to allow “corruption and crony capitalism” to flourish). Rather than being dominated by a “free-market bourgeoisie”, therefore, these nations are instead controlled by a “**parasitic state bourgeoisie**”. Their “rentier nature”, meanwhile, “accentuates this patrimonial character” even more. In neo-patrimonial countries, on the other hand, there is a “‘rational-legal’ bureaucratic dimension” which allows a free-market bourgeoisie to operate more effectively, although, essentially, the system is still corrupt and prone to the bestowal of preferential treatment on the ruling elites.

Such forms of capitalism, Achcar notes, obstruct investment, with the patrimonial and neo-patrimonial regimes “using the state as a cash cow” rather than focussing on investing adequately in the future. Global capitalist forces independent of the state, meanwhile, are reluctant to “tie their capital down in an economy ridden by nepotism, corruption and the lack of rule of law”, due to fears that their money will not be secure. As a result, foreign investors have primarily used the MENA region “to engage in adventure capitalism and speculative trading in the pursuit of short-term profit rather than the long-term productive investment capable of inducing job growth”.

The Alignment of External Factors

In spite of internal failures in the MENA region, however, Achcar argues that **the massive uprisings of the Arab Spring were only made possible because of an accumulation of external factors**. These factors, he says, were: “Western imperialism; Bush’s ill thought out ‘democracy promotion’ in the region in the mid-2000s, which inadvertently weakened the chains of autocracy; and the revolution in Arab news broadcasting provided by Al-Jazeera”. At the same time, though, the triggering of “a long-term revolutionary process” was not necessarily on the cards in all nations involved in the Arab Spring, Achcar concedes.

In Tunisia and Egypt, for example, there was “organised, political resistance” which “was (and still is) sorely lacking in the [rest of the] MENA region”. The “robust workers’ movements” in these countries (which had been “engaged in effective mass action for years”), Achcar asserts, along with “youth networks [like the April 6th Movement in Egypt] using digital activism and social media”, were key in ensuring the “rapid overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak” in 2011. The “lack of sectarianism” there, meanwhile, was also an important factor in pushing these dictators from power.

Elsewhere, however, coherent workers’ movements were sparser, while sectarianism often played a much more important role. In Syria, for example, the patrimonial Ba’athist regime’s “dogged coherence and repressiveness... [had] hindered a workers’ movement developing there in the first place”, and thus “revolutionary mass action” was not “anywhere near strong enough to break the regime”. Sectarianism, meanwhile, especially in the form of “counter-revolutionary, fundamentalist elements”, was fuelled in Syria by external forces, thus weakening even further the revolution’s hopes of triumph.

For Dathi, Achcar's view that "civil wars were always unavoidable in countries like Libya and Syria" (primarily because they were governed by patrimonial regimes) is a point of great contention. The crucial element, according to Achcar, was that the rulers in both countries had the armed forces on their side as their "praetorian guard" (partly as a result of the privileged position in society bestowed upon them, but also because of the "organic bonds of tribalism, sectarianism and/or regionalism" that bound them to their leaders). In Syria, for example, the Republican Guard was "a sectarian, Alawite force led by Assad's younger brother, Maher al Assad, and [was] fiercely loyal to the President", while the "entire Syrian military, from top to bottom, [was] dominated by Alawites". In neo-patrimonial states (like Tunisia and Egypt), meanwhile, Achcar asserts, this was not the case, as the moderate "separation between regime and state" meant that the state "could simply discard the regime whilst themselves remaining intact". The military elite in such places, therefore, essentially managed to "jettison Mubarak [and Ben Ali] whilst preserving itself".

Dathi, however, insists that "the ensuing revolutionary process" in both Egypt and Tunisia would be far from "bloodless or plain sailing", while the violence in Libya and Syria would be intensified significantly by Western interference (all as the West sought to underplay the violent oppression of regimes it saw as allies). In other words, Dathi argues that revolutionaries in both patrimonial and neo-patrimonial states would face just as much repression at the hands of their ruling elites. In particular, he criticises how Achcar's assumptions contributed to his lack of opposition to Western intervention in both Libya and Syria, claiming that he 'dangerously underplayed' the "destructiveness" of such interference (and "how corrosive [it was] to the integrity of any liberation movement"). If it was already hard for Libyans and Syrians to overthrow their oppressive regimes, Dathi says, the task was "made infinitely worse by the cruel and cynical interference of foreign powers" (as will be discussed in greater detail in Section D of this chapter).

Another criticism Dathi makes of Achcar's work is that he seems to take an essentially 'reformist' approach, in which he claims that a "return to the developmentalist policies [like those of Nasserism]" of between the 1950s and 1970s would be the ideal outcome of the Arab Spring uprisings, albeit "without the despotism and corruption that accompanied them". While Dathi agrees that such developmentalism would be a "massively welcome improvement to... the Arab people", he insists that, essentially, "a developmentalist state would only temporarily resolve the blockage in development". The resurgence of such a left-reformist government, he says, "would immediately come under pressure from hostile, capitalist forces both within and outside the country, leading to the inevitable jettisoning of the reforming credentials".⁴⁰⁴ In other words, just like the progressivism of Nasser was ultimately defeated by the onslaught of aggressive and self-interested forces within Egypt and from abroad, a return to such bourgeois nationalism (as outlined in Chapter Two) would, inevitably, also result in an eventual shift back to capitalist measures.

Liberal Revolution or Anarchist Revolution

According to Mohammed Bamyeh at LibCom.org, a key characteristic of the Arab Spring was that it had "no guardian intellectual authority, no political leadership, [and] no organized parties". Essentially, he says, it was like all other revolutions, in that it was "an experiment in enlightenment". And just like in the aftermath of other "grand experiments in the political, cultural and economic realms", the social implications of concepts such as reason and freedom would eventually be "verified (or amended, or abandoned)". By the Arab Spring, meanwhile, it was clear that insurgent citizens of the world could choose between three main types of revolt: an authoritarian one, a liberal one, or an anarchist one.

⁴⁰⁴ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/book-reviews/17129-the-people-want-a-radical-exploration-of-the-arab-uprising>

The first type of revolt, Bamyeh says, would believe that an “enlightened elite” could reform society using the state apparatus. The second, meanwhile, would also work for change through the state apparatus, but would deny the authority of the so-called ‘enlightened’ elite. And finally, the third would see enlightenment as a task for the People to undertake, and one in which “civic traditions” would be altered independently of the state and its ruling elite. The liberal method, Bamyeh asserts, has been the most common model followed in revolutions, seeing a “civic link [formed] between state and society” and thus a reduction in “the costs of policing and repressive needs... for the liberal order”.

The authoritarian technique, in which absolute power is seen to be more important for accomplishing goals than knowledge and democracy, is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the anarchist model, in which power structures are criticised as counter-revolutionary and “knowledge alone” is considered “as the best means” to accomplish objectives. In the Arab Spring, Bamyeh affirms, the nature of the revolts was a clear expression of “the failure of an earlier, authoritarian experiment”. Societies in the region, he claims, had long “become far more saturated with [the] ethos of enlightenment” than their governments had, and tension between them had grown significantly as a result.

According to Bamyeh, there was a certain “presumption” arising in the revolts of 2011 that “ordinary individuals [were] capable of enlightenment without leadership or guardianship”. In this sense, there were distinctly anarchist ideals at play, even if citizens were not aware of it. Far from advocating “a self-governed civic order”, however, they sought principally to “modernize the state so that it [respected] citizen's rights and [became] more accountable” (thus following a more liberal view of revolution). In short, Bamyeh insists, the “revolutionary style” of the Arab Spring was anarchist (and was facilitated by modern technologies like the internet), while the “explicit goal” was “the establishment of a liberal state” rather than an anarchist society.

Because the objective of change was widely supported, very little organisation was required to express it, Bamyeh says. In fact, the precedence in Islamic history of “a substantial part of the civic order” living either “independently of the state” or with “serious limits to the reach of the state in society” meant that these twenty-first century revolutions were not completely out of the ordinary in the region. In the absence of large political organisations, the non-violent nature of Arab Spring rebellions showed that there was a significant amount of civic enlightenment among the people themselves. Although there had previously been a trend of “terror” rhetoric, therefore, which had intensified in the Muslim World since 9/11, the peaceful nature of the mass protests of the Arab Spring meant that the authoritarian order could not claim protesters were waging violent war. These elites, therefore, lost their *raison d'être* – as supposedly ‘enlightened protectors’ of the People.

In short, the vanguardists and paternalists of the ruling nationalist regimes in the Middle East had moved away from their citizens so much that they had actually developed a “lack of interest in knowing the people”. They therefore fooled themselves into believing that their population would tolerate everything they did without asking questions, or would not dare to stand up to their armed defenders. As a result, their “anti-colonial, progressive, [and] Third Worldist claims” soon faded away, and they “governed openly by an avowed marriage of business and state elites”.⁴⁰⁵ But they had not truly understood their nations’ inhabitants, and their responses when the Arab Spring broke out showed that more than ever. The reality, which they were too self-obsessed to see, was that their citizens had long since seen through their hypocrisy, and that they would no longer remain quiet when faced with state brutality.

⁴⁰⁵ <https://libcom.org/library/anarchist-liberal-authoritarian-enlightenments-notes-arab-spring>

II) Liberalism as a Bankrupt Doctrine

In January 2014, philosophy blogger Omar Kassem reflected on how *libraliyya* (liberalism in Arabic) had become “associated with either tyranny or imperialism or both” in the Middle East. For the reason stated above, he says, liberalism no longer carried “any of [its] usual [Western] connotations” in the region. As a result, Muslim populations have, in an attempt to escape a “period of unprecedented chaos... in the Islamic world”, drawn up their battle-lines against *libraliyya* in a search for self-determination.

The ‘liberal’ elites in Egypt, for example, showed why they were out of touch with large sections of their population when they called for the overthrow of the democratically-elected Mohamed Morsi in 2013, and for his subsequent replacement by “a blood-thirsty raving lunatic”. The latter, backed by these ‘liberal’ forces, would now “rule Egypt through a constitution passed by a referendum organised around pre-stuffed ballot boxes”, and “with the entire political opposition in jail”. Although they would call it a “step for democracy”, Kassem insists it was mere ‘formalism’. The fact that they needed to undermine democracy in order to promote ‘democracy’ showed, he says, that liberalism was simply “a bankrupt doctrine”.

External Legislators and Enlightened Geniuses

In order to support the above statement, Kassem discusses the roots of liberalism, its relevance in the Middle East, and why the ideology (“represented by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill”) was “seriously flawed”. Rousseau, he says, “wished to free the people of the world, [and] to enable them to express their ‘General Will’”, though, when the French Revolution came, his “appeal to an ‘external Legislator’ to distil this General Will on behalf of the people” led to a “totalitarian nightmare in the management of the Republic”. Immanuel Kant in particular would later criticise this idea of an ‘enlightened dictator’ by emphasising the democratic importance of “individual rationality”. While he knew that dynamic systems (like that of politics) were “difficult if not impossible to model mathematically, especially in the social sphere”, he soon set out “three maxims ‘of the common understanding’” as the basis of justice.

Kant said that rational beings ought to think independently, reflect objectively on their own judgement, and ensure consistency in their thought. His emphasis on “interaction being the fundament of justice” would later be taken up by Karl Marx, for whom “justice... [existed] in mutual relations, wherever and whenever an agreement [was] concluded not to harm each other or allow each other to be harmed”. Mill, however, whose book ‘On Liberty’ Kassem considers “the founding document of the modern liberal sensibility”, sought to “establish one ‘very simple principle’ in regard to coercive government dealings with individuals in society”. This principle was that of “self-protection”, in which power could only “be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, [in order to] to prevent harm to others”. This doctrine, Kassem argues, was a “radical mistake”, and would be vulnerable to the self-interested interpretation of the elites seeking to implement it.

The reason for the persistence of liberalism as “a dominant doctrine to date”, according to Kassem, is the fact that Mill flattered “the educated middle classes” with his “appeals to those of ‘decided mental superiority’, persons of ‘genius’ or those exceptional people in a ‘small minority’, to save society from itself” (in other words, from its traditions and customs). Although seemingly benevolent, such a view would later play into the beliefs of vanguardist movements (like Ba’athism or authoritarian ‘communism’), which saw themselves as revolutionary elites bestowed by nature with the task of leading others and pushing them towards ‘progress’.

Inspired by Alexis De Tocqueville's fear of a "tyranny of the majority", where "those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority may desire to oppress a part of their number", Mill insisted that the enlightened 'geniuses' needed "to be protected... from such tyranny". In other words, even if these figures did not necessarily represent the views of the majority of the population, they were considered to be the biggest or only hope for the development of society, and their actions and lifestyles therefore had to be protected.

Who Decides Who the 'Moral Experts' Are?

Referring to liberals in Egypt in 2011, Kassem says **the "revolution in Egypt was essentially lost by the 26th February 2011..., when the liberal parties refused the principle of democratic elections, fearing the electoral strength of the Muslim Brotherhood"**. Pleading with the military to become the "guardians of the nation" (something which would eventually happen in 2013 with the toppling of Morsi's government), some "committed liberal revolutionaries... were vocal advocates of Morsi's forced removal as president". One of them, Omar Hamilton, told The Guardian that "elections alone [would] never be enough" because there was a "historical and geographical context in Egypt" that determined what was and was not "possible through the ballot box".

Kassem asserts that, with Hamilton "intuiting an entirely different nation in his mind to the one that [was actually] the case", he was essentially "seeking extraordinarily to change history and geography through revolution". In doing so, Kassem says, he subscribed to the view that "persons of genius" were "more individual than any other people". In other words, he was accepting that, although these people did not always want to go along with popular will, their say was nonetheless more important than that of everyone else.

In essence, Hamilton was taking on the liberal stance of Mill, for whom "there were special people... who could judge what was best for people in general", and for whom it was much "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied". While the philosopher's idea of valuing resistance over submission has since become an important revolutionary concept, the arrogance expressed towards the masses in his words fundamentally helped to engender a species of liberal authoritarianism.

Although Mill's focus on institutionalising free speech and the right "to eccentric and experimental lifestyles" (which facilitate the discovery of 'geniuses') was positive, therefore, his idealisation of the 'geniuses' essentially had a negative impact on the world's political landscape. His assumption that some people (due to both upbringing and nature) have more intelligence or creativity than others, for example, may indeed be correct, but at the same time he failed to emphasise that, just like others belong to their species, they were also fallible. Therefore, he also failed to accept that such 'geniuses' ought neither to be glorified as perfect 'super-humans' nor placed in unaccountable positions of power over their contemporaries.

Another problem arising from Mill's belief system was that there was no "selection procedure" provided for choosing the "moral experts" he spoke about. He simply assumed that, with freedom allowing experimentation, these people would eventually uncover the "right answer". In the interest of allowing this 'answer' to be found, he insisted that "despotism [was] a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement", and the means would subsequently be "justified by actually effecting that end". In short, this idea of using force to transform people who do not fit the 'enlightened' model would be used later on by a large number of vanguardist dictatorships (including those of Ba'athist Iraq and Syria).

Destroying Religion and Creating New Traditions

Liberal opposition to religion comes largely from Mill's idea that "the despotism of custom is... the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary" (by which he meant that custom was opposed to "the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement"). And, although many non-Liberal left-wingers may indeed agree with this idea, the divisive issue is to do with whether customs are to be changed by force or by education. For Liberals, for example, the fight "against custom and tradition" has long been "the most vaunted purpose" (and one which is "especially clear in the Muslim world..., where Islam is their enemy"). Libertarian socialists, however, may well prefer to focus on the political beliefs of citizens rather than their personal religious beliefs when forming alliances. For instance, if a person with strong religious beliefs also believed in freedom of speech and thought, social justice, and direct democracy, they would almost certainly be considered a comrade.

Unlike "all former and present creeds, religious, ethical and political", Mill said, which "require to be periodically thrown off and replaced by others", a liberal society would have "firm convictions as to right and wrong" and a "general unanimity of sentiment", all of which would be "well grounded in reason and [reality]". In response to Mill, we should consider essentially that, while it may indeed be true that "religious, ethical and political" groups occasionally (or often) lack scientific and rational arguments, the idea that liberals have a sort of scientifically-established authority to overthrow these groups is equally irrational.⁴⁰⁶ In this conclusion, I agree with Kassem, in his assumption that, "**without the competing ideas of different communities, [the human race] would perish**".⁴⁰⁷ In short, a society can only organise, cooperate, and progress in a truly free and peaceful way if the relations between its citizens are based on the use of rational and respectful interaction (even on occasions when there are significant disagreements).

In order to reach the "general unanimity of sentiment" that Mill spoke about, a "new set of customs and traditions" would need to be set up, and subjected to the "impeccable verdict" of his 'geniuses' (in what would be a form of "Millian despotism"). In such a system, an 'enlightened' society would feel a duty to impose itself upon 'barbarians' "by imperial edict", much in the same way that British elites argued that colonial rule was a gift to the 'uncivilised'. And the inability of the aforementioned 'barbarians' "to demonstrate individual free will", Kassem argues, is "the clearest sign of bankruptcy" in the liberal system. Its authoritarian tendencies, meanwhile, also become apparent when it is clear that democracy "cannot survive the contradictions and pseudo-science of liberal doctrine" (which then has to be forcefully "formalised [as the state doctrine] by the liberal priesthood").

In Egypt, Kassem asserts, an important example of liberal bankruptcy came with Dr Amr Hamzawy's analysis of the Muslim Brotherhood's stated "commitment to democracy, pluralism, the application of religious law, civil rights, and women's rights" in 2006. While Hamzawy did not criticise the organisation's "espousal of democratic political ideals", his "analytical framework", according to Kassem, held "a commitment to pluralism as fundamental, rather than to democratic processes". His approach, Kassem argues, subsequently led him to neither encourage the emergence of pluralism through "grass roots [and democratic] human interactions", nor criticise its imposition from above by a liberal elite. For Kassem, the report was essentially based on "formal pluralism", which was "exactly the philosophical ground on which the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Bashar el-Assad were built".⁴⁰⁸ In other words, liberalism cannot truly be considered a real alternative

⁴⁰⁶ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/24/some-fundamental-lessons-from-the-arab-spring/> and <http://different-traditions.com/>

⁴⁰⁷ http://different-traditions.com/?page_id=797

⁴⁰⁸ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/24/some-fundamental-lessons-from-the-arab-spring/> and <http://different-traditions.com/>

to authoritarian vanguardist movements like Ba'athism, as it essentially prefers pluralism imposed from above rather than democracy built from below.

D) The Imperialist-Islamist Takeover of the Arab Spring

I) The West's Four Counterrevolutionary Tactics

Professor Ismael Hossein-Zadeh from Drake University spoke in April 2012 of how, as the USA and its allies had "lost three loyal "friends"" in the MENA region "within the first few months of 2011" (and risked losing more in "pro-democracy rebellions against autocratic rulers (and their Western backers)" in allied countries like Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan and Saudi Arabia), the "US-Israeli "axis of aggression" and their client states in the region" were forced to mount "**an all-out counterrevolutionary offensive**". The ousting of Saad Hariri by the Lebanese parliament and the toppling of Mubarak and Ali by "widespread popular uprisings", Hossein-Zadeh says, were events that "tended to politically benefit the "axis of resistance" (consisting of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas) in the Middle East", and therefore had to be stopped from spreading to a greater number of the West's regional allies.

According to Hossein-Zadeh, the USA and its allies had been "caught off-guard by the initial wave", but soon "struck back with a vengeance". He refers to how "a number of simultaneous tactics [were used] to sabotage the Arab Spring", including: "**instigating fake instances of the Arab Spring**" in Iran, Syria, and Libya; "**co-opting revolutionary movements**" in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen; "**crushing pro-democracy movements against "friendly" regimes**" in Bahrain, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia "before they [got] out of hand"; and "using the age-old divide and rule trick by playing the **sectarian trump card** of Sunnis vs. Shias, or Iranians vs. Arabs". In this section of the chapter, I will look in more detail at the effect that these four tactics had in the region from 2011 onwards, whilst also discussing the damage that the West's delayed reaction to the Arab Spring caused to the continued domination of its global capitalist order.

Tactic One: 'Post-Modern Coups'

The first tactic, says NSNBC's Dr Christof Lehmann, could be referred to as a "post-modern coup d'état", and was a way for the USA and its allies to put into practice a "damage control" campaign. Essentially, it involved fomenting "civil war and regime change in "unfriendly" places, and then [portraying] them as part of the Arab Spring". This major strategy consisted of arming and training opposition groups, instigating "violent rebellion with the help of covert mercenary forces under the guise of fighting for democracy" and then, "when government forces [attempted] to quell the thus-nurtured armed insurrection", accusing them of "human rights violations". With this key liberal interventionist phrase uttered, the West could then "begin to embark openly and self-righteously on the path of regime change in the name of [its so-called] "responsibility to protect"".

Gaddafi, as the "weakest link", would become the first target of the aforementioned strategy. Hossein-Zadeh describes how, unlike the "spontaneous, unarmed and peaceful protest demonstrations in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain", the Libyan rebellion was "nurtured, armed and orchestrated largely from abroad". In fact, he says, there is even evidence that "shows that plans of regime change in Libya were drawn long before the overt onset of the actual civil war". The Syrian Civil War, meanwhile, would also be "neither spontaneous nor peaceful", and the Arab League and Turkey would stand "at the forefront of the onslaught" on the country's Ba'athist regime. As with Libya, Hossein-Zadeh asserts that there is "evidence that preparations for war on Syria had been actively planned long before the actual start of the armed rebellion".

These “post-modern coup d’états”, reflecting the “NATO-Zionist agenda of regime change in the region” were an “elaborate combination of covert operations, overt military interventions, and “soft-power” tactics”. The latter, as described by the Albert Einstein Institution’s Dr Gene Sharp, involves “a network of think tanks, endowments, funds and foundations, which are behind the overt destabilization of targeted sovereign nations”. With “deceptive and persuasive... narratives”, he explains, they “specifically target and co-opt progressive thinkers, media and activists” and try to draw the attention of the UN and human rights organisations. The “message to the targeted government”, he insists, “is invariably ‘go or be gone’”. In the case of Iran, Hossein-Zadeh asserts, the Western aim was “to replace the Iranian government with a “client regime”” but, as a military intervention would almost certainly “create a regional (and even very likely global) war”, interference would have to be limited mostly to non-military action.

Tactic Two: Cutting Losses

The second tactic saw the “US and its allies initially [try] to keep their proxy rulers... in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen... in power as long as possible”. The “massive and persistent uprisings”, however, meant that they soon had to change tactics, “reluctantly letting go” of the autocratic leaders “while trying to preserve the socioeconomic structures and the military regimes they had fostered”. Therefore, while they eventually lost “three client dictators”, they simultaneously managed to preserve “the three respective client states”. Through fostering “formalistic elections”, which did not represent a real shift towards meaningful democracy, they managed to “co-opt opposition groups (like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) and give legitimacy to military rulers”, whilst preventing much else from changing.

In other words, as long as popular Islamist political groups did not try to upset the military order, they would be allowed to stand as figureheads in their still fundamentally undemocratic states. This set up would be beneficial to both the establishment and the Islamists, however, as both would be able to gain increasing legitimacy (the former from allowing elections and the latter from winning them). Under Mohamed Morsi and the “NATO/Israel-backed military junta”, though, an oppressive state structure remained in Egypt, with both forces seeking to repress the reform movement which had given birth to the Arab Spring protests in the country. The new Sunni Islamist regimes would also begin to help the USA and its regional allies to conspire against the governments of Syria and Iran, “just as they [had] helped overthrow the regime of Gadhafi in Libya”.

Tactic Three: Supporting Repression in Allied States

The third tactic depended on the West helping Saudi Arabia and other “U.S. proxy regimes” (like those in Bahrain and Jordan) to repress their own “peaceful pro-democracy movements”. Fundamentally, these forces were “playing the vanguard role in the US-Israeli axis of aggression against “unfriendly” regimes” in the region, and they therefore had to be protected at all costs. This policy soon saw NATO train up the ‘security forces’ of these nations, broker weapons sale, and build “ever more military bases in their territories”. For Hossein-Zadeh, these “truly imperialistic policies and practices” were clear signs “that the claims of the United States and its allies that their self-righteous adventures of “regime change” in the Greater Middle East [were] designed to defend human rights and foster democracy [were] simply laughable”.

Tactic Four: Inciting and Exploiting Sectarianism

The fourth and final tactic, according to Hossein-Zadeh, was to help US allies in the MENA region to crush their opposition by portraying them as ““sectarian” Shia insurgences”. This

strategy was “most vigorously pursued in Bahrain”, where Shia mosques were destroyed as “part of the regime’s cynical policy of “humiliating the Shia” in order “to make them take revenge on Sunnis,” thereby hoping to prove that the uprising [was] a sectarian one”. Nabeel Rajab, for example, who was a Bahraini with mixed Sunni and Shia heritage, insisted that the country’s government was “attempting to incite divisive sectarian tensions, to intimidate Sunni people into not supporting the pro-democracy movement because it [was] being presented as a Shia movement”.

According to reporter Finian Cunningham, meanwhile, “the targeting of the Shia [was] a tactic by the regime to distort the pro-democracy movement from a nationalist one into a sectarian one”. It was also, he says, a way of “undermining international support for the pro-democracy movement by trying to present it as an internal problem of the state dealing with ‘troublesome Shia’”.⁴⁰⁹ Further analysis of the revolution in Bahrain will be covered in greater depth in the next sub-section, as it is a good example of Western hypocrisy in the Middle East during the Arab Spring.

In 2013, author Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya argued at Global Research that there had also been attempts at sectarian incitement in Syria. “Kurdish civilians in Syria”, he asserts, had been targeted “by US-supported armed thugs” as “part of a deliberate attempt to galvanize the Kurds and pit them in a resurgent struggle against the non-Kurd regions”. And indeed, in the sense of defeating radically democratic Kurdish autonomy in Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), it would make perfect sense for the United States conspire against Syrian Kurds. However, presuming that the defeat of Syria’s Ba’athist regime was the priority of US policy in the country, the ordering of Islamist attacks on Kurdish citizens (as well as against Assad) would seemingly contradict US interests (as Islamist forces would gain yet another active enemy). In other words, it would have been most logical for anti-Assad Islamists to focus on the hostile government forces rather than the neutral Kurds (who were largely staying out of the violence in non-Kurdish areas of Syria).

Therefore, even though US complicity in anti-Kurdish attacks is probable (with NATO ally Turkey, for example, almost certainly being involved [as will be shown later in this book]), suggestions that the USA actively encouraged attacks on Syrian Kurds are more doubtful. As proof of US collusion, at the very least, however, Nazemroaya stresses that, while Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the Iranian Parliament condemned the “targeting of Syrian Kurds” in Syria, the Obama Administration and its cohorts “remained mostly silent” on the matter (until late 2014).

As Kurdish regions represented “the main point of convergence in the Middle East”, Nazemroaya says, the co-opting of Kurdish nationalist groups had been used in the past “to create upheaval and instability in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran” (as seen in Chapter Four). From “the centuries-long conflict between the Ottoman and Iranian Empires”, in which Kurds were “especially decisive in ensuring an Ottoman victory in the Battle of Chaldiran against the Safavids in 1514”, to their attempted recruitment “by the Ottoman government in its hostilities with the Armenians of Anatolia in the 1890s”, Kurdish forces were at points an essential part of the region’s political developments. More recently, Nazemroaya argues, Israeli politicians have sought to court Kurdish nationalists “as part of their policy of forming alliances with ethnic groups, such as the Berbers, who live in the sea of Arabs stretching from Morocco to Iraq”. President Erdoğan in Turkey, meanwhile, has even allegedly “devised a Turkish-Kurdish federation of some sort that would eventually incorporate Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdistan”.

⁴⁰⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/04/13/whatever-happened-to-the-arab-spring/>

In spite of the West's fairly consistent support for Kurdish nationalists in Iraq, however, it has "actually supported and helped the Turkish government against the Kurds in both Turkey and Iraq". Considering its failure to recruit the Syrian Kurds to fight against Assad in 2011, therefore, it seems fairly plausible that the mainstream Syrian opposition (backed by the West) would see the Kurdish population as hostile to their own aims. The subsequent "systematic massacres of Syrian Kurds", Nazemroaya says, essentially marked "the start of a new strategy to entangle the Kurds in the fighting inside Syria".

By encouraging Kurds to arm themselves more and segregate themselves from potentially hostile groups, he argues, the propaganda released by Israeli and US analysts (saying that "Syria will be divided into sectarian mini-states based on faith and ethnicity") could potentially strengthen Western attempts to use a divide and conquer strategy in Syria. One issue that Nazemroaya fails to mention, however, is that the Kurds in Syria largely supported the idea of a secular, inclusive, and direct democracy rather than the form of ethnic nationalism that dominated the Western-backed government of Iraqi Kurdistan. This reality, contrary to the comments of Nazemroaya, suggests that it is unlikely that the West will (even if it wants to) be able to set the Syrian Kurds against their neighbouring ethnic groups.⁴¹⁰ [More on Rojava will be discussed from Chapter Nine onwards.]

The Derailing of the Arab Spring

In summary, Hossein-Zadeh believes that **the Arab Spring was "brutally derailed, distorted and contained... by Western powers and their allies in the Greater Middle East, especially Israel, Turkey and the Arab League"**. Therefore, in order for Arab nations (and others in the "less-developed, semi-colonial world") to truly transform their societies, it would be necessary for the "so-called 99% in the more-developed, imperialist world" to also step up and successfully defeat "the austerity policies of the 1%" in their own countries. By forcing, at the very least, a reallocation of "significant portions of the colossal military spending to social spending" (in order to achieve a "standard of living worthy of human dignity"), citizens of these countries could seriously weaken the hand of their elites in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world.

"Imperialist wars of choice and military adventures abroad", Hossein-Zadeh argues, are essentially "reflections, or proxies, of domestic fights over [the] allocation of national resources". In essence, he says, **the interest of Western elites in "inventing new (and never ending) enemies and engaging in permanent wars abroad" is to ensure power remains in their hands** (as "powerful beneficiaries of war and militarism"). Therefore, workers throughout the world must "coordinate their response to [these] brutal policies internationally" (just like the one percent (or 0.001%) ruling over them does) if meaningful revolution is ever to take place.⁴¹¹ Towards the end of this section of the chapter, I will show how the Arab Spring actually did inspire reform movements elsewhere in the world to hit the streets, although they were not yet powerful enough to derail the destructive and hypocritical foreign policies of their ruling elites.

II) Protection of Western Allies

The Forgotten Revolution of Bahrain

Former University of Bahrain professor Colin S. Cavell argued at Global Research in 2012 that the **US mainstream media effectively ignored "the uprising in Bahrain"**, instead focussing on Libya and Syria. This fact, he says, seems to suggest that, having failed to predict events in Tunisia and Egypt, the ruling elites in the USA were committed to

⁴¹⁰ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/no-friends-but-the-mountains-washington-seeks-to-ensnare-kurds/5346859?print=1>

⁴¹¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/04/13/whatever-happened-to-the-arab-spring/>

focussing citizens' attention on their enemies in the Middle East and away from their allies there. Cavell asks whether the media's effective marginalisation of the protests in Bahrain (where there had been "massive demonstrations and [a] subsequent onslaught by regime forces against the pro-democracy protesters") from its coverage was simply "careless journalism", a sinister and "deliberate policy to exclude reporting on Bahrain", or just "too small or too insignificant" to talk about. With Bahrain's "majority Shiites" living in poverty and being "disenfranchised by the Sunni monarchy", however, the country's population was one of the first to rise up in the Arab Spring. If only for that reason, Cavell insists, there should have been much more coverage on the Bahraini uprising.

The citizens of the island nation, he explains, like those in Egypt and Tunisia, were asking for simple "things like an elected Parliament [and] a new constitution". When they "started getting killed", however, "tens of thousands... converged on a place called the Pearl Roundabout to call for the fall of the ruling Al Khalifa family". In short, the uprising was almost a replica of what was happening in Egypt at the same time. Nonetheless, Bahrain's status as a key Western ally meant that the mainstream media could not allow too much coverage about these events. Bahrain State TV, meanwhile, "called protesters traitors and agents of Iran", and "pro-government thugs [soon] attacked protesters" as a result of this propaganda.

After one month, the monarchy "authorized some 1,500 troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to enter the country" to help suppress the demonstrators. They were soon "cleared [from] the Pearl Roundabout", and they "never made it back". According to Rutgers University's Dr Toby Jones, the uprising had been successfully quelled only because "the United States and its allies wanted it that way". With this in mind, he argues that there is "a huge gap between American interests and American values... in the Persian Gulf", primarily because it is a strategically important area in the Middle Eastern Cold War between the US-backed Saudi sphere of influence and the competing Iranian sphere of influence.

Furthermore, there is a US navy base in Bahrain, with American presence having "increased in significance following the U.S. withdrawal of forces from Iraq" (because the superpower wanted to maintain its military presence in the region in anticipation of a possible invasion of Syria or Iran). Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, also had reasons for wanting to avoid rebellion in Bahrain. Not only did the Wahhabi State not want protests "in its own backyard", but it also wanted to defeat the "Shiite-led uprising" (which it felt would "encourage its archrival", Iran).

An "11-week period of martial law" followed the demonstrations (which had included "more than half the citizens of the Kingdom"), and Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari forces and their "armored tanks and machine-gunned soldiers" controlled "the major highways leading to downtown Manama". This foreign intervention, meanwhile, gave "the Bahraini military, riot police, and paramilitary auxiliaries" the strength in needed to initiate "a brutal crackdown", in which "peaceful protesters in more than 20 villages" were attacked "with rubber bullets, stun grenades, shotguns and tear gas". At the same time, thousands of people were "rounded up, detained, tortured, and sometimes murdered", while those showing any form of solidarity with the demonstrators were also harassed. In addition, the "monument at the Pearl Roundabout" (now a revolutionary icon) was symbolically destroyed, and the roundabout itself was subsequently turned into a road junction, surrounded by army checkpoints.

The crackdown also saw "Shia families living in mixed neighborhoods" receive "letters... telling them to leave", which would serve to further intensify sectarian tensions in the country. At the same time, Reporters Without Borders would soon call Bahrain one of "the

10 most dangerous places for journalists in the world”, speaking of how the Bahraini authorities had done “everything possible to prevent international coverage of the pro-democracy demonstrations in the capital, Manama, denying entry to some foreign reporters, and threatening or attacking other foreign reporters or their local contacts”. Journalists from Bahrain, meanwhile, “were detained for periods ranging from several hours to several weeks”, and “many were tried before military tribunals”. **News censorship** there, the organisation said, had “**succeeded with the complicity of the international community, which [had] said nothing**”. In short, insists Cavell, the mainstream media outlets had “all gotten the implied US Government memo” advising them not to talk about Bahrain.

In the Bahraini Uprising, over 50 demonstrators were killed; more than “1,500 arbitrary arrests” were made (with “jail terms cumulatively of over 2,500 years”); 1,866 cases of “torture and ill-treatment” were documented; more than 200 civilians were “sentenced by military courts”; nearly 3000 workers were “fired for supporting... pro-democracy activities”; around “40 Shia mosques [were] destroyed”; and “over 90 journalists [were] targeted”. With “over 500 prisoners of conscience”, meanwhile, the country had definitively won the position of “highest number of political prisoners per capita of any country in the world”, though the pitiful coverage in the Western media would not reflect this fact.

The USA’s Shameful Silence

While “ABC, NBC, and CBS news coverage of the Libyan uprising garnered nearly 700 minutes” of network attention in 2011 (the rebellion in Egypt had received 489 minutes), **the “largest demonstrations in Bahraini history” got only “34 minutes of coverage”**. With this in mind, Cavell explains how, for Egyptian protests to reach the proportion of those in Bahrain, a “minimum of 41 million people” would have had to come out into the country’s streets (around two million actually did). Although the Bahraini revolt represented “the largest oppositional movement in the Arab world”, therefore, as far as the ratio of population to protesters was concerned, **mainstream media coverage reached shameful levels of obliviousness**.

For Cavell, it is of incredible value to analyse why the US media (as “purportedly the most unrestricted “free” media in the world”) would remain “largely silent on reporting on the Arab Spring rebellion in Bahrain”. To summarise, he says, the will (and therefore the voice) of the mainstream media regarding the Bahraini uprising was stifled primarily by the USA’s “dependency on oil”, its alliance with Saudi Arabia, and “the legacy of Iranian independence”.

When Bahraini human rights activist Nabeel Rajab came to the USA in late 2011 to receive the Ion Ratiu Democracy Award, he “stated that the Obama Administration’s defense of the Bahraini monarchy and its current push to sell the regime \$53 million in weapons [was] “sowing seeds of distrust and resentment of the United States among the Bahraini people””. In early 2012, Rajab was “brutally beaten” (after returning to Bahrain) while “attending a peaceful protest”. At the same time, the American Task Force’s Dr Hussein Ibish insisted that “the status quo” in Bahrain was “unsustainable”.

For Cavell, the survival of the Bahraini regime was, in large part, a result of “the world’s foremost booster of democracy [siding] hand-in-hand with the world’s most brutal dictatorial monarchs”. Nonetheless, Human Rights Watch argued, the “panoply of repressive tools” used in Bahrain (including “lethal force against peaceful protesters, torture and ill-treatment, unfair trials, abrupt dismissal of workers from jobs and students from universities”) would eventually backfire. The organisation claimed, for example, that these measures had “succeeded only in creating a divided population” in the country, which would inevitably rise up again when given the opportunity.

According to The Daily Telegraph's Shashank Joshi, the "political order which had been "frozen in place since the death of Egypt's Colonel Nasser..." [had] finally thawed" with the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Referring to the events as an "earthquake", he insists that the world should prepare "for the aftershocks", and that the "US and Britain may come to regret their feeble stance and continued arms sales" to dictatorships in the Middle East.⁴¹² As will be seen in the following chapter, the West's support for anti-Assad Islamists (and those supplying them) in Syria did indeed come back to bite the capitalist superpowers, with the sectarian radicalisation encouraged by the West and its allies eventually fuelling the rapid rise to prominence of ISIS in 2014.

US Collusion with Bahrain Set to Backfire

Jawaharlal Nehru University's Rick Rowden echoed Cavell's words at Truthout in 2013, referring to "a seething frustration" in Bahrain growing from the USA's rejection of democracy in favour of its "strategic imperatives in the Gulf region". Nonetheless, he says, the Bahraini monarchy (which had even ordered its "security forces [to raid] hospitals to arrest the doctors and medical staff who treated injured protesters" back in 2011) only managed to delay mass unrest with its violent crackdown. In other words, it would not go away as easily as the regime had hoped.

Rowden speaks of how "low-level protests [had] continued in the suburbs and smaller villages outside of Manama, in which protesters [battled] nightly with increasingly aggressive police and security forces who [had] been accused of massive human rights violations". Roads, meanwhile, were blocked by residents "with burning tires and barricades" on an almost daily basis, with security forces subsequently arriving to "break them apart" (chasing people away and tear-gassing residents in their "houses and neighborhoods" in the process). Having long been "marginalized in the distribution of power and wealth", and faced "systematic discrimination, such as being barred from top government and political posts", Rowden highlights, Bahraini Shias were simply tired of their "second-class citizenship", claiming that the ruling monarchy was "enforcing a Sunni "apartheid system" on the Shia majority". For Al Jazeera, Bahrain's democracy movement was "the Arab revolution that was abandoned by the Arabs, forsaken by the West, and forgotten by the world".

US officials had not remained completely quiet on the rebellion, however, with US Ambassador Thomas Krajeski having made "repeated public criticisms of Bahrain's crackdown" on protesters, and provoking a "highly unusual public condemnation" (from the Bahraini regime) against himself in the process. Nonetheless, the USA only responded by announcing ""formal consultations" with Bahrain under their bilateral free trade agreement in connection with the abuse of workers' rights and attacks on civil society in Bahrain". There was no funding of the opposition or military intervention, as in other countries - just 'consultations'.

The regime's commitment to reform, meanwhile, was poor, with promised changes not being enacted, political prisoners not being released, and dialogue with opposition groups being dominated by pro-government representatives. As a result, "the hand of the moderate groups willing to engage in the Dialogue and committed to nonviolence" had been significantly weakened.⁴¹³ And, inevitably, this bleak reality would see a more hard-line approach grow in popularity, with opponents of the monarchy now calling for regime change.

⁴¹² <http://www.globalresearch.ca/bahrain-how-the-us-mainstream-media-turn-a-blind-eye-to-washington-s-despotic-arab-ally/30176> - Contact the author at ccavell@gmail.com

⁴¹³ <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/16424-arab-spring-not-over-yet-in-bahrain>

US Hypocrisy and the Training of Oppressive States

In December 2011, Harvard University's Nick Turse reflected on how, while the Obama Administration had failed to take a strong stance in favour of pro-democracy protesters in the Arab Spring, the Pentagon had actually acted incredibly decisively (though in a negative way). Forging "ever deeper ties with some of the most repressive regimes in the region", Turse says, the USA further built up military bases in the Middle East, whilst at the same time brokering "weapons sales and transfers to despots from Bahrain to Yemen". At the same time, the crackdown on democratic dissent in the region did not stop American troops being dispatched "on training missions to allied militaries there" (teaching local security forces about "the finer points of counterinsurgency, small unit tactics, intelligence gathering, and information operations - skills crucial to defeating popular uprisings"). Shrouded in secrecy, Turse asserts, this "region-wide training program" was "wholly at odds with Washington's professed aims of supporting democratic reforms in the Greater Middle East".

According to one US military spokesman quoted at TomDispatch, "more than 40 exercises" were carried out annually "with a wide range of partner nations in the region", but "host-nation sensitivities" meant that further information was seldom discussed. Nonetheless, when TomDispatch analysed "military documents, open-source reports, and other data", it found that **US troops had "regularly partnered with and trained the security forces of numerous regimes that were actively beating back democratic protests and stifling dissent" in 2011.**

In May 2011, Obama finally addressed the Arab Spring, claiming to stand "with the protesters and against repressive governments", while insisting that "America's interests" were in fact "essential... to people's hopes" in the region. Just four days earlier in Morocco, however, protesters had been "pursued by police in their cars" and forced to say "long live the king", all at the same time as a military ceremony was taking place further south, attended by Colonel John Caldwell of the U.S. Marine Corps. In fact, Caldwell emphasised at the event that he was there to support "one of our most important allies in the region". One demonstrator, meanwhile, told Human Rights Watch about how he had been "clubbed... on the head" and knocked unconscious when he refused to pledge his allegiance to the ruling US-backed monarch.

In January 2011, Saudi Arabia "curtailed what little freedom of expression existed in the kingdom by instituting severe new restrictions regarding online news and commentary by its citizens", whilst also launching "a crackdown on peaceful demonstrators". Little afterwards, activists seeking to create the country's "first political party" (which sought "greater democracy and protection for human rights") were "promptly arrested". In spite of these events, though, US and Saudi forces began a joint training exercise in Tabuk, in which they "practiced combat maneuvers and counterinsurgency tactics". National Guard commander Major General Bob Livingston even said "we're sending a real good message out to the people of the region".

Meanwhile, although the USA had not been able to stop its autocratic allies in Tunisia and Egypt from being brought down, it remained silent in the face of repression in Jordan, where "criticizing King Abdullah or even peacefully protesting government policies [was] a crime". In March, when Jordanian security forces were supporting (or 'failing to take action against') pro-government protesters who "attacked peaceful activists seeking political reforms", American and Jordanian troops were engaged in "a training exercise in Amman, the country's capital" (focussed primarily on counterinsurgency techniques).

Three months later, another joint exercise took place in Jordan in which, along with counterinsurgency, “special operations missions” and “irregular warfare” were also covered. Meanwhile, when 150 protesters were put on trial in November, Human Rights Watch criticised the process as “seriously flawed”, emphasising how only anti-government demonstrators had been charged for unrest which had also involved supporters of the regime. And precisely at the same time, American troops were wrapping up a four-month-long “basic mentoring” exercise with the Jordanian military.

In Kuwait, “security forces assaulted and arrested “Bidun” protesters, a minority population demanding citizenship rights after 50 years of stateless status in the oil-rich kingdom”, and later even cracked down on online activists. For example, 26-year-old Nasser Abul was “blindfolded and shackled” simply for writing “a few tweets... criticizing the ruling families of Bahrain as well as Saudi Arabia”. In the meantime, the USA had been using Kuwaiti territory for “a four-day training exercise”, and had undertaken “a biannual joint underwater demolitions exercise”. Elsewhere, meanwhile, an “annual multilateral exercise” took place in Kazakhstan, and “an exercise focusing on close air-support tactics” was carried out by “U.S., Jordanian, and Turkish air forces” in October.

All of the support given by the USA to repressive regimes in the Middle East, says Turse, is important for the superpower, as it offers Washington both “access and influence” in the region. Whilst speaking of its support for “basic human rights for citizens throughout the Greater Middle East” wherever regional enemies were concerned, therefore, the US government conveniently failed to mention its friendship with oppressive criminal elites in countries like Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia.⁴¹⁴ In fact, US backing of such regimes actually demonstrated more clearly than ever that its claim of supporting democracy and freedom was totally false, and that its only true interest was to maintain its own dominant position in the region.

III) Targeting of Western Adversaries

Gaddafi on the Hit List

Counterfire’s John Rees also picked up on Western hypocrisy in the Middle East in August 2011, highlighting that “the end of the Gaddafi [regime had] not been brought about mainly by a popular revolutionary rising” like in Tunisia and Egypt, but had marked the military entrance of the West into the Arab World (with the aim of tipping the balance back in favour of its own regional allies and against more independent autocratic regimes like that of Libya). The “point of the western intervention” in Libya, Rees insists, “was to gain a foothold in the fast moving Arab revolutions [of the Arab Spring] and to create a compliant regime by making it militarily and economically dependent on the west in a way in which, say, the Tunisian UGTT or the Youth Coalitions of Egypt could never be said to be”. Although it would not be able to exert total control over the Libyan opposition, the USA and its allies wanted at the very least to establish a regime in the country that would be “a home for western military bases”, “supportive of Israel”, and “safe for BP, Shell and other western corporations, whether from the oil industry or elsewhere”.

In Libya, Rees insists, the “‘humanitarian intervention’ argument” (which had first been “used in the Balkan War of the late 1990s”) was simply a “cover for western imperial goals”, much as it had been in Afghanistan and Iraq several years before. The “course of military operations”, however, “proved this false”, he argues, insisting that Western powers were “like unwelcome dinner guests - very easy to invite, [but] very hard to get to leave”, especially as they would be “the main beneficiaries of the fall of Gaddafi”.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁴ <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/5557:nick-turse-did-the-pentagon-help-strangle-the-arab-spring>

⁴¹⁵ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/14504-gaddafi-loses-but-who-wins-nato-tripoli-libya>

NATO Complicity in Genocide

Among some of the most worrying news during the Libyan Civil War was the allegation of mistreatment, and even genocide, of non-Arab ethnic groups in the country. In September 2011, the “reports of witnesses, journalists and human rights workers” described how the Tawergha ethnic group, for example, was suffering not only ethnic cleansing “but, according to the legal definition, genocide” (and all at the hands of some of the rebels the West was helping to overthrow Gaddafi). Human Rights Investigations (HRI) spoke of having “grave concerns, not only for dark-skinned people in Libya generally, but also for pro-Gaddafi tribes including the Gaddafa and al-Meshashyas”. Tuareg citizens in southern Libya, for instance, were “being accused of being ‘mercenaries’” for Gaddafi’s regime (as Gaddafi had “once lavished [the town of Tawergha] with money and investment”). For HRI, a sense of resentment was likely one of the reasons for the targeting of Tawergha during the conflict.

According to Article 2 of the UN’s Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, acts intended to “destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group” constitute as genocide. In the case of Tawergha, which was home to an estimated 31,250 people in 2005, citizens were directly targeted by rebel forces from Misrata. Being “emptied of its entire population” in 2011, the town 30-40 miles south of Misrata saw its inhabitants either flee or be killed. A reality that complicated the matter even further, however, was that the town had been “inhabited mostly by black Libyans, a legacy of its 19th-century origins as a transit town in the slave trade”.

As “NATO and the rebels [had] described all loyalist black fighters, guest workers from sub-Saharan Africa and even black skinned inhabitants of Libya as ‘mercenaries’”, dark-skinned people were demonised and dehumanised (acts which represent two key factors in any genocide). Being “accused of mass rape, [and] of being collectively responsible for the battle of Misrata”, the Tawerghans soon suffered from increasing aggression and discrimination (which often had “racist overtones”). In fact, HRI speaks of how, “on the road between Misrata and Tawergha, rebel slogans like “the brigade for purging slaves, black skin” [had] supplanted pro-Gadhafi scrawl”.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ), meanwhile, reported that “areas of Misrata occupied by the Tawergha [had] also been ethnically cleansed”. In the city’s Ghoushi neighbourhood, for example, “nearly four-fifths of residents... were Tawergha natives” before the war. Subsequently either “gone or in hiding”, survivors purportedly feared “revenge attacks by Misratans, amid reports of bounties for their capture”. At the same time, their abandoned homes were torched by NATO-backed rebels, so they would have nothing to return to after the war. In what had previously been “the country’s only coastal city dominated by dark-skinned people”, the words “slaves” and “negroes” had now been “scrawled... on the gates of many vandalized homes” by “light-skinned rebels”.

Amnesty International soon wrote about how “tens of thousands [were] now living in different parts of Libya - unable to return home as relations between the people of Misratah and Tawargha [remained] particularly tense”. Apparently, “residents of makeshift camps near Tripoli” had told the NGO that “they would not go outside for fear of arrest”. In late 2011, meanwhile, accounts surfaced of armed rebels driving up to the refugee camps and arresting men, of people being dragged out of hospitals in Tripoli “to unknown fates”, and of “Tawerghans being raped, disappearing and being killed”.

Rebel commander Ibrahim al-Halbous, who had led the fight near Tawergha, said during the assault that “all remaining residents should leave at once if his fighters [captured] the town”. Tawergha “no longer exists”, he said, “only Misrata”. Other rebel leaders,

meanwhile, reportedly called “for drastic measures like banning Tawergha natives from ever working, living or sending their children to schools in Misrata”, amid “widespread atrocities including lynchings and beheadings in which the highest echelons of the National Transitional Council [had] been complicit”.

Being taken in mid-August in an assault “closely coordinated with NATO”, Tawergha had been attacked by both “aerial bombing” and “heavy weaponry”. Tawergha residents would later also affirm that “rebel soldiers from Misrata [had] forced them from their homes on Aug. 15 when they took control of the town”. Revealingly, one rebel commander said after the victory in Tawergha that “his men had orders not to allow any of the residents back in”. The “only sign remaining” with the word ‘Tawergha’ on it, meanwhile, “had been painted over with the words “New Misrata””.

In effect, NATO had “played an important role in the ethnic cleansing of this town, an ethnic cleansing of which they had been forewarned and in which they decided, nonetheless, to participate”. According to Sam Dagher at the WSJ, National Transitional Council Prime Minister Mahmoud Jibril had “rubber-stamped the wiping of [Tawergha] off the map in a public meeting at the Misrata town hall”, having insisted that “nobody [had] the right to interfere in this matter except the people of Misrata”. This matter, he had insisted, could not “be tackled through... examples of national reconciliation like those in South Africa, Ireland and Eastern Europe”.

After the fall of Gaddafi’s regime in Western Libya, “mass graves containing the bodies of people killed during the conflict” were “reported on a weekly basis in Tripoli and other areas, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)”. Meanwhile, a “communications intercept between a rebel commander from Misrata and Colonel Ahmed Bani” revealed that the “mass graves of “pro-Gaddafi soldiers”” were “not to be talked about”. At the same time, Human Rights Watch “expressed their concern about the rebels interfering with mass graves”, and thus making “forensic work to discover the perpetrators of massacres difficult”. Amnesty International would soon also reveal that Libyan soldiers supposedly “executed for refusing to kill protesters” in Al-Baida had in fact been “murdered and filmed for the world’s media by the rebels” (a fact that “only came to light because amateur video [footage] of the victims whilst in rebel custody surfaced”).⁴¹⁶

In late October 2014, Amnesty spoke of how “the rule of the gun [had] taken hold” in Libya, with “armed groups... running amok, launching indiscriminate attacks in civilian areas and committing widespread abuses, including war crimes, with complete impunity”.⁴¹⁷ In short, Kit Klarenberg said at Counterfire, “**the developments in Libya post-intervention... offered some of the most compelling arguments against the doctrine of humanitarian intervention** imaginable”. He stresses firmly that such conditions “should seriously undermine the claims of Western politicians that positive political and social conditions can be enforced by a hail of machine gun fire”.⁴¹⁸

What the Death of Gaddafi Represented

In 2012, Austrian historian Hannes Hofbauer reflected on how the War on Terror had not really been focussed on destroying Wahhabi extremism, but on overthrowing unpredictable opponents in the Muslim World. With Gaddafi having been lynched and NATO bombings having caused “an innumerable figure of deaths, both soldiers and civilians”, Hofbauer says, the regional uprising in Libya (which had rapidly been turned into a civil war) was one example of this Western strategy. The argument of ‘protecting civilians’, he insists, had now

⁴¹⁶ <http://humanrightsinvestigations.org/2011/09/26/libya-ethnic-cleansing-tawergha-genocide/>

⁴¹⁷ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/libya-rule-gun-amid-mounting-war-crimes-rival-militias-2014-10-30>

⁴¹⁸ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/17523-libya-the-lesson-they-want-us-to-forget>

been shown ultimately to be deception. NATO had chosen to intervene in Libya and not in, say, Egypt because it had always been “aiming at regime change” (just as it had with Saddam Hussein), and it simply did not wish to get rid of the regime in control of Egypt. The fact that overthrowing Saddam and Gaddafi would subsequently allow Wahhabi radicals to fill the vacuum left behind, meanwhile, had clearly never been a genuine concern.

While Gaddafi had become friendlier with Western corporations in his later years (which almost certainly had an impact on increasing dissatisfaction with his government), he was still considered to be an erratic character. In order to take over “the most profitable pieces of the Libyan economy”, therefore, intervention would be necessary. According to Hofbauer, Gaddafi also “knew too much [about] international relations” to be allowed to stand trial for his crimes (a fact which Hofbauer suggests led NATO to consent to the leader’s murder at the hands of its allies on the ground).

For Hofbauer, the same situation was true with former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic (who had been “left without medical help” in 1996 and allowed to die in his cell whilst on trial) and with Saddam Hussein (who was hanged in 2006). None of these figures, he argues, received a serious trial which would determine their “personal or political guilt” in the crimes of which they were accused. These “odious national leaders” were instead “presented as the personification of evil”, while their dead bodies were shown to the press in a “historical step backward in terms of [the] standards of civilization”.

Hofbauer emphasises that the figures mentioned above were indeed “responsible for monstrous crimes”, but that these crimes were only a “pretext for foreign interventions” (especially considering that many treasured Western allies are guilty of the same crimes, and in many cases of much worse). The leaders’ “repressive policy towards ethnic minorities and political opposition” groups, he argues, characterised “multiple political regimes” throughout the world but, in the majority of cases, this fact did “not lead to military intervention and [the] killing of [their] respective leaders”.

In short, Hofbauer stresses, Milosevic, Hussein, and Gaddafi were not hunted down “because of their bad politics”, but “because of their good ones”. The reality was that they were “symbols for different versions of a “dictatorship for development””, which included “social politics for the masses and national economic modernization”. In each of their countries, Hofbauer says, “a huge amount of public money” was funnelled for decades into modernising society, with nationalised industries being used for “social and regional development” rather than to line the pockets of “foreign investors”. Western companies, meanwhile, “had only restricted access to the markets”, and the countries’ leaders were therefore “considered as “odious” by Western media and politicians”.

A Post-Cold War Offensive

Historically allies of the Soviet Union, the aforementioned regimes were “not willing to give up political and economic independence completely” and, as they were “on the periphery of the Western sphere of influence”, there was not too much the West could do to change this stance. Despite the eventual fall of the USSR, these governments still refused to submit totally to the will of Western elites. Having previously kept a certain distance from “Western economic and political interests”, and thus developed a certain “self-consciousness” and culture of resistance which could not be eroded so easily, these ‘inbetweeners’ of the Cold War would now be the ones to “suffer [the] most under the advance of imperial strategies”. As their “potential to take part in a different integration” from the one dictated by the West “threatened the imperial advance”, therefore, Western elites began to plan their destruction.

These regimes' "long history of partnership with Eastern Europe" had been "rooted in... a common interest to counterbalance Western economic and political advances since at least the 1970s", and also in their willingness "to trade on barter or bilateral clearing" (rather than on "hard currency" like in the West). Iraqi oil, for example, "was imported by the Soviet Union in exchange for Soviet weapons", while Libya "was one of the main importers of Soviet military equipment outside Comecon after 1978" (with up to "10 % of the Soviet hard currency earnings in early 1980s" being thought to have come from trade with Libya). In the case of Yugoslavia, "Russian oil and fertilizers" were exchanged for "shipbuilding and consumer goods". The USSR also helped to develop "railroads and health care" in each of these countries.

The "**weakness of the post-Soviet Russian leadership**", and its subsequent abandonment of many of its former allies, gave the USA and the 'European Community' the opportunity to "impose [an] economic and cultural embargo on all of the three peripheral states". In fact, the "whole UN Security Council" was convinced into sanctioning Iraq, Yugoslavia, and Libya (with Iraq suffering "a total trade and financial embargo" between 1990 and 2003 and the other two nations being sanctioned from 1992 onwards). While the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Yugoslav participation in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and suspected Libyan participation in the "bomb explosion of the Pan Am flight over Lockerbie" all served as pretexts for the sanctions, the reality was that **the West was simply cracking down on regimes that did not comply with its demands for neoliberal economic reform**. In the case of Libya, the oil-business was conveniently "excluded from the UN-embargo" because it was too important, though other sanctions would continue until Gaddafi "compensated the families of the victims of the Pan Am flight in 2003".

While the fragile détente between the West and the USSR during the Cold War had previously prevented "an internationalisation of such sanction-regimes under the UN-flag", the emergence of a weak post-Soviet regime in Russia allowed Western sanctions to openly attack what were "three important economic partners of Russia" (thus weakening Baghdad, Belgrade, Tripoli, and Moscow all in one go). The new capitalist nation (which was focussing on privatising its state-owned firms with breakneck speed in the hope of pleasing the IMF and other international financial bodies) had now lost its three "most important possibilities to integrate" into the post-Soviet world "on a non-Dollar based level".

Within "the first six months of the trade embargo of Iraq", the collapsing USSR lost "about 4 billion dollars", while Russia subsequently lost significant markets in all three countries. At the same time, the former superpower lost much-needed "geopolitical influence", especially as there were eventually military interventions in each of the sanctioned countries ("1991 and 2003 in Iraq, 1994 in Bosnia and 1999 in Serbia/Kosovo, [and] 2011 in Libya"). Essentially, embargoes had done the work of significantly weakening the states and their economies, and military intervention had simply finished the 'progressive' nationalist regimes off once and for all.

Unlike Iraq, Libya had seen "a small window of opportunity to survive after 2003", with international agreements being signed with Great Britain, France, Italy, and even Russia. The renewed relationship with the latter, however, perhaps played a role in the Western European powers' attempts to undermine Gaddafi's regime, as Russia looked set to monopolise the supply of gas into Europe with its deals with Libya. This assumption seems even more likely considering that NATO's intervention in the country ultimately "pushed back [both] Russian (and Chinese) economic interests in the region", and thus assured Western domination of Libyan resources. Just like in former Yugoslav states and Iraq, Libya

was now effectively under a Western puppet government which was running a failed state after being “demolished by the Western military machine”.⁴¹⁹

Meanwhile, Wahhabi sympathisers in Libya would increase their own power, using the “forbidding – and thus useful – brand name” of ISIS to “scare enemies with its invocation of a larger cause”. Although “the murder of 21 Egyptian guest-workers outside the Libyan city of Sirte” in early February 2015 was perpetrated by a group claiming affiliation with the jihadist organisation, the attack did not represent an expansion of ISIS into Libya, but rather an extremist exploitation of the chaos left behind in the country after 2011. For Mary Dejevsky at The Guardian, the massacre simply revealed “the nature of Isis as a collection of affiliates”, and how the civil war that gripped Libya had to be “laid in large part at the west’s door”. In fact, she calls for perspective and historical analysis, rather than fear about the spread of ISIS, stressing that it was “the arrogance of the outsiders who argued that anything was better than Gaddafi’s rule” which had “caused [so] much Libyan blood to be spilt” and had “destabilised a vast region from the Maghreb to Mali”. Essentially, she argues, the assassinations of 2015 had “roots that go [went] far wider and deeper than a band of fighters claiming allegiance to Isis”.⁴²⁰

The USA’s Containment Policy in the Middle East

Political writer Norman Pollack argued at Counterpunch in late 2014 that “**geopolitical strategy of divide-and-conquer**” of US elites was “integral to [their] ambition for unilateral global hegemony”. The “half-century thread of anticommunism”, he insists, simply “transmuted into a doctrine of permanent war tightly attached to counterterrorism” in the early twenty-first century. However, he asserts, “world power is becoming crowded at the top” and, although the Middle East boasts great oil reserves, it is really “only a pawn, [and] an immediate sphere of influence, in the main theater of confrontation”. In reality, he stresses, **Russia and China are the powers that US elites really wish to contain, isolate, and weaken**. Islamic militancy, he says, merely functions as the pretext “for the full militarization of American society”, and an increasingly greater military presence in the Middle East. The EU, meanwhile, has been cemented as a key friend and ally of US imperialism in the proxy conflict in Ukraine against Putin’s Russia.

While containing the ‘Chinese threat’ necessitates weakening Russia, however, Western attempts to isolate the two countries actually drive them closer together, helping them to overcome “decades of their mutual distrust (under Stalin and Mao) and competitiveness”. Pollack also argues that, if the United States’ aims of antiterrorism were really genuine, the country’s unconditional alliance with Israel would almost certainly be recognised as the counter-productive policy that it is. Without the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the support of regimes like Saudi Arabia, and the assault on independent regimes, Pollack says, the “jihadist phenomenon” would never have grown so strong. Nonetheless, 9/11 saw the governing elites of the USA strengthen their support for regime change, Zionist apartheid, and the militarisation in the Middle East.

All of these factors lead Pollack to insist that the USA and Israel are two of the main actors responsible for the intensified ISIS insurgency of 2014. Continued US hostility (rather than “disengagement from the region, dismantlement of bases, [and letting] Israel sink or swim in its policies of occupation and prevention of a two-state solution”) simply dooms the vicious cycle to continue, he says. At the same time, he argues that **the ruling elites of the USA have a “psychopathology of strength, dominance, [and] hatred of difference”**, which drives their country “into a cul-de-sac of ideological hardness and inflexibility”. The New York Times and other mainstream media outlets, meanwhile, have encouraged the stubborn

⁴¹⁹ <http://www.silviacattori.net/spip.php?article2672> and <http://www.casahistoria.net/iraq2.htm>

⁴²⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/16/libyan-front-war-isis-murder-21-egyptian-christians-middle-east>

imperialist stance of the USA. The Times, for example, has falsely claimed that Iran (though opposed to ISIS) would not cooperate with US-led airstrikes against Wahhabi jihadists in Iraq and Syria.

For Pollack, the apparent chaos in the Middle East is “a function of interrelated developments”, including “US intervention in the region (e.g., bases in Saudi Arabia precipitating the rise of bin Laden; Iraq intervention, a genesis for ISIS by way of Qaeda in Iraq), and Israel’s divide-and-conquer strategy, aimed at both Iran and Assad”. Therefore, the hope for real change in the region should not be a demand for more intervention, but for the USA to stop meddling and stop supporting Zionist crimes.⁴²¹ [More on solutions to the problem of ISIS will be seen from the following chapter onwards.]

IV) The Outcome of the Arab Spring

In late 2014, blogger Louis Proyect emphasised at Counterpunch that 5,000 people had died in the 2011 war in Libya. He also reminds us that, “percentage-wise”, this number “would amount to 250,000 in the USA – all within the span of 6 months”. While we cannot know what would have happened if Gaddafi had been allowed to suppress the revolt in Libya, what we can say is that Western intervention contributed significantly to the loss of life that did occur in the country. The justification for NATO’s interference in the conflict, he asserts, was reduced even more by the disappointing situation that came about after Gaddafi’s death.

This “same sense of disappointment”, Proyect says, “would apply across the entire Middle East and North Africa as **various shades of political Islam and bourgeois secularism [began to] contend with each other**, at times through propaganda and at times with bombs”. With such an inevitable context awaiting, he affirms, the “image of an anti-imperialist Qaddafi [was] enormously appealing” to many on the left back in 2011, “even if it [was] not true”.

Where pro-Western dictators had been overthrown, meanwhile, like in Tunisia, “imperialism and underdevelopment” remained. For Proyect, however, it was important to remember that “modern Europe did not proceed peacefully and unidirectionally from feudalism to capitalist [bourgeois] democracy”. In France, for example, “Bonapartist empire-building and bloody suppressions of working class struggles” occurred before liberal ‘democracy’ was finally established. Therefore, it would have been foolish to expect that the uprisings of the Arab Spring would immediately change the fortunes of the region’s inhabitants in a significant way.⁴²²

Democracy Now’s Amy Goodman, meanwhile, reflected in the aftermath of the Arab Spring about how, while Libya had seen a direct Western military intervention, there had also been a **significant “expansion of the secret U.S. drone war in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Arabian Peninsula”**. At the same time, she says, US troops were finally beginning to leave Iraq, leaving “thousands of private security contractors... to guard the U.S. embassy”. Also, Occupy Wall Street had seen demonstrators in the ‘developed’ world (who had been inspired by the Arab Spring) standing up against the “unjust economic system” which governed their respective countries.⁴²³ In short, with Tunisia and Egypt being seen as successful examples of people power, Western activists had now begun to turn on their own leaders.

⁴²¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/22/usisrael-created-middle-east-tensions/> and pollackn@msu.edu

⁴²² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/31/shooting-the-arab-spring/> and <http://louisproyect.org>

⁴²³ <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/5851:year-of-global-uprisings-from-the-arab-spring-to-occupy-wall-street-a-special-look-back-at-2011>

A Legacy of Mass Protest (But Without Profound Demands)

In 2014, Research and Destroy (R&D) spoke about how mass protest was increasing throughout the world. "In Turkey and Brazil", it emphasises, "demonstrations over a change in the price of transit, or the development of a city park, [were able to] provoke violent conflicts of an almost insurrectionary intensity" while, in France, "teenagers [began to] barricade their schools against the withdrawal of a pension that [was] as yet fifty years off". At the same time, however, "neither capital nor its would-be antagonists [could] provide a compelling portrait" of the future, the website argues.

There may indeed be anger in the world, the group insists, but "no one can imagine capitalism providing a series of progressive social reforms, any more than they can imagine seizing the state and the economy to provide a more egalitarian distribution of resources". The masses, it says, have essentially become opportunistic, finding "in immediate and often trivial demands an opportunity to mobilize grand antagonisms which otherwise find no clear expression".

The Arab Spring is one example of what the group is talking about. While protesters were often united in their demand for their ruling elites to step down from power, they were not united in their political goals. They were brought together by their mutual hatred of the oppressive regimes which ruled over them, and not by a concrete plan for a better future. Massive gatherings took place in public squares, where protesters would stay until their demand was met, but their discontent with the leaders that followed the despots (such as Mohamed Morsi in Egypt) showed that, in reality, "it was not [just] the fall of the regime [that] the people [had] wanted". Instead, they longed for a fundamentally different political system (though they could not yet agree as to what that would look like).

In the West, meanwhile, protesters mimicking the Arab Spring by occupying key places could not get rid of their own leaders. Nonetheless, like in the Arab World, the gathering in squares and parks saw "radical democracy [hearken] back to its origin myth, the agora, the assembly-place of ancient Greece that served also as marketplace". Occupy Wall Street, however, failed to achieve its aim, and was eventually "pushed into a small, decorative park on the outskirts of Wall Street, its barricades turned on itself, penned by police". This separation of economic and political worlds "would prove decisive", says R&D, in the failure of the movement to bring about any significant change in the USA and elsewhere in the West.

At the same time, attempts to emphasise that the 99% needed to unite against the ruling elites **failed to bridge the gap between those seeking revolution and those seeking reform**. However, it was clear from the failure of protests that "even a slight modification of the system would require collective violence [or action] of a near revolutionary intensity" (a fact that the Left did not dare to speak). Such a lack of adequate rhetoric, meanwhile, helped to polarise the Occupy movement, and help it fizzle out.

Emerging from the Adbusters journal's idea of emulating Tahrir Square on Wall Street to propose an alternative form of consumerism, the Occupy movement sought to determine its real aim only once all the protesters had gathered. The movement's "unexpected force and breadth", however, meant that there was "a great unwillingness to split the crowd with the adoption of inevitably divisive programs" like the abandonment of capitalism. The campaign's ensuing impotence, therefore, which was a result of trying to build "the new world in the shell of the old", ensured that even achievements similar to the small ones made in the Arab World could not be made.

Lessons from the Failure of the Occupy Movement

The Occupy camps did, however, encourage “some of the most destitute people to organize for their own survival” which, unlike charities, effectively empowered the disempowered. In “a country based on a practiced ignorance of the lives of others”, R&D stresses, this collective action was in reality a significant achievement. In Oakland, it affirms, thousands of people managed to “create an autonomous zone off-limits to the police”, built on “principles of mutual aid and care, freedom and autonomy from compulsion”. This “practical communism”, R&D asserts, of what could be called the Oakland Commune, was complemented by a “willingness to burn and smash and riot” in defence if necessary. When the state attacked the camp in late 2011, for example, this popular will became apparent.

In short, while the Arab Spring failed to bring about profound change, with leaders falling but the same system remaining, Western occupations also failed “to block the successive austerity measures” after the global capitalist crisis. Essentially, **these spontaneous movements simply found it hard to create a lasting “collective struggle”** that could “multiply and coordinate and organize their powers”. The reason for this failure, says R&D, was their **absence of shared ideals**, and the “diminished or abstract” nature of the objectives that did temporarily manage to unify them. In the wake of these disappointments, meanwhile, many protesters still believed in being able to work within the capitalist system, even though the idea of a capitalism that could be tamed seemed a lot less possible than it perhaps had a century before.

What Value Is There in a Riot?

For R&D, these crisis-inspired 21st-century movements needed to extend, elaborate, and transform their “practices of struggle”. For vanguardists, the group says, the so-called “great chaos of the riot” represents the “need for the disciplining force of the party”. In fact, however, riots were actually “central to the tactical repertoire of the dominated classes... in the centuries before capitalism proper”. As “the site of class struggle [moved] from marketplace to workplace”, though, “the strike [would emerge] as the tactic of choice”, containing “an inherent discipline” and a non-violent character which would soon give it a perceived legitimacy.

Riots, meanwhile, became the speciality “of the lumpen, the urban poor, the colonized peoples of the third world, [and]... the “youth””. With the “onset of [economic] crisis in the seventies”, however, trade unions finally became “too much a hindrance for capitalism”, leading corporations to fragment the labour force and make “opportunities for effective workplace action... few and far between”. In this new world, **the riot was one of the only tools left for hitting back at state power.**

In the moments when there are too many rioters, R&D says, “moving too quickly and wildly” to be controlled by the state’s security services, it becomes clear that law and order are not physical things. Usually, it is only the “specific applications of force” that are enough to prevent people from disrupting the status quo. When the situation becomes so desperate that these ‘applications of force’ no longer instil so much fear in the population, and a riot breaks out, people suddenly become aware that their “struggle is concrete, a matter of bodies, maneuver, [and] speed”. In England in 2011, rioters in London actually “demanded the presence of the police”, as there was no other physical representation of capitalism (the abstract enemy causing the economic woes of inhabitants). Essentially, the police (as a “practical enemy”) would become the incarnation of the state.

R&D claims that there are “two paths open for us”, that of a ‘plaza protest’ and that of a riot. The former, in its attempts to broaden the struggle, reduces itself to “a common

denominator” of only slightly changing the status quo. The latter, meanwhile, is a primordial reaction without profound objectives. While the former could bring about change by expanding into occupation and expropriation of property ‘owned’ by the ruling elites, the latter (through its destructive actions) could create “a ground entirely inhospitable” to the continuation of the capitalist state.

Either way, however, if the protagonists fail to prove themselves capable “of meeting the needs of everyone”, it is then “only a matter of time before people will accept the return of the old dominations”, stresses R&D. Thus, in the moments of revolt, the active movements must focus on instituting “ways of meeting [their] needs and desires that depend neither on wages nor money, neither compulsory labor nor administrative decision”. All of this, meanwhile, must be done “while defending [themselves] against all who stand in [their] way”.

The fact is that, ultimately, “**the ambiguities of populism and nationalism**” prevented **strong revolutionary action** in the events that began with the Arab Spring. They “were visible”, for example, “in the hesitance of the Egyptian masses in the face of the army”, with protesters foolishly believing that “the army and the people [were] one”. In the same way, the “concept of the 99 percent” adopted a form of “populism minus one”. The façade of togetherness (in spite of the non-existence of a shared objective) covered up the fact that unity was in fact dependent on the temporary alliance between all of the ‘enemy’s enemies’. In turn, this ensured that, once the status quo had been disrupted (as per the broadly agreed objective), the alliance promptly fell apart.⁴²⁴

The Link between the Arab Spring and the Global Resistance Movement

In 2012, Jerome Roos gave a talk about the effect that the Arab Spring had had on protesters around the world who had been affected by the global economic crisis which had begun five years earlier. In a period of underemployment and lack of opportunity “for a growing number of people around the world”, he insists, “**revolutionary theory and practice** is no longer considered just an academic or activist privilege, but a **pressing global necessity** and – increasingly – a factual reality on the ground”.

For Roos, the “**illusory sense of growth and progress** that [had previously] underpinned the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism” (and its belief that a free market would regulate itself) was now “**dying a slow and painful death**”. As a result of people’s increasing distrust of the capitalist system, he says, the “horizon of the possible is rapidly shifting”, with the “post-political consensus of the centrist parties” being “brutally uprooted”, and the “battle lines” being “re-drawn... along the class divide”.

With there no longer being “such a thing as a safe and secure middle class”, Roos asserts, the “real cleavages in our globalized world economy” are becoming clearer. Austerity politics and a growing poverty gap have shown that the existing political struggle is in reality “between the 1% – politicians, financial capitalists, CEOs and military elites – and the rest of the world population”. Amidst an “overload of informational stimuli”, however, **it is “important to try and connect the dots between all the seemingly disconnected events”**, such as the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the “real democracy movements in Spain and Greece”, the “millions of smallholder farmers in Africa”, the “predatory speculation of a small group of investment bankers on Wall Street”, and the Occupy movement. In short, Roos says, revolutions are “processes by their very nature”, and they simply unfold as internal motivations become external manifestations, and that is precisely what began to happen with the progressive movements mentioned above.

⁴²⁴ <http://roarmag.org/2014/06/the-wreck-of-the-plaza/>

While the mass mobilisations of the Arab Spring, and Egypt in particular, created intense “political and emotional symbolism” on the Left, Roos stresses that **the real struggle “must first of all take place inside of each and every single one of us”**. In particular, it must be the **realisation that “the root causes of our current predicament are not to be found in the symptoms of the system – but at its very core”**. The great “internal contradiction” of a “globally integrated marketplace” coexisting with a “scattered array of competing nation states” simply reproduces “patterns of oppression and exclusion”, he says. As a result, a “revolution in one country is doomed to fail”, and people throughout the world “will have to work together across borders” in order to bring about a genuine global revolution. **The “institutions of the old world”, asserts Roos, which include “the nation state, parliamentary democracy and a privately-controlled money supply”, must simply be replaced.**

The Global Financial Crisis

The events of 2011 and beyond, Roos argues, are “only the beginning of our revolutionary process”, but the “structural failure... at the very core of the global capitalist system” means that it is only a matter of time before people throughout the world realise that the solution lies in replacing that system with another. The “most serious financial crash and economic downturn since the Great Depression”, he stresses, led to “a sovereign debt crisis”, which led to austerity politicians cutting welfare. In turn, these measures sparked a social crisis and a rising lack of trust in existing political institutions (with the politics of austerity laying “bare the allegiances of our political elites”, and governments putting “democratic principles... on halt”). Amidst these crises, both reactionism (in the form of neo-Nazi groups, for example) and revolutionary anti-capitalism began to grow in strength (in response to popular clamouring for a solution to the economic woes imposed upon them by the elites ruling over them). And, with “unelected banker governments” being installed, “European democracy [was] faced with... an existential threat” unseen “since the days of WWII”.

For Roos, however, this situation was simply the “latest and most blatant manifestation of a protracted assault on hard-working people around the world”. With real wages stagnating “for the past 30 years”, he insists, households had to pile up “unsustainable levels of debt in order to retain their purchasing power”. Banks, meanwhile, took advantage of this situation to build up “a global Ponzi scheme of unprecedented proportions”. At the same time, “neoliberal elites unleashed a historic crackdown on labor unions and collective bargaining”, launching their own “dystopian neoliberal vision of a globally-integrated financial kleptocracy”.

Wage decreases and unemployment have hit populations hard (whether in Mexico in 1982, South-East Asia between 1997 and 1999, Argentina in 2002, or Mediterranean nations after 2007), Roos emphasises, and these crises have resulted in both increased suicide rates and “widespread popular protest”. The neoliberal era, however, was just an intensified version of the previous capitalist order, he says, and even in the nineteenth century Marx spoke of how “national debt gives rise to stock exchange gambling and the modern bankocracy”. Today, Roos affirms, it is easy to recognise this same system, with a “small oligopoly of bankers” controlling most of the world’s wealth and creating “around 97% of the entire global money supply”. And with this power, these people have “manoeuvred themselves into a position of vast structural power”, he stresses.

The rot of this system, though, has become more and more apparent to the world’s citizens, Roos argues. The “illusion of progress” created by cheap credit, therefore, which created “the illusion that the ‘middle class’ still shared in the benefits of economic globalization”, had begun to fall apart as people lost their jobs and got kicked out of their homes, leaving

behind the desperate reality that was always there. Living within the debt-based economy which was maintained by the fading illusion of 'progress', therefore, left citizens asking questions about the reigning economic and political system. In northern Africa, Roos says, popular uprisings would be the first significant sign of mass resistance in the wake of what was essentially just the most recent of a number of global economic crises.

Quoting former Zapatista spokesman Subcomandante Marcos, Roos says that, "in the cabaret of globalization, the state appears as a stripper – it strips off all its characteristics, until only the bare essential remains: repressive force". In the Arab Spring, this reality became ever more apparent, with the local governments having retained very little social policy and exhibited greater and greater levels of arbitrary violence. The West's failure to respond to the popular uprisings against their dictatorial allies in Tunisia and Egypt, meanwhile, allowed hope to spread throughout the world (even if it would be short lived). Though the capitalist superpowers recovered ground in the following months, training its allies to quell uprisings and sparking civil war in Libya and Syria, the seeds of rebellion against the capitalist system had nonetheless already been sown.

Far from being just a "singular telegenic event", Roos says, the Egyptian uprising was a broader revolutionary process which did not just finish with the toppling of Mubarak. Like the rebellions in neighbouring countries, it "was not isolated from the broader crisis of capitalism". Youth unemployment was still high, and so were food and petrol prices, while the issues which had caused the "food crisis of 2007-'08" (in which Egypt suffered "widespread bread riots") were still present. Despite the mainstream media's failure to discuss this context, citizens of Spain, Greece, and elsewhere understood it. The causes of the Arab Spring were similar to those in their own countries, and the revolutionary wave which had "swept across North Africa and the Middle East" now encouraged them to take to the streets themselves in May 2011.

Indignados, Syntagma Square, and the Occupy Movement

On May 15th, a "massive march organized by a coalition of activists, artists and intellectuals, united under the banner **Democracia Real YA**" led some Spanish protesters to occupy the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid (emulating in part the role of Egypt's Tahrir Square in the Egyptian uprising earlier in the year). The so-called 15-M movement of these 'Indignados' would then spread to Greece and, later, "to New York and the rest of the world", in what would be "a global wave of indignation" connecting "oppressed Arabs with unemployed Europeans; Chilean students with Nigerian fishermen; [and] American occupiers with Chinese villagers". And, in spite of the "particular local grievances", **all of the protests "ultimately [emanated] from the same universal source: the structural crisis of global capitalism"**.

In **Greece**, the suspension of democracy under an EU and IMF-imposed "technocratic government under the leadership of a former Vice-President of the European Central Bank" had pushed citizens to emulate their Spanish counterparts by occupying Syntagma Square in Athens. With perhaps clearer demands than their Arab Spring forerunners, they called for "an end to the austerity memorandum, the ouster of the so-called Troika of foreign lenders, and the institution of direct democracy". Subsequent police repression, however, showed that (just like in Egypt and elsewhere) "democratic values [were] being undermined in order to keep in place a fundamentally-flawed economic arrangement".

In the same month, "hundreds of thousands of students and sympathizers" took to the streets in **Chile**, in the "biggest protests since the fall of the military dictatorship of Pinochet" in 1990. Demanding "free and high-quality public education" after pervasive privatisation had reached universities (and "pushed tuition fees to such high levels that

most families [were] either being forced to take on massive debt to send their children to university – or they [were] prized out of higher education altogether”), they were repressed by the police. As the country was the “most unequal member of the OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]”, however, the protests were destined to continue.

In **Israel** (the third most unequal OECD country), June saw an “outbreak of massive protests against the unaffordable cost of living” in what would become the “single biggest demonstration in Israeli history”. Nearly half a million civilians came out into the streets after “two decades of neoliberal reforms” which had “pushed the country’s wealth into the hands of a tiny oligarchy of corrupt political, corporate and military elites” and created “one of the highest poverty rates in the developed world”. The event, however, was given almost no coverage by the Western media.

In **China**, meanwhile, peasants ousted Party officials from their offices (after they had “conspired with real estate agencies to divvy up communal farm land for a handsome profit”). They even managed to “establish a self-governing commune” (though only temporarily) once they had overthrown the corrupt politicians. Such uprisings were not isolated incidents either, says Roos, with “two scholars from [China’s] Nankai University” actually affirming that the country had “experienced almost 90,000 such incidents in 2009 alone”.

On September 17th, “a global day of action against the power of the banks”, called for by Canadian-based anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, took place. It turned out to be the “biggest social movement in the United States since the end of the Vietnam War”, and saw thousands of people swarm into Lower Manhattan. A number of these protesters eventually “set up an occupation in Zuccotti Park” after discovering that the planned location (One Chase Manhattan Plaza) had been fenced off by the police. The ensuing **Occupy Wall Street** movement, argues Roos, would soon transform “the political discourse in the United States”, propelling “rising inequality and the power of Wall Street into the public debate”.

When the Indignados called for a global day of action on **October 15th**, Occupy activists also turned out. In “one of the largest transnational protests in world history”, millions of people took to the streets “in 1,000+ cities in 82 countries demanding not just a change in policy, but a change in the very structure of the world system”.⁴²⁵ Over “500,000 people gathered... in Madrid; around 350,000 in Barcelona”, and hundreds of thousands more elsewhere in Spain. In New York, meanwhile, “10 to 20,000 people gathered in Times Square”.⁴²⁶ The events, organised by Democracia Real Ya since May (through platforms like ‘Take the Square’), had proved, says Roos, that coordinated international action for change was on the rise, and that it was becoming a much stronger force in the world as a result.

At the start of 2012, meanwhile, “a massive protest movement” known as **Occupy Nigeria** (which campaigned “against corruption and [for] the abolition of fuel subsidies”) emerged. As Nigeria was at the “very crux of global capitalist development... as a key oil and gas exporter”, however, little or no news coverage was given to the event in the Western media. This lack of attention was not surprising, though, as “companies like Shell [already had] a dark history of bribing local officials, hiring paramilitary death squads and causing massive oil leakages in the Niger Delta”.

Nonetheless, the immense power of petro-dollars could not stop Nigerians from protesting, especially as fuel had “become unaffordable for the average Nigerian [in spite of]

⁴²⁵ <http://roarmag.org/2012/05/jerome-roos-ovni-2012-revolution-21st-century/>

⁴²⁶ <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/the-october-15-protests-didnt-start-from-occupy-wall-street/> and <https://indypendent.org/2011/10/21/october-15-protests-didnt-start-occupy-wall-street>

spectacular growth levels". In a country where "the majority of the population [lived] on less than \$2 per day" (and Nigerian oil was refined elsewhere before being "imported back into the country for a much higher price"), oil companies and Wall Street speculators had long been the kings of the Nigerian economy.⁴²⁷ With the protests of 2012, however, it was becoming ever more apparent that popular anger over this situation was now bubbling up to revolutionary levels.

The Seeds of a Solution

In an era in which internet petitions and 'shares' on social networking sites had become the key representations of 'activism', the concepts of 'slacktivism' or 'clicktivism' ("the delusion... that you can effect change without really doing anything at all") were being increasingly targeted for criticism.⁴²⁸ In fact, Occupy Wall Street co-creator Micah White would claim in 2010 that "a battle [was] raging for the soul of activism", primarily "between digital activists, who [had] adopted the logic of the marketplace, and those organisers who vehemently oppose the marketisation of social change". He would even say that "the possibility of an emancipatory revolution in our lifetimes... [was] at stake" in this struggle.⁴²⁹

The street protests around the world in 2011 (inspired in large part by the Arab Spring), however, seemed to suggest that the tide was now turning against a form of diluted digital activism and in favour of a concrete and dynamic form of popular mobilisation. For Roos, the trigger for this change had not just been the global financial crisis, but people's growing opposition to the "very system that [had given] rise to it in the first place". The aforementioned system, he says (referring to the international capitalist order), has been responsible for "the destruction of our environment, the depletion of natural resources, the catastrophic destabilization of our climate, the unprecedented manmade extinction of millions of species, the sustained growth of inequality, the emergence of gated communities and shanty-towns, the precarity of labor, the commodification of education, culture and the arts, [and a] growing sense of alienation, depression and despair". Such a structure, he emphasises, cannot be trusted to look out for the best interests of humankind.

Since the "Chicago Boys" were sent to Chile to advise General Pinochet's junta on how to implement "radical free-market reforms", Roos asserts, the so-called Washington Consensus has spread throughout the world, being "enforced by the IMF and World Bank" and producing "devastating consequences across the Global South". With the global protests and uprisings of 2011, however, the world was given a glimpse into the future, with popular occupations representing a "globally interconnected web of tiny little Utopias". These events, Roos says, were just a taster of what would eventually become a widespread search for direct democracy throughout the world.

In other words, 2011 was a watershed moment for an international protest movement geared towards creating "a society without parties or leaders - where decisions affecting the community [would be] taken collectively and on the basis of consensus". The fight represented in the Arab World and elsewhere, Roos argues, was a fight for an end to both wage slavery and unemployment, for the creation of a "self-organized society... without hierarchical structures of power or political representation", and for an emphasis on community rather than divisive individualism. In short, it was a turning point for all activists committed to culture, creativity, compassion, and cooperation.

⁴²⁷ <http://roarmag.org/2012/05/jerome-roos-ovni-2012-revolution-21st-century/>

⁴²⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/asher-wren/slacktivism-technology_b_5077194.html

⁴²⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/aug/12/clicktivism-ruining-leftist-activism>

Although the Arab Spring and its counterparts were largely confused about the utopia they sought to create, they were at least beginning to discuss the issue in greater depth. Greek anti-austerity campaigner Manolis Glezos insists that the boat, aeroplane, and satellite were all at one point utopias that no one believed were possible, but they would soon turn out to be great advances in human civilisation. **While ruling elites have long told us that ‘there is no alternative’, therefore, activists around the world should continue to ignore this unproductive and destructive lie.** And, when police cracked down on protesters in Syntagma Square, Greek protesters did just that. They returned to their respective communities, having learned “a lesson in direct democracy”, and started “applying these lessons in their everyday lives”.

One Greek activist called Konstantinos said that the protesters’ tree had been “cut down right when it was blossoming” but, as it fell, the wind “took the seeds and planted them in all the squares and villages of Greece”. Far from dying in Syntagma Square, the movement had spread out. And, while dictatorships in the Arab World also sought to cut down the trees blossoming in their own nations, the seeds had already been sown. In short, the Arab Spring was far from being the end of the region’s revolutions.

In summary, Roos insists, capitalism only replaced feudalism because “the merchants and bankers of Venice, Florence and Genova started to defy the church and the aristocracy in the early 15th century”. Without their defiance, he says, the “globally-interconnected capitalist economy” we see today would not exist, and we would still live under the domination of feudal rulers. Now, however, we must learn from the story of capitalism’s birth in order to find a replacement for it. Just as early capitalists defied their rulers, therefore, revolutionaries today must seek new solutions, “applying the lessons of **direct democracy, horizontal decision-making, self-organization and mutual aid in our daily lives**”.

According to Roos, everyone has a role to play in this process, and no-one will triumph alone. If we all participate, he insists, we will be able to sleep more peacefully at night for having actively tried to make the world a better place. In the morning, meanwhile, we will be able to look at ourselves in the mirror with pride, having been “part of the unique historical moment that we are [currently] living through”.⁴³⁰

The Obstacle of Sectarian Division

One of the biggest problems for the type of alternative solution that Roos proposes for the Middle East (and the rest of the world) is the existence of long-standing ethnic, tribal, and religious rivalries. In 2013, Patrick Cockburn described how “the whole [post-First World War colonial] settlement in the region [was] coming unstuck”, referring in particular to the fact that: the Syrian government “no longer [controlled] many crossing points into Turkey and Iraq”; “Shia and Sunni fighters from Lebanon increasingly [fought] on opposing sides in Syria”; “the Israelis [were bombing] Syria at will”; and the “so-called trigger line dividing Kurdish-controlled territory in the north [of Iraq] from the rest of [the country was looking] more and more like a frontier defended on both sides by armed force”.

In other words, with the influx of fighters, money, and arms into Syria (to support the largely Sunni Islamist opposition in the country), and the crimes and injustices allowed by the Shia sectarian government of the Iraq, the hopeful aspects of the Arab Spring had been truly overshadowed by 2013. Cockburn emphasises in particular how “dividing lines got more complicated in Iraq after the Hawajjah massacre on 23 April left at least 44 Sunni Arab protesters dead”.

⁴³⁰ <http://roarmag.org/2012/05/jerome-roos-ovni-2012-revolution-21st-century/>

Before this event, he says, there had been “four months of massive but peaceful Sunni protests against discrimination and persecution”, but the “Iraqi troops in Sunni-majority areas” had simply responded by behaving “like an occupation army” in these territories. And, while the “Syrian rebels and their supporters [downplayed] the similarities between the crises in Iraq and Syria”, asserts Cockburn, they actually exhibited “ominous similarities”. The Assad regime (like that of the Ba’athists in Iraq) had already become unpopular before the civil war, but the loss of power of the central government would eventually cause even more chaos. Ba’athists in Iraq, having been overthrown by a US-led coalition, “excluded from power, and turned into second-class citizens”, were always bound to put up a fight. And the same was true about Syrian Ba’athists, who were not prepared to just roll over and allow themselves to suffer the same fate. As a result of the regime’s failure to address tensions in a productive way, however, along with the interference of the West and its regional allies, Iraq’s sectarianisation was destined for emulation in Syria from very early on.

Kurdistan, meanwhile, began to look like it would be key in either ending or exacerbating sectarian tensions in the Middle East. With “the region between Syria’s Mediterranean coast and the western frontier of Iran” traditionally being “a zone where empires collide” (with Romans fighting Parthians, Ottomans fighting Safavids, and Britons fighting Turks there), the Kurds have witnessed many imperialist battles throughout history. Having been thoroughly dispossessed after the First World War, however, they have been “the most jubilant at the discrediting” of the colonial division of the Middle East into nation states (“of which they, along with the Palestinians, [have been] the greatest victims”).⁴³¹

In this process, though, the Kurds could play either a radically alternative role in the region, or a role that will perpetuate the destructive sectarian dynamics that currently prevail. Both libertarian socialists and ethnic nationalists in Kurdistan are all too aware of the arbitrary nature of the borders designed by Britain, France, and Turkey at the start of the twentieth century, and it is unlikely that they will see the decreased involvement of Iraqi and Syrian central governments in their communities as a negative thing. The crucial issue, however, is which system they choose to adopt in the absence of these forces – one based on the humanitarian values of the progressive Kurdish movement (led by the PKK) or one based on the self-interested sectarianism of bourgeois Kurdish nationalists (led by the KDP).

In June 2014, Cockburn quoted KRG president Masoud Barzani (of the KDP) as saying “we are facing a new reality and a new Iraq”, while insisting that the “wrong policies” of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki were responsible “for the violence” engulfing the country. Barzani then “called for [the Iraqi leader] to go”, asserting that “it was “very difficult” to imagine Iraq staying together”. The KDP leader, however, was simply seeking to capitulate on Baghdad’s weakness to seize even more power for himself and his tribal elite, rather than to give Iraqi Kurds more justice, freedom, or democratic power. Instead of seeking to reduce sectarianism, his actions and words essentially set Iraqi Kurds against their Shia and Sunni Arab counterparts in the rest of the country.

When Barzani’s nationalists “used the opportunity presented by the Isis assault and the disintegration of the Iraqi army in northern Iraq to take over territories disputed with the Arabs in Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salahuddin and Diyala provinces”, the opportunism of the KRG government was revealed more clearly than ever. This move (which saw the KRG forces take “a broad swath of land which [was] either populated by Kurds or from which Kurds [said] they [had been] ethnically cleansed by Saddam Hussein and his predecessors”) would significantly strengthen Barzani’s hand, as Kurdish authorities would now take control of the “oilfields of Kirkuk and [the] newly discovered oil or gas fields” nearby.⁴³² The official

⁴³¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/05/13/history-lessons-the-west-refuses-to-learn/>

⁴³² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/06/25/kurds-winning-battle-of-self-rule/>

excuse given, meanwhile, was (according to Kurdish commander General Sherko Fatih) that the KRG sought “to secure Kurdish territory abandoned by the Iraqi army”, while not becoming “involved in a civil war”.⁴³³

The fact that the KRG took advantage of the misfortune of Sunni and Shia Arab communities in Iraq, however, showed that secular solidarity was not at the top of the nationalist regime’s agenda (if it had ever been on the agenda in the first place). Seeing that the Iraqi state was “in no position to prevent Kurdish independence”, Barzani’s capture of Kirkuk and other provinces was effectively a precursor to future attempts to create a Kurdish state independent of Iraq (though not independent from imperialism, regional powerhouses, and the rule of capitalism).

At the same time, says Cockburn, it is “unlikely that Baghdad will in [the] future control much in the Sunni provinces” of Iraq, and that Kurds were therefore taking steps that were perhaps inevitable. The post-Saddam national army, for example, which had around 350,000 soldiers, was “demonstrably not prepared to fight for Iraq as a nation state”, while the Baghdad regime’s dependence “on purely Shia militias” showed that coexistence with Sunnis in Iraq was not an important issue for the country’s governing elites. In an Iraq submerged in such circumstances, Cockburn insists, “the Kurds, Sunni and Shia of Iraq appear to be fast going their different ways”.⁴³⁴

In summary, the only way to ensure that the cleavages mentioned above do not stain the Middle East with more innocent blood is to abandon completely the ethnic nationalism, ‘religious’ extremism, and crony capitalism that currently dominate the region. Instead, the people of the region (and the rest of the world) must embrace a secular and directly democratic political system, focussed on freedom, equality, and socio-economic justice. From Chapter Nine onwards, I will take a deeper look at this alternative, using the progressive Kurdish movement’s actions in Rojava as an example.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was essentially a smokescreen for the real intent of the Republican Administration of George W. Bush. Primarily, this reality is revealed by the fact that US allies like the regimes of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan (which probably had just as much to do with the September 11th attacks as the Taliban did (if not more)) were not targeted in the post-9/11 US offensive on the Muslim World. In fact, the fear and anger generated by the terrorist attacks were exploited in a cynical way by the ruling elites of the USA to justify a post-Cold-War military expansion throughout the world.

In short, the existence of the USSR had previously given US elites the privileged position of controlling the world’s only capitalist superpower but, after the fall of the Soviet Union, they had challengers in China, Europe, and elsewhere, and thus needed to exert their global dominance. The ‘soft power’ they subsequently exerted did not succeed in creating a uniform international capitalist order, however, and there were still a number of nations that were refusing to conform to the neoliberal Washington Consensus. As a result, a new trend emerged, in which ‘hard power’ was once again used (as during the 20th century) against any country that resisted US economic hegemony.

Essentially, the covert operations (like in Venezuela in 2002, when US-backed forces launched an abortive attempt to overthrow the progressive government of Hugo Chávez) and the overt operations (like the 2003 Invasion of Iraq and the 2011 intervention in Libya)

⁴³³ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/07/04/the-kurds-big-gains/>

⁴³⁴ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/06/25/kurds-winning-battle-of-self-rule/>

launched by the USA's ruling elites after 9/11 were a clear sign that the 'War on Terror' had nothing to do with destroying radical Islam. In fact, Wahhabi Islamists actually gained in strength in both Iraq and Libya as a result of US-led interventions. The active support of the USA and its allies for Wahhabi-inspired Islamists in Syria, meanwhile, showed that the primary imperialist concern was not radical Islam but the continued existence of quasi-independent Arab nationalist regimes. With Hussein and Gaddafi already overthrown, Assad was simply next on the list of targets.

In the next chapter, I will look at how **the jihadists of ISIS emerged from the rubble of Western-backed civil conflicts, and how they functioned as a pretext for further Western military action in the region** (even though imperialist collusion with oppressive authoritarian regimes, along with overt and covert military attacks on largely secular (though dictatorial) governments, had actually led to the rise of Wahhabi extremism in the Middle East in the first place).

7) Islamism, Wahhabism, and ISIS

As seen in Chapters Five and Six, both the US-led invasions of the early twenty-first century and the historic Western alliance with Wahhabism have wreaked havoc on independent and democratic politics in the Middle East. In this chapter, I will analyse in greater detail how the group known as ISIS, ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or simply IS became so powerful in 2014. In short, I will show that not all Islamist groups are like ISIS, whilst also reaffirming the point made in previous chapters that Islamism in general is not the solution for the socio-economic and political problems that plague the Muslim World.

In Section A, I will take another brief look at why Islamism rose to prominence as the main opposition movement in the Middle East, reflecting on the role that Western opposition to secular nationalism in the region had and on why not all Islamist groups are the same. In Section B, I will emphasise once again the way in which Saudi Arabia serves Western and Wahhabi interests simultaneously, repressing anyone who gets in the way. In the following section, I will evaluate the nature of ISIS, and why experts believe it managed to increase in power so rapidly. Finally, in Sections D and E, I will analyse the implications of Western military intervention in the fight against ISIS, why such action is of little use (or even counterproductive), and what really needs to be done in order to defeat the Wahhabi jihadists.

A) The Rise of Islamism

According to Tariq Ali, Islamists “are different in different countries”, but “what unites them is the belief that within the Koran there are the germs for an alternative way of organising society”.⁴³⁵ Another thing that unites them (as seen previously in this book) is that Western elites have played a crucial role in their rise to prominence, having destroyed independent secular, progressive, or nationalist alternatives to imperialist domination in the Muslim World. Nonetheless, elites in the West have also (in more recent years) expressed their concerns that, by supporting ‘democracy’ in the Middle East, they could facilitate the electoral success of “anti-American Islamist movements” (as happened in Hamas in Palestine in 2006).

However, it is important here to emphasise that some of the ‘anti-American Islamists’ that Western political figures have spoken about actually have more progressive features than some of the Islamists that the West (and particularly the USA) has supported in the past (and in some cases continues to support today). For Tamara Cofman Wittes at Harvard’s MESH, Tariq Ali was indeed right that “**there are differences in kind, not just degree, among Islamist movements in today’s Middle East**”. In particular, she said in 2008, there are “three distinct categories of Islamists”, and the quality of Islamist political discourse very much hinges on “the quality of the political system in which it resides”.⁴³⁶

In short, scholar Sheri Berman says, the **overarching principal of all forms of Islamism** is that “**Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life**”.⁴³⁷ The way in which this ‘guidance’ is to occur, however, depends very much on the political and historical context in particular territories, much like Cofman argues. In some places, Islamists may be able to participate peacefully within a democratic system, choosing to further their agenda by coercion rather than violence. In other places, however, violent and authoritarian means may be employed (as they have been in areas controlled by ISIS). Whatever the methods,

⁴³⁵ <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/30057>

⁴³⁶ http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/07/categories_of_islamism/

⁴³⁷ Berman, Sheri (2003). “Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society”. *Perspectives on Politics* : p.258. [doi:10.1017/S1537592703000197](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592703000197)

though, insists former CIA official Graham Fuller, the fact is that “**political Islam currently reigns as the most powerful ideological force across the Muslim world today**”.⁴³⁸

The Three Categories of Islamism

Cofman’s first category of Islamism is the “relatively small but important group of **radical, ideologically driven movements**” (of which Al Qaeda and ISIS would be examples). [While she herself does not emphasise the **Wahhabist/Salafist** nature of these groups, it is essential that we clarify the prominence of such a philosophy in this category.] She refers to these extremists as “**takfiri**”, due to their “readiness to label other Muslims heretics [or] apostates” (an idea which encourages them to see fellow Muslims as “justifiable targets of violence”). They have “**no interest in formal politics**”, she says, apart from their desire to create a “**strict pan-Islamic state**”, and they tend to “glorify violence as a religious duty and reject democracy as a violation of God’s sovereignty”. These “violently irreconcilable groups”, however, are “irrelevant”, Cofman asserts, “to the question of whether Islamist movements can be successfully integrated into a democratic Arab future”. Nonetheless, she does concede that such movements “endanger [such a] future”, effectively tarnishing the Islamist cause.

The second category Cofman mentions is that of “**“local” or “nationalist” militant Islamist movements**, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, or the Shiite militias of Iraq”. These groups, she argues, “combine their Islamist ideology with a **specific set of local political demands** that are the focus of their activity and the core concern of their supporters”. In other words, unlike the Wahhabis who see themselves as a vanguard movement, these nationalist groups “**seek and benefit from the vocal support of a given local community**”. Generally, Cofman stresses, such movements “exist in **weak or failing states** (or non-states, in the case of Hamas), where the central government has proved [itself] incapable of providing basic security”.

In short, the “armed activities” of these groups do aim to “advance the ideological cause”, but their focus is essentially a campaign to “protect local constituents”. And, in the absence of a functioning state which can give them sufficient protection, “these movements [are able] to wield their weapons with a **good deal of support from their local communities**”. As a result, Cofman highlights, debate regarding the participation of these groups in democratic systems must consider them as defensive nationalist militants first and foremost, and then as Islamists.

In Lebanon, Cofman explains, the government has been so weak since the civil war that it would, at no point, have been able to ban Hezbollah from participating in the political system. As a result, Hezbollah has been allowed both to remain armed and to participate in Lebanese elections. The same has been true in Palestine, where the Palestinian Authority “could not enforce” (primarily because Hamas was armed) a rule that disqualified political parties which “did not accept the signed agreements with Israel”. Cofman insists, however, that the simple fact that such groups “choose to run in elections is itself evidence of the extent to which electoral legitimacy is becoming a norm among Arab citizens”. She also suggests that electoral participation shows that “Islamist-nationalists” wish to “hedge their bets”, in preparation for a time when they are finally able to put their guns away. In short, they do not represent the same kind of political inflexibility that groups in the first category do.

The final category described by Cofman is that of **groups that do not gain legitimacy from armed resistance**. In a “strong state like Egypt”, for example, movements like those in the

⁴³⁸ Fuller, Graham E., *The Future of Political Islam*, Palgrave MacMillan, (2003), p.67

second category “could not have emerged”, she says. Proof of this fact was that, “whenever the Muslim Brotherhood or its offshoots in Egypt developed violent capabilities, the government crushed them mercilessly”. As a result, Islamist groups in such states have been forced to participate in politics in a largely unarmed capacity. This, Cofman insists, is the “largest category of Islamist movements”, and it aspires “to a political role... without voicing any revolutionary goals”.

Whilst wishing to “transform society and government into something more “Islamic””, therefore, these groups aim to reform society as they see fit by “persuading citizens to adopt Islamist ideas, [to] demand Islamist policies from government, and [to] behave as more closely observant Muslims”.⁴³⁹ Precisely because the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood provided such a ‘democratic’ Islamist alternative for the Middle East, Saudi Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz denounced it in late 2012, claiming in a characteristically exaggerative fashion that the group was “the source of all problems in the Islamic world”. And, with the party having taken power in post-Mubarak elections, “several Arab Gulf states expressed concern”, as their monarchies (having “narrowly escaped the Arab Spring”) suddenly became fearful due to the fact that “a popular Islamist party” was rapidly developing into “a key player in the region”.⁴⁴⁰ The Muslim Brotherhood’s behaviour after its electoral victory, however, showed that there were essentially authoritarian and reactionary characteristics within such supposedly ‘democratic’ Islamist movements.

Iranian-Inspired Islamism and Anti-Imperialism

As seen in Chapter Five, Iran “began to challenge Saudi hegemony in the 1980s” after Islamism had become “firmly entrenched” within the Iranian Revolution. Referring to a “people’s Islam”, the reactionary regime in Tehran was fundamentally seeking to synonymise the words ‘Islam’ and ‘revolution’, and thus attract anti-imperialists and left-wing Muslims to their cause. In the absence of a powerful left-wing movement in the region (thanks to decades of Western interference), this rhetoric soon propelled Iran’s political elites into the position of ‘main challenger’ to the “top-down” Saudi model, which was “based on the use of oil wealth to spread Islamism, with strict control being maintained at the top”. This competition subsequently turned into a type of Cold War, and influenced Islamists throughout the region.

While Iran sought to downplay its Shiite character in order to attract support from the majority Sunni Muslims in the Middle East (and from “young Islamist intellectuals”), Saudi Arabia counteracted these efforts by emphasising “Iran’s Shiism”, and by denouncing its revolution “as a vehicle for Persian nationalism”. Nonetheless, Rutgers University’s Deepa Kumar says, the Wahhabi state could not prevent many Islamists (both Sunni and Shia) from being inspired by the Iranian Revolution. In effect, she insists, it was to Islamists what the French Revolution was to liberals (or what the Bolshevik Revolution was to communists), providing them with an example of “how to depose a pro-Western leader and create an Islamic state”.

According to one Sunni Islamist, “Khomeini boosted our morale”, having shown how a religious leader could mobilise even “young Arab nationalists who were skeptical about the possibility of reestablishing the caliphate in the twentieth century”. This latter comment was a clear indication that, as seen in Chapters Two and Three, the “internal weaknesses of Arab nationalism” would soon fuel the popularity of Iranian-style Islamism as an alternative to Western Imperialism (in the absence of a secular, libertarian, and left-wing option).

⁴³⁹ http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/mesh/2008/07/categories_of_islamism/

⁴⁴⁰ <http://rt.com/news/gulf-monarchies-muslim-brotherhood-008/>

Kumar reminds us that the weakness of secular nationalism was not the only factor in the rise of Islamism, however. The USA, she says, “played an important role in stymieing secular nationalism and thwarting the left in Iran and elsewhere”. Moreover, in spite of “the end of formal colonialism”, the West “continued its dominance over the Middle East and elsewhere through pliant local rulers” after the Iranian Revolution, turning the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the Iranian regime into a source of inspiration for anti-imperialists in the region.

“From Egypt and the Gulf monarchies to Afghanistan and Iraq”, Kumar insists, “the United States continues to exercise control over nations that produce or house gateways for the transport of oil through alliances with corrupt leaders who are unaccountable to their people”. Precisely this dynamic, she argues, along with US support for the war criminals and occupiers of Israel, is what “fuels anti-imperialist sentiment” in the Muslim World and (in the absence of a “viable left”) allows anti-imperialist Islamists like those in Iran to “benefit from this anger”.⁴⁴¹

Wahhabi-Inspired Islamism in the UK

In October 2014, The Washington Post’s Griff Witte talked about the presence of Islamist Anjem Choudary in the UK. As Britain’s “most prominent propagandist for the Islamic State”, he says, Choudary had previously insisted that there would be “complete domination of the world by Islam” (one of many comments that had inspired “impressionable young men to carry out violence in the name of Islam – both in Britain and overseas”).⁴⁴² A month earlier, The Guardian reported on how Choudary had even spoke of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as “the caliph of all Muslims and the prince of the believers”. Anti-racist organisation Hope Not Hate, meanwhile, had spoken about how Choudary’s “network of groups” had become “the single biggest gateway to terrorism in recent British history”, having also insisted that he was “a serious player on the international Islamist scene”.⁴⁴³ According to The Independent, Choudary would have been happy to “renounce his British citizenship to go and live under Isis rule in Syria” if his passport had not been “seized by anti-terror police”.⁴⁴⁴

“Counterterrorism officials and experts”, Witte says, have affirmed that Choudary’s network has “become a vital facilitator in the flow of some of the thousands of Europeans who have swarmed to the battlefields of Iraq and Syria”. Nonetheless, he and “other enablers remain free to spread their seductively messianic ideology on the streets of the United Kingdom and globally, through the Internet”. They take advantage “of the very rights they condemn as un-Islamic” and, according to former MI6 counterterrorism director Richard Barrett, they know very well “where the limits of the law lie” (Choudary actually trained as a lawyer and “not [as] a preacher or religious scholar”).

Britain’s “large Muslim immigrant communities”, along with the country’s “tolerant approach toward those with radical views”, Witte argues, have given extremists a base to increase support in the UK. “North London’s Finsbury Park mosque”, for example, “became a critical way station for global terrorists”, he says. Since 9/11, however, “aggressive policing and intelligence efforts” moved the focus “away from Britain’s mosques and into the hands of freelancers who [were] much harder to monitor and control”.

⁴⁴¹ <http://isreview.org/issue/76/political-islam-marxist-analysis>

⁴⁴² http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-britain-islamist-extremist-anjem-choudary-proves-elusive/2014/10/11/eb731514-4e43-11e4-8c24-487e92bc997b_story.html

⁴⁴³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/07/anjem-choudary-islamic-state-isis>

⁴⁴⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/charlie-hebdo-radical-cleric-anjem-choudary-calls-cover-depicting-mohamed-an-act-of-war-9975618.html>

Choudary's legal experience, Witte stresses, made him incredibly effective at evading the authorities. When his extremist groups (like al-Muhajiroun, Islam4UK and Muslims Against Crusades) were outlawed, he simply "set up a new one with a similar structure and many of the same members". Furthermore, while his followers or supporters have been convicted of "Islamic-extremism-related offenses", he has "never been convicted of anything more than staging an illegal demonstration".

Born and raised in Britain, Choudary claims "he has never directly encouraged young people to fight for the Islamic State but acknowledges his followers have a habit of "popping up" in Syria". Nonetheless, he says that the people ISIS has killed "deserved to die". Although Hope Not Hate asserts that "Choudary or his organizations have been implicated in [a number of] terrorism cases" in the UK, there is (as Choudary himself brags) not enough evidence to convict him.

Robb Leech speaks about how his stepbrother Richard Dart began to move towards Choudary's radical form of Islam in his late 20s, craving "identity, respect, [and] empowerment". Dart subsequently trained as a terrorist in Pakistan and plotted to attack Royal Wootton Bassett, where "soldiers' remains [had] traditionally been repatriated". After the police "uncovered the plot", though, he was "sentenced to six years in prison". According to Leech, "Anjem was Richard's role model", especially as the extremist had also been a "lost soul" in his youth (and someone who had allegedly "indulged in drinking, drugs and women"). After Choudary met wealthy Syrian preacher Omar Bakri Mohammed, though, he soon "remade himself".⁴⁴⁵

According to Maajid Nawaz, who once sought guidance in Choudary and Bakri, the followers of these men "were encouraged... to operate like street gangs..., prowling London, fighting Indian Sikhs in the west and African Christians in the east", and they also "intimidated Muslim women until they wore the hijab". Now a reformed character, Nawaz insists that "Islamism is not Islam", but "the politicisation of Islam" and "the desire to impose a version of this ancient faith over society". In order to attract supporters, he says, figures like Choudary seek to "alienate... vulnerable young Muslims" from the rest of society by exploiting "political grievances", before then providing "an alternative sense of belonging" to them. "Preying on the grievances of disaffected young men", he argues, while creating a "them and us" scenario, "is the bedrock of Islamism". The "only way" to challenge the bigoted ideology, he stresses, "is to engage with one another".⁴⁴⁶

In the absence of such engagement, however, Witte asserts that Choudary "has a prodigious following on the Internet, where he keeps a steady stream of vitriol churning through Twitter", and has managed to inspire people throughout Europe and the world to follow his beliefs. Hope Not Hate, for instance, "estimates that several hundred among the several thousand Europeans who have gone to fight in Syria passed through Choudary's organization or one of its affiliates". In other words, his network has been "the continent's largest recruitment network for Islamist militants".

According to EU counterterrorism coordinator Gilles de Kerchove, "facilitators [like Choudary] play a vital role" in helping to recruit "would-be fighters", while ensuring "they have the necessary connections, instructions and money to link up with militant groups on the ground". Even worse, he says, is the fact that "very few facilitators have been prosecuted". The British government, however, subsequently sought to change the law to target figures like Choudary in particular. In a somewhat authoritarian move, that could have the potential for serious misuse if the political will existed, the government would seek

⁴⁴⁵ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-britain-islamist-extremist-anjem-choudary-proves-elusive/2014/10/11/eb731514-4e43-11e4-8c24-487e92bc997b_story.html

⁴⁴⁶ <http://www.news.com.au/national/i-was-a-radical-islamist-who-hated-all-of-you/story-fncynjr2-1226652515525#ixzz2c7SfbgAS>

to “restrict individuals’ travel and activities, even without a criminal conviction” (whilst also trying to keep them off the internet).

For former Islamist Ghaffar Hussain (who now leads the anti-extremist Quilliam Foundation), the only way to defeat Choudary (and those like him) is to “undermine [his] way of thinking”. On Facebook, Witte says, this process has already started, with the page Muslims Against Anjem Choudary in particular having “proved popular”. The leaders of the East London Mosque, meanwhile, called on the police to arrest Choudary’s followers “after they carried out vigilante “Muslim Patrols” – harassing women for not covering up and knocking beer out of people’s hands”. As discussed in Chapter Five, such aggressive behaviour is not approved of by a number of Muslim scholars and, according to Mosque spokesman Salman Farsi, “Sharia law says you can’t impose it on people who don’t want it”.⁴⁴⁷ In short, both knowledge and dialogue would be needed in order to defeat the chauvinist influence of Wahhabi-inspired preachers.

B) Institutionalised Wahhabism as a Western Ally

I) The Continuation of the Islamist Cold War

Saudi Attempts to Destroy Hezbollah and the Iranian Bloc

As seen in Chapter Five, the support of the capitalist West for Saudi Arabia has long helped the country’s regime to spread the violent, discriminatory philosophy of Wahhabism throughout the world since the second half of the twentieth century. According to Yaqub Shah at The American Muslim, Wahhabism has served Western interests not only by setting jihadists against communism in Afghanistan, but also by criticising the progressive elements of Iranian-backed Islamism. He refers particularly to criticism of Lebanese resistance movement Hezbollah, quoting one Wahhabi cleric who had condemned Hezbollah “simply for being Shia”.

Such preachers, Shah says, carefully ignore how the Hezbollah’s “persistent opposition to Zionist and Western imperialism [has] endeared it to vast numbers of Sunni Muslims across the world, (in addition to a significant number of Christians in Lebanon itself)”. At the same time, the cleric in question did not even call Hezbollah militants Shias, choosing instead to use the “contemptuous term of ‘Rafizis’ or ‘rejectors’, a phrase often used for the Shias by many hardliner Sunni ulama who consider that Shias have ‘rejected’ Islam”. By doing so, he sought to argue that Shias “were not Muslims at all”, and that Sunnis should therefore “denounce [Hezbollah] and shun those who join them”, insisting also that it was “forbidden for Muslims to pray for Hezbollah’s victory”.

Another Wahhabi cleric, considered to be one of the “sources of inspiration of Osama bin Laden”, called Hezbollah the “party of the devil”. Such statements, Shah asserts, which were “probably issued at the instigation of the Saudi authorities”, only help to “further strengthen the forces of Zionist and Western imperialist forces”, along with those of sectarian hatred in the Middle East.

In spite of the quasi-religious arguments used to denounce Hezbollah, Shah insists, the “underlying political motives” of criticising the group are clear. The Saudi regime, for example, “whose very survival depends on American protection”, could not possibly be seen to look favourably on Hezbollah’s “fierce resistance to Israeli and Western imperialism”. Also, as Hezbollah is an ally of Iran (which has “consistently opposed the

⁴⁴⁷ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-britain-islamist-extremist-anjem-choudary-proves-elusive/2014/10/11/eb731514-4e43-11e4-8c24-487e92bc997b_story.html

Saudi rulers both for the un-Islamic system of monarchy and for its servitude to America”), the “wrath of the [wealthy] Saudi establishment” has consistently been brought down upon them both.

Nonetheless, Western and Israeli media present clerics like those mentioned above as ‘leading’ scholars, in spite of the fact that they are barely known outside a “limited circle of hardcore Wahhabis”. The BBC, for example, has called the former a “well-known sheikh”, while the Jerusalem Post proclaimed him to be “a top Saudi Sunni cleric”. The corporate media, Shah argues, which on a number of occasions has claimed since 9/11 that Wahhabi groups are “the biggest danger to ‘civilisation’ and ‘security’”, undertakes an “enthusiastic highlighting” of Wahhabi scholars whenever it serves Western interests. This reality, he says, underlines its essentially hypocritical nature.

Speaking in 2006, Shah emphasises that the Western media’s referral to Wahhabi clerics as sources of supposedly legitimate commentary has actually sought to “promote divisions between Sunnis and Shias and thereby weaken the resistance to the American-backed Israeli offensive against Lebanon as well as the American occupation of Iraq”. Such a tactic, he says, “reflects the carefully selective and **self-serving policy that Western imperialist powers have long pursued vis-a-vis the Wahhabis**”. He then emphasises (as seen in Chapter Five) that “Wahhabism emerged as a powerful tool of the Saudi monarchy, backed by the West, to counter Leftist and nationalist movements all across the Muslim world” – which were branded “‘irreligious’ and ‘un-Islamic’ by Wahhabi clerics in the pay of the state”.

When the increasing power of radical Wahhabi groups flooded into the West and sparked the ‘War on Terror’, meanwhile, there was only a selective crackdown. Those **Wahhabis “who fiercely opposed the Saudi monarchy and Western dominance”**, for example, “**were to be stiffly opposed**”, but “**pro-establishment Wahhabi scholars, paid servants of the Saudi rulers, were to be projected in a somewhat benign light**”. After all, Shah insists, the latter “followed their masters in denouncing their radical opponents, who accused them of having sold their souls in return for [the] patronage that the Saudis showered on them”.

Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab “was himself fanatically opposed to the Shias”, stresses Shah, and the Saudi state thus “embarked on a large-scale anti-Shia pogrom” when it was set up for the first time. In fact, the idea that the Shia faith is a non-Muslim conspiracy “is a central pillar of the Wahhabi version of Islam”, with the former chief mufti of Saudi Arabia (“who issued a controversial fatwa allowing for American troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia”) having “been so fanatically anti-Shia that he refused to shake hands with them, considering them to be impure”. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that institutionalised Wahhabism has no love for any type of Shia Islamism, and especially not for that which exists in Iran or Lebanon (where Shia ‘anti-imperialists’ criticise both the Saudi regime and its US allies).

As revealed in Chapter Five, the rulers of Saudi Arabia have long “sought to stamp out any vocal criticism of their internal and external policies”. In order to do so, they have sent “funds, from both official and private sources”, to set up “a number of mosques, madrasas and publishing houses” in “almost every other country with a sizeable Sunni population”. What the Saudi regime hopes to push under the carpet, Shah insists, is “the enormous corruption and untrammelled despotism at home, Saudi Arabia’s key role in sustaining and promoting American imperialism and, of course, the very un-Islamic institution of monarchy”.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁸ http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/wahhabism_in_the_service_of_western_imperialism_the_politics_of_a_fatwa/

Saudi Provocations in Line with Zionist Goals

Pepe Escobar at Counterpunch insisted in 2013 that a “double suicide bombing targeting the Iranian embassy in Beirut” had been a “major, Saudi-enabled provocation”. Referred to as “blasts” in the Western media, he reports, it should in reality have been called a terror attack. Whether it was “carried out by a hazy al-Qaeda-linked brigade” or by “Saudi spy chief Bandar bin Sultan’s... goons”, however, it was never going to be condemned as terrorism. The reason for this definition dodging was, Escobar says, principally due to the West’s hopes of pinning Hezbollah down in Lebanon so that it would not have a significant impact on Assad’s chances of survival in Syria.

The Saudi agenda in Syria, Escobar argues, “implies getting both Hezbollah and Iran to be pinned down inside Lebanon as well” as in Syria. In this power game, he says, “Israel also wins”. In fact, he stresses, this overlapping of Israeli and Saudi aims was a “graphic illustration of the Likudnik House of Saud in action”, with both powers having “nothing to propose except regime change” in Syria.

Saudi Arabia’s strategy, “coordinated with jihadis, was to virtually beg for Hezbollah to fight inside Syria”, Escobar asserts. Then, when Hezbollah obliged, the Saudi-backed fighters implemented plan B: “blowing up innocent women and children in the streets of Lebanon”.⁴⁴⁹ This attack, led by Saudi citizen Majid bin Mohammad al-Majid, was committed by the “al-Qaeda-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades”, which soon claimed responsibility whilst warning “that more attacks would come unless the Lebanese-based, Iranian-backed Shiite militia Hezbollah [stopped] sending fighters to support Syrian government forces”.⁴⁵⁰ As Saudi-backed Islamists criticised Hezbollah, however, the group was in fact only “defending the Lebanese-Syrian border”, and had “only a few hundred fighters inside Syria”.

Iran, meanwhile, did “not want to go all out against the Saudis” in either Syria or Lebanon, especially with a “crucial nuclear negotiation on the table”. In fact, even when “its own embassy [was] attacked in Lebanon”, it sought to maintain “an extremely calibrated approach”. According to Escobar, Israeli attempts to claim that the Beirut bombing was a ‘false flag’ attack by Hezbollah were simply aimed at derailing this negotiation process (one that the Zionist regime vehemently opposed). At the same time, he says, US officials spoke of the “de-facto Israeli alliance with the Saudis” (in an attempt to defeat Iran and its regional allies) as “an extraordinary opportunity for Israel”. And, for Escobar, Prime Minister Netanyahu was up to this task, “bidding to replace the United States as military protector of the status quo” in the Middle East. Such a role, Escobar asserts, would effectively make the Zionist State the “military Mob boss of petrodollar Wahhabis”.⁴⁵¹

Meanwhile, Pakistani journalist Arif Hussain spoke of how “Saudi Arabia and her shameful ideology [had] been working as a tool for the enemies of Islam and humanity”. For him, “Wahabism and Zionism [were] sister ideologies”, similar in their hatred for the ‘other’ and their quasi-religious chauvinist values. Zionism, Hussain insists, has hijacked the American political system through its lobby groups, while Wahhabis have sought to hijack Islam with their oil money. And while pro-Zionist acts have defamed Christianity and Judaism in the Muslim world, he says, Wahhabi acts have encouraged Islamophobia in the West.

Wahhabism, Hussain argues, may be “loaded with throat cutting and flesh eating cannibal Jihadists”, but Zionism “is loaded with thermal, chemical and atomic bombs”. Both,

⁴⁴⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/11/20/the-likudnik-house-of-saud-axis-of-terror/> and <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article36924.htm>

⁴⁵⁰ http://edition.cnn.com/2013/11/19/world/meast/lebanon-beirut-explosion/index.html?hpt=hp_t2

⁴⁵¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/11/20/the-likudnik-house-of-saud-axis-of-terror/> and <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article36924.htm>

however, “commit extreme human rights violations”, and “are **equally responsible for all the wars in the Middle East**”. And, even though Saudi Arabia and Israel “don’t have each other’s embassies in their states”, he asserts, they in fact “work in close cooperation”. In short, while they reject “each other’s legitimacy as a state” in public, they simultaneously “have perfectly mechanized intelligence sharing”. The “only difference between them”, Hussain says, is that “**Wahabism takes the cover of religion and Zionism takes the cover of human rights**”.⁴⁵²

II) Qatar in Syria

Qatar’s Support for Islamist Groups in Syria

In late September 2014, author Elizabeth Dickinson reported on how Qatar had for years “pumped tens of millions of dollars through obscure funding networks to hard-line Syrian rebels and extremist Salafists”. As an example of Qatari interference in Syria, she speaks of restaurant owner Hossam, a Syrian expatriate living in Doha who “had 13,000 men under his control” in Syria in 2012 and 2013. In fact, Hossam says, “part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are loyal to me”.

While Hossam still spoke of sending “some of his revenue” to Syria in the form of “blankets, food, [and] even cigarettes”, he insisted that he had “stopped sending money to the battle, for now”. Nonetheless, he affirms that “his brigade’s funds came, at least in part, from Qatar..., under the discretion of then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah”. This money was only temporary, though, he insists, with dozens of brigades receiving “initial start-up funding” and only a handful continuing to “receive Qatari support as the months wore on”. According to Hossam, “**money plays a big role in the FSA**” and, “when the funds [from Qatar] ran out in mid-2013, his fighters sought support elsewhere”.

Dickinson insists that, although “Doha used to be quite welcoming to the young President Bashar al-Assad and his elegant wife (who were often spotted in the high-end fashion boutiques” of the city), the protests of 2011 soon saw a “**vast Qatari network of Islamist-leaning proxies**” come into play in Syria and elsewhere. Hossam, for example, was just one person in “an expanding pool of middlemen whom Doha called upon to carry out its foreign policy of supporting the Syrian opposition”. And, as “there were no established rebels when the uprising started”, Dickinson says, “Qatar backed the upstart plans of expats and businessmen who promised they could rally fighters and guns”. In fact, she stresses, “Qatar’s donations made it possible [for Islamist rebels] to think bigger”. Qatar, meanwhile, “by relying on middlemen”, managed not only to outsource the task of destabilising Syria, “but also the liability of meddling”.

As **Syria’s opposition was “overwhelmed by infighting and overtaken by extremists”**, meanwhile, Qatar’s allies in Libya “played a major role in... accelerating the growth of radical and jihadi factions”, leaving the country “mired in a war between proxy-funded militias” after NATO’s 2011 intervention. Between 2013 and 2014, Qatar’s Gulf competitors (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain) even “publicly rebuked [the country] for its support of political Islamists across the region”, ignoring the role that their own citizens (and especially those of the former) had also played in spreading Islamism in the region. Under pressure from its neighbours (which had supported the Egyptian military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013), Qatar actually requested in 2014 that “seven senior Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood figures” leave Doha. And, at the same time, the country “instituted a new law to regulate charities and prevent them from engaging in politics”.

⁴⁵² <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2014/01/30/348420/wahabizionist-onslaught-on-humanity/>

Qatar Seeks Greater Regional Influence through Its Proxies

The groups with which Qatar had the “longest ties” included “a menagerie of leaders from the global Muslim Brotherhood”, and “many of the ruling family’s top advisors were [in fact] Brotherhood-linked expatriates”. According to Dickinson, “**Doha was already becoming an extremist hub by the early 2000s**, as government-funded think tanks and universities popped up filled with Islamist-minded thinkers”. The Qatari ruling family, she says, “sought to differentiate itself from competing monarchies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)”, though Qatar’s “official sympathies” (with Wahhabi movements) meant that it was happy to emulate its Saudi neighbours by funding Wahhabi activists. Since the late 1990s, Dickinson affirms, Doha had “become a de facto operating hub for a deeply interconnected community of Salafists living in Qatar but also in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and elsewhere”. Ministries, for example, even called on Wahhabi clerics “to talk for important events”, while “charities like the Sheikh Eid bin Mohammad al Thani Charity, regulated by the Qatari Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs”, touted the cause. According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, this charity was “probably the biggest and most influential activist Salafi-controlled relief organization in the world”.

The Arab Spring, Dickinson argues, “[electrified] Qatar’s network of political clients”, and the country “bet that political Islam was the next big thing that would pay off”, putting its support behind Islamist movements wholeheartedly. According to Kuwaiti political scientist Abdullah al-Shayji, **Qatar wanted two things: to stop Saudi Arabia from being “the major or only player in the Sunni region of the Middle East”, and to propel itself into an influential role in the area**. As a small nation lacking sufficient infrastructure to play a significant role, Qatar “sought to amplify its impact by working through its network of Brotherhood and Salafi allies”. The NATO assault on Libya, meanwhile, allowed Doha to “build up rebel capacity on the ground”, making its clients some of “the most powerful political brokers” in the country (with the small Gulf nation “plying [them] with tens of millions of dollars and 20,000 tons of arms”).

Then came Syria, where Doha “issued a call for bidders... to help with the regime’s overthrow”. According to Hossam, Qatar had asked his battalion in 2012 to “send us a list of your members” and “a list of what you want — the salaries and support needs”. Meanwhile, “activist Salafists in Kuwait teamed up with Syrian expatriates” in 2012 and early 2013 “to build, fund, and supply extremist brigades that would eventually become groups such as al-Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al-Sham”. These Kuwaitis used both social media and their “deep Rolodex of Kuwaiti business contacts” to raise “hundreds of millions of dollars for their clients”. As a consequence of “Kuwait’s lax counterterrorism financing laws”, they operated “essentially unhindered”. In other words, although neither the Kuwaiti or Qatari governments orchestrated these fundraising activities directly, they were “not unaware of what’s going on”. In fact, many Wahhabi clerics who had been “outspoken in their backing of groups like [the] al-Nusra Front in Syria” actually found “a welcome audience among government-backed organizations in Doha”.

A ‘Toothless’ Mainstream Opposition in Syria

In mid-2013, it was clear that Qatar’s foreign policy had “been a complete and total failure, almost an uninterrupted series of disasters”, as the American Task Force on Palestine’s Hussein Ibish asserts. “Competition between Qatari and Saudi clients” in Syria, for example, had “rendered the political opposition toothless, perceived on the ground as a vassal of foreign powers”. And with different brigades fighting over “who could secure a greater share of the funding”, there were “few incentives to cooperate on operations, let alone

strategy". Their backers, meanwhile, had no "incentive to push them together", as such unity would almost certainly have eroded their own influence.

According to Hossam, Qatar's "bidding system" also led to corruption, with rebels exaggerating their "abilities and contacts on the ground". If they needed \$1 million, he says, rebels might affirm that they needed \$5 million (with the four million in between soon disappearing). Elsewhere, the Muslim Brotherhood had been overthrown by the military in Egypt, Libya was "falling into utter disarray, exemplified by the temporary kidnapping of the country's prime minister in October 2013", and Doha soon found itself promising "to focus on internal affairs" as a result. As all of its previous actions had been carried out "by proxy", however, it would not suffer any kind of international retribution.

In Syria, though, **"the disarray" caused by the presence of a large number of rebel groups "helped push fighters increasingly toward some of the groups that seemed to have a stronger command of their funding and their goals – groups such as al-Nusra Front and eventually the Islamic State"**. Between 2013 and 2014, Dickinson says, this situation led to a "string of defections from more moderate groups into these extremist elements" (which was not really surprising given that Doha had never really taken a strong position against such groups in the first place). In 2012, Qatari foreign minister Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah even said that he was "very much against excluding anyone at this stage, or bracketing them as terrorists, or bracketing them as al Qaeda". Even when the state sought to reject extremism officially, for example, it "mentioned the Islamic State but never al-Nusra Front by name".

Reactionaries with Free Rein

According to Al Jazeera Center for Studies director Salah Eddin Elzein, "the spat between Doha and the other Gulf monarchies" was simply a demonstration of the competition "between powers for the status quo and for change, where Qatar sided itself with change in the region". For Dickinson, however, it was "hard to see what Qatar [had] changed for the better". While the country may have sought to reduce Saudi domination in the region, it would essentially only replace Saudi elites with its own, rather than with a truly different political system. As Obama's regime in the USA had been unwilling to intervene in Syria in 2011, Doha had effectively stepped up and, although Washington had "asked Doha not to send anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles to the rebels", it had soon given its allies "de facto free rein" in the country.

Dickinson asserts that the **US Congress knew as early as 2003 that "Qatari-based charities were helping move and launder money linked to al Qaeda"**, but that the oil-rich state was too important an ally for US elites to risk losing or upsetting. At the same time, of course, the USA was bombing Ba'athist Iraq (which, unlike Qatar, had no proven links with Wahhabi jihadists). In other words, when it was convenient for the interests of American capitalists, Washington 'looked the other way', and was even shameless enough to state in August 2014 that **Qatar was "a valuable partner to the United States"** which ought to be credited with "play[ing] an influential role in the region through a period of great transformation".

This 'influential role' had been given to Qatar principally because it had been logistically easier for the USA to work with the small Gulf nation in Syria instead of Saudi Arabia, which moved a lot slower due to larger bureaucratic structures. According to one former US official, Qatar's "interagency process has about three people in it", which effectively allowed the country to "move an estimated 3,500 tons of military equipment in 2012 and 2013" without bureaucratic hold-ups.

Like Saudi Arabia, however, **Qatar was unable to control its Islamist proxies “once resources had been pumped in”**, and intelligence official David S Cohen called the country out publically in 2014 for its “permissive terrorist financing environment” (an action which would suggest that it had not been “responsive to Washington’s private requests”). Soon afterwards, the US Treasury Department “designated several individuals with links to Qatar”, who had apparently arranged for ISIS “to receive approximately \$2 million from a Qatar-based [Islamic State] financial facilitator”.

Nonetheless, the USA relied on its air base in Qatar, which served both “as the command center for operations” against ISIS in late 2014 and as a façade of “Arab support” for the campaign. At the same time, Qatar had proved itself as ‘up to the job’ of negotiating with a whole “range of extremist actors whom Washington [would not] want to negotiate with”. According to King’s College London professor Andreas Krieg, Qatar could even help groups like Al-Nusra to “be seen as a legitimate partner against [the Islamic State]”.⁴⁵³ In short, all of these factors simply made Qatar a useful ally that the US could not afford to lose. In other words, Doha was far from having served its purpose for US interests in the Middle East (which involve, as in the past, an increasing role in regional politics for Wahhabi-inspired Islamism).

III) The Saudi Arabia Not Seen in the Mainstream Media

Regular Executions in Saudi Arabia

As discussed in Chapter Five, Saudi Arabia has provided the funding and ideological framework for Wahhabi extremists throughout the world. However, its leaders also rubber stamp acts of state violence at home. In the first half of August 2014, for example, just as the West condemned ISIS for beheading American journalist James Foley, the Saudi regime “beheaded at least 19 people”. And this “surge of executions” saw Saudi citizens killed for offences ranging from “drug smuggling” to “sorcery”. Human Rights Watch (HRW) insisted that “international standards require that capital punishment should only be reserved for the “most serious crimes””, and that “executions for crimes such as drug smuggling or sorcery that result in no loss of life are particularly egregious”. Amnesty International, meanwhile, called the executions “disturbing”, with its official Said Boumedouha insisting it was “against international law to use [executions] in cases involving non-lethal crimes and where evidence used to convict the person is based on ‘confessions’ extracted as a result of torture”.

Four of the executions had been allowed by the Saudi government because the victims had allegedly smuggled hashish into the country, though the smugglers’ confessions “may have been obtained through torture”, according to Reuters. Mohammed bin Bakr al-Alawi, meanwhile, was killed for “allegedly practicing black magic sorcery”, and a “mentally ill man, Hajras al-Qurey”, was “sentenced to death for drug trafficking “after an unfair trial””. The son of the latter had apparently confessed to smuggling drugs, but the elderly man claimed “to have been beaten into confessing, despite repeatedly exclaiming that he was innocent and that he suffered a mental disability”. Although “an examination finding symptoms of mental illness” was carried out, he was still “held criminally liable” by the Saudi system,⁴⁵⁴ and was finally executed on September 22nd.⁴⁵⁵ His son “was sentenced to 20 years in prison and 1,000 lashes”.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵³ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/30/the-case-against-qatar/>

⁴⁵⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-executes-19-during-half-of-august-in-disturbing-surge-of-beheadings-9686063.html>

⁴⁵⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE23/024/2014/en>

⁴⁵⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-executes-19-during-half-of-august-in-disturbing-surge-of-beheadings-9686063.html>

On October 15th, meanwhile, “Saudi Arabia sentenced dissident Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr to death” – a move that would mean “trouble for [an anti-ISIS] strategy that [rested] on ending sectarianism in Iraq”. The Christian Science Monitor’s Dan Murphy affirms that Al-Nimr had been sentenced for allegedly “leading demonstrations and “inciting sectarian strife””. In spite of the latter claim, however, insists Murphy, it is actually **Saudi Arabia** which **represents “one of the greatest forces for sectarianism in the region”**. The country’s actions, both past and present, “illustrate the lengths Saudi Arabia will go to in their quest to stop Shi’a activists from defending their rights”, he says. As a result, asserts Boumedouha, the USA’s firm alliance with the Wahhabi nation makes it very “hard” for US politicians “to convince Iraq’s Shiite leaders that they’re taking their interests to heart”.⁴⁵⁷ Amnesty International also issued a statement calling al-Nimr’s trial “deeply flawed” and “appalling”.⁴⁵⁸

In 2008, Rutgers professor Toby Craig Jones argued that Al-Nimr’s activism had grown from the “**unwillingness of the Saudi regime to address the endemic sectarianism inside the kingdom**”. Thanks to its obstinacy, he says, “the moderation that [had] dominated Saudi Shi’a politics since the early 1990s” was coming more and more “under fire from within the community”. Al-Nimr, for example, had declared at one point that “we fear no one, be they regimes, arrogant powers, or mercenary pens”.⁴⁵⁹ The fact that Saudi Arabia’s suppression of democratic opposition has created even greater sectarianism in the country, however, has not stopped the state from continuing to follow the same repressive policies.

Abdullah’s Clampdown on ‘Terrorists’

In April 2014, Adam Withnall at The Independent referred to a report from Human Rights Watch, which spoke about how Saudi Arabia had “introduced a series of new laws which define atheists as terrorists”. King Abdullah, using the excuse of terrorism, had also decided to clamp down “on all forms of political dissent and protests that could “harm public order””. In Royal Decree 44, “participating in hostilities outside the kingdom” was criminalised, but the first article also defined terrorism as “calling for atheist thought in any form, or calling into question the fundamentals of the Islamic [read Wahhabi] religion on which this country is based”. Human Rights Watch official Joe Stork said “**these recent laws and regulations [turned] almost any critical expression or independent association into crimes of terrorism**”. He also insisted that they would effectively prevent the presence of any “peaceful dissent or independent groups” in the country, and that they were already being used by prosecutors and judges “to prosecute and convict” such dissidents.⁴⁶⁰

“Anyone involved in fighting abroad”, the Saudi state insisted, would be imprisoned for “three to 20 years”, though, as seen above, this was almost certainly a measure designed primarily for other purposes.⁴⁶¹ According to Chatham House’s Jane Kinninmont, the decree was set more to “presage prosecutions for Saudis accused of glorifying [anti-Saudi] movements elsewhere, potentially including Hezbollah or even the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood”, rather than groups more in line with Saudi-style Wahhabism. Both the US and Saudi regimes, for example, feared the success of the Brotherhood in Egypt after the Arab Spring, as it espoused “a conservative Sunni doctrine that [challenged] the Saudi principle of dynastic rule” and threatened the dominance of the pro-Western Egyptian military. As seen in Chapter Six, Saudi Arabia thus contributed to the overthrow of the

⁴⁵⁷ http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Backchannels/2014/1015/America-s-Saudi-problem-in-its-anti-IS-coalition?cmpid=addthis_twitter

⁴⁵⁸ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/saudi-arabia-appalling-death-sentence-against-shi-cleric-must-be-quashed-2014-10-15>

⁴⁵⁹ http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Backchannels/2014/1015/America-s-Saudi-problem-in-its-anti-IS-coalition?cmpid=addthis_twitter

⁴⁶⁰ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-declares-all-atheists-are-terrorists-in-new-law-to-crack-down-on-political-dissidents-9228389.html>

⁴⁶¹ <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/623511>

democratically-elected Brotherhood government, whilst branding the following unrest as “terrorism” and “sedition”.

As I explained in Chapter Five, the definition of terrorism very much depends on the government determining it. Saudi authorities, for example, have accused Hezbollah of “acting as an Iranian proxy throughout the Middle East”, suggesting that Iran was also “supporting protests among [Saudi Arabia’s] Shi’ite minority in Eastern Province”. As a consequence, terrorism for Riyadh is any act which “disturbs public order, shakes the security of society..., subjects its national unity to danger..., obstructs the primary system of rule or harms the reputation of the state”. In other words, anything that challenges the power of the country’s ruling elites is considered to be terrorism.

As with the USA, however, the Saudi state would easily be one of the biggest terrorist organisations in the world according to its own definition. Nonetheless, Saudi citizens (as people without the same kind of power as Saudi elites) have often found themselves in prison simply for calling for “political change in a peaceful manner”. International rights groups, for example, have accused the state of “jailing several prominent activists on charges ranging from setting up an illegal organization to damaging the reputation of the country”. It is no surprise, therefore, that Saudi human rights activist Walid Abu al-Khair insists the regime’s anti-terrorist laws are actually “intended to “combat peaceful demands” and “strangle freedom of expression”.⁴⁶²

In early September 2014, just as ISIS had finally got the attention of the West and its media machine, Saudi Arabia suddenly sentenced a preacher to five years in prison “for praising and supporting terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State (IS), during an Eid sermon” he had made a year before. The key issue, however, may well have been that he was accused of “using Friday sermons to provoke and encourage dissidence”, rather than for supporting such Wahhabi extremists. While the latter has never been a problem in the past for Saudi elites, the latter has, as it threatens their continued rule. The move was also, almost certainly, a token gesture for Saudi allies in the West, as demonstrated by the fact that, prior to his sentencing, the preacher had only been sent a letter by the government asking him “to stop delivering sermons” and had thus been, in reality, free to support terrorist groups abroad financially and harbour wanted terrorists.⁴⁶³

In summary, Saudi Arabia is seldom criticised by the West for its human rights abuses (whether they are executions or crackdowns on social activists) because it is such a key anti-progressive (and oil-rich) ally in the region. ISIS, meanwhile (which is very similar to the Saudi state in many ways (apart from the latter’s direct subservience to Western interests)) has been targeted for precisely the crimes that the Saudi regime routinely gets away with. And here lies the truth behind the West’s stated opposition to ISIS: it is not an enemy because of its war crimes and human rights violations, but because it is not a submissive Western ally.

In short, it is the independent nature of ISIS’s atrocities that really worries the West, and not the crimes themselves. As Gary Kohls at the Baltimore Chronicle and Sentinel said in 2011, “the list of fascist military dictators who have been supported by US presidents is long and smelly”. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example, once said that repressive Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza “might be a bastard, but he’s our bastard”.⁴⁶⁴ And, essentially, the same is true with Saudi Arabia. It may be just as much of a bastard as ISIS, but it is the USA’s bastard.

⁴⁶² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/03/us-saudi-law-idUSBREA1213O20140203>

⁴⁶³ <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/623511>

⁴⁶⁴ <http://baltimorechronicle.com/2011/022811Kohls.shtml>

Continuation of the Status Quo under Salman

Upon Abdullah's death in January 2015, "his 79-year-old half-brother, Salman" would officially take over the reins of the Saudi state. Vowing to "maintain the same policies as his predecessors", Salman was essentially promising to continue "abusing anti-terror laws to silence reformers and punish [the regime's] critics".⁴⁶⁵ With Abdullah having overseen "the spread of division, corruption and strife" in Saudi Arabia, a continuation of the same policies under Salman would effectively mean continued injustice, unrest, and inequality in the country.⁴⁶⁶

According to Murtaza Hussain at The Intercept, Abdullah had "protected American interests but also sowed strife and extremism throughout the Middle East and the world" since taking power in 1995. As a result of the former, however, the king received "glowing praise from American officials" after his death. The "fawning obituaries in the mainstream press", Hussain insists, had "faithfully echoed" the erroneous "characterization of Abdullah as a benign and well-intentioned man of peace", in spite of the fact that the king had "presided for two decades over a regime which engaged in wanton human rights abuses, instrumentalized religious chauvinism, and played a hugely counterrevolutionary role in regional politics". And, at the same, "he was not a leader who shied away from both calling for and engineering more conflict in the Middle East".

In other words, even though John Kerry described Abdullah as "a brave partner in fighting violent extremism" and "a proponent of peace", and John McCain called him "a vocal advocate of peace", the reality was that, according to "a State Department diplomatic cable released by Wikileaks", the king had actually been "directly advocating for the United States to start more wars in the region". This hypocrisy essentially shows us, says Hussain, that, "regardless of how venal, reckless, or brutal [Salman's] government may choose to be, as long as it protects American interests in the Middle East it will inevitably be showered with plaudits and support, just as its predecessor was".⁴⁶⁷ In fact, he could even expect to have the British flag "flown at half-mast on Government Buildings" (as the UK's political regime was accustomed to doing "following the death of a foreign monarch" like Abdullah).⁴⁶⁸

Meanwhile, having served as Defence Minister between 2011 and 2015, and on the Saudi National Security Council since 2011, Salman almost was almost certainly an active participant in the Saudi regime's ill-fated interference in the Syrian Civil War (as discussed in Chapter Five). In fact, according to David Andrew Weinberg at Foreign Policy, Salman had "an ongoing track record of patronizing hateful extremists", having been the Saudi regime's "lead fundraiser for [the] mujahideen, or Islamic holy warriors, in Afghanistan in the 1980s, as well as for Bosnian Muslims during the Balkan struggles of the 1990s". Essentially, says Weinberg, he "served as Saudi Arabia's financial point man for bolstering fundamentalist proxies in war zones abroad".

As a figure placed in charge of "maintaining order and consensus among members of [the Royal] family", Salman was given the task in the late 1970s of using "family contacts for international objectives", and was even appointed "to run the fundraising committee that gathered support from the royal family and other Saudis to support the mujahideen against the Soviets" in Afghanistan. During this period, says a "CIA officer who was stationed in Pakistan in the late 1980s", private Saudi donations "reached between \$20 million and \$25 million every month" at the time. Salman in particular, meanwhile, actually "helped recruit fighters for Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, an Afghan Salafist fighter who served as a mentor to both

⁴⁶⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30945324>

⁴⁶⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/22/king-abdullah-of-saudi-arabia>

⁴⁶⁷ <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2015/01/23/saudi-arabias-king-misremembered-man-peace/>

⁴⁶⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/half-masting-of-flags-following-the-death-of-king-abdullah-bin-abdulaziz-king-of-saudi-arabia>

Osama bin Laden and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed". At the same time, agencies run by Salman in the 1990s "provided essential support to al Qaeda in Bosnia"

After 9/11, things did not change, with Salman clearly willing to "associate with alleged jihadi funders and fundamentalist clerics". On the "board of trustees for the Prince Salman Youth Center, which Salman himself chairs", for example, sits Saleh Abdullah Kamel, "a Saudi billionaire whose name showed up on a purported list of al Qaeda's earliest supporters known as the "golden chain"". The Abdulaziz bin Baz Foundation, meanwhile, which has been "blessed with direct and continuous support" from Salman since its creation in 2001, is named after a deceased Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, who was renowned, according to Islamic historian Reuven Paz, for his "persistent attempts to move Saudi Arabia in the direction of strict and severe fundamentalism". He even ruled on one occasion that "women who [studied] with men [were] equivalent to prostitutes".

Salman "has also embraced Saudi cleric Saleh al-Maghamsi", who "declared in 2012 that Osama bin Laden had more "sanctity and honor in the eyes of Allah," simply for being a [Wahhabi] Muslim, than "Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, apostates, and atheists". The "worst-case scenario", says Weinberg, "is that the new king shares [these] hard-liners' views", while "the best case is that he is simply an opportunist, willing to accept intolerance in order to get ahead".⁴⁶⁹ In short, though, both the country and the region looked set to face more of the same under King Salman.

Wahhabism is not the Sole Culprit

Louisiana State University's M. Reza Pirbhai insists at Counterpunch that not all Wahhabi groups have the same perspective on the West or jihad as Saudi elites do. While some clerics in Saudi Arabia "routinely issue decrees condemning jihad against the European and North American states", for example, other Wahhabis (like Osama Bin Laden) strongly criticize them as "slaves of apostate regimes". Nor are Wahhabis alone in promoting ultra-conservatism, Pirbhai says, with the Saudi agenda in Pakistan largely being upheld by the "most militant madrasas" of Deobandism (as seen in Chapter Five).

For Pirbhai, there is a "gaping chasm between scholarly and governmental/ media/ pseudo-academic perspectives" on Wahhabism. He speaks of how, after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British had claimed that there had been Wahhabi agents at work, inciting anti-colonial activity in the local population. In reality, however, "Muslims and Hindus of various sects and classes had participated in these anti-colonial actions, while even more, including Wahhabis, had not". The British colonialists, in other words, were simply seeking to **mask the "socio-economic determinants of discontent" with talk of foreign subversion**. (This was, of course, decades before the West forged an alliance with the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia.)

Pirbhai asserts that "a significant section of the colonial establishment and the press" (and even the Bishop of London) spoke during the colonial period in the Indian subcontinent of how "the activities of 'seditious Wahhabis,' ...were the root cause of all the British government's failures in spreading Western 'liberalism' and 'democracy'" in the region. The bishop apparently even said, in a very aggressive manner, that the "'heathen' must be 'smote,' before... the 'progress of Christ and civilization' can be extended from Britain". In short, the consensus among ruling elites in the colonial nation in the nineteenth century was that violence was necessary in order to spread 'progress', and that their uncompromising belief in the validity of their idea of 'progress' was not at all arrogant or gratuitously authoritarian. And essentially, by suggesting that all anti-colonial rebels were stubbornly

⁴⁶⁹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/27/king-salmans-shady-history-saudi-arabia-jihadi-ties/>

violent Wahhabis intent on destruction, British rulers sought to justify repression of colonial subjects to their liberal patrons back home (it is probable that very few arguments were needed to get the 'less liberal' patrons on board).

When Wahhabis, mostly in Saudi Arabia, actually became useful for imperialist powers in the twentieth century, rhetoric soon softened significantly. And, although the links between the West and the Saudis had been growing ever since the first few decades of the century, "the 'problem' of Wahhabism... was only identified in October 2001, after the '9/11' attacks on New York and Washington". Muslims, Pirbhai says, had long "provided an alternative perspective to the theory of a 'Wahhabi Conspiracy'" (which Western elites suddenly took up again after many years of close relations with Wahhabis). Nonetheless, he affirms, there was a "wilful over-simplification" in the media and in political dialogue (driven by Western ruling classes) which aimed to "**obfuscate the political and socio-economic disenfranchisement that drives militancy in the Muslim World**". In other words, while Wahhabism has indeed played a role in spreading chauvinist and ultra-conservative views in recent decades, the reality is that, without injustice, exploitation, and oppression (and Western enforcement of or complicity with these realities), the discriminatory philosophy would have found it a lot harder (if not impossible) to gain the importance it has.

The "rhetoric of a Wahhabi Conspiracy" in the nineteenth century was essentially contradicted by the West's subsequent alliance with Wahhabism in the twentieth. Considering this hypocrisy, Pirbhai says, we can only conclude that the only aim of such rhetoric was "**to cynically conceal the political and socio-economic underpinnings of [anti-colonial] movements from their own citizens**". Today, he suggests, a return to criticism of Wahhabism "also serves as a mask for imperialist agendas and a carpet under which to sweep the protests and concerns of the Muslim classes disenfranchised as a result" of these hegemonic strategies.

In short, while terrorist acts targeting civilians generally are influenced by Wahhabism and other ultra-conservative reactionary movements, it is important to bring to the forefront "the motives of broad and disparate groups seeking redress for local discontentment caused by the colonial/imperialist activities of the powers-that-be".⁴⁷⁰ In other words, just as Soviet-style 'communism' provided an evil, ideologically-driven, and 'external' enemy for Western elites to distract people with in the Cold War, we should be careful not to allow talk of Wahhabism to confuse us into blaming one reactionary ideology entirely for the problems which gave birth to it.

To defeat such dangerously distracting over-simplifications, it is necessary to stress that **nothing is created in a vacuum**. Just as all life on Earth needs water to survive, all reactionary political and religious movements need confused, marginalised, or desperate human beings in order to endure. Wahhabi jihadist movements, therefore, did not just spring up out of the ground because one person suddenly developed violently intolerant ideas. The simple reality is that such ideas grew out of injustice and oppression in the Ottoman Empire, and then because of Western complicity in their continued growth in the twentieth century. In fact, imperialist support for the oppressive but apparently submissive Saudi monarchy (which was justified by the West's desire to ensure safe access to oil and the prevention of progressive developments in the region) was directly responsible for bolstering not only the conditions that would give rise to violence and intolerance but also the vicious, discriminatory ideas of Wahhabism itself.

Ultimately, the persistent poverty and brainwashing of the majority of the world's population presents a willing source of support for any group that promises material or

⁴⁷⁰ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2007/10/27/the-wahhabis-are-coming-the-wahhabis-are-coming/>

spiritual wellbeing (whether in the form of food, health, housing, or heaven). And poverty cannot be blamed on Wahhabism. Instead, it must be blamed primarily upon the ruling global economic system, which has been set up precisely with the aim of ensuring the continuation of inequality (as, without the poor, the rich would not exist). This system, whose socio-economic elites seek to divert attention away from their own responsibility for injustice and onto a handful of 'external' extremists (all in order to avoid sacrificing their privileged and unearned position in society), must therefore be held, essentially, as the prime culprit for all that is wrong with the world.

C) What is ISIS?

According to Washington's Blog, "the Saudi government and ISIS are virtually indistinguishable".⁴⁷¹ Nonetheless, as journalist Robert Fisk says, the story of ISIS technically began when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "al-Qa'ida's man in Iraq", was killed in 2006 in a US air raid. Under al-Zarqawi's successor, Abu Abdullah al-Rashid al-Baghdadi (now known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi), "this particular al-Qa'ida clone moved out of control".⁴⁷² In June 2014, the BBC spoke of how ISIS had officially been "formed in April 2013 and [had grown] out of **al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)**" from late 2006 onwards. Soon "disavowed by al-Qaeda", however, its "thousands of fighters, including many foreign jihadists", were led by al-Baghdadi with increasing success in both Iraq and Syria.

Born in Baghdad in 1971, al-Baghdadi had "joined the insurgency that erupted in Iraq soon after the 2003 US-led invasion", and "emerged as the leader" of AQI in 2010, working as a "battlefield commander and tactician". According to analysts, the BBC says, this military focus made "ISIS more attractive to young jihadists than al-Qaeda, which [was] led by... an Islamic theologian". In fact, King's College London's Peter Neumann has estimated that "about 80% of Western fighters in Syria [had] joined the group" by mid-2014, showing clearly that most foreign jihadis had been attracted by the methods, message, and tactics of ISIS.⁴⁷³

Instead of "claiming to represent all Muslims" as Al-Qaeda did, AQI actually "espoused Sunni - even tribal - aspirations", which were rooted in the sectarian Shia control of the Iraqi government after the US-led invasion of 2003. In fact, bin Laden himself would soon claim, in a letter found after his death in 2011, that "some of his "brothers" had become "totally absorbed in fighting [their] local enemies" and using other Muslims as "human shields". He questioned in particular "the actions of "our brother Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi"", showing clearly that there were "grave doubts about Isis, its leadership and its role" within the ranks of Al-Qaeda.

For Fisk, it could have been useful to have captured Bin Laden alive, as it would have allowed the world to "hear more of [his] argument", and may have had a taming impact on more extreme Wahhabists. In bin Laden's letter, for example, the Al-Qaeda leader had emphasised that the members of his group were "not the owners of the Salafist way". He even stressed the importance of "refraining from accusing and judging without being qualified to judge", which was an apparent reference to the excessive Takfirism of ISIS.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷¹ <http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2015/01/western-politicians-media-rush-issue-tributes-king-led-world-beheadings-whipped-bloggers-criticism-banned-women-driving.html>

⁴⁷² <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/09/01/official-policy-gore-isis-saudi-arabia-and-us-war-iraq> and <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/isis-isnt-the-first-group-to-use-the-butchers-knife-as-an-instrument-of-policy-nor-will-it-be-the-last-9702620.html>

⁴⁷³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>

⁴⁷⁴ <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/09/01/official-policy-gore-isis-saudi-arabia-and-us-war-iraq> and <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/isis-isnt-the-first-group-to-use-the-butchers-knife-as-an-instrument-of-policy-nor-will-it-be-the-last-9702620.html>

“Unlike other rebel groups in Syria”, asserts the BBC, ISIS offered supporters the hope of creating “an Islamic emirate that [would straddle] Syria and Iraq”. This unique proposition, which was strengthened significantly when the group “took over the Syrian city of **Raqqa** - the first provincial capital to fall under rebel control” – in March 2013, was made even more attractive by the fact that ISIS had now become one of the strongest anti-Assad groups fighting in Syria. When it “capitalised on growing tension between Iraq’s Sunni minority and Shia-led government” the following January, meanwhile, its fight definitively spread into Iraq, where it soon took “control of the predominantly Sunni city of **Fallujah**, in the western province of Anbar”.

The group rapidly “gained a reputation for brutal rule” in the areas it controlled, and its “conquest of **Mosul**” (Iraq’s second city) in June 2014 “sent shockwaves around the world”, making ISIS potentially “the most cash-rich militant group in the world”. Initially relying “on **donations from wealthy individuals in Gulf Arab states, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia**”, who were impressed with the insurgents’ successes in defeating government forces in Syria, the “oil fields it [now controlled] in eastern Syria” (along with the alleged sale of “looted antiquities from historical sites”) made ISIS a much more independent organisation. In fact, even before its capture of Mosul, it was thought to have “cash and assets worth about \$900m (£500m)”. When it took the city, however, this figure increased to “around \$2bn (£1.18bn)”, according to Neumann. The BBC affirmed, meanwhile, that “hundreds of millions of dollars” had apparently been taken “from Mosul’s branch of Iraq’s central bank”.

Although al-Baghdadi originally “sought to merge with [Al-Qaeda affiliate Jahbat] al-Nusra” in Syria, the latter’s rejection of the deal soon saw the groups operate as completely separate (and even opposing) entities. Al-Qaeda, for example, had asked ISIS to focus on Iraq rather than Syria, but “Baghdadi and his fighters openly defied” the organisation. Subsequently, they “regularly attacked fellow rebels and abused civilian supporters of the [mainstream] Syrian opposition”. In fact, “both Western-backed and Islamist groups” apparently launched an offensive against them in January 2014, “seeking to drive [ISIS’s] predominantly foreign fighters out of Syria”.⁴⁷⁵

On July 19th, meanwhile, RT reported that ISIS had “stormed a former US base in Tikrit” (Saddam Hussein’s birthplace). Iraqi government troops attempting to recapture the city “reportedly consisted of 700 troops, accompanied by more than a 100 Iranians”, but failed spectacularly. At the same time, “at least 270 Syrian troops and civilians died... at the hands of ISIS in Homs province, when a seized gas field was set ablaze”. There had allegedly been summary executions of prisoners, and ISIS was clearly gaining in strength thanks to its brutal tactics, stepping up its operations in both Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, a UN report spoke of how there had been “5,000 Iraqi deaths” at the hands of ISIS so far, “many of whom were women and children”.⁴⁷⁶

Foreign Fighters

On the same day, Al Jazeera’s Ted Regencia spoke of how ISIS’s “notoriety” was “drawing fans and fighters from as far as Asia and the Pacific” – a surge in popularity “driven in part by social media”. According to Vervan Khan, of the Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium (TRAC), there were “already some 500 fighters from the Asia Pacific region [fighting] in the Middle East”. On July 11th, meanwhile, Australian Wahhabi convert Robert ‘Musa’ Cerantonio was arrested by Philippine and Australian authorities for “trying to incite Muslim men in the Philippines to fight in the Middle East”. The “third most “liked” person online among “western jihadists in Syria””, Cerantonio apparently had “thousands of

⁴⁷⁵ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24179084>

⁴⁷⁶ <http://rt.com/news/174080-isis-iraq-syria-tikrit/>

followers” on his Twitter account. According to TRAC, Cerantonio’s support was just one example of how ISIS had “won the vote of the young jihadists” of the world.

Cerantonio was not the only person sympathetic to ISIS in the Philippines, however. One YouTube video, for example, showed “dozens of Filipino prisoners... shouting slogans in front of a black flag with white lettering and vowing loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”. More Filipinos, who had “fought alongside other Southeast Asian fighters” in Afghanistan in the 1980s and had “organised the Abu Sayyaf Group when they returned home”, also expressed their sympathy towards ISIS. Indonesian veterans from Afghanistan, meanwhile, who had later founded the Jemaah Islamiyah (“linked to the Bali bombing in 2002”), declared their support for the jihadist campaign in the Middle East, with jailed Indonesian preacher Abu Bakar Bashir “reportedly [urging] his followers to fight alongside the Islamic State group” in a message sent through terrorist group Jamaah Anshorut Tauhid.⁴⁷⁷ In fact, in mid-October, Haaretz’s Mark Hosenball reported on how even “a handful of Jews, some converts to Islam”, were “among 1,000 French citizens” who had joined jihadist groups like ISIS in Syria and Iraq, though there was “no official proof they [had] actually joined IS”.⁴⁷⁸

Back in Australia, Federal Police claimed that Robert “Cerantonio’s known social media postings” were “offensive and disturbing”, but that they were “not breaching Australian law to [that] point”. Nonetheless, his Australian “passport was cancelled”, and he effectively went into hiding afterwards. He would later be “allowed to attend a major Islamic conference” at a youth centre in Melbourne, however. Aware of his presence, the event’s organisers “did not try to remove him or stop him from interacting with about 100 other attendees”. According to centre leader Sheikh Mohammed Omran, banning extremists from entering “might lead to more harm than good”. At the same time, he stressed that avoiding the radicalisation of youngsters was a matter which “belongs to everyone in society”, especially “the Prime Minister himself” and “the media”, which were responsible for increasing popular marginalisation and alienation.⁴⁷⁹

According to The Telegraph’s Justin Huggler in early November, a 24-year-old Lebanese-born German citizen Ismail Issa “was arrested after he returned to Germany to buy supplies” for an extremist group which was later “believed to have allied itself to Islamic State”. Having bought sports watches and other goods from Aldi, he said in court that he had gone to Syria “to join a jihadist group” because “his family had been persecuted” by Bashar al-Assad’s government. Upon his arrival in Syria, however, he allegedly “changed his mind and decided he didn’t want to take any further part in the violence”. He claimed that he had “faked an arm injury so that he would be sent back to Germany to buy supplies”, though “intercepted messages” show otherwise, reflecting he was in fact “eager to return to the fighting”.

Four “alleged Islamic State supporters” from Turkey, meanwhile, were “arrested in a series of raids in Berlin”, just as a “well-known German rapper” known Desk Dogg was seen participating in an ISIS beheading video.⁴⁸⁰ Emphasising once and for all the presence of foreign fighters in the ranks of ISIS, forces in Rojava would speak in late October of how “the documents carried by those terrorists who have been killed show that they are mostly foreigners and come from Chechnya, Turkey, Morocco, Egypt, Belgium and France to Syria and their passports have all been sealed in Turkey”.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/07/islamic-state-support-spreads-into-asia-201471392121686815.html>

⁴⁷⁸ <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/1.620751>

⁴⁷⁹ <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/sheikh-defends-radical-preachers-attendance-at-conference-20140927-10n17g.html>

⁴⁸⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11213410/German-Aldi-jihadist-claims-he-faked-injury-to-escape-Isil-ranks.html>

⁴⁸¹ <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930806001457> and <http://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/2014/10/29/syrian-kurds-reject-fsa-aid-in-Kobani-battle/>

I) The Nature of ISIS

Robert Fisk explains how ISIS has sought to use fear and terror to ensure the obedience of the populations it rules over, and stresses that the Saudi monarchy does exactly the same. Decapitation, for example, had long been regarded “as a mundane if unpleasant ritual in Wahhabi Saudi society”. Regardless of what the crimes were, how fair the trial was, or how much pain the victims suffered, however, the Western media had for too long dismissed criticism of Saudi Arabia (considering beheadings instead as a “timeless tradition”). Much like the Saudi regime, Fisk insists, ISIS has also “deliberately turned to the butcher’s knife as an instrument of policy”. **Things like “debate, discussion, [and] objections”, meanwhile, “have no place in the polity of this Salafist lot”,** he says.

For ISIS, “power (and revenge) [was] imposed through the knife”, and their “rule by fear” would actually rely on “documenting their own war crimes”. As a result, “mobile phone video, the blog and the internet have become the new purveyors of earthly terror”. According to Fisk, “almost every ancient text can be used to justify judicial murder, ethnic cleansing or genocide”, and ISIS has become yet another force using precisely such justifications. Claiming, like other Wahhabis, to seek a return to the pure origins of Islam, ISIS believes that “purity is about absolutes, absolute right and absolute wrong”,⁴⁸² rather than about frequent Quranic reminders that “good Muslims do not initiate violence against others so long as the latter do not provoke hostilities”.⁴⁸³ In other words, they are like any other discriminatory, authoritarian, and essentially political force that believes itself (and only itself) to be in the right, and that everyone else is in the wrong (and is thus deserving of punishment).

In early November 2014, the International Business Times (IBT) emphasised that “almost 1,000 people [had] been executed in Iraq over the [previous] four months, most in areas controlled by the Islamic State”. These “widespread and systematic” massacres did not include, however, “the more than 820 people found in mass graves and in rivers in Iraq during the same period of time”. According to HRW, “at least 600” of these people “were killed [in the] summer, after the Islamic State group began its surge in the country”. For IBT, the fact that the “rate of executions per month increased dramatically every month from July to October” indicated clear “parallel between the number of people executed and the rise of ISIS in the country”.⁴⁸⁴

RT, meanwhile, reported in the same month that, “while media attention [continued] to focus on the five Westerners who [had been] beheaded”, ISIS had actually “killed 1,432 Syrians in non-combat situations since the end of June”. And, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), “eight hundred and eighty two of those” had been civilians rather than enemy combatants. One child was said to have been “shot because... [he] had allegedly been caught taking pictures of the Islamic State headquarters”, while another “stood accused of saying offensive things about the Prophet Muhammad”. At the same time, the fighters killed outside of combat by ISIS included “some 483 pro-government Syrian forces” and “63 members of insurgent and Kurdish fighting groups in Syria”. The murder methods of the jihadist organisation comprised of shootings, beheadings, stonings, and the slitting of throats.⁴⁸⁵

ISIS Seeks to ‘Uproot Toxic Weeds’

⁴⁸² <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/09/01/official-policy-gore-isis-saudi-arabia-and-us-war-iraq> and <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/isis-isnt-the-first-group-to-use-the-butchers-knife-as-an-instrument-of-policy-nor-will-it-be-the-last-9702620.html>

⁴⁸³ <http://www.islamforpeace.org/quran.html>

⁴⁸⁴ <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-executions-1000-iraqi-civilians-killed-isis-controlled-towns-june-hundreds-more-found-1718076>

⁴⁸⁵ <http://rt.com/news/206271-islamic-state-syrians-june/>

In late September 2014, MEMRI reposted excerpts from an article from the Al-Hayat newspaper, which “blamed the U.S. for the horrors taking place in Iraq, including the ethnic cleansing of minorities from areas controlled by the Islamic State”. The author, Al-Hayat editor Ghassan Charbel, asserts that “the Yazidis and the Mosul Christians could hold Obama responsible for their suffering because he has not done enough to help them”, in spite of having allegedly “created the chaos that ultimately gave rise to IS terrorism”.⁴⁸⁶ MEMRI, which is supposedly an “independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization”, in reality has its main office in Washington and has conservative and pro-capitalist figures on its Boards of Directors and Advisors.⁴⁸⁷ With this fact in mind, I will point out some of the obvious gaps in the article.

For Charbel, the UN, the Iraqi Army, and the Kurdish Peshmerga were weak (or powerless), while the Arab League was “known to be bankrupt”. For him, the USA was the only option for saving minorities from ISIS. However, he fails to mention that it was in fact the progressive Kurdish fighters of the PKK and YPG, and not the United States, who came to the rescue of Yezîdîs in Iraq [more on this issue will be seen in Chapter 10]. In fact, he speaks of how moderate Sunnis claim “that diversity is an asset, that Islam is [a] religion of tolerance, and that imposing a dress code is a crime”, whilst failing to mention how over Kurds in Rojava were providing examples of such beliefs on the ground (forging a system which represented freedom, tolerance, and diversity). In other words, while Charbel describes the ISIS caliph as “sensitive and moody” (and a believer that “otherness means subversion” and that moderate Sunnis are legitimate targets), he ignores the fact that Rojavans represented precisely the values of ‘moderate Islam’ that he sought to defend.

Meanwhile, Charbel blames Obama for leaving Iraq before it was stable, for pretending “to forget that his own country invaded Iraq, and that one of its witless administrators ordered to dismantle the Iraqi army”. He also speaks of how Obama “demanded that the head of the [Syrian] regime step down without understanding the nature of the regime and the [regional] power balance”, emphasising that, “if the Syrian blaze [had been] put out early, ISIS would never have reared its head”. Essentially, then, Charbel believes that the solution for the Middle East is for the USA to continue behaving like an international and unilateral police force in the region (and to adopt a role of sustained dominance and anti-democratic control there). At the same time, he ignores the possibility of any organic solution created by local inhabitants, like the system built in the Rojava Revolution, which would be truly sustainable in the long term.

Summarising the political context from which ISIS arose, Charbel says that, “to be fair to the caliph, our region was a harsh place even before he appeared”. However, unlike repressive dictators, he asserts, ISIS “does not desire to restrain opponents”, but to “erase them forever”. For the Wahhabi jihadists, “minorities are toxic weeds” and “sleeper cells”, for which the only “solution is executing”, or “uprooting the toxic weeds”).⁴⁸⁸

Inferiority Complex or Religious Conviction?

For Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, writing in September 2014, ISIS “is a disgrace to true fundamentalism”. Its opposition to the arbitrary colonial borders drawn at the start of the 20th century, however, is just the “latest chapter in the long story of... anticolonial awakening” in the Middle East, and “the struggle against the way global capital undermines the power of nation states” (and the citizens of those states). Žižek emphasises the essentially reactionary way in which ISIS represents this movement, though, insisting that, for ISIS, “the principal task of state power is not the regulation of the welfare of the state’s

⁴⁸⁶ <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8157.htm>

⁴⁸⁷ <http://www.memri.org/about-memri.html>

⁴⁸⁸ <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8157.htm>

population” but the regulation of the role of ‘religion’ in their lives. They believe, he asserts, that if they “take care of religion”, welfare will then “take care of itself”.

Zizek argues that, far from representing “extreme resistance to modernization”, ISIS actually represents “a case of **perverted modernization**”, in which the groups aims to mix the restoration of a past system with the system that currently exists. Al-Baghdadi’s “exquisite Swiss watch”, along with ISIS’s “web propaganda..., financial dealings..., [and] ultra-modern practices”, is a good example of this theory, he stresses. Its image of a “strictly disciplined and regulated fundamentalist organization”, meanwhile, “is not without its ambiguities”, he affirms. The “daily practice of the ISIS gangs”, he says, “includes full-scale grotesque orgies, including robberies, gang rapes, torture and murder of infidels”. In part, he claims, this reality is a result of the fact that, while many citizens in the West are like Nietzsche’s “Last Man” (an “apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment..., immersed in stupid daily pleasures”), ISIS militants are “ready to risk everything”, and even “their self-destruction”.

For Zizek, though, ISIS’s “violent outbursts” are proof of its “lack of true conviction”. From “Tibetan Buddhists to the Amish in the United States”, he argues, the “absence of resentment and envy” and “the deep indifference towards the nonbelievers’ way of life” is what usually characterises religious fundamentalism. ISIS, on the other hand, “feel threatened by nonbelievers”, as if they do not genuinely believe “they have found their way to Truth”. Unlike “true fundamentalists”, Zizek insists, ISIS militants are “deeply bothered, intrigued and fascinated by the sinful life of the nonbelievers”. In fact, he suggests, they are actually “fighting their own temptation” by waging war against these ‘infidels’.

How fragile, Zizek asks, must someone’s belief system be if they feel “threatened by a stupid caricature in a low-circulation Danish newspaper”? Far from being grounded in the “conviction of their superiority”, he affirms, Wahhabi extremists like those of ISIS have, in reality, a “desire to safeguard their [delicate] cultural-religious identity” through violence. In fact, he says, they must “secretly consider themselves inferior”, having “already internalized [Western] standards and [measured] themselves by them”.⁴⁸⁹ In other words, **they are not truly convinced of the righteousness of their own path, but they are aware that there is something about the ‘Western path’ that they do not consider righteous.** Therefore, they seek to boost the validity of their own philosophy by attacking those that have different beliefs.

In former colonies, Zizek concludes, there has essentially been a hybridisation of cultures, with the foreign colonial values having been imposed upon the indigenous societies because they were considered by the colonisers to be superior. Amidst the ensuing mixture of cultures, the idea of colonised people’s own culture being inferior created an internal desire within these people either to resist the coloniser’s culture or to repress of their own culture. Just like imperialist forces had sought to show the superiority of their culture through violence in the past, reactionary forces have thus sought to do the same, not feeling confident enough about the objective value of their own culture to convince others of that value through the use of reason, and choosing instead to impose it through the use of force. According to Zizek, therefore, ISIS simply represents a microcosmic mimicry of the violent imperialist conquests of both the distant and the not so distant past.

ISIS Goes Against Islamic Principles

In late September, “more than 120 Muslim scholars from around the world joined an open letter to the “fighters and followers” of the Islamic State, denouncing them as un-Islamic by

⁴⁸⁹ http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/03/isis-is-a-disgrace-to-true-fundamentalism/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=1

using the most Islamic of terms". The 18-page Arabic letter "picks apart the extremist ideology of the militants", referring to "heavy classical religious texts and classical religious scholars" to back up its arguments. According to Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations, the letter is "not meant for a liberal audience", and "even mainstream Muslims... may find it difficult to understand". Nonetheless, it was designed to convince prospective supporters of Wahhabi extremist groups, rather than to inform moderates or non-Muslims.

In a 24-point summary of the letter, the authors ask people "to stop using the term" Islamic State to refer to ISIS, "arguing that it plays into the group's unfounded logic that it is protecting Muslim lands from non-Muslims and is resurrecting the caliphate – a state governed by a Muslim leader that once controlled vast swaths of the Middle East". For Ahmed Bedier, president of United Voices of America, "they are not a state and they are not a religion".

The letter criticises ISIS harshly, insisting it is forbidden to "'cherry-pick' Qur'anic verses... to derive a ruling without looking at everything that the Qur'an and Hadith teach related to that matter". It also claims ISIS leaders do not have a "mastery of the Arabic language", that they "oversimplify Shari'ah matters and ignore established Islamic sciences", and that they "ignore the reality of contemporary times when deriving legal rulings".

The scholars insist, contradictory to the teachings of ISIS, that it is "permissible in Islam [for scholars] to differ on any matter, except those fundamentals of religion that all Muslims must know", emphasising that it is "forbidden in Islam to declare people non-Muslim unless he (or she) openly declares disbelief". It is also **forbidden**, according to the letter, to "**kill the innocent**" (including "journalists and aid workers"), to **torture people**, and to "**disfigure the dead**". In addition, harming or mistreating "Christians or any 'People of the Scripture'" (which includes Yezidîs) is prohibited, as is forcing people to convert.

Denying women and children their rights is also not allowed, the scholars emphasise, and neither is the "re-introduction of slavery" (which they insist was "abolished by universal consensus"). Forced migration, destruction of "the graves and shrines of Prophets and Companions", and the declaration of "a caliphate without consensus from all Muslims" are also prohibited, they say. A key point, meanwhile, is the fact that it is "forbidden in Islam to attribute evil acts to God".⁴⁹⁰

Is ISIS a Fascist Group?

If we define fascism as the purging of groups that do not fit in with a particular societal model (whether ethnic, religious, or political), then Wahhabi Islamism could easily be compared to the oppressive and chauvinist European ideology. Unlike other forms of Islamism, which are sometimes fairly open to breaking down sectarian differences, Wahhabis have very little time for anyone who does not conform to their discriminatory belief system. Nonetheless, Tariq Ali has warned the world not to "make the mistake, made by many people after September 11, of calling this Islamic fascism". While there are "many common features between fascists and Stalinists", he says, that doesn't mean you "call a Stalinist party a fascist party" as a result.

"The left across the Muslim world", Ali insists, "is immersed in NGOs, [and] totally cut off from reality". As a result, Islamists often take on the traditional left-wing role of opposing imperialism and socio-economic injustice. And it was the brutal crushing and destruction of class struggles throughout the twentieth century ("with imperialist support") that was

⁴⁹⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/24/muslim-scholars-islamic-state_n_5878038.html and <http://lettertobaghdadi.com/index.php>

“partly responsible for the situation today”, Ali emphasises. “When people fight against neoliberal policies and the only alternative is fundamentalism”, he asks, “where else should they go?”⁴⁹¹

In other words, the growth of groups like ISIS is partially due to the fact that they are often the strongest groups that offer an alternative to the status quo. And when they speak about escaping from the “tyrant’s financial system... that is based on satanic usury”⁴⁹² and about seeking the “annihilation of the disgrace of Sykes-Picot”, they certainly succeed in dressing in sheep’s clothing to hide the fact that they actually have no real political plan to deal with such socio-economic injustices.

As the “best-organized and most effective force” in Iraq, ISIS managed to win over “a highly instable, and already partially collapsing, coalition of various Sunni groups and militias, including former Baathists and local tribal forces”, with its arguments and military efficiency. For Georg Maier at Socialist World, the group is effectively a “multinational corporation selling terror as their product”, and is thus well-prepared at the art of convincing people to join its ranks or give financial support.

In a “400 page document covering the “business year” November 2012 to November 2013”, ISIS focussed on giving “detailed lists of the number of attacks [and] weapon stocks” in order to show it was “accountable to the investors” (i.e. “rich businessmen from the despotic oil-countries on the Gulf”). Filled “overwhelmingly with young, desperate, radicalised men, often deprived of all rights and suffering oppression”, Maier says, many ISIS members simply “see IS as a way of fighting back” against “what they see as [the] persecution of Sunnis”. And with “an increasing number of young people [seeing] absolutely no way to escape hunger and despair”, the “reactionary revolt” led by ISIS is “seen as the only way out”.

According to Maier, the document mentioned above shows clearly that ISIS acts like “a profit-driven, capitalist corporation”. At the same time, the war it wages for “direct private accumulation” means that the group’s “economy is deeply interwoven with regional capitalism”, and its struggle results in part from an “acute economic crisis”. ISIS, Maier says, is “not only a **new kind of right wing political Islam**”, but also a “state of the art capitalist corporation”.⁴⁹³

For Norman Pollack at Counterpunch, “fascism comes in many forms”, often speaking “with a mellow voice (except when ruling groups are, or perceive themselves to be, threatened)”, donning “softened gloves... to achieve the regimentation of thought and opinion heretofore reliant on force”. The ideology, he says, “represents sustainment of the existing structure of wealth and power whilst the political economy itself bounds ahead”. Through a “display of fervent patriotic support”, populations are distracted from the fact that fascist groups ensure “the conservation of the Old Order under the conditions of modern industrialism”. In short, fascism seeks to “transform capitalism into a permanent Old Order, not to be attacked or dismantled, but modernized, so as to make possible an advanced industrial system with all else frozen... and the class structure contained in equilibrium”. In a more concrete manner, **fascism is represented through “large military budgets..., ethnocentrism, [and] the engendering of fear”**.

Fascism, says Pollack, “saves capitalism from itself”, **ensuring the creation of “a disciplined, nonthreatening labor class”**, along with “unimpeded wealth-accumulation and

⁴⁹¹ <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/30057>

⁴⁹² <http://news.nationalpost.com/2014/11/14/isis-plans-to-mint-its-own-currency-to-escape-the-tyrants-financial-system-based-on-satanic-usury/>

⁴⁹³ <http://www.socialistworld.net/doc/6881>

ownership-concentration". It "facilitates the emphasis on a militarized political economy and domestically regimented populace" by ensuring that citizens are on "a permanent war-footing" (which helps their leaders to keep them under control).⁴⁹⁴ Although the military machine of ISIS does indeed seek to create discipline in the communities under its control, however, the reality is that, if we call ISIS a fascist organisation because of the similarities it shares with fascism, we also ought to call imperialist powers like the USA fascists too.

In fact, Jerome Roos at Roar Magazine makes exactly that claim. Far from Benjamin Franklin's idea that, "in free governments, the rulers are the servants and the people their superiors and sovereigns", Roos insists that the USA resembles "Mussolini's description of fascism as "the merger of state and corporate power"". Franklin D. Roosevelt, meanwhile, insisted that "the liberty of a democracy is not safe if the people tolerate the growth of private power to the point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself". This, he said, was essentially fascism: the **"ownership of government by an individual, by a group or any controlling private power"**.

As a result of these comments, Roos asserts that, "by the standards of both Mussolini and Roosevelt, Wall Street's capture of Washington turned the United States into a fascist republic a long time ago". And the American Heritage Dictionary seems to back him up, describing fascism as "the domination of a government by corporations of the political right, combined with bellicose nationalism".⁴⁹⁵ In short, while the USA appears to have already arrived at this point, ISIS still has some way to go.

Kobani and Guernica

ISIS's attack on the Syrian town of Kobani (which will be analysed in detail in Chapters Eleven and Twelve), brought issues of jihadism and fascism into the Western media once again. The Observer's Nick Cohen said on October 12 that Kurds protesting around the world had "inflamed two acute causes of western discomfort" by comparing radical Wahhabism with "fascism" and Kobani with the Spanish village of Guernica. Nonetheless, such 'discomfort' was firmly rooted in the fact that the West had long been reluctant to give Kurds the right to govern themselves (rather than live under the yoke of the current nation states drawn up by France and Britain after the First World War). While playing down the revolutionary role of Kobani and the reactionary role of ISIS, Western politicians spoke of not wanting to affect "stability" in the region. At the same time, Bayan Abdul Rahman (the KRG's ambassador to Britain), asks "how long must we be punished for a stability that doesn't exist?"

"Militant religion", Cohen insists, "is a radical reactionary force", which "grinds down on women's rights and denies the basic freedoms of liberal society". Radical Wahhabi Islamists, he argues, receive "the same support from... financiers and businessmen [i.e. the "capitalist bourgeoisie"]" that fascists did in the first half of the twentieth century, while promoting the "belief that women can never aspire to be anything other than dutiful wives". Just like with "the "Christian right" in America" or "the messianic Jewish settlers in Israel's occupied territories", Cohen says, **there are "good grounds" for saying that "radical Islam [is] the fascism of our time"**.

At the same time, however, there is fear among 'liberals' in the West, he asserts, that left-wing criticism of such reactionary groups can help the far-right to justify calling all of those belonging to a certain religious or ethnic group as "extremists". According to Cohen, though, the "fine distinctions between fascist state-based totalitarianism and religious

⁴⁹⁴ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/06/toward-a-definition-of-fascism/>

⁴⁹⁵ <http://roarmag.org/2010/12/wall-street-washington-us-fascism/>

totalitarianism [had] vanished”, and it was impossible to simply sweep that fact under the carpet.⁴⁹⁶

ISIS and a Renewal of Turkish Imperialism

Former radical Islamist (and ‘Christian’ convert) Walid Shoebat said at the end of September 2014 that **Dabiq** (the site of a “major historical event” in 1516AD in which the Ottoman Empire won a battle that “paved the way for their occupation of Iraq and the Levant for more than four centuries”) “is what ISIS is all about”. Found to the north of Aleppo in Syria, Wahhabi control in the area would, according to Shoebat, symbolise the revival of “the sick man of Europe” (as the Ottoman Empire was known in its years of decline). In fact, he says, ISIS “calls its magazine Dabiq” (along with its TV station) in dedication to the Ottoman victory there. In short, he insists, “everything goes back to Dabiq”.

In Shoebat’s opinion, Turkish President “Erdoğan sees himself as Selim I” (the Ottoman “King of the North” who defeated Egypt’s “King of the South” in the Battle of Marj Dabiq). To support this view, he comments on how Erdoğan “has used public funds to build more than 17,000 mosques while announcing plans to create a super-mosque overlooking Istanbul to celebrate the 560th anniversary of Istanbul’s conquest by the Ottomans”. **The Ottoman Caliphate**, he suggests, **is still fresh in the minds of many Islamists**, especially considering the colonialist and imperialist-fuelled chaos that has ensued in the Middle East since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Reflecting on ancient prophecies, Shoebat says, ISIS feel that a Western attack on Dabiq would lead to the resurgence of an Islamic Caliphate, and in turn to a “Final Confrontation” in which “Muslim forces will triumph”.

This apocalyptic prophecy, Shoebat claims, is part of the reason “why Turkey supports ISIS”. It is also one of the tools that the extremist group uses to “manipulate the masses to follow them”, emphasising to its prospective followers that “if you do not go forth [fighting in Jihad], He [Allah] will punish you with a painful punishment”.

However, while Shoebat may understand to a certain extent the mind-set of ISIS extremists, he also goes to the dangerous point of demonising Islam whilst proselytising for his own belief system. And one potential cause of further conflict in the Middle East is precisely this: that the West, driven to a certain extent by its own religious extremists, plays into the hands of radical Islamists by taking them up on their challenge to a holy war. Shoebat, for example, argues that the West must fight its “enemies whom God ordained us to defeat”.⁴⁹⁷ His insight, therefore, may be of use for understanding the Wahhabi mentality, but his own sectarianism offers no rational or lasting solution to the region’s conflicts.

The More the West Attacks ISIS, the Stronger It Becomes

Graeme Wood at the New Republic, writing in late June 2014, spoke of how ISIS had “publicly uttered for the first time” the word ‘caliph’. With al-Baghdadi being named “the Caliph of all Muslims and the Prince of the Believers”, the “self-image and propaganda narrative” of the group took on a new dynamic. Its “meticulous use of language”, meanwhile, along with “its almost pedantic adherence to its own interpretation of Islamic law”, had helped it to create a “fierce” fighting force.

Nonetheless, its army was also a “predictable” force, whose whole strategy was now “based on emulating the early leaders of Islam” (from Mohammed to the leaders who took over from him between 632AD and 661AD). By doing so, they sought to conjure up images of

⁴⁹⁶ http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/12/will-no-one-help-kurds-fight-fascism?CMP=twl_gu

⁴⁹⁷ <http://shoebat.com/2014/09/27/every-christian-needs-know-isis-master-plan/>

Islam spreading, as it did in this period, “to the farthest corners of modern-day Iran and coastal Libya”.

Like other Wahhabis, Wood says, ISIS believes that “the military and political practices of its statesmen and warriors – barbaric by today’s standards but acceptable [in the early years of Islam] – deserve to be revived”, with “beheadings, stonings, crucifixions, slavery, and dhimmitude, the practice of taxing those who refuse to convert to Islam” once again becoming the norm. The University of Chicago’s Fred Donner, meanwhile, asserts that, according to the Wahhabi belief system, “if you just establish the caliphate in the right way, Muslims will come to you and everything will fall into place”. For the reasons stated above, Wood refers to ISIS as a “monstrous squad of historical reenactors”.

Al-Baghdadi’s claim to be caliph (or ‘successor’ to Mohammed) requires him to fulfil certain conditions, such as being a “fully grown, devout, sane, and physically whole” Muslim man, and a member of “the Quraysh tribe of the Arabian peninsula”. The reality of the historical caliphs, however, was that (much like certain ‘Christian’ monarchs) they sat at the head of empires – largely as “figureheads”. Under the rule of the Umayyads, Abbasids, and Ottomans, meanwhile, “many not-so-exemplary men held the office”.

Nonetheless, Baghdadi has sought to emulate Abbasid caliphs (one of whom “briefly relocated the caliphate” to ISIS’s stated capital of Raqqa), and wore “all black – the regnal color of the Abbasid caliphs” – when he led Friday prayers in Mosul after ISIS’s victory there. In his sermon, meanwhile, he showed a command of classical Arabic rhetoric, along with a “slavish loyalty to historical example”, which makes ISIS a “little more predictable than... a spy, global-reach organization like Al Qaeda”.

ISIS is one of the only extremist Wahhabi groups to declare a caliphate since the institution’s destruction in the 1920s. In the 1970s, Norwegian jihadist expert Thomas Hegghammer says, Islamists simply called their organisations “‘groups’ or ‘fronts’” and, in the 80s, ‘emirates’ (controlled by “secular princes”). Al-Baghdadi, however, unilaterally decided that the time had come to use the word caliphate once again.

Wood insists that “almost everyone in the old guard of Al Qaeda... hates ISIS”, with the mentor of Baghdadi’s own guru (Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi) condemning the declaration of the caliphate “on the grounds that it creates discord among [the] mujahedin”. Princeton Islamic law expert Bernard Haykel, meanwhile, has stressed that “caliphs are supposed to be chosen by consultation with all Muslim scholars, and **Baghdadi hasn’t shown [that] he has the support of even a majority of ultra-radical Muslims**”.

Wood says that a comparable Western example to ISIS declaring itself a caliphate would be “a few dozen Neo-Nazis or Italian fascists [declaring] themselves the Holy Roman Empire or [dressing] up like Augustus Caesar”. Donner, meanwhile, emphasises this near absurdity by insisting that “**anybody who actively wishes to reestablish a caliphate must be deeply committed to a backward-looking view of Islam**”, as it “hasn’t been a functioning institution for over a thousand years”. ISIS’s control of Raqqa “for more than a year”, however, has made it a lot harder to simply laugh at ISIS as a fringe group of lunatics with a fetish for ancient history.

It may well be easier to destroy ISIS than it was to fight Al-Qaeda, though, as al-Baghdadi “demands total allegiance”, unlike the “cell-based activity that made the bin Laden network [so] hard to eradicate”. For Wood, however, “giving Baghdadi more time as caliph might only make him more plausible in the role [of caliph] and allow him to draw more fighters to his state”. Although “only an infinitesimal number of Muslims have sworn fealty to him” so far, he says, allowing ISIS to take more territory and resist Western and pro-Western attacks

for longer will only make the group more dangerous. Once Baghdadi “becomes a popular figure instead of a divisive one”, he argues, “his death will have spillover effects”. Princeton doctoral candidate Cole Bunzel, for example, insists that “killing the religious leader of even a small minority of Muslims is not good propaganda”. Therefore, according to Wood, a “massive invasion by the United States would have equally deplorable effects, because it would instantly convert Baghdadi’s squalid army into the world’s premier terrorist organization”.⁴⁹⁸

The Use of Chemical Weapons

The MERIA Journal claimed in early October 2014 that they had pictures of fighters killed by ISIS who were marked by “burns and white spots...without any visible wounds or external bleeding”. These appeared to “support claims that the Islamic State [had] used chemical weapons against Kurdish fighters in the Kobanî enclave on at least one occasion in the past”. During a previous ISIS attack in July, the group was thought to have “unleashed a chemical agent on Kurdish fighters”, with activists having “claimed that the chemical attack occurred on July 12, in the village of Avdiko in Kobanî”. Such weapons, MERIA suggests, “may have been obtained [in] Iraq”.⁴⁹⁹

According to Iraqi officials, meanwhile, an ISIS attack in September had “caused 11 Iraqi policemen in the town of Dhuluiya to seek treatment for symptoms consistent with chlorine gas poisoning”. There were also claims that the group had “used chlorine gas in two other attacks, though corroborating details of those incidents [had] not been released”.⁵⁰⁰ At the same time, a US Central Command spokesman claimed in January 2015 that ISIS was “pursuing chemical-weapons capabilities”.⁵⁰¹

II) Women and Minorities Face the Brunt of ISIS Chauvinism

ISIS Targets Educated Women

The view of women that ISIS holds is that they should be subservient, housebound objects which are simply complementary to the dominant males around them. In November 2014, for example, the group released a cartoon which aimed “to teach wives of ISIS militants how... to be the “ultimate wives of jihad” ... [and] cook for their husbands after a battle, ... stitch damaged clothes and even ... perform first aid”.⁵⁰² While this propaganda showed that women could have a role in the activities of the organisation, it was fundamentally a chauvinist and authoritarian view. In other words, while the progressive Kurdish opponents of ISIS in Rojava had up to fifty percent female fighters in some places, the jihadi group maintained an utterly exclusive and discriminatory mentality towards women, showing that (for females in the region) the fight against ISIS was essentially a battle for women’s rights.

A New York Times piece at the end of September 2014, meanwhile, covered a report about a female Iraqi lawyer, Sameera Salih Ali al-Nuaimy, who had been “taken from her home in Iraq by members of ISIS, tortured, and then executed by firing squad”. She was just one of a number of Iraqi women who had been executed by the jihadists, who had **targeted “educated and literate people, especially women, whose acts of criticizing [the Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic] society [were considered to be] especially odious”**. Sameera’s far-from-radical crime, however, was posting “comments on her Facebook page condemning the “barbaric” bombing and destroying of mosques and shrines in Mosul” by

⁴⁹⁸ <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119259/isis-history-islamic-states-new-caliphate-syria-and-iraq>

⁴⁹⁹ <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-Photographs-of-Kurdish-fighters-bodies-suggest-chemical-weapons-use-by-ISIS-378644>

⁵⁰⁰ <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/iraq-Accuses-isis-Of-chemical-weapons/381920/>

⁵⁰¹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/coalition-strike-kills-isis-chemical-weapons-expert-1422661826>

⁵⁰² <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/variety/2014/11/06/ISIS-housewife-Extremists-release-domestic-guide.html>

ISIS. She was subsequently “convicted of apostasy” and her family was not allowed to attend her funeral.⁵⁰³

Eternal Virgins and Earthly Sex Slaves

In late September 2014, Your Middle East’s Rozh Ahmad interviewed former ISIS member ‘Sherko Omer’, who had surrendered to the People’s Protection Units (YPG) of Rojava earlier in the year. Having “left his hometown in Iraqi Kurdistan [in October 2013] to join the Syrian opposition”, Omer “eventually became an IS member”. Through the Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal), he and two friends met with what they thought were members of the FSA in Turkey but, after staying in a hotel and travelling to a “training camp on the Turkey-Syria border”, they soon realised they were at an ISIS camp rather than one belonging to the FSA. The contacts apparently “did not mention anything about IS until [they] were at the training camp”. As they had “no beards”, were “dressed in modern clothes”, and stayed in “a hotel in the Turkish city of Kilis”, Omer and his friends had simply “assumed that they were FSA not IS”. According to Omer, “many others who came to Turkey to join the Syrian opposition” also fell into the same trap.

As a “technical professional”, Omer “was assigned to technical works and trained with pistols and lightweight weapons”, though his “main duty was to learn the communication equipment, interception of enemy phone and radio lines as well as rescuing digital gadgets and archives during attacks”. According to Omer, the “political leadership” of ISIS paid “unbelievable attention to education and educated recruits”. In fact, because he had “never engaged in a firefight”, he would eventually be handed back to his family by his YPG captors after “months of investigations”.

Omer speaks of how “IS commanders were very nice and respectful at the camp”, and how there had been a sense of “friendship and brotherhood” there. He says he “knew deep inside there was a choice to leave”, but felt like he wanted to spread this sense of brotherhood into Syria. He also stresses that it was comforting for him that ISIS officers claimed he had “secured a place in heaven” by fighting with them (guaranteeing himself martyrdom, the receipt of “72 eternal virgins”, and the salvation of “dozens of [his] close relatives from hell”). Another reason why he stayed was allegedly because he felt a “moral obligation” to do so, as ISIS had “spent money” on them (giving them “food, clothes, cars” and, essentially, respect). From these words, it is clear that ISIS was aware that it had to treat its own people well if it was to encourage them to destroy the lives of others. In short, it knew how to make its fighters feel like ‘the good guys’.

In addition to the heavenly virgins, Omer says that ISIS fighters were “promised women... on earth too”, being told that “**all non-Muslim women prisoners [would] be [their] wives**” (and that this was God’s will – suggesting that the god of these Wahhabis was a male chauvinist who saw women as objects designed to serve men). “In Islamic holy war”, he explains, “you cannot kill enemy women and children”, and they can “only be taken as prisoners”. Nonetheless, it was “**permissible**”, according to ISIS, for militants to “**have sexual intercourse with the captive women** even if jihadists [were] married”. **They could also be bought and sold**, while children would have to be raised “as home workers” or taught “to become jihadists”. According to Omer, ISIS “openly and proudly [said] they [were] carrying out these acts as implementation of Islamic Sharia”.

Meanwhile, Omer asserts, “there are Muslim women who willingly offer their bodies for IS jihadists”. This practice, reserved mostly for ISIS commanders, was called ‘Sex for Jihad’, and the women would supposedly “be compensated in heaven” for their support. Many

⁵⁰³ <http://shirazsocialist.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/isis-are-fascists-and-must-be-fought-as-such/>

foreign recruits, meanwhile, “had no clue as to what the verses of [the] holy Quran actually meant”, and were simply “put in the suicide squads” as a result. They were apparently considered to be useless, as “they spoke no Arabic, they weren’t good fighters and [they] had no professional skills”. Consequently, “they were brainwashed into [believing in] the “women in heaven” and [dreaming of] those they could rape on earth before they eventually killed themselves”.

Omer insists that “IS emirs and commanders openly and proudly” said it was “permissible to sleep with women prisoners even against their will if they [were] infidels, non-Muslims and apostate women”. He apparently saw this happen in Al-Raqqa “to Christian women... after their husbands [had been] publically beheaded”, and was aware of it happening to Kurdish Yezîdî women in Sinjar, too. When he was sent to “test some equipment” in a Christian home in Al-Raqqa, meanwhile, he says he saw “six jihadists demanding that a Christian woman and her daughter become their wives”. Seeing that the girl was “12-13-years-old”, he allegedly “told the jihadists [that] forcing women [was] forbidden in Islam and [that] children [could not] be touched under any circumstances”. The militants responded by loading their guns in his face and telling him to leave. He subsequently went to the local court, where the judge told him that a “13-year-old girl is not considered a child, essentially because Prophet Muhammad married his wife, Aisha, when she was only 9 years old”.⁵⁰⁴ In fact, he would only be saved from punishment because his field commander arrived to take him away.

Repression of Christians

In mid-July 2014, the Guardian reported on how ISIS insurgents had “issued an ultimatum to northern Iraq’s dwindling Christian population to either convert to Islam, pay a religious levy or face death”. A statement, known as the Ninevah decree, was issued in the “militant-controlled city of Mosul”, in which Christians “who wanted to remain in the “caliphate”” were told they would have to “abide by terms of a “dhimma” contract – a historic practice under which non-Muslims were protected in Muslim lands in return for a special levy known as “jizya””. The dhimma had been “largely abolished during the Ottoman reforms of the mid-19th century”, but ISIS clearly hoped to resurrect the measure.

If Christians refused to convert or pay up, they were informed that they would receive “nothing but the sword”. Nonetheless, they would be given two days or so to “leave the borders of the Islamic Caliphate” if they “did not want to stay and live under those terms”.⁵⁰⁵ And this situation was not unique to Mosul, as Christians in the Syrian city of Raqqa had been given the same choices earlier in the year. In Mosul, the Christian population was thought to have stood at around 5,000 before ISIS’s invasion but, according to citizens still in Mosul, only around 200 were suspected to remain afterwards.

Other Muslims as Infidels

While working in Al-Raqqa, Omer says that he wanted to leave but was “scared of getting beheaded”. He speaks of how the “jihadists acted as God in Al-Raqqa”, being rude and arresting and killing “anybody for no real reason”. When he “witnessed a wounded captured Kurdish YPG fighter [being] publically beheaded”, meanwhile, he was struck by how the soldier “spat on every jihadist around him” and “shouted slogans about Kurdish freedom and Abdullah Öcalan”. Even though his “fingers were cut”, Omer stresses, he “shouted insults against the jihadists”, and was eventually “beheaded from behind”, before “salt was put on his half-cut neck to [make him] die in agony”. With children “present at the

⁵⁰⁴ http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/exclusive-qa-with-former-islamic-state-member_26696

⁵⁰⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/18/isis-islamic-state-issue-ultimatum-to-iraq-christians>

public execution”, Omer emphasises that he felt sick and “did not sleep for a week” after the event.

In the city of Serêkanîye (or Ras Al-Ain), Omer finally got a chance to escape. His commander told him that the YPG “was an infidel secularist army and impure”, and that “each jihadist [had] the duty to first purify his own people”. (In other words, “jihadists should first fight impure Muslims”.) Joining a new battalion, he went back to Turkey and “crossed the Turkish border to enter Serekaniye”. At the Ceylanpinar Turkish border post, he says, which was “heavily controlled by Turkish soldiers”, the officials “just turned a blind eye”. His field commander told him “to fear nothing because there was cooperation with the Turks at the border”. In fact, when the watchtower light caught them, the officer “talked on the radio” and, “after 8-10 minutes”, the watchtower light began to move again. That, he says, “was the signal saying we could safely cross the border”. [Such Turkish compliance with ISIS attacks on Kurds in northern Syria will be analysed in further detail in Chapters Eleven and Twelve.]

In February 2014, ISIS was planning “to regroup in northeast Syria to attack the YPG”, and Omer’s superiors asked him to “intercept and interpret YPG radio communications”. Although the YPG fighters spoke Kurmanji Kurdish and he spoke Sorani Kurdish, he says he “could’ve tried harder” to understand the enemy fighters. Hearing “female fighters speaking in Kurdish over the radio”, however, he insists that he just “couldn’t do it”. After a week, though, his campsite was attacked, and he “immediately surrendered after YPG sniper killed the two jihadists beside [him]”. Having “shouted in Kurdish”, he was told to take off his clothes to show he had no suicide belt on. Although his surrender was accepted, and he was eventually allowed to return home, the events of Al-Raqqa, he insists, were “mentally haunting” for him.⁵⁰⁶

Taking Children Hostage

In November 2014, Olivia Crellin spoke at VICE about how 153 Kurdish boys from Kobanî had been taken hostage and been “repeatedly beaten with an electric cable and a hose while in the custody of Islamic State militants”. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), she says, the youths were also “forced to watch videos of the terror group’s beheadings and attacks”. The kidnapping and physical abuse, HRW insisted, “amount to war crimes under international law”.

Aged 14 to 16, the children were abducted at the end of May “as they traveled home to Kobane after attending middle school exams in Aleppo”. Around 100 girls were also detained but “were sent home within a few hours”. Some of the boys, meanwhile, were held by ISIS for up to five months. Four of them who were released in September spoke to Human Rights Watch in Turkey, and referred to one case in which a boy was suspended “with his hands and one foot fastened together behind his back” as a punishment for having called out for his mother.

About 50 of the captives “either escaped or were released between June and September”, and seventy-five more were let go “toward the end of September”, while the remaining 25 were set free on October 29th. HRW’s Fred Abrahams said “this evidence of torture and abuse of children by ISIS underlines why no one should support their criminal enterprise”. Governments must “tackle [ISIS’s] fundraising and recruitment”, he said.

According to HRW, ISIS abducted the boys partly for indoctrination purposes, but also for “possible prisoner swaps”. In fact, fifteen of the boys were said to have been “exchanged for

⁵⁰⁶ http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/exclusive-qa-with-former-islamic-state-member_26696

Islamic State fighters being held by the [YPG]”. The boys interviewed by the rights group claim they were “forced to pray five times a day”, and were given “intense religious instruction”. They also say that, if they “didn't conform to the program” (by not learning the verses of the Koran correctly, for example), they would be beaten. Their captors, they insist, came from Syria, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia, and family members of YPG fighters “were particularly singled out for abuse”, being ordered to “give [the ISIS militants] the addresses of their families, cousins, [and] uncles”.⁵⁰⁷

The Iranian Bloc on ISIS

Hezbollah has referred to ISIS as takfiris (or Muslims who accuse other Muslims (or members of other Abrahamic religions) of apostasy), a term which comes from the word kafir (or infidel). The latter should technically only be used in Islam when uluma (or Muslim legal scholars) have taken the correct legal precautions. Wahhabi extremists, however, no longer follow this orthodox method of determining who is an infidel, and reserve the right to declare apostasy on basically anyone who does not agree with their narrow, intolerant form of Islam.

In July 2014, deputy leader of Hezbollah Sheikh Naim Qassem insisted that his group was “fighting one scheme, which is the American-Israeli takfiri scheme”. The Syrian Civil War, he said, had been from day one “an Arab-Western takfiri scheme to destroy Syria in favor of Israel's interest”.⁵⁰⁸ In late October, the group's leader Hassan Nasrallah insisted that “Saudi Arabia bears primary responsibility for preventing the spread of this [ISIS] ideology”. For him, takfiri terrorism was “rooted in a “Wahhabist mentality” and represented “**the biggest distortion of Islam in history**”. He called it “a threat to Islam as a religion [as well as to] its principles and values”, emphasising how ISIS's actions were pushing “non-Muslims away from Islam” (because they presented Muslims “as a savage and bloodthirsty group”).

The problem of Wahhabi extremism, Nasrallah asserted, was “**too deep to be addressed only through a military solution**”, underlining that it first had to be “dealt with at intellectual, scientific, and cultural levels”. Its causes, he said, and not only its effects, “must be addressed”. Much unlike ISIS and other Wahhabis, Nasrallah “stressed the need for unity among Shias and Sunnis to counter the growing threat emanating from the Takfiri militants”. In fact, Press TV even alleged that many ISIS members had “received training by the CIA in Jordan and Turkey”, while Nasrallah himself insisted that **the US was “using ISIL as a means to scare and blackmail the people of the region [in order] to impose its hegemony, especially in Syria and Iraq”**.⁵⁰⁹

III) What Led to the Birth of ISIS?

A Post-2003 ‘Balkanised Order’ in Iraq

In 2009, Evergreen College's Steve Niva spoke at Counterpunch about how suicide bombings in Iraq had gained a “new audacity and sophistication, striking in all parts of the country and against many seemingly highly secured targets”. Six years after the US-led invasion and with a ‘democratic’ government supposedly installed, attacks were now being launched against “U.S.-backed Sunni militia leaders” and “on Iraqi army bases and police stations in Shia enclaves and holy sites”. Nonetheless, the USA “downplayed the bloody surge... as a desperate response to the fact [sic] that the United States [was] successfully ending the war and withdrawing troops”. It “was simply a “last gasp”, according to US officials, and a “signal that the rejectionists [feared] Iraq [was] going in the right direction”.

⁵⁰⁷ https://news.vice.com/article/kurdish-boys-from-kobane-detail-awful-abuses-at-the-hands-of-the-islamic-state?utm_source=vicenewstwitter

⁵⁰⁸ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-21/264598-hezbollah-slams-us-israel-takfiri-plot-in-region.ashx>

⁵⁰⁹ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/10/27/383863/ksa-responsible-for-stopping-takfiris/>

This arrogant propaganda, however, failed to capture the true complexity of what was going on in Iraqi society.

The reality of the violent events of 2009 was that Iraqi insurgents were “in conflict with the American backed Iraqi state”. Essentially, they were fighting against US efforts “to perpetuate an order favorable to continued American influence and interests in Iraq”, in spite of the approaching withdrawal of US forces from the country. In short, they were fighting against neo-colonialism and, upon the exit of US troops, the occupation of Iraq simply continued “in a new form”. The withdrawal plan, Niva says, simply ignored the role of “the parallel army of over 100,000 American mercenaries and private contractors who currently [roamed] Iraq”. Neither did it talk about what would happen to the “283 military bases and installations in Iraq”.

Having “built up a Shia-dominated state through its faulty counterinsurgency “surge” policy”, the USA was leaving Maliki as prime minister, “backed by a reconstructed military and security apparatus that [was] predominantly Shia and hostile to the Sunni population”. It was also parting ways with “armed Sunni tribal leaders” (which it had armed and funded), who opposed both al-Qaeda and the Shia government. In other words, it was leaving behind “**a new balkanized Iraqi order**” which had very little chance of holding itself together.

The “taproot of suicide bombings”, says Chicago political scientist Robert Pape, was “foreign military occupation, not Islamic fanaticism or a “cult of martyrdom”” – as US officials had argued. The actions were simply “part of organized campaigns to achieve a political goal”, he insists, which in this case was “the ejection of foreign military occupiers” from Iraq. **Before 2003**, he stresses, **there were no suicide bombings in Iraq**, but they “subsequently acquired a frequency and lethality unprecedented in other similar campaigns” precisely because of US-led military offensives (and “major political initiatives that [emphasised] Iraq as being on the path to stability”). With a new status quo in the country, enforced by a foreign occupier, popular anger simply grew, and led to resistance even among communities that had not been fans of the Ba’athist regime.

In short, all that stunk of post-invasion foreign interference was under attack, and insurgents were seeking to “create conditions that [would] compel the United States... to withdraw sooner rather than later”. There were also “signs of renewed Ba’athist and Islamist coordination”, with the “Islamic State of Iraq” taking responsibility for the new surge of attacks. Izzat Ibrahim Al-Douri, the “fugitive former deputy of Saddam Hussein”, even claimed at the time that the “strategic direction of the campaign” was to continue the “struggle against U.S. forces and Iraq’s government”. Maliki’s regime and the Iraqi elections, meanwhile, were seen as “illegitimate”, as “the political process [was] the occupation’s main project”. In other words, “**U.S. occupation forces and the illegitimacy of the new Iraqi regime [were] the cause, not the solution**”, and unrest would inevitably continue in Iraq until a ‘legitimate’ regime was installed.

What suicide bombings achieved was to create “a pervasive sense of panic, uncertainty, and fear among the populace”. Essentially, neither the USA nor the Iraqi regime could claim any sort of legitimacy as long as such “political anarchy” continued in the country. Only by ending both military occupation and economic imperialism could the chaos created by the invasion of 2003 be dealt with. And, for Niva, “as long as the United States [attempted] to salvage strategic interests in the region..., the effort to develop a truly independent Iraqi security force [would] prove disingenuous, and many Iraqis [would] reject the legitimacy of their government as a pawn of indirect imperial rule”. The self-interested character of the US-led invasion, which had always been apparent to many Iraqis, meant that the USA’s

stubborn fight to protect its own economic interests in the country simply perpetuated conflict there.

Niva's idea for ending the violence in Iraq was to "initiate a new political process, preferably under U.N. or international auspices", in which Iraq would "no longer [be] governed by American sponsored laws, procedures and client parties". Unfortunately, however, such a process never happened. Instead, Maliki's regime continued to govern Iraq (supported by the USA), and the tear in Iraqi society simply widened. This situation, in turn, allowed ISIS to gain power, so further Western bombings to stop the group would simply allow it to "justify [more] kidnappings, bombings and killings".⁵¹⁰

Turkey, Syria, and Continued US Meddling

Political writer Mike Whitney has also blamed the US-led Invasion of Iraq for the growth of Wahhabi extremism in the country. He quotes fellow writer Nafeez Ahmed as saying that, "since 2003, **Anglo-American power** has secretly and openly coordinated direct and indirect support for Islamist terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda across the Middle East and North Africa" in an attempt to "**dominate regional oil resources, defend an expansionist Israel**", and "**re-draw the map of the Middle East**" (a viewpoint shared by Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah).

Whitney asserts that the USA's "determination to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has pushed the Middle East towards a regional war that could lead to a confrontation between... Russia and the United States". Turkey's stubbornness regarding Assad, meanwhile, does nothing to help this matter, with Erdoğan's government insisting that "Turkey [would] not allow coalition members to use its military bases or its territory" to fight ISIS "if the objective [did] not also include ousting the Bashar al-Assad regime". The president also pointed to the role that Rojava and the PKK played in his stance, emphasising that "Turkey [could not] be content with the current situation and [could not] be a by-stander and spectator in the face of such developments". Even though the tide of popular opinion went against continued government authoritarianism, especially in Turkish Kurdistan, Erdoğan's regime essentially wanted to keep a hold on to the aggressive military stance that had left Turkey at war with the PKK since the 1980s.

With Turkey moving "tanks and other military units" towards the Syrian border, meanwhile, it seemed like "the decision to go to war [had] already been made" (probably with the cooperation of the USA). However, Syria's allies (Russia and Iran) were unlikely to allow Turkish tanks to invade Syria and, if they somehow reached Damascus, there was likely to be a "protracted guerrilla war that could spill over borders engulfing both Lebanon and Jordan". And Whitney is just one of many commentators who believe that the West's "fight against Isis is merely a pretext for regime change" in Syria. In short, he says, current US policy simply "compounds the problem and increases the prospects of another Iraq-type bloodbath".

Ahmed, meanwhile, speaks about how "military supplies from Saudi Arabia and Qatar... were transported by Turkish intelligence to the [Turkish-Syrian] border for rebel acquisition", and how "CIA operatives along with Israeli and Jordanian commandos were also training FSA rebels on the Jordanian-Syrian border with anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons". At the same time, the "British and French military were also involved in these secret training programmes", he says. In fact, even ISIS commander Abu Yusuf insisted that "**many of the FSA people who the West has trained are actually joining us**". The USA, however, sought "little oversight over whether US supplies [were] falling prey to corruption

⁵¹⁰ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2009/05/08/the-return-of-the-suicide-bombers/>

- or into the hands of extremists", and relied mostly on "the judgment of its allies" in the region.

In October 2013, Whitney says, The Telegraph discovered that "hundreds of al-Qaeda recruits [were] being kept in safe houses in southern Turkey, before being smuggled over the border to wage "jihad" in Syria". This setup, he stresses, enabled "a steady flow of foreign fighters... to join the country's civil war", who soon "largely eclipsed the "moderate" wing of the rebel Free Syrian Army". The paper also suggested that the Turkish State was "turning a blind eye" to this issue, or even contributing to it.

Whitney, meanwhile, goes even further, emphasising that the fuelling of the civil war in Syria had been a "major region-shaping operation that the Turks, the Saudis, the Qataris, the Americans etc [were] in on". He says that "Isis [had] already achieved many of Washington's implicit objectives", whether intentionally or not, by replacing Nuri al Maliki in Iraq with "a US stooge" and fracturing the Iraqi state so it could no longer challenge Israeli hegemony like it did under the Ba'ath Party. It had also created a "tangible threat to regional security" that would help to justify renewed "US meddling" in the Middle East.

According to Iran's Press TV, ISIS had even "purportedly opened a consulate in Ankara", to help it "issue visas for those who [wanted] to join the fight against the Syrian and Iraqi governments". As Syrian Kurds already suspected, the media outlet claimed that **ihadists were "operating freely inside [Turkey] without much problem"** (though such comments could, to a certain extent, be put down to Iran's opposition to the Turkish political agenda in the region).

Whitney suggests that ISIS arose because "various western Intel agencies" had sought to recruit fighters from "(former) hotspots like Afghanistan, Libya, Chechnya, Kosovo, Somalia and prisons in Iraq" to fight in Syria. He quotes Alakhbar English, which asserted that **"the majority of the leaders" of ISIS, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "had all been incarcerated in the same prison at Camp Bucca, which was run by the US occupation forces near Omm Qasr in southeastern Iraq"**. Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, Haji Samir, and Adnan Ismail Najm, meanwhile, were former Ba'athist army officers who had also "'graduated" from Camp Bucca" (and would later join ISIS).

In fact, former US prison officers at the aforementioned camp have claimed that the administration segregated "prisoners on the basis of their ideology", which "made it possible to recruit people directly and indirectly". Former detainees add to this theory, having said in interviews that Camp Bucca "was akin to an "al-Qaeda school," where senior extremists gave lessons on explosives and suicide attacks to younger prisoners", while "U.S. military officials did nothing to stop [them]".

In summary, Whitney asserts that the key aims of the West are: to install 'friendly regimes' in the Middle East, which threaten neither Western interests nor the State of Israel; to establish "forward-operating bases" across the region; and to open "pipeline corridors between Qatar and the Mediterranean", to increase profits on "gas sales to the EU market".⁵¹¹ In other words, the motives for Western policy in the region were purely economic, and not at all concerned with human or democratic rights (which were frequently abused by key Western allies).

The Desperation and Anger that Fuelled Extremism

⁵¹¹ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/americas-terrorist-academy-in-iraq-produced-isis-leaders/5406545> and fergiwhitney@msn.com

Metin Yeğin at Özgür Gündem insisted in late October 2014 that the invasion of Iraq had led to actions that were considered ““obligatory” economic activity” by a number of different groups. “The large bureaucratic apparatus [of Ba’athism]”, he says, “was left in a bind following the destruction of the regime”, as it was “excluded by the new, heavily Shia Iraqi regime”. With “the lion’s share of the income from oil... taken by international oil companies, and what was left... divided up by those close to the occupiers”, it was only “the Kurdish governments of Barzani and Talabani and Shia powers” which truly benefitted from the 2003 invasion. Meanwhile, the war had effectively destroyed the agricultural industry, leaving Sunni Arabs in particular without “their basic form of economic activity”. In fact, Yeğin asserts that they could not even “produce enough food to fill their stomachs”.

As a result of this situation, “the only thing which remained to them... was the “war economy””, which eventually led to the “sphere of economic activity” that was so important for ISIS. This system, Yeğin says, would be “characterized by the ransom of kidnapped Christians, concubines, slaves, gold, money, the management of conquered property and the rent derived therefrom, and the 20% tax paid on all of this income to the ‘Islamic State’”. In other words, the US occupation had left a section of the population with nothing “except the retrograde economy of pillage”.

On top of this phenomenon, meanwhile, was the psychological impact of being unemployed, marginalised, and destitute. “The Sunni community”, Yeğin stresses, “did not just lose their income but their [privileged] social status”, and this was not easy for them to take. Former Ba’athist allies, therefore, “replaced their former positions and social status, now destroyed, with the terrible explosions of truck bombs, the esteem of territory captured for Islam, and of course the status of the martyr”.

Exclusion and desperation, Yeğin asserts, often lead to consolation in the idea of ““the beautiful days to come” that occupies a place in every social structure’s utopic foundation”. Martyrdom, he argues, “comes from [this] dynamic”. At the same time, he says, dying for a cause can “define the social status of [the martyr’s] family and tribe in this world”, giving them “a status and prestige which allows [them] to “walk around with [their] head high”” (even if they continue to live in poverty). The horrors of Fallujah or Abu Ghraib, meanwhile, simply added to a type of ‘**wartime mentality**’, which contributed further to the justification of ISIS’s ‘economy of plunder’.

In summary, Yeğin asserts, “ISIS is not an organization only concerned... with the ‘other world’”. While there may have been a warped religious justification “when ISIS sold the Yezidi people which they captured – the men as slaves and the women as concubines – because Yezidism was a ‘non-sanctioned’ religion”, the reality is that “ISIS economic activities [centre] around booty”. For Yeğin, therefore, “the economy of “communes, collectives and cooperatives” symbolized in Kobani and Rojava is so important for the Middle East”. The wider region, he says, must adopt such a form of “radical democracy” (in which everyone has control over their economic and political reality), or it will be confined to the “barbarism” and looting of ISIS.⁵¹² [More on Rojava will be seen from Chapter Ten onwards.]

US Plans to Redraw the Map of the Middle East

In late August 2014, Michel Chossudovsky alleged that ISIS was a “construct of US intelligence”, referring in particular to how the group’s conquest of Mosul could “not be explained in strictly military terms”. In June 2014, he says, Iraq’s second largest city, “with a population of over one million people”, fell to ISIS in what was an “unexpected”

⁵¹² <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/24/the-isis-economy-and-the-importance-of-rojava/>

development according to the Obama administration. According to Chossudovsky, however, the Pentagon and US intelligence “were not only providing weapons, logistics and financial support to the ISIS rebels”, but “were also coordinating, behind the scenes, the ISIS attack on the city of Mosul”. The capture of Mosul, he maintains, “did not hinge upon ISIS’s military capabilities” because, although it was fairly well organised, the Iraqi forces supposedly defending the city “outnumbered the rebels by far”, and were “equipped with advanced weapons systems [which] could have easily repelled the ISIS rebels”.

With ISIS outnumbered 30 to 1 in Mosul according to reports, the Iraqi army “chose not to intervene”, supposedly as a result of “mass defections”. According to The Guardian, for example, soldiers “simply turned and ran in the face of the assault”, leaving even ISIS militants “openly surprised at the ease with which they took Iraq’s second largest city after three days of sporadic fighting”. The Daily Telegraph, meanwhile, spoke of how army defectors had accused Iraqi military commanders of “cowardice and betrayal” for having ““handed over” the city... to Sunni insurgents, with whom they shared sectarian and historical ties”. Chossudovsky, however, insists that the “senior commanders were largely hardline Shiite”, and that the “defections occurred de facto when the command structure collapsed and senior (Shiite) military commanders left the city”.

Chossudovsky stresses that “there were US military advisers and special forces, including operatives from private security companies, on location in Mosul working with Iraq’s regular armed forces”, and claims that there were also “Western special forces or mercenaries within ISIS (acting on contract to the CIA or the Pentagon) who [were] in liaison with US-NATO (e.g. through satellite phones)”. US intelligence, he says, was “amply involved” in the taking of Mosul, and there was “routine communication, coordination, logistics and exchange of intelligence between a US-NATO military and intelligence command center... and Western special forces attached to the ISIS brigades”. With little fighting having taken place in Mosul, he argues, it simply seems likely that its capture was “a carefully engineered operation, planned well in advance”.

In Chossudovsky’s opinion, it would have been incredibly easy for the Iraqi divisions, “trained by the US military with advanced weapons systems at their disposal”, to have “repelled the ISIS rebels”. He thus asks if ISIS would really have launched the operation if they hadn’t had “prior knowledge” that Iraqi soldiers would not intervene, insisting that “the rebels would have been decimated” if they had faced normal resistance from the army. In fact, some reports actually suggest that soldiers were “ordered by their commanders not to intervene” as ISIS invaded the city.

In short, Chossudovsky says, the “handing over of Mosul to ISIS” may have been “part of a US intelligence agenda”, especially considering that “US forces could have intervened” if they had not wanted ISIS to take the city. He also speaks of how “Sunni Tribes and sections of the former Baathist movement (including the military)” played a central role in the taking of Mosul and other cities. As an “important component of the resistance movement directed against the al-Maliki government”, he stresses, these Sunni groups had formed “a de facto “relationship”” with ISIS in order to capture territory under government control.

Chossudovsky also insists that ISIS is “a US intelligence asset” and “an instrument of non-conventional warfare”, pointing to the fact that “there were no Al Qaeda rebels in Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion”, or in Syria prior to “the outset of the US-NATO-Israeli supported insurgency in March 2011”. The objective of this “engineered conflict”, he says, “is to destroy and destabilize Iraq as a Nation State”, and is **part of a “process of transforming countries into territories”**. Breaking up Iraq along sectarian lines, he claims, is simply “a longstanding policy of the US and its allies”, and the ISIS project represents the Sunni aspect of this tactic. Although “the Sunni population of Iraq... has been [historically] committed to

a secular system of government”, he concedes, the Wahhabi “caliphate” was “a US design” to facilitate the “demise of its own proxy regime in Baghdad”, which had been moving too close to Iran.

“The division of Iraq along sectarian-ethnic lines”, Chossudovsky claims, had “been on the drawing board of the Pentagon for more than 10 years”, and “destabilization and political fragmentation in Syria [had] also [been] contemplated”. This “**proposed re-division of both Iraq and Syria**”, he asserts, is “broadly modeled on that of the Federation of Yugoslavia which was split up into seven “independent states””. In summary, he refers to author Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, who has suggested that “the re division of Iraq into three separate states is **part of a broader process of redrawing the Map of the Middle East**” to better suit the interests of Western economic elites.⁵¹³

The USA and the Toxic Smokescreen of Shia-Sunni Conflict

In early September 2014, University of Osnabrück Professor Mohssen Massarrat wrote at Global Research about how the “impending genocide” of the Yezîdîs in Iraq had been manipulated by the USA to “manipulate public opinion” into supporting the exportation of arms to Iraqi Kurdistan. Giving the “strong impression that arms transfers to the Iraqi Kurds [were] the only possibility to prevent the impending catastrophe”, US elites refused to mention “all the other short- and long-term alternatives”. The experts who warned of the “dramatic consequences of military support of the Iraqi Kurds”, meanwhile, were “systematically ignored”, says Massarrat, and US actions looked suspiciously like a “pretext to enforce their own interests”.

Backing the friendly capitalist Kurds in the KRG rather than the independent, libertarian socialist Kurds linked to the PKK (which would only be temporarily supported in Kobani in late October), US elites were essentially trying to “polish their damaged image in the Middle East” by attacking the “brutal “IS”” whilst trying not to weaken their own hand in the region. They also sought to “underline that their further military presence... [was] indispensable” (even though the “virtual inventor of the “IS”” was, according to Massarrat, former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice). In the past, the USA had stood by happily as brutalities occurred elsewhere in the Arab World, but with Iraqi oil being too important to ignore, its return to the country it had invaded just a decade before was almost inevitable.

For Massarrat, Rice had “prompted all Sunni states to set up a “Sunni belt”” in 2006, “in response to the alleged “Shia belt” that Iran had supposedly created against Arab Sunnis”. This strategy came at the “peak of the U.S.-Iran conflict”, and essentially sought to focus attention on sectarian divisions rather than political divisions between the two countries and their allies (which, as seen in Chapter Five, was the real issue). As part of this tactic, the Lebanese government was also given “military aid with the explicit purpose of containing Shia Hezbollah”, and the infamous Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan was given the task of nurturing brutal Wahhabi groups in Syria. And “the barbaric “IS” group” would soon become “unprecedented in the entire history of Islam”.

Speaking in a German context, meanwhile, Massarrat also emphasises that the German political elite wanted to “participate in future global military conflicts without any restraints”, and had therefore sought to “remove parliamentary barriers to so-called humanitarian interventions”. The “credibility of the humanitarian motives of the German government”, however, could be measured, he says, “by the fact that the same government did not say a word about the atrocities of the Israeli government in Gaza”. The exploitation

⁵¹³ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-destruction-and-political-fragmentation-of-iraq-towards-the-creation-of-a-us-sponsored-islamist-caliphate/5386998>

of Yezîdî suffering for German interests, therefore, whilst ignoring Palestinian suffering was, Massarrat insists, an example of “terrifying hypocrisy”.

For Massarrat, the only effect Western intervention in the Middle East has had and is likely to ever have is to “intensify chaos” there. In fact, he refers to how “U.S. **neoconservatives have long been talking about a policy of “creative chaos” in the Middle East**”, in order to **consolidate “U.S. hegemony** in the region by causing area-wide instability and generating more “failed states””. One element of this tactic, he says, could well be Western arms transfers to the KRG, which is likely to “proclaim a Kurdish state in northern Iraq” if the Iraqi central government loses any more legitimacy or power. Having long been a failed state in the making (as ‘a nation with several nations inside it’), Kurdish secession simply would put a nail in the coffin of the colonially-engineered Iraqi experiment. Such a situation, meanwhile, would be supported by Israel, which has said that “it would immediately accept a Kurdish state” in northern Iraq (where it has allies in the governing Kurdish nationalists).

Massarrat argues, however, that independence for Kurds in Iraq would “inevitably evoke reactions from Kurds in Turkey and Syria who are under the influence of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)”. Rejecting the idea of a Kurdish national state and pursuing the aim of creating “autonomous Kurdish regions within the existing states”, the latter’s actions could lead to Kurdish nationalists in Iraq starting a civil war with their opponents. ISIS, meanwhile, would find “ideal conditions for building their “Caliphate”” if this were to happen. On the other hand, though, temporary Peshmerga unity with PKK allies in Kobanî and elsewhere towards the end of 2014 suggested that civil war was unlikely to break out (at least while the threat of ISIS existed).

According to Massarrat, ISIS (which is “massively steered from abroad”) threatens “all religious and ethnic minorities”, along with the “positive civilizing achievements of tolerance, the protection of minorities and the peaceful coexistence of different peoples and religions within the Islamic world (which had already been damaged significantly by Western colonial influence in the early twentieth century). Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, Massarrat argues, would be “in a position to end the “Caliphate” project through common efforts” if they were to “act beyond short-term national interests” and address their own Kurdish questions (“the most significant common issue” facing them all). If these countries entered into “direct dialog and negotiations”, for example, allowing Kurds “more administrative autonomy” and setting up “a joint regional security framework”, they could easily defeat ISIS.⁵¹⁴ Because of nationalist and sectarian tensions between the countries themselves, however, and the authoritarian nature of their governing regimes, such cooperation seems unlikely.

Throwing Arms at Iraq

According to HRW’s Erin Evers, speaking in late September 2014, the key to defeating ISIS in Iraq would be to deal with the country’s “ongoing abuses” (which contributed to the group’s rising popularity and power in the first place). Obama’s plan to “degrade and destroy” ISIS in Iraq, she says, did not “seem to include the elephant in the room – how to end **abuses by the Iraqi government and its allies**”. Failing to press Iraq “on even nominal security system reforms”, she insists, the USA chose not to speak of the “extensive documentation of abuses by Iraqi security forces, and their infiltration by the very Shia militias that have wantonly killed Iraqis and American soldiers”.

The USA also sought to overlook the fact that, until 2014, it was still “supplying military hardware and training the forces operating under former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s

⁵¹⁴ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-fiction-of-fighting-the-islamic-state-an-entity-created-and-financed-by-the-u-s-and-saudi-arabia/5398833>

direction without meaningful human rights vetting of those forces". In other words, Evers criticises how the USA's strategy in Iraq after the 2003 invasion was to throw weapons at problems and rely on government authoritarianism to protect its interests in the country. Meanwhile, it never really showed an interest in ensuring that justice and democracy arrived in the country.

The new focus on ISIS, Evers insists, actually "diverted attention [away] from the critical need for the Iraqi government to stop using abusive tactics". In particular, she asks where US criticism was "during the last nine months as the Iraqi government's **indiscriminate bombing of Sunni groups killed civilians and radicalized many of those who survived**", emphasising that the USA's previous "unquestioning support" of Maliki had allowed him to get away with numerous abuses. HRW, she says, had long "documented unspeakable abuses by forces loyal to the Maliki government", she claims, with: "indiscriminate air strikes" having "killed hundreds or even thousands of civilians in Sunni areas"; the government having allowed "**torture and extrajudicial killings in prisons**"; a justice system having been created that "seemed exponentially more abusive than just"; and the "incorporation of Shia militia into the government's security forces" having made the two "effectively indistinguishable".

Evers uses careful language to criticise the USA, but in the end suggests that "U.S. policy may well have helped increase the threat that it now seeks to eliminate". In fact, the superpower only "emphasized the need for an inclusive government" in 2014 because it was no longer possible to ignore the fact that Maliki's "abusive policies had alienated allies and undermined [his] ability to keep Iraq "safe enough" so that the U.S. could continue to ignore the consequences". She asserts that the USA was "again prioritizing military objectives over the institutional reforms that, in the long run, [would] be the key to ending the abuses that helped give rise to ISIS". In spite of Maliki leaving government, she says, there was "no indication [of] who the most abusive elements in the Iraqi security forces and among the Shia militias [were] accountable to, and who - if anyone - [would] be held accountable for ending their abuses or eliminating abusive units altogether".

Meanwhile, the USA had also "remained mute about continued bombing and shelling by Iraqi government forces of densely populated Sunni civilian areas, including the use of barrel bombs", Evers says, even though the use of the latter had been criticised in Syria. Unsurprisingly, the use of such weapons was ignored in both Iraq and Israel (two key US allies), showing **clear US double standards**. At the same time, in April 2013, Sunnis "protesting their disenfranchisement and [the] abusive and sectarian policies [of Iraqi] security forces" were attacked by government forces, seeing "at least 50" protesters killed. And "it is no coincidence", Evers insists, "that Sunni groups that now support ISIS radically shifted toward that position" after this government attack.

The Sunni "Awakening Councils that [had initially] defeated al-Qaida", she asserts, had long been alienated by "Maliki's abusive sectarian rule", and "many of them [were] now [even] backing ISIS" as a result. In other words, ISIS was being used as a vehicle by some Sunni communities to exert greater autonomy and control over their own lives. In short, while they may recognise the group to be harsh on its perceived enemies, they believe it treats its 'own people' well.

According to Evers, steps desperately need to be taken to bring these aforementioned groups "back to the other side" in order "for there to be any viable anti-ISIS strategy" (essentially, she is talking here about the need for democratic inclusion and cooperation). The most valuable international policy towards Iraq, therefore, would be to encourage engagement between Sunni leaders and non-Sunni leaders on measures that would put an

end to government abuses. If this does not happen, Evers says, there may eventually be “reprisal killings and other attacks on Sunni civilians” in Iraq after the defeat of ISIS.⁵¹⁵

US and Turkish Policies Helped to Create ISIS

In early September 2014, American author and former CIA officer Graham Fuller described ISIS as “made in the USA”. He also speaks of how **Turkey “miscalculated Assad’s capacity to remain in power” in Syria**, and how **its support for anti-Assad groups soon “made the issue even more complex”**. For Fuller, Turkey’s failure to operate “independently from the bankrupt policies of the United States” in the region contributed to a deterioration of relations with both Iraq and Iran, and moved Turkey away from secularism and towards sectarianism. When Wahhabi jihadists became the prominent anti-Assad force in Syria, meanwhile, both Turkey and the USA tried to shy away from the fact that “to topple Assad by force would be to the detriment of all”.

For a long time, Fuller says, Syrian minorities (“and even Israel”) saw the Ba’athist regime to be “much more acceptable than a possible Islamist Sunni government”. As “more of an Arab nationalist than all [other] Arab leaders”, the pragmatic Assad was essentially “a predictable foe”. While the USA began to move closer and closer to the “position of consenting to Assad’s continuing rule of Syria” in 2014, Turkey still remained stubborn, however, and damaged its position in the region as a result.

According to Fuller, **the United States was “one of the key creators” of ISIS, with “its destructive interventions in the Middle East and the war in Iraq” being “the basic causes of the birth of ISIS”**. The Wahhabi group arose, he insists, precisely to “protest the US invasion of Iraq”, underlining that it was (and is) “supported by many non-Islamist Sunnis” who had also been “isolated by the Shiite government” of Maliki. **The destruction of sectarianism in Iraq, he says, is the “only way to get rid of ISIS, never militarily”,** as such a change would simply take away ISIS’s support base.

“Arab geography”, Fuller affirms, “is full of incompetent dictators who are vulnerable to exploitation by ISIS”, so there would be no reason for the group to “push its luck”⁵¹⁶ too much by entering into Turkey (which has “NATO’s second-largest army”⁵¹⁷). Nonetheless, the fact that “the PKK [saw] ISIS as a threat to all the Kurds of the region” meant that ISIS conquests of Kurdish areas in Syria and Iraq had made the jihadist group a major enemy of the PKK and its allies. At the same time, though, Turkey’s “good commercial and political relations with the Kurdish administration in northern Iraq” contributed to the weakening of Iraqi national unity, and thus to an increase in the opportunities for ISIS to exploit societal fissures there.⁵¹⁸

ISIS Was a Saudi Project

In early 2014, John McCain said, regarding the fight against Assad in Syria, “thank God for the Saudis and Prince Bandar, and for our Qatari friends”. In fact, “McCain and Senator Lindsey Graham had previously met with Bandar to encourage the Saudis to arm Syrian rebel forces”, reports Steve Clemons at The Atlantic. Soon afterwards, Clemons asserts, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah “relieved” Bandar of his post, with “sources close to the royal

⁵¹⁵ www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/28/defeat-isis-us-needs-hold-iraqi-government-accountable-too and @ErinHRW

⁵¹⁶ [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+\[English\]&utm_campaign=8833cf4508-September_3_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-8833cf4508-102384513#](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+[English]&utm_campaign=8833cf4508-September_3_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-8833cf4508-102384513#)

⁵¹⁷ <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21571147-once-all-powerful-turkish-armed-forces-are-cowed-if-not-quite-impotent-erdogan-and-his>

⁵¹⁸ [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+\[English\]&utm_campaign=8833cf4508-September_3_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-8833cf4508-102384513#](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+[English]&utm_campaign=8833cf4508-September_3_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-8833cf4508-102384513#)

court” insisting that the king had in fact fired him for “his handling of the kingdom’s Syria policy”.

While the West spoke about the ‘moderate’ Free Syrian Army (FSA), “two of the most successful factions fighting Assad’s forces [were actually] Islamist extremist groups: Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)”, whose “success [was] in part due to the support they [had] received from two Persian Gulf countries: Qatar and Saudi Arabia”. In other words, **the USA’s treasured allies in the Middle East had in fact been fuelling Wahhabi extremism in Syria**, all whilst receiving praise from self-interested, war-mongering US officials like McCain.

Clemons speaks in particular of how “**Qatar’s military and economic largesse... made its way to Jabhat al-Nusra**” while, according to a senior Qatari official, “**ISIS [was] a Saudi project**”. In short, he suggests that ISIS “may have been a major part of Bandar’s covert-ops strategy in Syria”, even though the Saudi government has officially denied supporting ISIS directly. In fact, with the increasing prominence of ISIS in the war, Clemons claimed in June 2013 that there were “signs that the kingdom recently shifted its assistance – whether direct or indirect – away from extremist factions in Syria and toward more moderate opposition groups”, reflecting increasing worries within the Saudi royal family about the negative effect that the group could have on its own political legitimacy at home.

In part, the aforementioned change was likely a result of the fact that “the United States, France, and Turkey [had] long sought to support the weak and disorganized FSA” and wanted “Qatar and Saudi Arabia to do the same”. Actually, Bandar’s replacement as Saudi intelligence chief in February 2014 was almost certainly a sign that the Saudi regime was finally “endorsing this strategy”. In other words, when the extremist actions of Wahhabi Islamists were beginning to get coverage in the world’s media, Saudi leaders believed it was convenient to distance themselves from extremist acts. In fact, there was also a meeting in February “between U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice and the intelligence chiefs of Turkey, Qatar, Jordan, and others in the region”, regarding the fact that “that ISIS and al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra had emerged as the preeminent rebel forces in Syria”. The participating governments “reportedly committed to cut off ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and support the FSA instead”.

In spite of official government support for Wahhabi extremists in Syria fading away in early 2014, Clemons insists, “non-governmental military and financial support may still [have been] flowing from these countries to [Wahhabi] Islamist groups”. Nonetheless, he places particular emphasis on the fact that, **just like the mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, “ISIS achieved scale and consequence through Saudi support”**. In summary, he says, Bandar “may have tried to achieve his objectives in Syria by building a monster”, but it was always very unlikely to be worth the risks.⁵¹⁹

Who Has Funded ISIS?

In April 2013, Pravda’s Sergei Vasilenkov spoke of how the USA’s terrorism list called the problem of “terrorism financing and money laundering” in Iran and North Korea “so serious that it [required] immediate defensive “counter-measures””. For him, such comments were a good example of how “the Americans generally like to change their opinions, [defining] enemies [as] those who are not beneficial at the time”, while at the same time “justifying real devils” like Saudi Arabia. For instance, the Pentagon’s leading analyst firm (Rand Corporation) “called Saudi Arabia the primary sponsor of terrorists” in July 2012, stating that the Saudis “were active in all areas of international terrorism” and “were

⁵¹⁹ <http://m.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-saudi-arabia-iraq-syria-bandar/373181/>

planning attacks and engaged in financing the activities of criminal gangs” in numerous countries. Nonetheless, the kind of rhetoric reserved for the countries mentioned in the terror list was not applied to Saudi Arabia (even though Rand Corporation recommended that, if the latter did not “do away with [its terrorist-funding] activity”, it would be “advisable to freeze all financial assets of the kingdom and strike at the Saudi oil fields”).

According to Vasilenkov, terrorist groups are simply the “advanced echelon of [an] enormous extremist structure that wants to change the existing world order through violence”. And the “core jihad countries”, he insists, “are usually economically weak communities... with fairly limited resources”, which dedicate “a great deal of money for the maintenance of their own armed forces”. **The main funding for terrorism, however, comes from “oil emirates of the Persian Gulf”**, whose absolute monarchies rely on the “production and sale of oil and gas” as their “main sources of income”. Generally of a “Wahhabi orientation” (which Vasilenkov refers to as “the most reactionary Muslim faith”), these terrorist sponsors are generally found in “Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain” – all key US allies in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia in particular, he says, consistently advocates Wahhabism (whose mission can be summarised in “the Tauhid manifesto that says that true Muslims must fight with the infidels everywhere and continuously, with word, arms and money”).

“Saudi Arabia's military budget”, Vasilenkov stresses, “is \$18.7 billion, which is one of the highest in the world”, even though “the Saudi Army [in reality] has only 200,000 soldiers and officers”. In other words, he insists, compared to a country like China (which “spends \$17 billion dollars on its military” but whose armed forces “exceed 2.4 million people”), there seems to be a significant gap between funding and manpower. He alleges that this extra money is in fact “spent on funding the countries and organizations on the frontlines of the war” against the global enemies of Wahhabism.

For example, American, Israeli, and Russian intelligence have all recognised that Saudi Arabia financed both “Pakistan's nuclear and missile programs” and “the “Taliban” and its activities in Afghanistan”. Vasilenkov also claims that it paid for “the activities of Chechen military units”. The USA, therefore, as a key ally of Saudi Arabia, must look within “before blaming other countries [for] supporting terrorism”, he insists.

“American neo-conservatives openly support terrorists in the Caucasus”, he asserts, in an attempt “to manipulate and destroy the Russian Federation” with a “complex network of terrorist organizations operating under the banner of “independence” and “separatism””. US money created “Kavkaz-Center”, for instance, which was the “propaganda mouthpiece of [Chechen Islamist] Doku Umarov”, and which characterised “any terrorist attack... as a heroic act”. The ‘American Committee for Peace in the Caucasus’, meanwhile, “was founded in 1999 by Freedom House - a neo-conservative organization that cooperates with the U.S. government” and was also a sponsor of the Chechen cause. Receiving money from the National Fund for Democracy, it apparently financed “the activities of terrorists” in Chechnya. In short, says Vasilenkov, the USA was in many ways “the founder and a main sponsor” of terrorism.⁵²⁰

Western Allies Key in Funding Wahhabi Extremists

Author Owen Jones, meanwhile, also says “**Britain's allies are up to their necks in complicity with terrorism**”. If there is “money to be made and weapons to sell”, however, “our rulers’ lips will remain stubbornly sealed”, he argues. After 13 years of the ‘War on Terror’, he insists, the West has only seen “crackdowns on civil liberties”, “tabloid-fanned

⁵²⁰ <http://english.pravda.ru/world/americas/29-04-2013/124448-terrorism-0/>

generalisations about Muslims”, and disastrous and catastrophic military interventions in the Muslim World. With Wahhabi-inspired Islamist militias taking over on the ground in Libya, Britons believing wars abroad had “made them less safe”, and “jihadists too extreme even for al-Qaida’s tastes running amok in Iraq and Syria”, Jones asserts that the West’s foreign policies have been an enormous failure. The worst thing of all, however, is the fact that **the West is “militarily, economically and diplomatically allied with... often brutal regimes... that have played a pernicious role in the rise of Islamist fundamentalist terrorism”**. Media coverage, meanwhile, “all too often reflects the foreign policy objectives of our governments”, he stresses.

As seen previously in this essay, there are arguments that Qatar has supported Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, and that “powerful private individuals within the state” (along with the Saudi regime) have also funded ISIS. Arms “intended for other jihadi groups”, meanwhile, “are likely to have fallen into [ISIS’s] hands”. And, although Hillary Clinton claimed (according to a Wikileaks memo) that **“Qatar has the worst record of counter-terrorism cooperation with the US”**, the country has not been sanctioned by the USA, and in fact remains a key US ally.

Britain, meanwhile, “arms Qatar’s dictatorship, selling it millions of pounds worth of weaponry including “crowd-control ammunition” and missile parts”. The country itself also has a presence in the UK, owning “lucrative chunks of Britain such as the Shard, a big portion of Sainsbury’s and a slice of the London Stock Exchange”. In addition to Qatari interference, Jones says, hundreds of millions of dollars have “been channelled by wealthy Kuwaitis” to Wahhabi extremists in Syria too. “Slammed by Amnesty International for curtailing freedom of expression, beating and torturing demonstrators and discriminating against women”, Kuwait is also an important Western ally in the Middle East, he stresses.

According to the US Treasury’s undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence, David Cohen, **Kuwait has been the “epicentre of fundraising for terrorist groups in Syria”**, and author Kristian Coates Ulrichsen has reported on how **“high profile Kuwaiti clerics were quite openly supporting groups like al-Nusra, using TV programmes in Kuwait to grandstand on it”**. Such support was all “helped by lax laws on financing and money laundering”, Coates emphasises. As another “important British ally”, though, Kuwait has actually been granted “hundreds of arms licences... since 2003, recently including military software and anti-riot shields”.

At the same time, Jones asserts that, in Saudi Arabia, “around 2,000 people have been killed since 1985, [with] their decapitated corpses often left in public squares as a warning” to others. Amnesty International, meanwhile, claims that “torture to extract confessions [is] commonplace” in the country, that “Shia Muslims are discriminated against”, and that “women are deprived of basic rights, having to seek permission from a man before they can even travel or take up paid work”. And even talking about atheism in the country is considered a “terrorist offence”, thanks to the long-standing “pact between an opulent monarchy and a fanatical clergy”. In summary, the country is “deeply complicit in the rise of Islamist extremism” (as demonstrated earlier in this book), yet it still remains an important Western ally.

According to Chatham House professor Paul Stevens, “there was an unwritten agreement” for a long time, “whereby al-Qaida’s presence was tolerated in Saudi Arabia” as long as the government was not targeted. Coates, meanwhile, argues that **Saudi policy in Syria is like “Afghanistan on steroids”**, with “elements of the regime” turning “a blind eye to where funding for anti-Assad rebels ends up”. Therefore, while Saudi Arabia “has given \$100m (£60m) to the UN anti-terror programme” (and its grand mufti “has denounced Isis as “enemy number one””), Wahhabi jihadists abroad “receive [both] ideological and material

backing from within the kingdom". America knows this all too well (with Hillary Clinton having called Saudi donors "the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide"), and Britain does too. However, their regimes either see Saudi Arabia as the lesser evil regarding the protection of Western interests in the Muslim World, or feel that they cannot afford to risk their lucrative alliance with the kingdom.

In summary, Saudi Arabia is "the British arms industry's biggest market, receiving £1.6bn of military exports", and there are "more than 200 joint ventures between UK and Saudi companies worth \$17.5bn". In other words, money talks in a global capitalist system, and Saudi Arabia has both money and oil (the source of more money). Therefore, **the current Western governments are never going to deal with the root cause of Wahhabi jihadism**, and their actions are only ever going to consist of an empty shell of aggressive but fruitless rhetoric.⁵²¹

Even US Political Elites Are Aware of Saudi Arabia's Role In Creating ISIS

US Vice President Joe Biden came under fire from his superiors in early October 2014 for accusing "America's key allies in the Middle East of allowing the rise of the Islamic State (IS), saying they supported extremists with money and weapons". Speaking at Harvard University, he insisted that "our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria". Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, he said, had been "so determined to take down Assad," that in a sense they [had] started a "proxy Sunni-Shia war" by pouring "hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons" towards anyone who would fight against Assad".

According to Biden, the USA "could not convince [its] colleagues to stop supplying them". His attempted disassociation from the civil war in Syria is implausible, however, as **the United States could have easily leveraged their allies into stopping their support for jihadists in Syria** if the political will had really existed. They could, for instance, have cancelled arms deals or oil imports, but the fact is that the backlash from such a decision would have hit American elites hard. In other words, the USA saw Saudi capital and oil as simply too important to risk losing for the sake of Middle Eastern lives.

Nonetheless, Biden kept up his story, claiming that "the outcome" of the terrorist-funding policy of the USA's allies, was "now... more visible" (as if America had not suspected that funding terrorists would lead to terrorism). For former MI5 agent Annie Machon, Biden's "apparent amnesia about what America and Britain [had been] trying to ferment in Syria only a year [before]" was his most cynical act of all. In reality, she says, these Western regimes had been "putting staff intelligence personnel on the ground", "providing logistical support to the rebels in Syria", and "spearheading the campaign to try to oust Assad".⁵²² Essentially, trying to backtrack and deny responsibility when things turned bad represented the political spinelessness of the ruling US elites.

NGO Aid to ISIS-Held Territory Allowing the Group to Settle

In July 2014, Isabel Hunter spoke at the Belfast Telegraph about how "Western governments [were] sending millions of pounds of aid to areas held by the radical Islamic group Isis in northern Syria". Paid for "by the UK, European and US governments", this aid consisted of "food, medicine and hygiene kits", she says, and was being "brought into the country through the war-torn north from the two last remaining border posts open with Turkey in Reyhanli and Kilis".

⁵²¹ <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/who-bankrolls-islamic-terrorism-david-cameron-knows-but-his-lips-are-sealed#.VAYjnWOGcSH> and <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/31/combat-terror-end-support-saudi-arabia-dictatorships-fundamentalism>

⁵²² <http://rt.com/news/192880-biden-isis-us-allies/>

Hunter reports on how “Western groups such as Mercy Corps International, the Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision, the International Rescue Committee and the United Nations World Food Programme [were all providing] supplies to hundreds of thousands of people every month across the self-proclaimed Islamic State”. Aid had even reached “Raqqa, Manbij and Jarablus, which [had] witnessed beheadings, crucifixions and other draconian interpretations of sharia since Isis took over”. Aid workers say, meanwhile, said that ISIS militants had let them work “mostly without interference” (generally because it helped them to look better).

The groups, which claimed that their aim was “to help vulnerable people, not to support the rule of Isis”, had received money from Western governments, Hunter asserts, with Mercy Corps, for example, having “received £27.3m from the UK Department for International Development for humanitarian activities in Syria”. The aid in ISIS territory, however, had helped to boost ISIS’s image to its prospective supporters, says Hunter. Using social media “to demonstrate the brutality with which it [treated] its enemies and those who [broke] its laws”, for instance, the Wahhabi group also showed its militants “distributing aid and administering healthcare to people under its rule”. In fact, Hunter even suggests such aid had “been a major factor in persuading residents of recently conquered towns such as Mosul to accept [ISIS’s] rule”.

Essentially, the fact that ISIS already controlled Raqqa and Deir Ezzour (“very fertile” areas which could “produce a vast amount of the region’s wheat”) meant that international aid simply bolstered ISIS’s abilities even more. Additionally, Deir Ezzour also had “some of the biggest oilfields in Syria”, helping the jihadists to rapidly increase their disposable income. According to one doctor, working with a Norwegian medical NGO in Raqqa, ISIS had even been “luring doctors and nurses with large salaries in return for their loyalty”, offering “up to 100,000 Syrian pounds a month (£390), which is a fortune there now”. And, at the same time, “warehouses and industrial parks along Turkey’s southern border” were loading “unmarked boxes” onto commercial trucks which were “then driven across the border to areas precariously held by Syrian opposition forces and Islamist groups including Jabhat al-Nusra”.⁵²³ [Such questionable and unscrupulous Turkish behaviour will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Eleven and Twelve.]

Summary

Overall, it is clear that ISIS was created by a combination of factors. The increasing presence of Al-Qaeda in Iraq after the destruction of the generally secular Ba’athist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein (following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003) was a key factor, though the desperate conditions the country had found itself in for two decades prior to the invasion (thanks to war and sanctions) clearly played a part too. Furthermore, as seen in this section of the chapter, there are not only suggestions that the USA created a Shia-Sunni conflict in the region to counteract Iranian influence in the early twenty-first century, but also that the superpower hoped to split nations into sectarian or ethnic territories. In fact, as Chossudovsky suggests, ISIS may even have been a US intelligence asset in the fight to accomplish this goal.

What is most clear, however, is that Western allies in the Middle East (primarily Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Turkey) fuelled the sectarian and jihadist violence in Syria, which allowed ISIS to expand its operations into the country from Iraq. In short, the lack of Western interest (and that of regional allies of the West) in resolving conflicts peacefully or diplomatically played an important role in the rise to prominence of the brutal Wahhabi

⁵²³ <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/how-the-west-bankrolls-isis-millions-from-governments-and-ngos-funding-radical-islamic-terror-group-30438217.html>

organisation. Even allowing aid into ISIS-controlled areas has contributed to its increasing power, but the funding and arming of Wahhabi extremists in Syria (and almost certainly Iraq too) has been the main force that has stoked the flames of sectarian violence in the region. On top of already existing injustice and authoritarianism (for which Western imperialism was in large part to blame), it has been key Western allies in the region that have sought, through their interference, to perpetuate such an order (generally with the support of the West). Therefore, at least to some extent, ISIS must be considered a creation of Western capitalist elites.

D) The Reality behind the USA-Led War against ISIS

I) Distracting the World

Chomsky on ISIS

In October 2014, the Plymouth Institute for Peace Research (PIPR)⁵²⁴ asked Noam Chomsky⁵²⁵ about ISIS, suggesting that Western governments must be “thrilled” with the group for “providing them with new excuses for war and internal repression”. Chomsky’s response, in spite of an insistence that there was still only “scattered evidence” and limited reporting on the Wahhabi jihadist phenomenon, was to call **ISIS “one of the many horrifying consequences of the US sledgehammer**, which among other crimes, incited sectarian conflicts” that have been “tearing the region to shreds”.

In particular, he refers to how the 350,000 men of the Iraqi army (“heavily armed [and] trained by the US for over a decade”) had suffered an “almost instantaneous defeat” at the hands of the “few thousand lightly armed militants” of ISIS on several occasions. With commanding officers fleeing and “the demoralized troops” either following suit or dying, the fight against ISIS was essentially left to “Shiite militias organized by the sectarian government, which [were themselves] carrying out crimes against Sunnis that [mirrored] those of ISIS”. In such a dangerously polarised environment, he suggests, the conflict was unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

Chomsky also mentions the “crucial assistance” that the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga had received from the PKK and its allies, and how the latter had been “the most significant force that rescued the Yazidi from extermination and [were] holding off ISIS in Syria, including the crucial defense of Kobani”. Nonetheless, he emphasises, “Turkey [had] escalated its attacks against the PKK, with US tolerance if not support”, and had been “satisfied to watch... ISIS and the Kurds... killing one another within eyesight of the [Syrian-Turkish] border”.

Finally, he also points out that Iran had been effectively “excluded from the US “coalition [against ISIS]” for policy and ideological reasons”, in spite of the fact that the superpower and its proclaimed enemy actually found themselves on the same side in the fight against Wahhabi jihadism. Meanwhile, the US-led coalition included only “a few of the Arab oil dictatorships that [were] themselves supporting competing jihadi groups” in Syria and elsewhere. **Saudi Arabia** in particular, he underlines, as the major US ally in the region, **had “long been the major source of funding for ISIS as well as providing its ideological roots”**.⁵²⁶

Hiding the Context to Instil Fear and Justify War

⁵²⁴ www.pipr.co.uk

⁵²⁵ <http://www.chomsky.info>

⁵²⁶ <http://www.pipr.co.uk/all/dark-clouds-loom-in-the-shadow-of-the-first-world-war-noam-chomsky-discusses-isis-ukraine-and-gaza/>

In late September 2014, Peter Baker and Brian Knowlton reported on President Obama's comments that the "United States had underestimated the rise of the Islamic State militant group... and had placed too much trust in the Iraqi military, allowing the region to become "ground zero for jihadists around the world"". Head of US intelligence Jim Clapper, meanwhile, was said to have "underestimated what had been taking place in Syria", also agreeing that he had "overestimated the ability and will of the Iraqi Army to fight such Sunni extremists".

In short, the above statements are incredibly unlikely to be true (unless of course the world is to assume that the US intelligence services, powerful as they are, simply had no idea of the dynamics of Iraqi politics or the sectarianism that had been encouraged there). Our options are essentially to believe that US officials were both stupid and ignorant, or that (just as the September 11th attacks gave US warmongers an excuse to launch a holy war (for capitalist interests) around the world) **the USA consciously turned Iraq into a breeding ground for Wahhabi jihadism and sectarian conflict**. The only perceptible third option, meanwhile, would be that intelligence officials recognised that they could not act to address sectarianism (in a way that would benefit US elites) without a credible justification, which would be required in order to obtain the approval of the majority of US citizens.

While it is frightening to believe the second option, it is almost impossible to believe the first, especially given that the US intelligence community has abundant resources and ample experience interfering in the political processes of foreign nations. In fact, even the most minimal amount of awareness (which we should expect from US intelligence officers) would have made it clear that fuelling Saddam Hussein's opponents in the run up to the 2003 invasion and failing to encourage peaceful, democratic reconciliation afterwards would eventually end in chaos.

Presuming, therefore, that the aforementioned officials did understand the sectarian quagmire created in Iraq by the Bush II Administration (and did not underestimate it), we can only suppose that their self-ridiculing public comments were simply attempts at 'damage control'. For example, their words were almost certainly aimed at both discouraging the idea that they were involved in the creation of ISIS and that they allowed the group to grow in strength. Nonetheless, claiming stupidity should never have been an option for them, as it simply created yet more suspicion.

When the horrors of ISIS were amplified by the media (in a way that the crimes of authoritarian US allies seldom had been), the US regime was now provided with an excuse to intervene militarily in Iraq (and Syria), and the idea that the intelligence community had simply remained powerlessly quiet (rather than stupid) about the growth of Wahhabi extremism in the region became a lot more credible. However, the fact still remained that the intelligence community had, at the very least, been complicit in allowing ISIS to grow in strength or, at the most, responsible for creating ISIS as a means of justifying military intervention.

It is probable that Obama's "refusal to intervene more directly" in Syria and "his decision to pull all American troops out of Iraq in 2011" were designed to restore popular faith in a US foreign policy that had appallingly low levels of public support. Nonetheless, it is at the same time unlikely that he and those around him did not suspect that these actions had, at least in small part, "created conditions that allowed the rise of the Islamic State". While Obama tried to blame Maliki for 'squandering the democratic opportunity' that the USA had supposedly left behind in Iraq, therefore, we cannot ignore the fact that the United States had basically handed Maliki and his cronies control of Iraq in the first place (showing their almost in-existent interest in democracy or human rights).

Whether through ignorance or cynicism, the US president essentially failed to recognise that what had been left behind in Iraq was not even close to being a true democracy. In addition, he made the easy and self-interested choice of blaming the puppets (Maliki's regime) rather than the puppet masters (the US invaders and occupiers) for the chaos and division which had been sown in Iraq. And, in doing so, he effectively disregarded all sense of historical context and US blame for sectarianism in the country (and in the region as a whole).

Obama: Caught Between Liberals and Warmongers

As Democrats like Senator Timothy Kaine criticised Obama for attacking ISIS "unilaterally when as a candidate for president he [had] made very plain that the president [could not] unilaterally start a war without Congress", Republican warmongers like House speaker John Boehner insisted that ISIS "intend to kill us" and, "if we don't destroy them first, we're going to pay the price". Both groups, however, missed the point. The former focussed on technicalities rather than on actually opposing all military interventions abroad for the counterproductive effect they have. The latter, meanwhile, focussed on an ignorant analysis devoid of reason or historical context.

The words of Boehner and others, however, represented a deeper aspect of the elite psyche in the USA. For him, the USA had "no choice" but to attack ISIS. There was no other possible path. And this stance essentially emanated from both political ignorance (or fabrication, depending on your levels of scepticism) and a dehumanisation of 'the other' typical of all imperialist powers throughout history (and characteristic of US Republican elites today). Whatever the roots of this posture, however, the reality was that it represented a fundamentally capitalist outlook, promoting both militarism and destruction (or 'reconstruction') as the only possibilities for dealing with sectarian conflict in the Middle East (which, of course, they are not).

In effect, propaganda sound bites like Boehner's lacked both an understanding of life and history in the region and a sense of empathy with those pushed, by dire circumstances, to desperate (if horrifically violent and misplaced) actions. And essentially, such deluded and deadly thought promised the world only a future of endless war and injustice. Nonetheless, such a position has too often been the driving forces (at least in public) of the USA's reckless imperialism. Behind the rhetoric, meanwhile, we could argue that such a focus on militarism is one of several signs of elite desperation within the declining empire of the United States.

The political reality of the USA's anti-ISIS strategy in Syria, meanwhile, was that (as Obama himself identified) the superpower was "working at odds with the [Ba'athist] government rather than in tandem" with it (while also working bypassing international law).⁵²⁷ Therefore, just like in Iraq before and after 2003, the priority of the US regime was not to encourage reconciliation between those working within and against the Ba'athist system, but to create a rebel force and future government that could act as a US puppet in Syria.

One big problem for the United States, though, was that 'moderate Islamists' and liberal Arab nationalists did not have the ideological programmes needed to truly revolutionise Syrian society, and would almost certainly marginalise those currently in league with the government. In short, the US-backed opposition in Syria (much like it was in Iraq) would likely be just as bad as the Ba'athist regime itself. As will be seen from Chapter Ten onwards, only a libertarian left-wing solution in Syria could realistically bring the country's different ethnic and religious groups together, by radically democratising society (and thus nurturing secularism, freedom, social justice, and cooperation). Neither liberal nor conservative elites in the USA, however, would be happy with such a phenomenon.

⁵²⁷ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/world/middleeast/president-obama.html?ref=world&_r=2

Energy Politics and the Revitalised 'War on Terror'

When the USA officially launched its assault on ISIS in Iraq and Syria in late 2014, President Obama did not succeed in explaining how the group was actually “a threat to the U.S.” or how it was “in U.S. interests to suppress it”. In fact, says political economist Rob Urie, considering the USA’s record of breaking Iraq “along sectarian lines” and killing “hundreds of thousands of civilians” (after, of course, over a decade of “economic sanctions estimated to have killed a few hundred thousand more”), the “plausibility of ‘humanitarian intervention’” in its fight against ISIS was almost non-existent. Additionally, the “direct CIA and indirect proxy support for the Syrian ‘opposition’” (which had added fuel to a sectarian fire that was already beginning to rage in the region) also undermined US claims of humanitarianism.

Nonetheless, Obama sought to revitalise Bush’s ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric, using the beheading of Western journalists to get the American press (and therefore people) “on board” with his bombing campaign. In reality, though, the traditional reason for US intervention had always previously been “**oil, natural gas and pipelines for their transport**” (even if “keeping the ‘communist menace’ at bay” was used as the official justification). As a result, believing the US government’s claims that its primary objective is to end jihadist violence in the Middle East “requires overlooking this history of contrived rationales for wars and coups” in the region, along with “Obama’s own role in using drone terrorism to further his own goals in Pakistan, Yemen, [and] Somalia”. In short, Urie says, ‘terrorism’ is simply “the new ‘communism’ in Western political slander”.

Urie speaks of how, in 1945, a “pipeline project was conceived” for Syria, though the country refused to sanction the plans at the time. Consequently, ARAMCO (the Arabian American Oil Company) asked the CIA to intervene, and a coup arrived four years later. The new Syrian regime then “approved the project and construction of the Syrian leg of the pipeline was begun”. Although this “Trans-Arabian Pipeline... is no longer in service”, Urie admits, a natural gas pipeline is, and it “unites North Africa with the Middle East, Turkey and eventually with Europe”.

In fact, Urie argues, there was no coincidence in the favourable outcome of the Arab Spring for the USA. With the army in control in Egypt (and still being “a major recipient of U.S. foreign ‘aid’”) and the Libyan regime actively overthrown by NATO, **Syria was the main problem for guaranteed Western control of the pipeline** (especially considering Europe’s increasing “dependence on oil and gas from Russia”). NATO’s proxy war with Russia in Ukraine, meanwhile, was yet another example of how **the conflict over natural resources is crucial to international politics today**.

Although ‘humanitarian intervention’ has been the favoured term for many Western military expeditions since the end of the Cold War, the fact is, according to Urie, that “there is hardly a mass grave in the Middle East that doesn’t have U.S. energy geopolitics associated [with] it”. Both the proxy war in Ukraine and the conflict in Syria, Urie claims, are about breaking “the relation between Russia and Europe” and installing a system of “U.S. and ‘coalition’ control over Middle Eastern oil and gas”, which could replace Europe’s dependence on Russia.⁵²⁸

Israeli Political Diversion and Anti-Iranian Propaganda

⁵²⁸ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/12/energy-geopolitics-and-the-u-s-mission-in-iraq-and-syria/>

As seen in Chapter Five of this essay, the Iranian Revolution was taken over by Shia Islamists precisely as a response to overbearing US imperialism and the increasing influence of Western allies in the region. The extremism of Saudi Wahhabism, meanwhile, was a threat to a significant part of Iran's population, and especially to its Shia majority. Nonetheless, the fact that Al-Qaeda is referred to as "in theory an arch-foe of the Iranian regime" does not stop some forces (such as Israel, the USA, and their allies) from speculating that there is an unlikely alliance between Shia Iran and Wahhabi Sunni extremism.⁵²⁹

Jason Burke asserted at The Guardian in 2013 that there was "no evidence of any contact between al-Qaida elements and any parts of the opaque and fragmented Iranian security establishment before 2002". After the collapse of the Taliban in 2001, however, "many of the foreign extremists who had been in [Afghanistan] fled west into Iran", with most making their way through to Iraq ("where they organised and led attacks on US forces and, later, Shia Muslims"). Others, meanwhile, including some "members of Bin Laden's close family" and some "veteran militants such as the Egyptian Saif al-Adel", remained in Iran. Nonetheless, most were eventually "placed under house arrest, confined to compounds scattered around the country", and "most analysts believe elements within the hardline Revolutionary Guards took charge of them".

Ramin Mehmanparast, a spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, insisted that "al-Qaida's beliefs were in no way consistent with those of the Islamic Republic, and that Iran opposed "any kind of violent action that endangers lives"". Neither were there any indications of "any working relationship with al-Qaida or its various offshoots". According to Burke, it was not clear whether the figures mentioned in the previous paragraph were being held as "bargaining chips", as an "insurance policy", or as "potential assets".⁵³⁰

Whatever the reason for their presence in Iran, however, the rapid spread of ISIS in 2014 actually gave Iran (a firm opponent of the group) an increasing amount of regional legitimacy. For this reason, US attacks against ISIS towards the end of the year were at least in part an attempt to reassert US 'legitimacy' in the region and prevent the anti-Wahhabi Iranian regime from gaining more acceptance as an important regional actor.

According to Joyce Karam, writing at the Al Arabiya, the "collapse of... Taliban rule in Afghanistan in 2001, and the escape of al-Qaeda leaders to Pakistan", saw many Wahhabi extremists also reportedly seek shelter in Iran. Safe from US airstrikes, unlike Somalia, Pakistan, and Iraq, speculation arose that some Wahhabi figures and Iranian Islamist leaders actually saw "common ground in distrusting America and Israel". When Al-Qaeda members "kidnapped an Iranian diplomat in Pakistan" in 2008, Karam suggests, Iran suddenly saw the concrete value of hosting such figures. Unlike ISIS, she says, Al-Qaeda was "more cognizant of appeasing Tehran and not embracing what some of its offshoots... started in 2003 in massacring Shiites". In fact, bin Laden said in 2004 that he "did not condone Abu Musaab Zarqawi's "total war" on Shiites in Iraq". For Karam, this difference between extreme and pragmatic Wahhabism (which would divide Al-Qaeda and ISIS eight years later) was precisely why Iran's leaders could stomach having Al-Qaeda members in their country. In other words, while "Iran is not in league with Wahhabists", it definitely "protects itself by not launching an all-out war" against Wahhabi forces in the region.

Behind such claims (of, at the very least, appeasement between some Shia elites in Iran and some Wahhabi figures), however, is the fact that, "for Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Iran has to be at the heart of the discourse". Therefore, even with US allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait actively supporting Wahhabi terrorism in the region, any hint of

⁵²⁹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/09/25/Iran-s-relationship-with-al-Qaeda-It-s-complicated.html>

⁵³⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/23/iran-al-qaida>

terrorists being found in Iran would have to be the top story for Western allies in the Middle East. As a “master of political diversion”, Karam maintains, Netanyahu consistently seeks to place “Israel as a victim of and a crusader against foreign-inspired terrorism”.

According to Karam, though, **the reality is that ISIS “is the worst possible manifestation of American interventionism”**, proving that the neo-conservative “regime-change doctrine” of US elites has been “a complete failure”. Its “bull in a china shop” approach, she says, wreaked “more havoc on Iraq” than under Saddam, fuelling Al-Qaeda’s entry into the country and “playing around with sectarian and tribal cards to lower the intensity of the resistance and to busy Iraqis with fighting each other”.

The eventual US withdrawal from Iraq, meanwhile, “left behind a country in ruins, [with] millions of refugees on the run, deep sectarian divides, a brutal government, and an army made mostly of loosely united Shiite-militias with a blood-soaked past”. By “destroying Iraqi nationalism and replacing it with a dangerous form of sectarianism that used the proverbial “divide and conquer” stratagem”, **the USA welcomed Wahhabi extremism into Iraq.**⁵³¹ The USA’s war against ISIS, therefore, is essentially a fight against a problem created by its Invasion of Iraq and assault on the Ba’athist regime in Syria. However much the West (encouraged by Israel) tries to link Iran to Wahhabi terrorism, meanwhile, the fact is that the blood of those killed by ISIS is firmly on the hands of the USA.

Protection of Israel and Aggression towards Iran

As seen in Chapter Five, Iran is not the irrational enemy that the USA and its allies often portray it to be. In fact, the main reason why Iran is really shunned by the West is its “years of incendiary anti-Israeli rhetoric”⁵³² and its refusal to limit its own activities because of American opposition. For Eric Sommer at Pravda, it is the USA’s aims of “‘full spectrum dominance’ - i.e., military dominance on land, sea, air, and outer space over all other countries in the world” - that guide its position on Iran. In other words, because the superpower’s elites believe that “only countries firmly allied to the U.S. government should be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons or to even develop the capacity to do so”, Iran automatically becomes an enemy of the USA when it asserts its right to make its own decisions independently of US interests.⁵³³

Israel, meanwhile, which “is the only Middle Eastern country that is not party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons”, is not sanctioned by the West because it is a strategic political ally. “Widely considered to possess nuclear arms”, its subservience to the hegemony of US elites in the Middle East essentially means that it gets away with flagrant violations of international laws and treaties.⁵³⁴ Meanwhile, the fact that India and Pakistan (also US allies) have also “declined to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and have [already] developed nuclear weapons” is also ignored.⁵³⁵ In other words, sanctions and investigations are never imposed on US allies, and if Iran would simply stop criticising Israel and start allowing US military domination in the region, it could easily become a good friend of the West.

Ever since the Iranian Revolution, however, it has been clear that Iran’s elites are not prepared to give up their independent and anti-Zionist rhetoric. And with the USA harbouring the Shah and supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, they had no reason to do so. If anything, this context would strengthen their rhetoric even more, giving them an even

⁵³¹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/09/25/Iran-s-relationship-with-al-Qaeda-It-s-complicated.html>

⁵³² <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/feb/20/why-cant-iran-and-israel-be-friends>

⁵³³ http://english.pravda.ru/opinion/columnists/15-02-2010/112215-dominance_iran-0/

⁵³⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/12/un-israel-nuclear-weapons-2014122221235793813.html>

⁵³⁵ http://english.pravda.ru/opinion/columnists/15-02-2010/112215-dominance_iran-0/ and <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-real-reason-for-sanctions-against-iran-america-s-quest-for-global-military-dominance/17665>

firmer control over Iranian politics thanks to their apparently unwavering opposition to US and Israeli crimes against all odds.

American hostility essentially began when “all business activity between the US and Iran was officially halted after the 1979 US hostage crisis”, and when sanctions were imposed on the country. US corporations, however, would wait eagerly for Iran to soften its rhetoric and its stance towards Western domination so they could benefit from the Iranian economy. US company World Eco Energy, for example, “signed a preliminary agreement” in July 2014 “to invest \$1.175 billion to generate electricity in Iran” (marking a “thawing of relations between the US and Iran” which came as a result of Tehran’s promise to curb its nuclear program).⁵³⁶

Further suggestions of a possible détente between Washington and Tehran came with the intensification of ISIS activities in the following months, which led to both countries stating their fervent opposition to the group’s actions. In early December 2014, for example, the Pentagon reported on how the Iranian air force had “attacked [ISIS] targets... in eastern Iraq”, though Tehran denied the claim.⁵³⁷ Nonetheless, the two nations found themselves on the same side in the fight against ISIS, even if joint denials of military coordination were necessary due to the fact that their governments were still, at least nominally, at loggerheads (as US aggression towards Iran could only really end if the latter’s stance on Israel and US hegemony changed).

The USA Forced to Fight Assad’s Opponents

With US and Iranian interests coming into alignment with regards to ISIS, the USA also found itself effectively helping Assad’s government by weakening its most powerful opponent. In August 2014, author Matt Carr criticised how the USA was “bombing ISIS, an organization that it [had] once helped to fight Assad, in a new war that may well require Assad’s assistance”. All of ISIS’s actions, he says, suggested “an organization with a clear political project, namely to destroy the Middle East state system imposed after WWI and replace it with its notion of a ‘caliphate’ that [would] have all the trappings of an Islamic super-state”. In short, the idea of a hostile nation appearing across oil-rich territory was actually more of a threat to US interests than Syria’s Ba’athist regime was.

Rejecting arguments that sought to portray ISIS as unreasonable, apolitical lunatics, Carr emphasises that an “‘apocalyptic’ organization doesn’t issue appeals for doctors, judges and other professionals to help it build the caliphate”. Neither does it “send twitter messages to the protesters at Ferguson telling them that they don’t live in a democracy and that Islam is the answer”. For Carr, the West’s depiction of ISIS “as a mysterious eruption of irrational evil intent on the end of the world obscures its strategic intentions and the strategic context in which it emerged”. And this **context**, he maintains, “**includes the disastrous trajectory of the war on terror, the crisis of the post-colonial authoritarian order in the Arab world, the collapse of the Iraqi state, the Syrian civil war, and the sectarian shift of the Gulf States in their attempts to rollback Iranian influence**”.

Western support for ‘rebel groups’ in Libya and Syria, Carr quotes the Washington Post’s Souad Mekhennet as saying, **has “empowered groups** whose members had either begun **with anti-American or anti-Western views** or found themselves lured to those ideas in the process of fighting”. In other words, the Western tactics (outlined in Chapter Six) aimed at manipulating the Arab Spring helped to create ISIS. In particular, Mekhennet refers to the comments of a “senior Arab intelligence official”, who said that “**some of the people the U.S. and their allies had trained to fight for ‘democracy’ in Libya and Syria had a jihadist agenda** – already or later, [when they] joined al Nusra or the Islamic State”. A Libyan

⁵³⁶ <http://rt.com/news/170768-iran-energy-deal-usa/>

⁵³⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/03/iran-bombs-isis-in-iraq-says-us>

jihadist called 'Abu Saleh', for example, claimed "to have received training and support in Libya from French, British, and American military and intelligence personnel with a group of fellow-fighters, who later went on to fight in Syria" for ISIS or Al-Nusra. "Sometimes", Saleh said, "I joke around and say that I am a fighter made by America".

ISIS commander Abu Yusuf, meanwhile, told the Post "that members of the Free Syrian Army had received training from the United States, Turkey and Arab military officers at an American base in Southern Turkey, and that 'now many of the FSA people who the West has trained are actually joining us'". And such reports, Carr argues, "contradict the arguments... that the US paved the way for ISIS because it failed to arm 'moderate' rebels in Syria". Such distinctions, he quotes Patrick Cockburn as saying, were always "impossible to maintain, in a fast-moving and chaotic civil war" in which natural selection would mean the strongest and most ideologically committed fighters would dominate. "It is difficult", therefore, according to Carr, to believe that the USA did not do "exactly the same thing" in Libya and Syria that they had done in Afghanistan in the 1980s ("deliberately [cultivating] the most reactionary political and social forces in Afghanistan for the simple reason that they believed they would fight the Soviets [and today the remaining Arab nationalists] more effectively"). Knowledge of such tactics, he claims, "really ought to make us wonder... about the motives of those who did so much to facilitate their progress".⁵³⁸

Why not Bomb Everything?

The Guardian's George Monbiot argued towards the end of September 2014 that, if the USA was really on a quest to "save the lives" of people in the Muslim World, it would surely attack many more countries and organisations in the region rather than just ISIS. In short, he insists, the fact that it does not attack Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Shia militias in Iraq, Pakistan, or the Syrian government, shows that its interest does not really lie in 'saving lives'.

In Gaza, for example, "2,100 Palestinians were massacred", but there was no sign of a US "air war against Israel", he says. In June 2014, meanwhile, one Shia militia in Iraq "selected 40 people from the streets of Baghdad" and "murdered them for being Sunnis", while "another massacred 68 people at a mosque in August". And in the fight against ISIS, these Shia militias were "openly [talking about] "cleansing" and "erasure" once Isis [had] been defeated". In fact, one "senior Shia politician" even warned that Iraq was "in the process of creating Shia al-Qaida radical groups". In Iran, meanwhile, "Mohsen Amir-Aslani was hanged" just for "suggesting that the story of Jonah in the Qur'an was symbolic rather than literal".

At the same time, Pakistan saw an "elderly British man, Mohammed Asghar, who [suffered] from paranoid schizophrenia", on death row for "claiming to be a holy prophet", while Saudi Arabia (as already seen in this chapter) has a terrible record of beheadings. The latter nation in particular, Monbiot claims, has long posed a "far greater threat to the west than Isis now poses", supporting as it did the "extreme Sunni militias in Syria during Bandar's tenure" (which contributed to "the rapid rise of Isis"). Monbiot therefore asks "**why take out the subsidiary and spare the headquarters?**"

"Humanitarian arguments" used by Western governments, Monbiot stresses, "could be used to flatten the entire Middle East and west Asia... if consistently applied". In reality, however, the political and economic elites of the West portray their forces as "destroying angels" in a quest to drive all evil from the face of the Earth while in fact being incredibly selective about which 'evils' they target. For Monbiot, ISIS is just "one of many networks of

⁵³⁸ <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/why-isis-eyes-are-smiling-at-us-insanity-in-iraq-and-syria#.VADjIGOGcSE> and <http://infernalmachine.co.uk/why-isis-eyes-are-smiling/>

death” and yet, in spite of the fact that “more than 6,000 fighters [had actually] joined Isis since the bombardment began” (rather than leaving the group), the West continued to seek a military solution to what was a much more complicated problem. “Never mind the question”, he insists, “the answer is bombs”. Although “the targets change; the policy doesn’t”. And while Western leaders may speak of “peace and the preservation of life”, they “wage perpetual war”.

The simple fact is that imperialism requires militarism and fear to survive. Using these techniques, societal elites can fool citizens into thinking they represent a benevolent force (protecting their own population from an external enemy), whilst in reality endangering, oppressing, and exploiting their populations even more (and getting away with war crimes all around the globe). Those who have sought to escape from imperialist or capitalist hegemony are all too aware of that hypocrisy. And for that reason, any regime or organisation exposing even a part of this reality is targeted as an enemy of imperialism. In short, ignorance must remain, anxieties must remain, and hatred must remain, for the righteousness of imperialist military might and thought must never be brought into question.

Although “the joint congressional inquiry into 9/11” apparently documents “Saudi Arabian complicity in the US attack”, Monbiot says, the US government “still refuses... to release the 28 redacted pages” taken out of the report. Meanwhile, the “Serious Fraud Office” of the UK “began investigating allegations of massive bribes paid by the British weapons company BAE to Saudi ministers and middlemen”, all to have Tony Blair intervene to “stop the investigation”. And it was Saudi Prince Bandar (one of the biggest sponsors of terrorism in the world, as explained in Chapter Five) who was the “biggest alleged beneficiary” of these deals, receiving “£1bn in secret payments from BAE... with the approval of the British government”. Private Eye, for instance, reported on sinister dealings between Saudi Arabia and the UK, “drawing on a dossier of recordings and emails” and alleging that “a British company [had] paid £300m in bribes to facilitate weapons sales to the Saudi National Guard”. Even worse, however, was the fact that, when the British Ministry of Defence was told about these payments by a whistle-blower, it simply “alerted his bosses... instead of taking action”, forcing him “to flee the country to avoid being thrown into a Saudi jail”.

Considering this Western complicity with Saudi terrorism, Monbiot insists, there are “no good solutions that military intervention by the UK or the US can engineer”. The only possible “political solutions in which our governments could play a minor role” (but almost certainly won’t), he says, would be “supporting the development of effective states that don’t rely on murder and militias, building civic institutions that don’t depend on terror, helping to create safe passage and aid for people at risk”, and “ceasing to protect, sponsor and arm selected networks of death”.

The reality is, Monbiot argues, that Western armed forces have simply “made life worse” whenever they “have bombed or invaded Muslim nations”. In fact, he says, in “the regions in which our governments have intervened most”, citizens have subsequently suffered from the worst cases of “terrorism and war”. That situation, he insists, “is neither coincidental nor surprising”.⁵³⁹ In short, the arguments of Monbiot leave only one possible solution for ending extremism: citizens in the West and elsewhere must oppose the political and economic system that believes in the acceptability of injustice and oppression (and wars to maintain this status quo). In other words, citizens must oppose capitalism.

II) Hezbollah, Syria, and Sunni Islamists

⁵³⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/30/isis-bomb-muslim-world-air-strikes-saudi-arabia>

Lebanon and Hezbollah Key to the Fight against ISIS

Rachel Avraham of Jerusalem Online News affirmed in late August 2014 that Hezbollah was “working with local Christians within Lebanon to fight a war” against ISIS. According to Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, she reports, the Shiite resistance group sees ISIS as a major security threat “wherever there are followers of [its] ideology” (which meant, in particular, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, and other Gulf states). The capabilities and numbers of ISIS were “vast”, Nasrallah said, and “everyone should be worried”. It was particularly dangerous, he insisted, because it did “not recognize Shiites, Sunnis, Muslims, Christians or Druze or Yazidis or Arabs or Kurds”, and it was a “monster” that was “growing and getting bigger”.

Having already fought back against Israeli occupation and colonialism for many years, receiving widespread support in both Lebanon and Palestine as a result, Hezbollah’s own brand of Islamism represented a real challenge to the brutal extremism of Wahhabists like those of ISIS. In fact, with the spread of the latter since 2011, Hezbollah sought to establish “Peoples Protection Committees, which [sought to] unite all sects in Lebanon against ISIS”, and prepare communities to defend themselves against its advance. As part of this essentially ‘progressive’ training programme, even “many Lebanese Christians have been working with Hezbollah”, according to Avraham. One Christian youngster even affirmed that (considering the treatment of Christians in Mosul under ISIS, and the world’s general inaction to the group’s conquest of the city) people like him clearly needed “to rely on themselves to defend their existence”.

Captured jihadist Imad Jomaa, meanwhile, made it very clear that “ISIS sought to kill off all Hezbollah members” and supporters, insisting that it “would have spared the Christians in Lebanon” because its main targets were Shias. Nonetheless, insists The Levant Institute’s Sami Nader, “Hezbollah understands... [that it] cannot take the front seat without inciting sectarian tension”, and has therefore encouraged the Lebanese Army in their fight to resist ISIS, even though it “is better armed” itself and “probably has a stronger drive to fight”.

No matter who fights ISIS in Lebanon, though, says Syrian analyst Hassan Hassan, the country will be “key to the dynamics of the fight against ISIS”.⁵⁴⁰ And, if Hezbollah succeeds in uniting different ethnic and religious groups in the fight against ISIS, Lebanon has a strong chance of preventing ISIS expansion into Lebanese territory. At the same time, the growing awareness in the country regarding the need for self-protection and self-governance could well lead to longer-lasting socio-political advances beyond the defeat of ISIS, and demonstrate clearly that defeating extremism and exploitation requires unity (based on peaceful co-existence and popular democracy).

Shia-Sunni Divisions over the Syrian Civil War

The Shia-Sunni divisions exacerbated by US-led military activity in the Middle East also threaten to worsen sectarian tensions in Lebanon, however. In January 2014, for example, Professor Franklin Lamb wrote at Counterpunch about the “tensions between the Palestinian Resistance and... its historic off-spring Hezbollah”. Regional and international “forces allied against the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah-Palestinian Resistance”, he argues, have been “working on yet another project to weaken and hopefully destroy all four”. These “anti-Resistance forces”, he stresses, aim to build up the Lebanese Army with “\$ three billion from Riyadh”, in the hope that it will “somehow confront Hezbollah and its allies”, thus debilitating Hezbollah and its support for the Assad regime in Syria.

⁵⁴⁰ <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2014/08/31/hezbollahs-war-against-isis/>

Lamb quotes Patrick Cockburn as saying that “**anti-Shia hate propaganda** spread by Sunni religious figures sponsored by, or based in, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, [was] **creating the ingredients for a sectarian civil war engulfing the entire Muslim world**”. Some of “the local Sunni and Christian power centers” in Lebanon, meanwhile, had apparently been “egging on the Palestinians and Hezbollah to confront each other... in Lebanon’s [refugee] camps”, while the tactic in Syria was to imprison “without food and medical care the remaining 17,000 out of a March 2011 population of 250,000 Palestinian refugees in Yarmouk camp in Damascus”.⁵⁴¹ According to analyst Sharmine Narwani at RT, Palestinians in Syria had “suffered most at the hands of opposition rebels”, though also at the hands of Assad’s regime. Whatever their political beliefs, however, they had been increasingly squeezed by the civil war, with many feeling “exploited and bullied by all parties”. As a consequence, “all the Palestinian political factions – with the exception of Hamas – signed onto two separate letters/ declarations” in 2012 that “essentially pledged neutrality in the Syrian conflict”.⁵⁴²

Hamas, for example, refused to back Ba’athist forces in the civil war, in spite of the fact that “the exiled Hamas leadership had been hosted by Assad's regime in Damascus for a decade”. In turn, however, it incurred “the wrath of Syria's allies, Tehran”, where the group’s “powerful political, financial and military sponsors” resided. In fact, a number of Hamas leaders left Syria in 2012, while “Iranian leaders cut off funding” to the group “which had been worth around \$23m (£14m) a month, causing a serious financial crisis for Gaza's rulers”.⁵⁴³ In the past, the Iranian regime had “successfully taken advantage of Arab states’ lack of interest in helping the Palestinians against Israel” in order to “build its own standing in the region”. Its whole-hearted support of the Assad government in Syria, however, “caused it to lose decades of building on that standing in the Arab world”.⁵⁴⁴ With Islamist regimes and movements losing momentum in the years after the Arab Spring however (and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt being overthrown and persecuted), Hamas’s “big dream of political Islam coming to power” began to vanish.⁵⁴⁵ Consequently, the resistance group sought to rebuild its ties with Iran (although it “did not change its position regarding the Syrian regime”).⁵⁴⁶

According to Céline Cantat at Open Democracy, Narwani sought to depict “Syria’s Palestinian population as endlessly grateful toward the regime” with her article, claiming that ‘Islamic rebels’ challenged their neutrality by “invading Palestinian neighbourhoods and forcing refugees to take up arms”. At the same time, she criticises Narwani for overlooking “the way in which the Syrian regime [had] been cultivating conflict between Palestinian factions [ever] since the 1970s, to better ensure its hegemonic grip over the region”, speaking in particular of the historical alliance of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) with the Syrian regime. The PFLP-GC, she insists, “assassinated numerous PLO fighters on [Syria’s] behalf” in Lebanon in the 1980s, while the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) “was practically “a branch of the Syrian army””, being mobilised by the regime “to prevent armed opposition groups from progressing toward the capital city”. The aforementioned organisations, Cantat argues, “had lost most of their credibility with the Palestinian population in Syria... before the beginning of the uprising”, and thus made themselves largely irrelevant to the general mood of Syria’s Palestinians.

In order to criticise both Narwani and Lamb’s generalisations about Syrian-Palestinian sentiment, Cantat refers to how the Yarmouk refugee camp had, in July 2013, been

⁵⁴¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/10/a-palestinian-hezbollah-war-in-lebanon/>

⁵⁴² <http://rt.com/op-edge/203907-palestine-syria-shelling-clashes-conflict/>

⁵⁴³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/09/hamas-iran-rebuild-ties-falling-out-syria>

⁵⁴⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/12/hamas-iran-rapprochement-2014121694023735679.html>

⁵⁴⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/09/hamas-iran-rebuild-ties-falling-out-syria>

⁵⁴⁶ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/12/hamas-iran-rapprochement-2014121694023735679.html>

“hermetically sealed off” by the Syrian regime. In an attempt to drive enemy fighters out, she says, the government left civilians there “without food or medicine, and for weeks without drinking water”. Palestinian refugees had become, she stresses, “victims of the manoeuvres of the dictatorial regime and its allies”. In short, she wishes to underline the fact that the Palestinian neutrality referred to by Narwani hides the reality for many Palestinians who, like Syrian civilians, had found themselves “caught between the bloody regime and equally brutal extremist groups” fighting against it.⁵⁴⁷

Hamis Referred to as Apostates by ISIS

Although the ruling elites of Israel would love to see Hamas lumped into the same category as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, the reality is that the latter have actually been very critical of the Palestinian resistance organisation. In fact, says Ali Mamouri at Al-Monitor, “most of today’s Salafist jihadist movements have no interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for the time being regarding it as irrelevant”. These groups instead believe it is first necessary to “engage in intense, bloody confrontations” aimed at “purifying” the Islamic world”, and therefore do “not regard fighting Israel as legitimate”. One supporter of Wahhabi jihad on twitter actually argues that “the Hamas government is apostate, and what it is doing does not constitute jihad, but rather a defense of democracy [which Salafists oppose]”. A Wahhabi sheikh in Egypt, meanwhile, said it was “inappropriate to aid the people of Gaza because they [did] not follow a legitimate leadership, and because they [were] equivalent to Shiites” (as a result of their alliance with Hezbollah and Iran).

This belief in ‘purification’ and intra-Islamic struggle is rooted in history, says Mamouri, with even Saladin, for example, having “fought the Shiites and suppressed them before he engaged the crusaders in the Holy Land”. Just like in any authoritarian state, essentially, such repression was necessary (in order to exert complete internal control) before any imperialist expansion could occur. And therefore, Wahhabi jihadists today “see... their priority as fighting Shiites, “munafiqin” (dissemblers, or false Muslims) and apostates”. In other words, they believe that “conflict with an allegedly illegitimate Hamas government [is] a first step toward confrontation with Israel”, meaning that, “should the opportunity for military action present itself in the Palestinian territories, Salafists would fight Hamas and other factions deemed in need of “cleansing” from the land and [only] engage Israel afterward”.

In short, the jihadist position stems from “Salafist theological principles”, says Mamouri, as Wahhabis believe that “jihad must be performed under legitimate leadership” (which “fulfills the criteria of religious and political leadership and has raised the banner of jihad”). And, as “there is neither a legitimate leader nor a Salafist-approved declaration of jihad in Palestine”, Wahhabi extremists believe that “fighting there is forbidden”. In fact, when Israel bombarded Gaza in mid-2014, ISIS fighters actually “burned the Palestinian flag because they [considered] it a symbol of the decline of the Islamic world, which [had] succumbed to national divisions through the creation of independent political states”. For them, “the entire Islamic world [had to] be united under a single state”. In other words, far from criticising the idea of the nation state from a libertarian perspective, they were criticising it from an ultra-authoritarian perspective.

As a result of these beliefs, “Salafist groups active in Gaza have [actually] engaged in various rivalries with Hamas”, essentially as a result of their “disparate principles”. Hamas, Mamouri argues, “is more realistic and pragmatic than the jihadist Salafists”. While the former is still a conservative and essentially reactionary force, its “political priorities”

⁵⁴⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/c%C3%A9line-cantat/palestinians-in-syria-struggle-for-bread-and-agency> and <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2014/11/21/liberer-la-palestine-et-protoger-les-camps-resistance-du-regime-et-resistance-palestinienne/#more-9123>

nonetheless lie “in liberating Palestinian land” – a goal that could generally be considered ‘progressive’. The latter, on the other hand, have “religious priorities in the establishment of a totalitarian Islamic caliphate”.⁵⁴⁸ Therefore, however much Israeli elites may wish to claim that Hamas and ISIS are one and the same, such a statement is actually fairly far from the truth.

Attempts to Divide Hezbollah and Palestinians

Back in Lebanon, Lamb asserts that Hezbollah allies Amal and Michele Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) have had an anti-Palestinian influence on the resistance group. The latter, he claims, is accused by “some in Hezbollah and Palestinian factions” of “blocking Hezbollah from pushing for the right to work and to own a home for Palestinians in Lebanon”. Amal, meanwhile, was “widely believed to have killed more Palestinians in Lebanon during the 1985-88 camp massacres... than Zionists have in the past 60 years” (as seen in Chapter Five), and is “fairly universally despised by Palestinians in Lebanon” for that reason. And, while Sunni and Shia populations in refugee camps “largely co-exist in a tense but generally peaceful juxtaposition with refugees from Syria”, Lamb says, matters have deteriorated since “the Syria crisis and Hezbollah’s involvement there”.

Lamb reports on “evidence of individual Palestinians supporting anti-Hezbollah militia forces and political parties in Lebanon”, with some going or returning to Syria “to fight against the Assad regime”. A number of sources close to Hezbollah, he affirms, “claim that many Palestinians don’t appreciate that the organization is [in reality] the main supporter of their cause to return to Palestine”. Nonetheless, critics claim Hezbollah has actually “done little for Palestinians living in Lebanon’s camps and that Hezbollah has to date refused to use its political power to force Lebanon to comply with international law and grant elementary civil rights to them”. This mutual tension, Lamb asserts, has been growing ever since the start of the Syrian Civil War.

According to Al-Nusra leader Abou Mohammed al-Jawlani, members of the jihadist group have been “active on Lebanese soil in order to help the Sunnis including Palestinians face the “injustice” of Shiite Hezbollah”. And indeed, ever since Hezbollah “declared it was fighting on the side of the Syrian regime” in May 2013, “Shiite-populated areas across Lebanon have been the target of terror attacks”. Leader of the Islamic Jihadist Movement in the Ain al-Helweh refugee camp (the largest in Lebanon), Sheikh Jamal Khattab, meanwhile, warned of a “possible armed sectarian confrontation between Hezbollah and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon if the party did not revise its policies at home and in Syria” – one that would be worse than the ‘war of the camps’ in the 1980s. Although this previous conflict involved largely Shia forces attacking Sunni refugees, it “was not considered particularly sectarian”, with Hezbollah actually having “helped [to] end it and protect the overwhelmingly Sunni Palestinian civilian population”. This time, however, a renewed battle “would be a Sunni vs. Shia war”, says Lamb, reflecting the “poisonous sea-change in sectarian relations since the invasion of Iraq in 2003”.

Lebanese security sources, meanwhile, have suggested that Palestinian Wahhabi Islamist groups in Lebanon have “finalized preparations” to fight against Hezbollah if necessary.⁵⁴⁹ In June 2013, the southern Lebanese city of Sidon saw Wahhabists attack the army, in what represented the way in which “the conflict in Syria [had] helped entrench sectarian divisions not only at home, but also in Lebanon”.⁵⁵⁰ The jihadists were allegedly “being financed... by [some] of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries and some Lebanese pro-Western... parties”, all in preparation for “an expanded war against “Shia infidels””. In Syria,

⁵⁴⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/islamic-state-fighting-hamas-priority-before-israel.html#>

⁵⁴⁹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/10/a-palestinian-hezbollah-war-in-lebanon/>

⁵⁵⁰ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/blogs/politics/6392-sectarianism-in-the-battle-of-sidon>

meanwhile, “several groups” were claiming to “seek a wider war “against Shia infidels””, which would include bringing the Sunni-Shia conflict into Lebanon.

While “there clearly are supporters of [ISIS], the Nusra Front, [and] Al-Qaeda” in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, says Lamb, the same can be found “across Lebanon especially in Sunni areas”, meaning that the camps are not unique in that respect. At the same time, Palestinian officials claim that “all Palestinian groups in Lebanon and Syria and elsewhere have consistently maintained their policy of non-involvement in the Syrian crisis”. Nonetheless, “some Palestinian Islamist factions and camp residents criticize Hezbollah’s armed support for Syrian President Bashar Assad”.

According to Lamb, “**Israel and its new and longtime allies seek Sunni-Shia war** and the sooner the better”. He stresses that they saw the Syrian crisis as a means of achieving this aim, as Hezbollah was perceived to be “squandering some of their best fighters and commanders as well as their weapons stores”. **Both the USA and Israel**, he argues, **hope that “Syria will be Hezbollah’s Achilles heel and Iran’s Vietnam”**. In short, their strategy clearly focuses on militarism and violence rather than diplomacy and peace. Although negotiations with Iran could easily force Assad to deal with the Syrian opposition, for example, the West prefers to use sectarian conflict in Syria to debilitate Iran, which has evaded its destructive efforts ever since the Iran-Iraq War. For Hezbollah, however, the fight against Wahhabi terrorists and the defence of Lebanon has not been at all fatal, representing “only five percent of its capacity to confront Israel”. In fact, one source even claims that the group “has self-sufficiency when it comes to the missiles, strategic and non-strategic weapons” in its possession – all of which “are quite abundant”.

For Lamb, **Sunni and Shia communities desperately “need each other” in order to “confront growing Islamophobia, anti-Arab hate propaganda, and the deepening and broadening Apartheid occupation of Palestine”**. Effectively, it is of utmost importance that they recognise that, as long as their forces are divided, they have less power to confront Israel directly (along with Western interests in the region). Only upon such a realisation can they truly sort out their “differences publicly and privately”, and thus work together to “neutralize both Sunni and Shia sectarian provocateurs, domestic, regional and international”, which have long been “seeking... sectarian violence in order to weaken both”.⁵⁵¹

The Wahhabi War against Hezbollah

In July 2014, Lamb reported on how one ISIS leader had claimed that, “soon, Lebanon will ignite”. The Lebanese branch of Al-Nusra, meanwhile, spoke of how “Iran’s party [i.e. Hezbollah] and all its bases and strongholds are a legitimate target for us”, calling on “Sunnis in Lebanon to refrain from approaching or residing in [Hezbollah] areas or near its bases, and to avoid its gathering places and posts”. At the same time, Western sources indicated that “many suicide bombers had been dispatched by ISIS/Nusra Front to Lebanon”. According to Lamb, ISIS had developed “an ability to inspire such intense support” in the region, and especially from youngsters that would “do anything for the cause” (believing that the group would bring ‘justice’ to the region). In particular, it had been able to exploit “some specific areas in some Palestinian or Syrian refugee camps”.

To stop “jihadi expansion into Lebanon”, Lamb says, “Hezbollah is needed to take a lead role because the Lebanese army and security agencies cannot do the job”. With “as many as 5,000 DAASH fighters” ready to fight in Lebanon, many were “currently in caves and tunnels dug in the mountains over the past three years, reportedly with a huge arsenal of

⁵⁵¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/01/10/a-palestinian-hezbollah-war-in-lebanon/>

weapons and ammunition". In a country with "seemingly vast geography of fertile sectarian soil for IS to plant its creed, grow recruits, and harvest territory", Lamb asserts, such a mobilisation could have a devastating impact. And this environment (created by colonialism, imperialist-backed dictatorships, reactionary authoritarian regimes, and the destruction of the political left in the region) was only worsened by the continued Western emphasis on hostility with Iran and its allies.

In fact, even though Tehran had "made it clear" that Iran would "not tolerate a Caliphate (IS) on its borders nor... allow the formation of a Sunni mini-state in Iraq's Anbar province backed by Turkey or one of the Gulf States", the USA (which was also supposedly opposed to ISIS) was at the same time against cooperating with Iran. Nonetheless, Iran's knows that, "despite its support for the Iraqi regime's weak forces and the claimed "revitalization" of Iraqi Shia militias", it cannot defeat ISIS on its own. And, as a result, Lamb suggests, there could well be "a limited US-Iran détente".

Finally, Lamb argues that one key danger is that some moderate Sunnis believe that they will be able to "tame the... jihadist tiger, once the Caliphate returns, as happened to a great extent under the Ottomans". Another problem was that "Sunni-Shia mutual mistrust and growing antagonism", along with "appalling hate speech", was "growing" in Lebanon, with the potential for catastrophic results. And, for Lamb, it is Hezbollah that holds the key to ending the Sunni-Shia conflict and defeating ISIS, though this would have to be "in partnership with Lebanese security forces".⁵⁵²

A Divided Syrian Opposition As Long As ISIS Is Around

According to Shawn Helton, writing at 21st Century Wire in September 2014, "opposition groups the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and al Qaeda affiliate 'al Nusra Front'" had "signed a non-aggression pact" with ISIS in the Hajar al-Aswad neighbourhood of Damascus, agreeing that the "Nussayri" (a "derogatory name for [Assad's] Shiite Alawite sect") was their "principal enemy". The London-based anti-Assad Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) had apparently reported that the rebels and jihadists would "respect a truce until a final solution [was] found", and that this agreement was aimed at stopping "fierce fighting that [had] engulfed the neighborhood for over 40 days".

One of the groups signing the truce was the US-backed Syrian Revolutionary Front (SRF), whose leader Jamal Maarouf had previously said that "Al-Qaeda was not his problem", and that he would welcome "anyone who [fought] against the regime inside Syria".⁵⁵³ SRF spokesman Ibrahim Barakat "strenuously denied" the claim of a treaty with ISIS, though at the same time Al-Monitor confirmed that "efforts to reach a truce in south Damascus [had] been made", principally in order to ease an ISIS blockade of the neighbourhood in question.⁵⁵⁴

Meanwhile, Helton reports, evidence was arising that many Al-Nusra and ISIS fighters had initially "come from opposition linked groups that the US [had] helped to arm in the first place". He also quotes writer Tony Cartalucci as saying that statements of US surprise about ISIS (as previously discussed) were an "unlikely narrative", designed to "maintain plausible deniability" about links between the group and those whose funding had empowered it. For Cartalucci, previous headlines like "C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition" had not come out of nowhere. "Revelations that Americans [were] fighting within ISIS' ranks", meanwhile, were just "politically-motivated propaganda, timed perfectly to justify US military intervention in Syria", he argues.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/07/11/jihadists-in-lebanon/>

⁵⁵³ <http://21stcenturywire.com/2014/09/16/a-devils-deal-us-armed-syrian-rebels-signed-pact-with-isis-prior-to-haines-beheading/>

⁵⁵⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/syria-rebels-deny-truce-with-islamic-state.html>

⁵⁵⁵ <http://21stcenturywire.com/2014/09/16/a-devils-deal-us-armed-syrian-rebels-signed-pact-with-isis-prior-to-haines-beheading/>

III) Damage Control of Turkey's Quagmire

Turkey at War with Syria's Regime in All But Name

Peace activist Cem Ertür wrote at Global Research in April 2014 about how “NATO-backed mercenary forces and Turkish Armed Forces [had] launched a massive offensive on the Syrian border town of Kasab in the Latakia province” the previous month. He then details “the flagrant war crimes committed by Turkey and NATO during the ongoing offensive on Kasab”, speaking about how, at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey had deliberately “rendered the entire 877 kilometres-long border with Syria porous” by taking down “fences and concrete barriers”, stabilising roads “to allow the passage of all sorts of vehicles, including those rigged with bombs”, and generally seeking to “ease the passage of mercenaries as well as military and intelligence officials of Turkey’s and allied NATO countries’ security forces”. In fact, in preparation for destabilising Syria, he says, the Turkish regime began to remove “some 615,000 landmines” in 2007, and lifted “mutual visa requirements with Syria in 2009”.

In the run up to the March 2014 attack, Ertür says, “mercenaries from Kosovo, the Balkans and other European countries had been deployed in [the] Yayladagi and Samandag countryside in preparation for a cross-border offensive on the predominantly Armenian town of Kasab”. Seven villages on Turkey’s border with Syria, he maintains, were even “evacuated and allocated to the mercenaries”. In fact, local villagers speak of how, on March 21, “over 1500 mercenaries launched a coordinated assault from at least five separate points across Turkey’s border with Syria..., backed up by the heavy artillery fire of the Turkish Armed Forces”.

The aforementioned forces then allegedly used “pick-up trucks fitted with anti-aircraft weapons, tanks belonging to the Turkish Armed Forces, [and] vehicles loaded with heavy weaponry and lorries”, while “masked Turkish special forces troops killed 15 Syrian border guards”. Actually, Syria subsequently called on “the UN Secretary-General and Chairman of the UN Security Council to take all measures required to condemn the Turkish involvement in supporting the armed terrorist groups which attacked Kasab district”.

According to a report from Iran’s Al-Alam News Network, meanwhile, ambulances regularly crossed Turkey’s border with Syria during the attack “to collect the wounded mercenaries and transport them to hospitals across Turkey’s Hatay province”, even though “local protestors in Hatay’s Harbiye district blocked the paths of those ambulances”.⁵⁵⁶ Mihraç Ural, meanwhile, who had allegedly “long been in the service of the Syrian intelligence agency, the Mukhabarat”,⁵⁵⁷ claimed his group (called the ‘Syrian Resistance’) had captured a Dutch-Kurdish mercenary in August 2013, who he supposedly brought sarin gas from the Netherlands to Turkey “via the VIP section [under the auspices of] the authorities from [Turkey’s ruling] Justice and Development Party (AKP) and [had] handed them over to the al-Nusra Front”.⁵⁵⁸

The KDP Betrayed by Turkey

In September 2014, Fouad Hussein (chairman of the KRG Presidential Council) claimed that, in spite of “telling our people that Turkey is our best friend”, the Turkish government had let Iraqi Kurdistan down “when the first true test came” (when the KRG “needed assistance” in the fight against ISIS). With ISIS approaching Erbil, Turkey had apparently used “the

⁵⁵⁶ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/nato-and-turkeys-genocidal-war-on-syria/5377216>

⁵⁵⁷ http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_mihrac-ural-a-man-with-a-long-history-of-terrorism_315474.html

⁵⁵⁸ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/nato-and-turkeys-genocidal-war-on-syria/5377216>

Mosul consulate crisis as an excuse” not to help its supposed ally. According to Hussein, he had gone to Turkey secretly in early August to ask for “assistance against ISIS” but, “because of presidential elections, that assistance did not materialize”. When it did come, he says, it was “limited and late”.

In short, Turkey’s “only ally in the region is Erbil” (thanks to Turkish hostility to other regimes), but it did not even extend silent assistance when it looked like its allies’ capital was about to fall. Iran, meanwhile, came immediately to the aid of the KRG when asked, with the “top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani” being “personally involved in fighting alongside peshmerga [forces] to save the Turkmen town of Amerli from ISIS”.

Milliyet and Al-Monitor’s Asli Aydintasbas insists that the “ISIS issue [had now] become a serious impasse for Turkish foreign policy”.⁵⁵⁹ Essentially, as Ankara was seeking to destabilise the Assad regime in Syria whilst preventing Syrian Kurds allied to the PKK from strengthening autonomous rule close to the Turkish border, it simply did not see defeating ISIS as a priority. However, not joining the fight against the jihadist group simultaneously risked alienating Turkey from its ‘liberal’ NATO allies, losing friends in Iraqi Kurdistan, and ruining a fragile peace process with the ‘progressive’ Kurds of the PKK at home. [The role of Turkey in the rise of ISIS and the conflict in Syria will be discussed in much greater detail in the following chapters.]

Summary

The reality of the US-led war on ISIS is that **Western humanitarian intervention in the Middle East is a laughable concept**. Having created sectarian chaos in Iraq, and later on encouraged it in Syria, any idea of US benevolence in the region is simply absurd. Effectively, American citizens elected President Obama with a mandate to withdraw troops from Iraq and to stop invading foreign nations, and he was thus obliged to do so. The hegemony of US economic elites in Iraq and the wider region, however, actually required greater military control, rather than less, and only with ISIS was such a possibility truly put back on the table. At the same time, though, Iran (as a Western nemesis) could not be allowed to jump on to the US-led bandwagon against ISIS (even though it was perfectly natural for the Shia Islamist regime to oppose the chauvinist and fiercely anti-Shia Wahhabi jihadists). Therefore, both Israel and the West tried to ensure that Iran was nonsensically left out of the equation.

However much Western propaganda tries to demonise Iran, though, the fact remains that the Iranian bloc (including Hezbollah, Syria’s Ba’athist regime, and Iraqi Shias) is a central political grouping in the region, and an essential part of the mission to defeat ISIS jihadists. And, while these forces are far from being angels (as seen previously in this book), they are lesser evils than Wahhabi extremism and represent significant sections of the Middle Eastern population. Rejecting their participation in ensuring an end to ISIS horrors in Iraq and Syria, therefore, is a self-interested, self-defeating Western policy which dooms the region to continued conflict and ever increasing levels of sectarianism.

Judging on the information given in this section of the chapter, it does indeed seem possible that the USA may well have wanted ISIS to gain power in Syria and Iraq (as a means of justifying a return of US armed forces to the region). Whether it did or not, however, historical precedents suggested that it was always going to happen, though the question was ‘to what extent’ and ‘in which way’. Through its firm alliance with Wahhabis or Wahhabi-sympathisers in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Turkey, it essentially helped to fuel sectarian violence in Syria (of the Wahhabist ‘anti-everything’ type), and it was thus almost

⁵⁵⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-iraq-krq-kurds-erbil-ankara.html>

certain that it would mobilise its armed forces at some point to ensure these countries did not suffer too much from the 'blowback'.

The reality was that ISIS's Wahhabi terrorism (and that of other groups in both Syria and Iraq) had: become a risk to US allies in Iraq and elsewhere; distracted attention away from the minority of 'moderate Islamist rebels' in Syria; begun to give the Iranian bloc greater legitimacy; and threatened to undermine the legitimacy of authoritarian US allies in the region. To rescue its imperialist aspirations, therefore, the USA had to act, and it was never for 'humanitarian reasons'. In the next section, however, I will explain why such intervention was generally both destructive and counterproductive, and why other potential courses of action were infinitely more preferable.

E) How to Really Defeat ISIS

According to Patrick Cockburn, the USA's anti-ISIS strategy in 2014 was "an Alice-in-Wonderland construction", seeing the superpower (along with "limited European support") oppose "both ISIS and its main enemies", whilst "loosely incorporating dubious Arab allies". Instead of adhering to "domestic and international law" (by "appealing to the UN Security Council and then following its lead, and seeking political and diplomatic avenues to escape from the morass or at least mitigate its horrors"), he says, the USA's approach was (as it often had been in the past) a military one first and foremost. Any other method, Cockburn asserts, would have been "almost unthinkable in US political culture".⁵⁶⁰

Considering the irrationality of the USA's 'humanitarian' argument (as seen in the previous section), and its true imperialist intentions in sending its armed forces to the Middle East once again, it is worth looking explaining in greater detail why further US military intervention is unlikely to improve anything in the region. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the superpower's plan was always likely to go ahead unhindered, I will take a look in this final section of the chapter at the suggestions of a number of commentators as to what an alternative to US intervention might look like.

ISIS Wants Western Intervention

In late September 2014, Oliver Miles at The Guardian spoke of how, if the West were to get involved militarily in the Middle East to stop ISIS, the war was "likely to be long" and the "end [was] likely to be different from what we now foresee". **The battle against ISIS, he insists, would only "end with a political and not a military solution"**. As long as the focus was on Obama and the USA to lead the campaign against ISIS, meanwhile, rather than on regional actors, the contributions of US allies in the region would be minimal. And such US domination of the conflict was, Miles suggests, "exactly why Isis staged the monstrous beheadings" it had. By provoking a military response from the West, he argues, ISIS could claim to be launching a defensive crusade (rather than one driven by chauvinist reactionism), and could thus "count on growing support from marginalised Muslims" around the world.

In the UK, he asserts, the Conservative-led government was on the same path as its Labour predecessors, ignoring "consistent advice" from intelligence agencies that British policies in the Middle East had been "a principal driver in the recruitment of Muslims in Britain for terrorism" at home and abroad. At the same time, Middle Eastern powers allied with the West continued to make only minor military contributions whilst failing to make political ones. The fact that nations like Turkey and Saudi Arabia had no interest in settling for a

⁵⁶⁰ <http://www.pipr.co.uk/all/dark-clouds-loom-in-the-shadow-of-the-first-world-war-noam-chomsky-discusses-isis-ukraine-and-gaza/>

peaceful, negotiated solution to the Syrian Civil War, for example, meant that a long term resolution to the conflict was almost impossible in the current climate.

In short, as long as regional and international powers sought to realise their own interests in war-torn Syria and Iraq, the chances of a successful, widespread, and democratic revolution were close to null. As Miles insists, “a political contribution from the heavyweights – Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Egypt” – would be needed in order to deal with ISIS and bring peace to the region. Unfortunately, however, any contribution from the anti-democratic and self-interested ruling elites of these nations was always unlikely to do any good.

For Miles, the West “backed the wrong horse” in Syria, and “compromise and negotiation” with Assad’s Ba’athist government was now necessary. Essentially, he means to say that the Syrian regime now needed to be considered as the lesser evil when compared to ISIS and other Wahhabi jihadists. Nonetheless, he also stresses that a “no talking to terrorists” strategy “delivers deadlock”, and that talking would at some point “be needed with whatever [developed] from Isis in its present form, or from its fragments” (such as disenfranchised Sunni communities and former Iraqi Ba’athists).

Such recognition of the reasons for people joining ISIS – whether marginalisation, poverty, or oppression – was something that clearly needed to be considered (but that Western elites either ignored or tried to mask with aggressive fear- or war-mongering rhetoric). In other words, Miles emphasises that delegitimising and dehumanising people who have genuine reasons for fighting (whether or not they are fighting in the wrong way and against the wrong enemy) can never lead to anything positive. For him, diplomacy with Iran was particularly essential, as the country represented the “most effective” military force available in the region which also opposed Wahhabi extremism. In other words, to end the Islamist Cold War which had polarised political dialogue in the Middle East (and had led to increasing sectarian extremism in the region), Iran had to be brought “back into the fold” of international politics once and for all.⁵⁶¹

Finally, in the wake of the genocidal Israeli offensive on Gaza in the summer of 2014⁵⁶², Miles underlines that the West “should recognise Palestine” as a step towards reducing tension in the Middle East. In fact, he says, even the former British consul general in Jerusalem, Sir Vincent Fean, had pointed out that “Britain [had] noted at the UN three years [previously] that “the Palestinian Authority [had] developed successfully the capacity to run a democratic and peaceful state, founded on the rule of law and living in peace and security with Israel””. With Palestine largely fulfilling “the legal and technical criteria for UN membership, including statehood”, therefore, the effect of international recognition “would be extremely positive”, Miles asserts.⁵⁶³ Zionist money and opposition from US elites, however, were major obstacles that would be very difficult to overcome.

I) A Left-Wing Stance

In late September 2014, The Guardian published a letter signed by Tariq Ali; British MPs Caroline Lucas, Jeremy Corbyn, Diane Abbott, John McDonnell, and George Galloway; Stop the War’s Lindsey German; author Michael Rosen; musician Brian Eno; film directors Ken Loach and Amir Amarani; the CND’s Kate Hudson; UNITE’s Len McCluskey and Andrew Murray; and a number of scholars, activists, and actors. In the letter, they argue that “all the experience of the varied military action taken by the west in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya

⁵⁶¹ http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/26/west-isis-crusade-britain-iraq-syria?CMP=tw_t_gu

⁵⁶² <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

⁵⁶³ http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/26/west-isis-crusade-britain-iraq-syria?CMP=tw_t_gu

shows that such interventions kill innocents, destroy infrastructure and fragment societies, and in the process spread bitterness and violence”.

These figures also call ISIS a “product of the last disastrous intervention, which helped foster sectarianism and regional division” in the Arab World (along with the support and funding of “some of the west’s allies”, like Saudi Arabia and Qatar). Therefore, they insist, more bombing would “only exacerbate the situation” further.⁵⁶⁴ In this sub-section, I will look at critical, left-wing views on the US-led military campaign against ISIS, focussing particularly on what strategies would and would not destroy the Wahhabi jihadist group.

The Growth of Islamism and Its Reactionary Nature

In November 2013, the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty (AWL) emphasised that **religious fundamentalism does not only come from Islam**. “There is also”, the group affirms, “militant primitive Christianity..., most importantly in the USA”. And, as supposedly the “main international bulwark against political Islam”, the superpower fails to deal with the fact that it “is itself riddled with its own ignorant fundamentalism” (by which we should read extremism). Believing “their own religious feelings, aspirations, and wishes are truths superior to reason and modern science”, the AWL asserts, Christian fundamentalists represent “an assertive and increasingly active political force in the USA” (which is meant to be, technologically at least, the “most advanced society on Earth”).

Religion, Sean Matgamna argues, “or concerns and interests expressed in religion”, were in the early 21st century “at the centre of international politics to a degree without parallel for hundreds of years”. He speaks of how, “in both East and West **the growth and increasing centrality of religion is in very large measure a consequence of the decline and failure of socialism as a mass force**”, thanks in large part to the domination of authoritarian bureaucrats in the USSR and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of Islamism, the AWL underlines that “no socialist would deny the role of the US and its allies in the growth of [the ideology]”, both through “active support (to fight the USSR in Afghanistan [and] to provide a counterweight to secular left or nationalist movements, eg in Palestine and South Asia)” and by “boosting Islamism’s appeal through their brutal imperialist activity, particularly since 2001”. At the same time, it asserts, Islamism tends to have a “‘reactionary anti-imperialist’ character”, which helps it to channel resentment “against the exploitation and disadvantage of the mostly poor countries where it is strongest”. As a result, the group stresses, “the main victims of [Islamic] fundamentalist politics are the people, mostly Muslim, of the fundamentalists’ home countries”.

It was “uneven capitalist development... in the post-colonial period”, the AWL claims, which truly “affected societies in the Muslim world” and soon created problems “that movements like Arab nationalism and the nationalist left tail-ending it could increasingly not even pretend to solve”. The resulting conditions, the group maintains, “enabled the growth of Islamism, [along] with its elements of ‘reactionary anti-capitalism’”. Nonetheless, it insists, Islamism is not “straightforwardly and automatically a “direct result” of imperialism”. Although imperialist actions “provoke angry responses” from populations, it concedes, they do not necessarily determine “the form or content of those responses”. In short, the group argues, the fact that “no form of ‘reactionary anti-imperialist’ politicised religion [ever became] strong in Central America” suggests that “Islamism has to be explained by something other than just the role of imperialism”.

⁵⁶⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/23/bombing-will-make-isis-problem-worse>

While Britain promoted “the carve up of India and creation of Pakistan as a ‘Muslim state’”, the AWL claims, and “right-wing, pro-US military regimes” in countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh also promoted Islamism in the 1970s “as a bulwark against the left”, there is “hardly evidence of Islamism being a “direct result” of imperialism, rather than a complex interaction of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ factors some time after liberation from colonialism”. The presentation of “Islamism as a reflex response against imperialism”, therefore, ignores “the dynamics of class struggles and ideological struggles in the Muslim world”.

In Iran, for example, militant Islamism was (while in part a response to “pre-1979 US domination in Iran”) mostly a response to secular revolutionary forces which it had fought in the past to keep out of power (as seen in Chapter Five). To consider the victory of Islamists in the Iranian context as a simple reaction to imperialism, then, is to fatefully merge “revolution and counter-revolution” out of a desire to make the political situation ‘black and white’ (with imperialists as the only enemies and their opponents as the only ‘good guys’). As Iranian revolutionary Marxists have insisted, the rise of Iranian Islamism was in fact **“a form of counter-revolutionary mass movement with similarities to fascism or extreme right-wing nationalism in Europe”**.

Far from being a progressive anti-imperialism movement, therefore, or a simple tool of imperialism, the reality is that, “in some countries, Islamist forces [have] directly repressed the left” while, in others, they have “benefited from previous repression, moving into the vacated space to expand networks of religious charities, welfare services and so on”. Fairly universally, though, the AWL insists, these groups “benefited from the discrediting of a left closely tied to Stalinism or nationalism”. Their role, however, “was fundamentally counter-revolutionary... [and] regressive”, even though they represented “something new and different [from bourgeois nationalist movements]”. Essentially, the AWL accepts, there are “large differences between ‘Islamisms’”, but one generally has to accept the fact that the ideology as a whole “employs anti-imperialist rhetoric in the service not of limited democratic goals, but utterly reactionary ones”.

Right-wing nationalism in twentieth-century Europe, the group stresses, was “not the only possible or the only actual response to the experience of capitalist crisis and imperialist domination”. To dismiss it merely as “a product of the capitalist regime”, therefore, was overly simplistic. In fact, Trotsky wrote in 1934 that such an unsophisticated view would necessitate the renunciation of the whole struggle against capitalism, as “all contemporary social evils [would be considered as] ‘products of the capitalist system’”. In other words, failing to see the dissimilarities between reactionaries (whether fascists or right-wing Islamists) and imperialists creates confusion about the different tactics that should be used against them.

Where the Left Should Stand on Islamism

The AWL goes on to criticise the pro-Islamist left in the West, speaking of how, in 2012, the British SWP “called for a vote for the Brotherhood in Egypt’s presidential election”. Such left-wing “accommodation to Islamism and to Islamic reaction”, the group insists, is incredibly poisonous, leading not only to “apologies for Islamist brutality in other countries”, but also to alliances with Islamist offshoots in their own countries. During the anti-Iraq war movement in the UK, for example, such a coalition led to “the endorsement of gender-segregated meetings”, the “sidelining of women’s and LGBT rights”, and “support for religious schools”.

In other words, in seeking to combat racism towards Muslims and Western invasions of Muslim nations, sections of the left failed to make the necessary criticisms of the reactionary ideology of Islamism (in their attempts to prove they were opposing both religious

discrimination and imperialist militarism). British Islamists, therefore, such as the core leaders at the East London Mosque and Hizb ut-Tahrir (a university group in London), were effectively allowed to “organise homophobic and anti-abortion campaigns in local schools” with insufficient opposition, whilst also being accused of intimidating local Muslims (and especially women). Failing to combat such actions from a principled, anti-racist, and left-wing position, the AWL says, simply fuels the growth of the racist, anti-Muslim right (rather than hindering it).

Standing by what may be “reactionary mosque leaderships and Islamists to repulse racist assaults on Muslim communities”, therefore, does not mean “standing side by side with those reactionaries against the more emancipated segments of their own communities”. And this is an important distinction to make, asserts the AWL. At certain points in history, the group argues, misguided sections of the left-wing (such as the SWP) have ended up siding with reactionary forces simply because of their opposition to NATO. In the 1999 NATO-Serbia-Kosovo conflict, for example, the SWP “concentrated solely on opposing NATO” and, in doing so, “built an ‘anti-war’ alliance with Serb nationalists” (who were Islamophobes intent on subjugating “the oppressed, mainly-Muslim Kosovars”). In short, the AWL stresses, the fact that NATO supported reactionary Islamists in Kosovo (as seen previously in this book) does not mean that the left should not have supported exploited and underprivileged Muslims who were not in league with the Islamists. The simple truth was that there was not only a choice between NATO and Serbian nationalists. As in other conflicts elsewhere in the world, neither of the main forces was truly progressive, and the most enlightened thing to do was to take actions in solidarity with exploited, marginalised, and oppressed civilians.

In a similar way, the AWL insists, the left ought to have opposed both Soviet occupation and the Islamist opposition in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Nonetheless, there were some sections of the left (such as Workers’ Power) which “virtually supported the Russians” in their invasion, while the UK Socialist Party’s predecessor, Militant, “hailed what it saw as the work of the Russian militarists in dragging Afghanistan’s “‘dark masses’, sunk in the gloom of barbarism” into the 20th century” (apparently showing both ignorance and chauvinism).

In summary, the AWL asserts that “the central reality of Islamism is that “it is directed against women, LGBT people, atheists and secularists, dissidents and critical-minded people in Muslim-majority countries and in some Muslim communities in countries like Britain”. It is, the group argues, “a threat to the working class [and], in the first instance, [to] the Muslim working class”. **In order to defeat it, therefore, an “independent class organisation and struggle by Muslim workers” is necessary**, “in alliance and solidarity with other workers” around the world.

Such cooperation, the AWL says, “is the key to defeating the Islamists, just as workers’ unity is the answer to all bourgeois reaction”. Any “political concession to Islamism”, meanwhile, was to be considered a “barrier” to such solidarity.⁵⁶⁵ At the same time, AWL’s Sacha Ismail insists that “the rise of political Islamism is a direct result of... continued post-colonial oppression in the Muslim world, and combating Islamism means combating those forces that galvanise it” – which include the ‘War on Terror’. He says, therefore, that “principled and clear opposition” to that imperialist-led onslaught is “central to any socialist platform if we want to win people from reactionary ideas” (such as those of ISIS).⁵⁶⁶

Necessary to Oppose Both Imperialism and Islamism

⁵⁶⁵ <http://www.workersliberty.org/replysimonhardy>

⁵⁶⁶ <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2013/11/19/debate-islamism-and-imperialism>

Quaid-e-Azam University professor Pervez Hoodbhoy insisted in 2009 that “left-wing discourses” had been giving too little time to “the war between radical Islam and everybody else” (i.e. “modernism in all its shapes and forms, as well as socialism and progressive Islam”), focussing almost entirely on the war between imperialism ‘and everybody else’. For Hoodbhoy, the Left needed to focus on both ideologies, rather than simply lumping reactionary thoughts in with imperialism (much as the Trotskyists of the AWL argued above).

Without a “reasoned, informed, and humane... left-wing analysis”, Hoodbhoy says, people are left with something between “the xenophobes and Muslim-haters of the West on the one hand, and the illogic of Islamic radicals on the other”. Like the AWL affirmed, he claims that some left-wingers have supported “anything and everything that purports to fight America” (driven by their justified anger at “the rapaciousness of imperialism and the horrors it has wrought upon the world”). Such a stance, Hoodbhoy argues, has led these individuals to “implicitly side with religious radicals in Pakistan, oppose the pro-democracy movement in Iran, and call for Afghanistan to be turned over to the Taliban”.

At the same time, Hoodbhoy calls assertions that “the Taliban are spearheading national liberation struggles in Afghanistan and Pakistan”, and that “Hezbollah and Hamas deserve unqualified support from the international left” absurd, pointing out at the same time that “little sympathy is shown for the Muslim Uighurs of Sinkiang” (because “China still lies in the good books of some leftists”). While “people across the world have excellent reason to feel negatively about the United States”, he stresses, due to the way in which, “in pursuit of its self-interest, [it] has waged illegal wars for decades”, these feelings should not lead people to lose perspective. “One must not assume”, he says, “that international politics has eternally fixed aggressors and victims”.

It is indeed true, Hoodbhoy asserts, that the USA “has bribed, bullied and overthrown governments, supported tyrants, undermined movements for progressive change, and felt free to kidnap, torture, imprison, and kill anywhere in the world with impunity”. It has also pursued “the goal of total planetary control”, with its military operating “more than 900 installations in 46 countries, in addition to over 4600 bases in the U.S. homeland and territories”. And, in spite of these realities, it has hypocritically emphasised its support for democracy and human rights. Nonetheless, Hoodbhoy insists, while “predatory imperialism... was indeed yesterday’s threat to global peace..., today there are other forces as well”.

Echoing the words of the AWL, Hoodbhoy argues that “religion lies at the base of much conflict today”, with: “Christian fundamentalists [attacking] abortion clinics in the US and [killing] doctors; Jewish settlers holding the Old Testament in one hand, and Uzis in the other, [burning] olive orchards and [driving] Palestinians off their ancestral land; Hindus in India [demolishing] ancient mosques, [burning] down churches and [slaughtering] both Muslims and Christians; [and] Sri Lankan Buddhists [slaughtering] Tamil Hindu separatists”. And, while “violent Islamic radicalism... is the most dangerous” of these fundamentalist religious forces, he insists, the Left sometimes fails to “uphold reason and the scientific method” in their stances.

Some left-wingers, Hoodbhoy argues, “seem locked into a state of denial, choosing to direct all their anger towards America and the West – no matter what”. While Hugo Chávez in Venezuela “gained the admiration of the international left... for standing up to American bullying”, for example, he was at the same time “exceedingly short-sighted in defending Ahmadinejad against the unconscionable election rigging in Iran”. The focus of this alliance may have been unity between nations using anti-imperialist rhetoric, but the message sent

out was, essentially, that reactionary regimes were perfectly acceptable allies in the fight against imperialism.

Pepe Escobar, meanwhile, wrote in 2009 that the “wily” and pro-Taliban TNSM (Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law), led by Sufi Muhammad, had “managed to regiment Swat valley landless peasants [in Pakistan] to fight for their rights and economic redistribution against the usual wealthy, greedy, feudal landlords who happened to double as local politicians and government officials”. Escobar failed, however, to mention how the redistribution of “seized lands, properties, and captured women” had actually been a tactic used by these Deobandi extremists simply to “swell their ranks”, rather than a tactic born from progressive principles. He also omitted, Hoodbhoy affirms, the fact that **the “declared Taliban agenda has no mention of social justice and economic development, creating jobs for the unemployed, building homes, providing education, or doing away with feudalism and tribalism”**. On the contrary, he insists, the Taliban sought “to build a religious fascist state in Pakistan and Afghanistan” (which was exemplified by a pro-Taliban assassination attempt against activist schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai in 2012 and the massacre of 132 children in an Army Public School in December 2014).

Hoodbhoy also criticises Eric Margolis, who wrote (also in 2009) about how the “rebellious Pashtun tribesmen of Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP)” had been “collectively mislabeled ‘Taliban’ in the west”. He swiftly corrects Margolis, by asserting that “those at war against the Pakistani state as well as its society are not ashamed to call themselves Taliban”. He also denounces the way in which Margolis “fantasizes these religious fanatics to be social revolutionaries”. Although “the **rise of violent Islamic fundamentalism**” has been “a response to poverty, unemployment, poor access to justice, lack of educational opportunities, corruption, loss of faith in the political system, or the sufferings of peasants and workers”, this fact does not automatically make Islamism revolutionary, he stresses. Instead, he says, it simply proves that “those condemned to living a life with little hope and happiness” are “terribly vulnerable to calls from religious demagogues who offer a happy hereafter in exchange for unquestioning obedience”.

In short, Hoodbhoy argues, not all problems “come from Western imperialist domination, past and present”. He asserts that “consciousness is not simply a consequence of material conditions” and, although “less tangible”, there are also “psychologically rooted factors”, which are just as important. In order to produce religious radicalism, he points out, religious ideologues “carefully [cultivate] grievances, both real and imagined, ...to which the poor and rich are both susceptible”.

And Saudi Arabia, he asserts, is a good example of this tactic, using petrodollars to frenetically propagate Wahhabism “in mosques, madrassas and over the internet”. It is therefore very dangerous, Hoodbhoy insists, to automatically hold external causes responsible “for every ill afflicting Muslim society”. Essentially, he stresses, religion has been employed not only for imperialist purposes, but also in order for “shaky Muslim governments, as well as community leaders in places where Muslims are in a minority”, to “generate an anger that steers attention away from local issues towards distant enemies”.

Hoodbhoy asks “what on earth” anger about “women being allowed to walk around bare-faced, being educated, or the very notion that they could be considered the equal of men” has got to do with imperialism. He also questions how an old man saying “he would rather die than let his gangrenous leg be amputated by a group of Cuban doctors” (after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan) relates to imperialism. Fundamentally, he claims, while such ignorance and chauvinism may be rooted in imperialist support for Wahhabi political powers, it is also rooted in local Muslim elites seeking to direct attention away from real material issues and towards irrelevant immaterial issues.

In Pakistan, Hoodbhoy says, radical Islamists “stone women to death, cut off limbs, kill doctors for administering polio shots, force girl-children into burqa, threaten beard-shaving barbers with death, blow up girls schools, forbid music, punish musicians, destroy 2000-year statues”, and even punish the flying of kites. Far from combatting injustices caused by imperialism and capitalism, then, these reactionary figures risk transporting their countries “into the darkest of dark ages”. Under these forces, Hoodbhoy argues, education would “at best be replaced by the mind-numbing indoctrination of [their extremist] madrassas whose gift to society would be an army of suicide bombers”. For all of these reasons, he stresses, **“the hatred of Islamists for the West must never be mistaken as a call for equality or class struggle”**.

Hoodbhoy reminds us that “Hitler and Mussolini too waged war against America – after wiping out the communists”. And, just as these fascists claimed to be on a mission to save society by directing attention towards minority groups rather than exploitative power structures, Islamist fanatics today “know nothing of the diversity and creative richness of Muslims, whether today or in the past”, even though they claim to defend Islam. “Intellectual freedom” in Muslim society, Hoodbhoy points out, “led to science, architecture, medicine, arts and crafts, and literature that were the hallmark of Islamic civilization in its golden age”, with **progress only possible “because of an open-minded, tolerant, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural character”**. Therefore, far from defending the progressive characteristics of Islam, he says, radical Islamist groups tend to suppress them, much in the same way that fascists in Europe did.

The Left, Hoodbhoy argues, needs to adopt a “nuanced, critical, and impartial” agenda, which insists that “theocratic rule is totally unacceptable”, and that “only those who struggle... for creating a secular society run by rules made by humans properly belong to the Left”. Women’s rights, meanwhile, must be “non-negotiable”, and “the claim that these are mere “bourgeois rights” must be shown to be “wrong and unacceptable”. Communities who have been oppressed or wronged “by the West, or by any locally dominant power, should be strongly supported”, Hoodbhoy emphasises, but “this should not translate into uncritical support for organizations that purport to represent their interests”. It is necessary, he says, for the Left to undertake a “case-by-case critical appraisal” of all groups. Finally, he stresses, **“militarism must be opposed”**. Both imperialist and supposed ‘anti-imperialist’ nations, he asserts, are “embarked on a reckless pursuit for advanced weaponry while neglecting the needs of their people”, and the Left should declare this to be intolerable.

In summary, Hoodbhoy insists that **there should be “no ‘higher authority’ [that] defines the left agenda”, and “no covenant of belief [that] defines a leftist”**. Only key principles, such as “secularism, universalistic ideas of human rights, and freedom of belief”, along with opposition to all forms of domination and exploitation, should be considered “non-negotiable” left-wing values. In short, Hoodbhoy asserts, the Left should always defend “the dispossessed from the occupiers, the colonised from the colonisers, Muslims from Western Islamophobes, populations of Western countries from terrorists, workers from capitalists, peasants from landlords, religious minorities from state persecution, [and] women from male oppression”. And amidst the imperialist and Islamist Cold War in the Middle East, he stresses, the Left’s task should be “to draw the attention of people back onto their real problems through encouraging critical reasoning”, and the promotion of the ‘non-negotiable’ left-wing values outlined above.⁵⁶⁷

Opposing all Forms of Fundamentalism

⁵⁶⁷ <http://zcomm.org/znetarticle/imperialism-and-islamism-a-view-from-the-left-by-pervez-hoodbhoy/>

In 2002, the Socialist Review's Kevin Ovenden reported on Tariq Ali's "riposte to arch-conservative US pundit Samuel Huntington, who wrote 'The Clash of Civilisations' in the late 1990s". In his book, Huntington had "attempted to portray the world as divided into eight religious/cultural blocs whose mutual hostility would increasingly become the dividing line of world politics". His "chauvinist tirade against Islamic civilisation", argues Ovenden, provided "intellectual gloss for every 'Mad Mullah' headline in the right wing press", and very much represented the type of thinking prevalent in the Bush II Administration in the USA.

According to Ovenden, Ali shows that Islam had "essentially political roots" (though "expressed in religious ideas") in an Arabian Peninsula "where great empires clashed in the 7th century". In "varied societies", he says, "different cultures and beliefs [soon] mixed, argued and influenced one another". In this sense, Ali asserts, Islam presented a somewhat progressive force in the world at the time. With these facts in mind, Ali launches a "twin polemic against western imperialism (and assumptions of cultural superiority) and backward looking Islamic sectarianism", claiming that both are negative and counter-revolutionary political forces.

For Ali, US imperialism is "the mother of all fundamentalisms", and "Islamist political movements" have simply "failed to successfully confront this monster", reinforcing instead "the oppression of those they claim to liberate".⁵⁶⁸ Stepping in where Nasserism, Stalinism, and Ba'athism had failed in the late 1970s, right-wing political Islam really took off with the Iranian Revolution, he says, which "began as a workers' movement with the masses striving for a 'republic of the poor'", but eventually saw Ayatollah Khomeini step in "to fill the political vacuum" in "the absence of a mass revolutionary socialist alternative". While essentially a reactionary force, though, Iranian Islamism initially "had to adopt a left, radical and anti-imperialist phraseology" in order to appease progressive citizens and revolutionaries, before then "consolidating [its] rule and moving to the right".

In Afghanistan, meanwhile, the USA thought it could manipulate the "right-wing phenomenon" of Islamism to serve its own interests, though it eventually reaped the hostility it had sown "as veterans of Afghanistan turned their attention to Kashmir... and opposition to US presence in the Holy lands". Exploiting the "seething anger and frustration of lives mired in poverty and humiliation at the hands of imperialism", Ali asserts, these Islamists would soon take the place of communists and nationalists as the most vocal opponents of Western-controlled capitalism.

Having "by-passed the Islamic world" since the Christian reformation, capitalism only really became an issue in the twentieth century after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, when it would enter into the region at the same time as secular political regimes. Although "secularism in the Islamic world gained mass support" after the Second World War, its "failure to decisively break with capitalism allowed reactionary elements to come to the fore". And with the fall of the Soviet Union, the situation got even worse. With the "narrowing of dissent and debate in a period where one ideology, capitalism, has [supposedly] triumphed over another, communism", Ali says, Islamism was allowed to take up its position as main opponent to the status quo in the Muslim World.

According to Jim Horton at Socialism Today, however, Ali fails to emphasise that "the former Soviet Union and other Stalinist states were not genuine socialism but planned economies ruled over by bureaucratic dictatorships", and that "genuine socialism requires democratic control and management by the working class". In other words, "bureaucratic degeneration and capitalist restoration" in the USSR and elsewhere "were inevitable", and

⁵⁶⁸ <http://socialistreview.org.uk/262/islam-or-imperialism>

represented the failures of authoritarian techniques rather than the weakness of socialist principles. Nonetheless, Horton stresses, the collapse of the Soviet Union did indeed have “a huge negative impact on the consciousness of workers across the globe, particularly in the neo-colonial world”. And, in Muslim nations, he says it led many citizens to toy with the notion that Islamism was the most effective opponent of capitalist injustices.

For Horton, Ali generally takes more of an anti-imperialist stance than a socialist stance to Islamism. He asserts that Ali, “trapped within the constraints of the post-Stalinist world..., fails to advance a socialist solution and therefore leaves the masses in the Islamic world disarmed in the face of reactionary Islamic leaders and an increasingly belligerent imperialism”. While he does provide “a devastating account of the role of imperialism in the Islamic world”, he at the same time “appears to ignore the raging class divisions in these countries, and the class interests that lay behind the national conflicts”. In short, Horton insists that Islamism is not a genuine alternative to capitalism, and that any attempts to play down the need for secular and democratic socialism in the Middle East simply serve to perpetuate the region’s problems.⁵⁶⁹

II) Why US Methods Will Fail and What the Alternatives Are

Bombs Will Backfire

According to Zafar Bangash at the Crescent Online, the US-led bombing campaign against ISIS (which began in Iraq in early August 2014) was “not aimed at destroying the terrorists” but at creating “the illusion that the US [was] trying to “degrade and destroy” them”. Bangash claims that the “real purpose” of the intervention was “to create the pretext to send ground troops to attack Syrian government forces with the express purpose of overthrowing the government” there. In fact, he says, General Martin Dempsey even asserted on September 16th 2014 that, “if air strikes [did] not achieve the objective, he would recommend putting “boots on the ground””.⁵⁷⁰

According to Chelsea Manning at The Guardian, however, “bombs [would] only backfire”. One crucial element in defeating ISIS, he stresses, is understanding that the group has its “origins in the insurgency [against] the United States occupation of Iraq”. As a result of his own personal “experience as an all-source analyst in Iraq”, he believes that ISIS “cannot be defeated by bombs and bullets”, even if the military campaign “is conducted by non-Western forces with air support”. The reason, he argues, is that ISIS “strategically feeds off the mistakes and vulnerabilities of the very democratic western states they decry”. Therefore, further Western intervention would simply make the group even stronger.

The group’s leaders, Manning insists, are “canny strategists”, with a “solid and complete understanding of the strengths and, more importantly, the weaknesses of the west”. In other words, they “know what pushes [the West] toward intervention and overreach”, he claims, pointing to the group’s “astonishing success in recruiting numbers of Americans, Britons, Belgians, Danes and other Europeans in their call to arms”. Although horrors committed by ISIS make it “very tempting” for citizens in the West to support the military actions of their governments, he says, the reality is that, “**when the west fights fire with fire, [it feeds] into a cycle of outrage, recruitment, organizing and even more fighting**”. Simply speaking, what happened in Iraq during the civil war in 2006 and 2007 could “only be expected to occur again” as a result of an intensified Western-led military campaign against ISIS.

When ISIS’s forerunners “attacked civilians in suicide and car bombings in downtown Baghdad” in 2009 and 2010, attempting to “provoke American intervention and sectarian

⁵⁶⁹ <http://www.socialismtoday.org/77/tariqali.html>

⁵⁷⁰ <http://www.crescent-online.net/2014/11/takfiris-saudis-and-the-struggle-for-the-soul-of-islam-zafar-bangash-4711-articles.html>

unrest”, Manning asserts, they were “often not effective in their recruiting efforts when American and Iraqi forces refused (or were unable) to respond”. In fact, he stresses, the “barbarity and brutality of their attacks worked against them” on these occasions. As soon as the USA did respond, however, “the attacks were sold to the Sunni minority in Iraq as a justified response to an occupying government favoring the Shia government”.

The only effective solution to the ISIS crisis, Manning suggests, would be “a very focused and consistent strategy of containment”, and that Western citizens needed to remain disciplined in their opposition to warmongering rhetoric, even in the face of “very public humanitarian disasters” and “the beheadings of journalists”. He insists that the world must instead focus on countering “the narrative in online Isis recruitment videos”, and thus avoid the “deliberate propaganda targeting of desperate and disaffected youth”.

Perhaps most surprisingly, however, is that Manning proposes letting ISIS “succeed in setting up a failed “state””, which would soon “prove itself unpopular and unable to govern”, thus discrediting “the leadership and ideology of Isis for good”. This way, the group would “fracture internally” and eventually “disintegrate into several smaller, uncoordinated entities – ultimately failing in their objective of creating a strong state”. In summary, Manning believes that the West should “let the Isis fire die out on its own”, insisting that the “cyclic trap” of violence must be avoided and that the group must be allowed to fall on its own “sharp, heavy and very deadly double-edged sword”.⁵⁷¹

The USA’s Counter-Productive Twitter War with ISIS

According to Rita Katz at SITE Intelligence Group (which is responsible for studying “jihadi extremists’ behavior online”), the USA’s attempts to “enter the war of ideas and win over hearts and minds of jihadists on social media” since the start of the Arab Spring have been “embarrassing”. Launched in 2011 in Arabic and Urdu, and in English in late 2013, these efforts, particularly on Twitter, were generally “ineffective”, Katz insists, with administrators “regularly engaging in petty disputes with fighters and supporters of groups like IS..., al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab, and arguing over who has killed more people”.

The strategy of the Obama Administration, she says, took “two approaches: tweeting counter messaging material and addressing prominent jihadist accounts”, with the second being “where things [started] to get ridiculous”. For Katz, subjects like the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal in 2003-2004 needed to be avoided, but “involvement in [such] counterproductive conversations [had] been a regular occurrence” on the US government’s “Think Again Turn Away” twitter account.

The main intent of such online campaigns, Katz stresses, must be to “hijack the audience” of jihadists, “in order to address the moderate Muslims on the fence regarding jihad”. Nonetheless, she affirms that “these exchanges... frequently [backfired] by providing jihadists legitimacy”. In one case, the government’s account responded to a comment made by Australian cleric Abu Sulayman (an official leader of the Al-Nusra Front) by criticising the leader of ISIS (which Al-Nusra already opposed). Such comments, Katz says, show that the “U.S. is clueless to the jihadi landscape”, as “any competent foreign policy analyst knows that the al-Nusra-IS feud is one all jihadists are attuned to”.

Overall, Katz argues that the US government lacked “the basic understanding of recruitment of young Westerners”, failing to see that “ghastly scenes of executions and destruction [were] exactly what groups like IS [had] been using as recruitment propaganda”. If the USA really wanted to counter the growth of jihadism, therefore, Katz claims, it would first have

⁵⁷¹ http://www.theguardian.com/commentsfree/2014/sep/16/chelsea-manning-isis-strategy?CMP=tw_t_gu

to study the phenomenon in greater depth “before adopting a solution”. In the meantime, however, she emphasises that the US government’s “project of counter messaging” was simply a “waste of taxpayer money” and was “ultimately... counterproductive”.⁵⁷²

“Stop Bombing Nations into Ruins”

Author David Swanson argued at the end of August 2014 that bombing Iraq and Syria would only make the problem of ISIS jihadism worse, stressing that there were “plenty of other options” to be considered. In order to take a different path, however, the world would need to recognise “where ISIS came from”. As already explained in this chapter, for example, people would need to understand that it was “the US and its junior partners [who] destroyed Iraq”, while leaving “a sectarian division, poverty, desperation, and an illegitimate government in Baghdad that did not represent Sunnis or other groups”. The fact that the West then supported Sunni Islamists in Syria, Swanson says, supposedly expecting them not to rise up against the illegitimate government in neighbouring Iraq too, is yet another key point to consider.

ISIS, Swanson claims, had “religious adherents but also opportunistic supporters” from the resistance movement against the US-backed regime in Baghdad. A significant move to stop such opposition, therefore, would be for the West to “**stop bombing nations into ruins, and stop shipping weapons into the area [it has] left in chaos**”. In Libya, he argues, the pretext for NATO intervention in 2011 (that Gaddafi was “threatening to massacre civilians”) was “well documented to have been false”, and for that reason we must be “very sceptical of humanitarian claims” in the fight against ISIS. US bombing around Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, meanwhile, was primarily “to protect Kurdish and US oil interests”, even though it “was initially justified as bombing to protect people on a mountain” (who were actually saved by libertarian socialists, as will be seen in Chapter Eleven). By the time the USA arrived, in fact, “most of those people on the mountain were in no need of rescue”. And then, shortly afterwards, when ISIS intensified its assault on Kobanî in northern Syria, the USA’s humanitarian claims were significantly damaged by the fact that they had previously allowed ISIS to advance on the town simply because their Turkish allies had opposed helping its inhabitants.

According to Swanson, no matter who the US-led forces were killing in their assault on ISIS, they were “generating more enemies”, and “building support for ISIS, not diminishing it”. In short, he stresses, the USA just realised that it was on the wrong side of the Civil War in Syria (or, at the very least, that the path the most powerful anti-Assad forces were taking in the conflict was damaging the USA’s reputation). Therefore, the superpower moved from arguing that it was a “great moral imperative” to bomb Assad to the effectively arguing that it needed to “bomb in defense of Assad”. The fact was that it wanted to get involved in Syrian politics somehow, and the clearest objective it had was that, in order to do so, someone needed to be bombed.⁵⁷³

For anti-war activist Lindsey German, meanwhile, the arguments of British Prime Minister David Cameron for going to war against ISIS desperately needed deconstructing. Cameron, she says, had essentially insisted that the 2003 invasion of Iraq ought to be left out of discussions about ISIS, claiming that “the problem shouldn’t be defined by a war 10 years ago”. The war, however, according to German, was “a defining moment in Middle East history”, destroying infrastructure and worsening “sectarian tension and fighting”. Therefore, it would have been entirely illogical to ignore the role that it had played in creating ISIS.

⁵⁷² <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/>

⁵⁷³ <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/bombing-iraq-and-syria-will-only-make-it-worse-so-what-should-be-done-about-isis#.VAYjtGOGcSG> and <http://warisacrime.org/content/what-do-about-isis>

Regarding Cameron's idea that "if we don't fight ISIS in Iraq, they will come over here to attack Britain", meanwhile, German reminds us that British "intelligence services" had consistently emphasised that "the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq [had actually] increased the level of terrorism" in the UK. The Prime Minister's "convenient amnesia" concerning these statements, she adds, represents how **"history and context are much too difficult for those who want to drum up support for more wars"**. Cameron's attempt to present the anti-ISIS military assignment as the only option to deal with Wahhabi jihadism, therefore, was a tactic consciously designed (whether by him or those controlling his puppet strings) to encourage citizens not to think for themselves about whether war was a sensible anti-terrorist strategy or not.⁵⁷⁴

How to Resolve the ISIS Threat Most Peacefully

In September 2014, Win Without War (WWW) explained how "American bombs simply [could not] eliminate the threat of ISIS and [could] indeed make the conflicts in Iraq and Syria worse and harder to solve".⁵⁷⁵ One example the group uses is that of the murder of four American military contractors in the Sunni city of Fallujah in 2004, an event which came almost a year after the Fallujah killings of April 2003 (in which "US soldiers fired into a crowd of Iraqi civilians who were protesting their presence at a school within the city"). Although the soldiers present at the incident of 2003 had claimed they had been "receiving fire from the crowd", Human Rights Watch (having inspected the area afterwards) "found no physical evidence of shots [being] fired at the building where U.S. forces [had been] hiding".⁵⁷⁶

Twenty civilians had been killed in the aforementioned attack of 2003, and the city soon became a hotbed of resistance to the US occupation, leading to the murders of 2004. The latter (which triggered to a "massive military offensive" known as the first battle of Fallujah) saw twenty-seven soldiers killed, up to two-hundred and twenty-eight suspected insurgents slain, and around 616 Iraqi civilians murdered.⁵⁷⁷ In the end, the conflict "resulted in a stalemate", and the anti-American resistance emerged "stronger than before the attack" as a result of the USA's massacre of civilians. And in 2014, the city fell "under the control of ISIS". In other words, the USA's actions, both in 2003 and after 2004, had been the cause of much bloodshed, much anger, and little (if any) progress towards peace.

WWW insists that there are alternatives, however, which are "ultimately far more effective in keeping America safe, protecting innocent lives and crippling violent extremists". One solution, the group says, is to crack down on "Turkish, Iraqi, and other oil dealers" allowing the resource to be smuggled from ISIS-held territory and sold on the black market. Such "international cooperation", it claims, would "prove more costly to ISIS than any bomb". If the cash flow of ISIS was not cut off, though, ISIS would "remain able to replace any weapons [the West could] destroy and any militants [it could] kill".

The same, WWW argues, should be done with the organisation's "ability to resupply itself", with ISIS's neighbours in particular doing "more to cut off its supply routes". In particular, the group highlights, Turkey should be singled out and forced to "crack down on the flow of fighters and weapons across its border with Syria". In short, it was "essential" to shut off "ISIS's access to the outside world". [I would add here that ending the isolation and blockading of the jihadists' enemies (such as the secular, socialist, and largely Kurdish forces of Rojava) was also key.] At the same time, WWW asserts that the West needed to stem the "flow of weapons to other parties in the region", especially as "arms transfers to Syrian

⁵⁷⁴ <http://stopwar.org.uk/videos/kurds-and-isis-in-iraq-is-us-and-uk-military-intervention-the-answer#.VADXC2OGcSE>

⁵⁷⁵ <http://winwithoutwar.org/alternatives-isis/>

⁵⁷⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallujah_killings_of_April_2003

⁵⁷⁷ <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/reference/press-releases/9/>

rebels and the Iraqi military [had] led to ISIS gaining American-made weapons". One problem here, however, is that the undemocratic Syrian and Iraqi governments would consequently gain a monopoly of violence, essentially facilitating their continued rule.

WWW also claims that a "truly multilateral international response" was needed to weaken ISIS. In other words, citizens of the world would need to understand that ISIS thrived "because of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, which [were] fueled by foreign interests". As a result, they would then have to campaign to stop their own political and economic elites from stoking the flames of sectarian fighting, and to force them into cooperating with all other nations in order to find a solution that could be commonly agreed upon. If these elites could not cooperate with each other, meanwhile, the people of the world would have to do so, using the social media and other organisational means to build a united front against their anti-democratic political leaders. Fundamentally, there would need to be more democracy and social justice at home and abroad, and less economic and military interference in foreign affairs.

The most important solution that WWW suggests is that citizens of the world help to "**address the underlying political grievances of local populations**", something I would argue could only come with direct democracy and social justice (i.e. with libertarian socialism). The twenty-five million Sunnis under ISIS control always had the power to destroy the group by withdrawing their support for it, but this would only be likely to happen if they were presented with a realistic alternative. The truth is that poverty and oppression are "very real" grievances, though a genuinely revolutionary solution is needed to end them (as many opposition groups in Syria and Iraq are simply reactionaries, responding to the causes of anger but exploiting sectarian grievances and dividing communities in the process).

Finally, WWW argues, long-standing conflicts must be dealt with once and for all. "Ending the Syrian civil war" peacefully, it stresses, while "bringing Sunnis back into the Iraqi political process", would be a significant step towards ending Wahhabi-inspired extremism in the region. As long as conflict remains, it emphasises, the humanitarian crises in both countries would simply continue to get worse, fuelling reactionaries even more and further nurturing a cycle of violence, suffering, and injustice.⁵⁷⁸

The USA's History of Monster Fabrication

Author Nicolas J. S. Davies emphasised at Alternet in September 2014 that "the growth of ISIS and the current crises in Iraq and Syria [were] all deeply rooted in US policy". Having "ensured that any [Saudi] accomplices [to the 9/11 attacks] still in the US were quickly flown home to Saudi Arabia before the crime could be investigated", he says, US leaders emphasised that the country had a choice to make. Before embarking on a piece of "misdirected vengeance on the people of Afghanistan" in 2001, he stresses, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared "either we change the way we live, or we must change the way they live. We choose the latter".

Instead, therefore, of reflecting on or acknowledging how its interference abroad had led to violent foreign resistance in the first place, the superpower "launched more than 94,000 air strikes, mostly on Afghanistan and Iraq, but also on Libya, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia" between 2001 and 2014. And, essentially, it did 'change the way people lived', but by stopping "a million of them" from living altogether and "reducing tens of millions more to lives of disability, disfigurement, dislocation, grief and poverty".

⁵⁷⁸ <http://winwithoutwar.org/alternatives-isis/>

Davies insists that there has been a “sophisticated propaganda campaign” to hide “systematic US war crimes”, quoting George Orwell as saying that “the nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them”. As a result of the USA’s own efforts, Davies stresses, many American citizens were unaware of the “torture, ...use of hostages, forced labor, mass deportations, imprisonment without trial, forgery, assassination, [and] the bombing of civilians” that their country had been involved in since 2001 (and long before).

However, when “millions of newly war-wise Americans” eventually managed to elect Barack Obama as president in 2008 on a ““peace” platform””, media misinformation appeared to have failed (albeit only in part). Nonetheless, Obama soon oversaw “the largest military budget since WWII; an eight-fold increase in drone strikes; special forces operations in at least 134 countries, twice as many as under Bush; and a massive increase in the special forces night raids or “manhunts” originally launched by Rumsfeld in Iraq in 2003, which increased from 20 in Afghanistan in May 2009 to 1,000 per month by April 2011, killing the wrong people most of the time according to senior officers”. In short, the new president (who was prematurely awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the end of his first year in power) would simply represent a continuation of the USA’s aggressive interventionist agenda.

Just like President Eisenhower had adapted his tactics after the Korean War, and other Presidents had changed theirs after the Vietnam War, “Obama turned to methods of regime change and power projection that would avoid the political liabilities of sending young Americans to invade other countries”. The latter’s “covert and proxy war”, however, would “only spread America's post-9/11 empire of chaos farther and wider”. In fact, it would repeat the mistakes of the past.

Although the US invasion of Vietnam was horrific, the USA actually “dropped more tonnage of bombs in its secret war on Cambodia than it dropped on Japan in WWII”. In the wake of this covert conflict, the Khmer Rouge launched an “orgy of genocide”, and its recruitment efforts would prove to be “most effective among refugees subjected to B-52 strikes”. In other words, those who had lived through horrific events themselves were more likely to partake in such actions themselves (when their feelings of anger and desperation were exploited in the correct way, of course). In a similar way, Obama’s “24,000 air strikes, mostly in Afghanistan”, killed “thousands of people and [made] implacable enemies of millions more”, much like the previous US assaults on Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Iraq had.

Although “air strikes are an integral component of Obama's covert war doctrine”, Davies asserts, “they are only covert in the sense that they are unreported”. In Libya, for example, “the US and its NATO allies launched 7,700 air strikes in a war that killed at least 25,000 people and plunged the country into endless chaos” (as seen in the previous chapter of this book). Weapons and fighters were then airlifted to Turkey, he says, “where British special forces provided training and the CIA infiltrated fighters into Syria to try and duplicate the overthrow and butchering of Gaddafi”. In short, Obama had “embraced the use of Islamist militias to destabilize Libya, providing them with weapons, equipment, training and air support”, in spite of the ‘blowback’ that support for Afghan militants in the 1980s had created. The “leadership on the ground”, meanwhile, “came from Qatar’s mercenary “special forces,” many of whom [were] veterans of the Pakistani military and its ISI intelligence agency, which [had worked] with the Taliban in [both] Pakistan and Afghanistan”. The Qataris then “transposed” the strategy into Syria, embedding their insurgents within the al-Nusra Front.

Encouraged by the USA, “Qatar spent \$3 billion and flew 70 planeloads of weapons to Turkey to support its proxies in Syria, while its regional rival Saudi Arabia sent volunteers

and convicts, and paid for weapons shipments from Croatia to Jordan". The Gulf's economic elites, meanwhile, "paid up to \$2,000 per day to hardened mercenaries from the Balkans and elsewhere" in exchange for their presence in Syria. "As first al-Nusra and then ISIS established themselves as the dominant rebel group", Davies stresses, "they absorbed the bulk of the fighters and weapons that the US and its allies [had] poured into the country".

With these facts in mind, Davies denounces, as many other critics have, the Western tactic of "creating and arming groups of religious fanatics as proxies to fight secular enemies". In spite of "limited local support", he says, such forces can soon create long and bloody conflicts if they have "powerful external backers". And that is precisely what happened in Syria. In flagrant opposition to "Kofi Annan's 2012 peace plan", the USA and its allies "pledged ever more support, funding and weapons to the [anti-Assad] rebels as the conflict escalated".

"Western media and political debate", Davies says, was always "distorted" with regards to ISIS. With the jihadist group "playing up its strength and its atrocities" in videos, and the West downplaying its role in the Syrian conflict, political and economic elites with an interest in defeating Assad "allowed ISIS to quietly gain strength and eliminate its rivals". When the group's power could no longer be ignored, the US-led coalition's support for the sectarian Iraqi regime and anti-democratic nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan threatened, according to Davies, to "reduce [even] more Iraqi cities to rubble, kill thousands more civilians and turn ISIS into [an] unstoppable monster".⁵⁷⁹ In fact, according to some claims, Davies would be right about more innocent lives being lost as a result of US airstrikes. On October 18th 2014, Sputnik would report on how, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, "at least 10 [Syrian] civilians, including children, [had been] killed by U.S.-led airstrikes in Syria" targeted at ISIS.⁵⁸⁰

Thanks to the devastation caused by the USA's invasion of Iraq, Davies affirms, "millions of Iraqis... see an alliance with ISIS as a lesser evil than submission to the brutal US- and Iranian-backed regime" in Baghdad. Only by providing "full diplomatic and political support for a legitimate political transition in Iraq that would honor the civil and political rights of all Iraqis", therefore, could this situation change, according to Davies. In fact, ISIS's allies in Iraq had actually already offered to "get rid of" the group if they were granted such rights. Meanwhile, Davies argues, there must be a "diplomatic solution" to "Iran's non-existent nuclear weapons program", a "global consensus on ending the Israeli occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories" (which only the USA truly defends), and an implementation of the "framework for a peace process in Syria [that] was agreed on in Geneva on June 30, 2012" (which was "stalled as the US and its allies reintroduced their precondition that President Assad must resign first").

The "proposed solution to any US foreign-policy failure is always some kind of escalation", Davies points out, and this strategy "invariably [leads] to an even more dangerous crisis". Describing this cycle in the case of Iraq, he speaks of how "a failed CIA coup in 1996 and the impending collapse of the UN sanctions regime led to the invasion and destruction of Iraq" in 2003, how "the US defeat in Iraq led to [the] targeting [of] Syria and Iran", and then how "Russia's role in Syria led to a US-led coup in Ukraine and a US-Russian confrontation that [would raise] the specter of nuclear war". Therefore, while the "US propaganda system presents... [America as] a bastion of peace, democracy and prosperity", and looks down on the rest of the world for being in "a dreadful mess", the reality is that **the "current crises are all deeply rooted in [aggressive, hegemonic] US policy"**. In particular, they are a result of

⁵⁷⁹ <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/will-the-obama-america-bombing-campaign-turn-isis-into-an-unstoppable-monster> and <http://www.alternet.org/world/9-11-america-insane-foreign-policy-continued-under-obama-has-killed-million-and-created-isis>
⁵⁸⁰ <http://www.sott.net/article/287561-At-least-10-civilians-including-children-killed-by-US-led-airstrikes-in-Syria> and <http://sputniknews.com/world/20141018/194265861/US-Led-Airstrikes-Against-IS-Kills-10-Civilians-in-Syria-Syrian.html>

the USA's "fateful decision to respond to a mass murder in New York City with 94,000 air strikes, an opportunistic global military expansion and a doubling of the military budget".⁵⁸¹

War Brings No Safety

Self-proclaimed peace journalist Robert Koehler, writing in September 2014, picked up on Barack Obama's comments about why ISIS had to be bombed. The president had made the ridiculous claim that, "thanks to our military and counterterrorism professionals, America is safer". In other words, having campaigned against the wars of George W Bush before him, Obama was now praising them to a certain extent. The "God of War", Koehler insists, "is on the verge of another victory and Planet Earth and human evolution lose again".

Koehler quotes TomDispatch's Tom Engelhardt as saying, "nowhere, at home or abroad, does the obvious might of the United States translate into expected results, or much of anything else except a kind of roiling chaos". All of the country's military applications since 9/11, Engelhardt asserts, had simply "furthered the fragmentation process, destabilizing whole regions". The campaign against ISIS, therefore, would have only one possible outcome - "the region [would] be further destabilized and in worse shape when [finally] over". Koehler agrees, referring to how the USA's leaders spoke of bombing ISIS like they would about "a squirt of Raid on an infestation of bugs". The US political elite, he says, did not mention the fact that innocent people would die as a result of the attacks or that they would have "unintended consequences". For that reason, a bombing campaign was portrayed to be something nowhere near as horrifying as a beheading.

"Declarations of War", Koehler argues, always try to "separate us from the evil that our enemies are committing". To address "the complexity of others' brutal behaviour", he affirms, "means facing our terrifying complicity in it". And as a result, Obama stuck to the rhetoric of his "inarticulate predecessor", exploiting the "simplistic emotional safe haven of war and militarism". Just a month after 9/11, the latter had said he was: "amazed that there's such misunderstanding [in the Muslim World] of what our country is about". He apparently could not understand popular anger at the USA abroad, saying naively: "I know how good we are". Whether we believe that Bush was being deceptive, deluded, or just plain stupid, the fact remains that the total detachment of his rhetoric from historical context was astonishing.

Bombing Iraq again, Koehler emphasises, "will just strengthen IS and likely open the door to the next multi-year military quagmire". In fact, quoting beheaded journalist James Foley, who had spoken of the "hell and absurdity of war", Koehler stresses that "dehumanization [is] needed before people can be killed", and that "the shallowness of media coverage" is what allows such a process to take place. For Koehler, it is an incredibly dangerous sign that the USA "still tolerates such simplistic, knife-edged rhetoric" based on concepts of 'good and evil', such as the emphasis on how the "might and purity" of the USA leave its government with "no choice but to go after" whatever it determines to be evil at any given moment. On the contrary, he argues, "engaging in the game of war is always an act of defeat".⁵⁸²

Iraq against Foreign Troops Fighting ISIS

At best, limited aerial bombing is only a way of temporarily killing proponents of an idea. The idea itself, however, could only ever be destroyed by slaying all of those likely to support it or, as argued in this chapter, by dealing with the causes which led to its

⁵⁸¹ <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/will-the-obama-america-bombing-campaign-turn-isis-into-an-unstoppable-monster> and

<http://www.alternet.org/world/9-11-americas-insane-foreign-policy-continued-under-obama-has-killed-million-and-created-isis>

⁵⁸² <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article39716.htm>, <http://stopwar.org.uk/news/the-isis-beheadings-are-barack-obama-s-9-11-as-he-takes-up-the-war-mantle-of-george-w-bush>, and commonwonders.com

popularity. One problem with the first strategy, however, is that such a comprehensive, iron-fisted campaign would require either the backing of the government and people of, say, the USA, or the abandonment of any claims of political or moral legitimacy. Therefore, without popular support for a return to full-scale military action (supposedly in order to degrade and destroy ISIS), the attempts of the United States to assert their military and economic hegemony in the Middle East are likely to fail.

In September 2014, "Iraq's new prime minister ruled out stationing U.S. ground troops in his country", and thus dealt a serious blow to US hopes of an all-out (and internationally-approved) military offensive against ISIS. The latter, meanwhile, having "20,000 to 31,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria" according to CIA estimates, had "rampaged across northern and western Iraq in June" 2014, and had even extended its control "to the outskirts of Baghdad". Amidst such advances, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was clearly aware that another US occupation of Iraq would simply worsen the situation in the long run.

At the same time, Abadi criticised the "puzzling" exclusion of neighboring Iran from the coalition being assembled to fight the Islamic State group". This issue was particularly important for Abadi because "Iranian-backed [Shiite] militias [had] provided much of the muscle for Iraq's government", due primarily to the fact that "the national military [had] struggled" to cope with ISIS advances. Thought to be a "more inclusive leader" than Maliki, who "might heal the internal rifts" in Iraq, the new prime minister did indeed praise the USA's aerial campaign against ISIS, saying it had "helped efforts to roll back the Sunni extremists", but at the same time insisted there was "no need for the U.S. or other nations to send troops into Iraq". Summarising his position, he stressed: "we don't want them. We won't allow them. Full stop".

As a veteran Shiite lawmaker who had spent twenty years in exile in Britain before 2003, Abadi affirmed that "the Iraqi military [would] choose and approve targets, and that the U.S. [would] not take action without consulting with Baghdad first". The "only contribution the American forces or the international coalition [were] going to help [Iraq] with", he said, would be "from the sky". Whilst perhaps recognising the importance of dealing with ISIS through local cooperation and not through another Western occupation, he nonetheless urged the international community to "expand its campaign against the extremists in neighboring Syria", where militants were retreating to as a result of the increased aerial attacks in Iraq. Furthermore, he emphasised that Iraq did not "have the luxury of refusing cooperation with Damascus", and pushed instead for "some sort of coordination" with the Assad regime, highlighting that the "sovereignty of Syria" was "very important". In fact, Abadi (as a fellow ally of Iran) appeared to "already be coordinating on some level" with Assad, having agreed with Damascus to "strengthen cooperation in fighting "terrorism"".

The USA, meanwhile, "rejected cooperating" with Assad, just as it did with Iran. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives, for example, even voted "to give the U.S. military authority to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels", showing that the fight against ISIS was actually threatening to spark a new, more overt period of US military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. In short, the superpower was stepping up its campaign against Assad, while at the same time fighting against his main opponents. Nonetheless, a direct 'boots on the ground' intervention was still unlikely, with Obama promising not to commit the army to "fighting another ground war in Iraq" (perhaps in part due to the fact that he knew that politicians in Baghdad, and the people of Iraq themselves, were opposed to such an occurrence).

Whilst thanking the USA for its aerial efforts in Iraq, Abadi insisted that the country's position on not cooperating with Iran or Syria put him "as prime minister" into "a very difficult position". He then explained how this stance left Iraq "caught in the middle" of "a

disagreement between the international allies... and Iran" – a reality he thought to be "catastrophic". He also emphasised that "inclusiveness" was "the only way we will succeed", especially given that his country was "on the verge of a three-way split, with Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish regions seemingly pursuing divergent paths".

Nonetheless, Abadi still expressed a certain deference regarding the perceived role of the USA in the world. The fight against ISIS, he maintained, was "the responsibility of the international community – on top of them the United States government" (as if the superpower was the unappointed planetary police force). Apparently presenting the USA as some sort of sanctified global leader and moral force, though alluding to historical context, he failed to criticise directly the USA's role in shaping the current chaos within Iraq and its neighbouring nations.⁵⁸³ However, the fact that the Iraqi regime was not prepared to accept US boots on the ground once again did put a spanner in the works with respect to US ambitions of an increased presence in the country.

US Elites Are the World's Biggest Terrorists

However much it tries, the USA cannot destroy the memories of Middle Eastern citizens. It can only try to erase collective memories by erasing lives but, even in this way, compassionate human beings elsewhere in the world can see the Empire's actions and feel indignation, especially in a modern world with much freer access to information (in spite of government and corporate resistance). The superpower can only pacify its rightfully angry opponents, therefore, by ceasing to prop up oppressive dictators and war criminals (like those in the Israeli and Saudi political establishments), and by ceasing to undermine democratic efforts in the Middle East and throughout the world. In short, such actions are the best (if not only) way to truly end anti-US sentiment.

The main point emphasised in this section of the chapter has been that Western citizens are in desperate need of a more sophisticated analysis of the War on Terror. The fact is that, in spite of the aggressive, self-interested, and ill-informed verbal diarrhoea of political leaders, Western military action (along with the socio-economic injustices resulting from the corrupt and destructive global political system) simply increases the 'terrorist threat'.

Essentially, the USA's military might has long been used "to control and to stabilize" areas that are "crucial to the interests of U.S. imperialism". As Marxist newspaper The Spark insisted in 2010, "**the biggest terrorist, with the biggest weapons, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians ... is the U.S.**". Imperialist terrorism, far from being carried out by "individual terrorists", it asserts, has long been routinely "carried out against whole populations" as part of a political dogma. And Western citizens need to realise that **such attacks are precisely what "fuel anger in populations around the world" that can on occasions send shockwaves back to the West.**⁵⁸⁴ The real way for them to end terrorist threats, therefore, is to **stop the mega-terrorism applauded by their own political and economic elites.**

III) An Alternative Regional Model

Human rights activist Peter Tatchell wrote in the New Internationalist in late 2014 that "a Western instigated and led external military intervention" in Iraq and Syria would "inevitably be a propaganda gift and recruiting sergeant for ISIS". The group, he says, would be able to "portray [the operation] as Muslims under attack by Western crusaders and their stooges". While the USA and UK claim "ISIS must be defeated because it poses a

⁵⁸³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/17/iraq-foreign-troops_n_5835706.html?utm_hp_ref=world

⁵⁸⁴ <http://the-spark.net/np863403.html>

threat to Britain and the US”, he asserts, the truth is that “the main threat is to Muslim people in Iraq and Syria”, and “the danger to Western nations is minimal”.

Part of the “distorted Western-centric” rhetoric uttered by Western elites, Tatchell affirms, is bolstered by the fact that political actors in the West have been “effectively ignoring that an anti-ISIS fight-back has been going on for more than a year in places like Kobani, northern Syria, led by Kurdish troops”. Although “the Western powers looked the other way” regarding events in Rojava, he stresses, that did not mean it was not happening.

A serious fight against ISIS, therefore, would need to focus on “aiding the people on the ground who know the region best, have local roots and who are already leading the fight against the jihadist menace”, Tatchell insists. The **PKK and “allied local self-defence movements in Syria” are “anti-Islamist”**, he says, and “**they support democracy and secularism**”. They are not Western puppets, but “**authentic local movements with mass support**”, and in that way “they are the best bulwark against ISIS”. Because of their autonomy, however, they are “under-equipped and lack the heavy and sophisticated weaponry needed to defeat” ISIS.

For Tatchell, “international aid to the Kurds” would follow “the spirit of aid to republican Spain in the 1930s”, but was prevented by the fact that the “leftist PKK” was “still wrongly branded a terrorist organization by the US and European Union”. They and their allies, he says, “are a key bulwark against the spread and triumph of the Islamic State – and deserve international recognition and support” for that reason. At the same time, Tatchell emphasises, the UK Stop The War Coalition (STWC) had “allowed its opposition to war to trump support for democracy, secularism and human rights”. While it is “laudable to oppose Western military attacks”, he says, it is “a betrayal to show no solidarity with the democratic, secular, liberal and Left forces in Iraq and Syria”. And although Tatchell is right here (that left-wingers ought to focus on supporting progressive forces around the world), the STWC’s stance was probably based on the assumption that an anti-democratic capitalist government like that of the UK would not be likely to support such forces.

Nonetheless, Tatchell insists that “not backing military aid to these progressive Kurdish forces, as an alternative to Western intervention, [was] a serious misjudgement”, and that the “STWC’s failure to support” them had “a whiff of de facto acquiescence and collusion”. In spite of the fact that he is opposed to war himself, he argues that, “to stave off a bloodbath and enslavement, the progressive anti-ISIS Kurdish fighters deserve assistance from the West and from the whole international community”. Just as aid was given to “partisans fighting Nazi fascism” in the 1940s, he says, “those opposing ISIS’s clerical fascism” today should also receive support.⁵⁸⁵

Kurds Are Key, but Kurdish Nationalists Are Not

In August 2014, STWC’s John Rees argued that “Western calls to arm the Kurds and bomb Iraq [were] both hypocritical and dangerous”. Although the West had promised Kurds their own land after the First World War, he says, it would soon abandon them, overseeing the division of “historic Kurdish territory” between several different ‘nations’. For Rees, this was “the first of many broken promises”, with “great power hypocrisy [being] just as evident today” as it was almost a hundred years ago. Whilst these powers have supported and armed Kurdish nationalist guerrillas against the governments of Iraq and Iran, he argues, they have called the PKK a terrorist organisation (even though it was also oppressed by its nation’s government, seeing “many thousands of its members killed, imprisoned and tortured”).

⁵⁸⁵ <http://newint.org/blog/2014/10/03/support-kurds-against-islamic-state/>

Having been complicit in the suppression of Kurds (and the general population of the Middle East), the West was only ever interested in them when they could use their forces to destabilise regimes they didn't like. In 2003, for example, the USA "saw a chance to use the Kurds' opposition to Saddam for its own purposes", emphasising "their oppression and in particular the Halabja massacre" before using Kurdish areas "as a base for the invasion". According to Rees, the USA then saw "granting the Kurds effective autonomy" as "part of the divide and rule strategy which led directly to the sectarian structure of the occupied Iraqi state". Precisely these tactics, he stresses, led to the emergence of ISIS, allowing extremism "to grow out of the alienation of Sunni Muslims in the US-constructed" nation. Rees, therefore, like so many others mentioned in this chapter, underlines that "the current threat from IS [was] a direct product of US policy in Iraq".

According to Rees, while the USA arms nationalist Kurds in Iraq, it really prefers "a weak and divided Kurdish nation to a united and free Kurdistan". As an oil rich region "dominated by US oil companies", Iraqi Kurdistan is a key ally for the West in the Middle East, and could therefore not be allowed to unite with Kurdish areas elsewhere in the region (which are influenced by much more progressive ideologies). Such a united Kurdistan, meanwhile, would also break apart US ally Turkey, and would almost certainly think twice before supplying oil cheaply to its Turkish neighbours (whose political elites have oppressed Kurds for many decades). It would also be less likely to trade with Israel, or see it as a positive force in the Middle East. In short, a united and democratic Kurdish region would not be the type of malleable Western lackey that the KRG nationalist regime has been.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for exactly the reasons stated above, favours "independence for Iraqi Kurds but remains resolutely opposed to full independence for Kurdistan as a whole". Like its US allies, Rees asserts, "Israel hopes for a divided and weakened Iraq", and would love to see the same happen in Iran and Syria. At the same time, however, it would also like to avoid supporting the creation of a united (and much more socialist) Kurdistan.

For Rees, it is absolutely imperative that, if the Kurdish struggle for autonomy "is not to be diverted into (and limited to) a pro-imperial rump statelet in northern Iraq", the world must focus on supporting Kurdish forces outside Iraq. Essentially, he argues, "the Iraqi Kurdish leadership", he says, "has done too many deals with too many reactionary forces to be trusted" (having "even supported Turkish military operations against the PKK"). In other words, Rees comes out in favour of the PKK and its progressive regional allies, and against the KDP and PUK nationalists of the KRG. Apart from the considerably questionable nature of the Iraqi Kurdish regime, the fact that their forces were "not even the ones that [were] most effectively fighting against IS or rescuing [civilians]" in 2014 showed that they should not have been the ones to be receiving arms, Rees insists.

"Co-option by the major powers", Rees asserts, "is not new", with the very first Marxists being "highly critical of small nationalist movements drawn into the role of imperial proxies in the 19th century". Parts of the Irish republican movement, he stresses, were co-opted "both in the 1920s and the 1970s", as were opposition forces in both Libya and Syria in 2011 (in each case "with disastrous consequences"). Nonetheless, he assures us that "an independent Kurdistan across the whole of the [Kurdish-inhabited] territory [in the Middle East] would be the one development that could stop IS in its tracks and marginalise the [corrupted and reactionary] Iraqi Kurdish leadership".

While the destructive "post First World War settlement [was indeed] breaking down", Rees argues, it was "breaking down in favour of reactionary forces", such as ISIS and Kurdish nationalists. "A unified and free Kurdistan", however, would "have the effect that the

ANC's victory over apartheid had in southern Africa". Meanwhile, though, the "long and heroic record of anti-imperialism" of the Kurds, he says, is sold short by the nationalists of Iraqi Kurdistan, who "profit at the expense of other Kurds [and] the Palestinians". If betraying fellow Kurds and dealing with an utterly repressive force like Israel is the price Iraqi Kurdistan has to pay in order to receive Western arms, Rees asserts, it is not a deal worth making. Nonetheless, it is a price that the Kurdish nationalists in government were happy to pay. For Rees, Kurds did indeed "have the right to armed self-defence", but he emphasises that "**getting into an agreement with the US... [would only] increase the weight of all the reactionary forces among the Kurds**".⁵⁸⁶

While Rees understands the key role that the Kurds would play in ending conflict and injustice in the Middle East, I would argue that he takes too ideological a stance, and thus fails to truly understand the genuine political dynamics in the region. For example, there is no local or international power that really has any interest in supporting the progressive forces of Kurdistan, and the latter is therefore likely to be caught between self-destruction or a temporary tactical alliance with 'liberal' forces in the West (however undesirable that may be given the track record of Western elites in the Middle East).

The creation of a united Kurdish nation, meanwhile, would theoretically reduce the role of reactionary nationalists, but it is simply not possible, precisely because of the political interests (American, Turkish, and Israeli) that are involved. At the same time, however, Rees's criticism of the Kurdish nationalists ruling the KRG is spot on. **Progressive Kurds in the Middle East** (focussed on secularism, direct democracy, and social justice) **are indeed crucial in the fight against ISIS, but a Kurdish nation is not** (as numerous theoreticians from the PKK and allied organisations would themselves argue). In short, the latter is simply not a realistic aim, and the progressive Kurdish movement has realised that. Autonomous communities governing themselves, however, are incredibly feasible, as the Rojava Revolution has shown. Therefore, **progressive citizens of the world must take the reasonable, concrete step of increasing support for and solidarity with Rojava**, while emphasising its revolutionary example in the face of rhetoric favouring the nationalist reactionaries of the KRG.

The Isolation of ISIS Requires the Recognition of Rojava

Dr Kersten Knipp at Deutsche Welle (DW) says that "every nation, even a caliphate, requires the long-term cooperation of other states", and that, "after the atrocities [ISIS] has committed, it is unlikely to find many countries which would be willing to cooperate with it" in the future. Kurds, for example, have already responded firmly to the brutal acts of the organisation and, according to Knipp, were "currently the only ones who... [could] stand in the way of IS terrorists". Speaking in late August 2014, Knipp emphasised how, although the presence of ISIS had pushed Kurds in both Iraq and Syria to seek greater autonomy and self-governance, "leaders of Western countries [had] taken a reserved position, fearing that shifting borders - or even a border war - could destabilize the entire region". Nonetheless, he says, support for Kurdish militias in their "fight against [ISIS would] eventually" and inevitably "include demands for additional steps towards independence".

Like in Rojava, Knipp asserts, the "Kurdish region of Iraq is the only part of the country where followers of several religions are able to live peacefully together" (in spite of the political and economic domination of nationalists). He affirms that this "**multi-denominational model** could have a positive influence on the entire region", particularly considering that "sectarian logic [had] driven the region to the edge". The Cold War of the

⁵⁸⁶ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/17381-the-way-to-stop-the-islamic-state-is-a-united-free-kurdistan-just-what-the-us-does-not-want> and <http://internationalsocialist.org.uk/index.php/2014/08/the-way-to-stop-the-islamic-state-is-a-united-free-kurdistan-just-what-the-us-does-not-want/>

Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, had seen tensions between Sunnis and Shiites grow in the region, and had created an artificial sectarian division which would facilitate the governance of pro-Western governments. Although Knipp does not mention Rojava in particular, he says that 'the Kurds' in general were "setting a good example by using a system that works" (referring here to secularism).⁵⁸⁷

Adding to Knipp's arguments, I would insist that international support for secularism in the Middle East will indeed start with the region's Kurdish community. In particular, however, I would make a distinction between Iraqi Kurdish nationalists and the progressive Kurdish movement prominent in Turkey and Syria. While the former lead a secular government in northern Iraq, they preside at the same time over an essentially reactionary and anti-democratic regime. The autonomous government of the Rojava Revolution in northern Syria, nonetheless, is essentially a progressive force, which also presents a secular model, but mixed with an experiment in direct democracy, feminism, and social justice. While the KRG already has recognition and diplomatic status around the world, though, Rojava remains isolated. And as long as the latter's progressive, secular order is not recognised by surrounding nations and the international community, a 'system that works' will find it a lot harder to truly take root in the Middle East.

The PKK and YPG Are Crucial For Defeating ISIS

Although an unlikely source of support for libertarian socialism, The Financial Times (FT) also argued in late that the PKK and its allies were "crucial to [the] fight against Isis". Erika Solomon and Daniel Dombey speak at the paper about how the interests of the progressive Kurdish movement in the Middle East were now at least partially in convergence with those of the USA, presuming as they do that US elites genuinely do wish to "stave off a jihadi offensive" in Iraq and Syria. "Battle-hardened" PKK militants, they say, had "come to the aid of peshmerga fighters" in Iraq, thus "augmenting US air strikes to halt the jihadi group's advance into the autonomous [Kurdish] region of northern Iraq".

According to veteran PKK commander Sedar Botan, the FT asserts, the support of the PKK was "just as important for the peshmerga as [the] US [air] strikes". Having come "with seven units from the group's stronghold in the Qandil mountains", Solomon and Dombey stress, she helped to "secure Makhmour, a strategic point between the [Kurdish] regional capital Erbil and the oil rich Kirkuk province". For Lehigh University's Henri Barkey, such interventions (like other wartime actions) were "always a very important catalyst for change" and, within a year, "the position of the PKK" would be "much stronger" as a result.

Although the PKK has different aims from the KDP and PUK, Solomon and Dombey affirm, which "often make them rivals rather than allies", the fight against ISIS managed, at least temporarily, to bring their forces together to defeat a common enemy. Relations between them were indeed "warmer than in the past", they insist, although "local media [sources had] already reported rising tensions between PKK affiliates and the peshmerga on the region's western front lines" (partly as a result of KRG military failures and aggression towards Rojava). Nonetheless, PKK commander Tekoshar Zagros insists that, while this was "the first time" his organisation's fighters had developed "military co-operation with the Peshmerga", they planned "to increase it".

And this disposition to mutual aid was partially due to the fact that the KRG Peshmerga, "previously touted as the one force in Iraq capable of countering Isis", had sparked "a temporary panic in the region" when it withdrew from areas previously under its control following intensified attacks from ISIS. According to PKK fighters, "their support - along

⁵⁸⁷ <http://www.dw.de/opinion-a-case-for-kurdistan/a-17890233>

with US strikes – [had] helped the peshmerga regain its confidence to fight” after these setbacks.

In spite of the KRG’s alliance with Turkey (a country deeply and utterly hostile to the PKK), meanwhile, KRG President Masoud Barzani actually “visited the PKK in [the rescued town of] Makhmour... to thank them for their help”, which was a significant and self-humbling gesture for the usually inflexible and self-interested nationalist leader. For Barzani, this move showed that Turkey would no longer be “in a position to say to Barzani: ‘Don’t work with the... PKK’”, because Barzani would simply respond by insisting: “I need them”. Nonetheless, Ankara would not follow the lead of its KRG allies, and would seek to ignore and underplay the PKK’s role in fighting ISIS in Iraq. In fact, one senior Turkish official would even stress: “I don’t think their involvement is real”.

The PKK’s defence of Iraqi Kurdistan was very real, though. As will be seen in greater detail in Chapter Eleven, one Peshmerga fighter insisted that the PKK, which had “sent a few hundred fighters from Qandil” to Makhmour, was crucial in the retaking of the besieged town. Meanwhile, the PKK’s “sister group in Syria, the People’s Protection Units (YPG)”, was “the main force battling Isis and helping [Yazidis] escape” when ISIS launched an assault on the Iraqi town of Şengal in early August 2014. The YPG, Solomon and Dombey argue, had probably been “the most successful group fighting Isis”, having fought against the group in northern Syria for many months before the jihadis’ attack on Iraq’s Yezîdîs. At the same time, Zagros adds that “the only force that [had] consistently fought Isis for the past two years was the PKK, under the name of the YPG”. Because the fighters of the progressive Kurdish movement “never surrender”, he stresses, they “know how to fight them” (referring to the stubborn, ideologically-driven militants of ISIS).⁵⁸⁸

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that US participation in the growth of Wahhabi extremism makes the superpower’s claims of fighting for democratic or humanitarian aims in the Muslim World implausible, and its interventions in the region therefore entirely illegitimate. In short, American interference has almost always been destructive, whether in the form of support for Wahhabi forces in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and elsewhere (with the aim of defeating communism, secular progressives, or ‘anti-imperialist’ Shia Islamists) or in the form of direct or covert military operations. With this historical context in mind, there is no way we can ever believe that a superpower historically interested in maintaining an oppressive, anti-democratic status quo in the Middle East (and further afield) is a force for good.

While US elites have proven themselves on countless occasions to be the biggest sponsors of terrorism in the world, this does not mean that Islamists opposed to these forces are by extension revolutionaries. In other words, anti-imperialist rhetoric does not automatically turn a group into a progressive force. And, although it is important to point out that there are Islamist forces in the world that are less extreme (or even ‘more progressive’) than others, the ideology is always reactionary. By exploiting pre-existing conditions (such as poverty, oppression, and sectarian hostility), they often take democracy, freedom, and justice even further away from the hands of the people they claim to serve. Essentially, then, Islamism is simply not the answer to the problems of the world’s exploited masses (in spite of the fact that some Islamists are indeed more open to dialogue and freedom than others). Furthermore, because it generally mobilises people around religion (just like nationalism does with ethnicity), it fatally divides populations by distracting them from the real dichotomy affecting their lives – that of workers and their exploitation at the hands of parasitic ruling elites.

⁵⁸⁸ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4a6e5b90-2460-11e4-be8e-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3CCMcWHSa>

Imperialism and the global capitalist order may indeed be the biggest enemies of the human race, but that does not mean that Islamism is its saviour. In fact, in order to create a world of justice, peace, and freedom, we must fight both forces, just as we must fight all kinds of discrimination: economic, ethnic, sexual, or religious. Simply speaking, exploitation and oppression do not end with war or anti-imperialist rhetoric. They only end with secular and directly democratic actions designed to bolster popular participation in the political process and turn all citizens into the protagonists of a grassroots system geared towards equality, social justice and peaceful coexistence. And that is why neither imperialist adventures (supposedly aimed at 'degrading and destroying 'terrorist' groups') nor reactionary resistance can ever lead to true progress in the world.

In Part Three of this book, I will begin by looking at where the Left should stand on the Syrian Civil War, with a view to justifying the democratically-oriented actions of the Kurds in the north of the country. Then, I will reflect on the growing importance of a secular democratic alternative in Turkey with the PKK, and on how the largely-Kurdish areas in northern Syria have turned into a secular (and socialist) beacon of hope for the Middle East. In particular, I will analyse ISIS's assault on Rojava and the town of Kobani, which would lead the jihadist group into a "war of attrition" against libertarian socialist forces (in which it would suffer "more than its Kurdish adversaries"). In fact, Kurdish journalist Farhad Shami would even insist that the world was "witnessing the defeat" of ISIS in Kobani.⁵⁸⁹ And that will be the focus of the final part of this book – how libertarian socialism is the only force that can truly defeat exploitation, oppression, and sectarian extremism (whether 'religious', ethnic, or political).

⁵⁸⁹ <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/155387-islamic-state-faces-war-of-attrition-in-syria-s-kobane>

Part Three: A Left-Wing Alternative

8) The Left-Wing Divided on the Syrian Civil War

There has been division on the political Left almost since the term ‘socialism’ first appeared in England in 1827, and in France five years later. A “product of two revolutions in human affairs...: the industrial revolution in England and the popular-democratic revolution in France”, the ideology began to discuss how society could move towards justice for all, and what role freedom had to play in that process.⁵⁹⁰ And in these debates lay the seeds of division on the Left. While the generally accepted aim of the movement was to create “a society founded on workers’ control” (a truly democratic form of politics in which the fate of the masses would not be determined by a small, exploitative elite), there would soon be disagreements about the best way to cultivate such a political model.⁵⁹¹

The insufficient amount of open, rational debate between socialists has thus led to the growth of irreconcilable factions ever since the nineteenth century, and either the failure or corruption of many left-wing movements. In particular, the hijacking of socialism in the USSR and elsewhere by bureaucracies and authoritarian elites would appear, in the eyes of a world influenced heavily by Western capitalist propaganda, to discredit the whole socialist ideology. In particular, the “crisis-ridden decade of the 1980s” would deal an essentially fatal blow to ‘actually existing socialism’ and, from the 1990s onwards, the numerous groups on the Left which had not previously been in power began to fight to fill the gap left behind by the Soviet Union.⁵⁹² However, they largely did this separately, and thus failed to forge a truly unified international front against the triumphalist political defenders of capitalism.

In the first two parts of this book, my aim was not to disparage any particular group on the Left. While constructive criticism of left-wing movements is sometimes necessary (as it has been in previous chapters), my main focus has been to condemn the unjust, violent, and discriminatory practices perpetuated by capitalist imperialism, oppressive dictatorships, and quasi-religious extremists in the Middle East. And, indeed, the bulk of left-wing critiques should always lie where it is most due: on such counterrevolutionary and reactionary political forces.

In the fight against capitalism, I believe there must always be genuine, inclusive attempts to unify exploited workers throughout the world, in all of their diversity, because **homogeneity is simply not the solution to creating a better world**. Humanity has an amazing assortment of minds, bodies, and ideas, and it is precisely from this multiplicity that the seeds of progress will be found. No ethnic or religious group is the sole proprietor of truth, and any effort to prove such superiority will inevitably meet with both failure and resistance. Truth is something objective which can be understood only through the use of reason and scientific investigation, and does not simply enter the human brain at birth. Only through education can humankind arrive at the truth, and this learning process must occur through discovery and guidance rather than through authoritarian imposition from above. In fact, the latter can even have the negative impact of pushing people away from the truth.

Just as our relatives in the animal kingdom repel physical transgressions, we human beings naturally resist attacks on our personal freedoms. Therefore, it is entirely logical that, when we are forced to follow a particular school of thought, we either resist or (if we lack the power to do so) become mindless puppets of those pushing us to change. In short, when we

⁵⁹⁰ http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/contemp/pamsetc/socfrombel/sfb_2.htm

⁵⁹¹ http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/contemp/pamsetc/socfrombel/sfb_int.htm

⁵⁹² http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/contemp/pamsetc/socfrombel/sfb_8.htm

cease to use our own mental faculties and instead rely on those of others, we place ourselves at the disposition of counterrevolutionaries, reactionaries, and even criminals.

In other words, freedom-loving forces on the Left must not seek to impose their views on anyone but to convince people using reason and evidence. As any teacher knows, though, education can be a slow process, and is often hindered by a countless number of external factors (including media propaganda, religious indoctrination, and political misinformation). Therefore, all forces on the Left which fight for both freedom and social justice should accept that there are differences and unite in spite of them. Realistically, the human race will not become entirely enlightened tomorrow, next week, or even next year, but it will take even longer for that to happen if the Left remains divided and allows capitalist elites to continue misinforming the public. Essentially, a divided Left (which bickers about secondary issues rather than focussing on the most important ones) will never succeed in creating a fairer, freer, and better world.

In this chapter of the book, I will show why a left-wing analysis that focusses on freedom and social justice above all else is key, and why the world's Left should oppose both the Ba'athist regime of Bashar al-Assad and the Western-backed Islamist forces seeking to overthrow him. I will also take a closer look at the left-wing divisions regarding the Syrian Civil War, with the aim of showing the reader that the conflict has never been as 'black and white' as the media, Western elites, and even some figures on the Left would have them believe.

A) The Issue of Anti-Imperialism

Libertarian socialists have generally criticised both Assad and the Syrian Ba'ath Party on numerous occasions, saying "yes to the Syrian Revolution" but "no to Western intervention". Nonetheless, there has also been an emphasis on the fact that "supporting the revolt as if it is a 'thing' that can be supported as a whole... is seriously problematic as well". For example, when it became clear that the strongest forces in the Syrian Civil War were reactionary Islamists, the 'revolution' that the aforementioned commentators spoke about had clearly taken a back seat (though events in Rojava in northern Syria would keep the revolutionary flame alight).

Groups taking a more authoritarian left-wing stance, meanwhile, tended to focus on the need to support, or at the very least tolerate, Assad's government (due to its position as one of the more progressive Arab political regimes). The main reason for this point of view is that Syria has been seen to oppose Israeli occupation and US-led imperialism in the Middle East on several occasions. For example, the Ba'athist regime supported anti-Zionist resistance through both Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine for a number of years (with the support of its allies in Iran). Focussing on both Zionism and imperialism as the main enemies, therefore, figures on the authoritarian Left have focussed on how the Assad regime (though 'not perfect') is a regional obstacle for these destructive forces. If his government were to fall, they correctly assume, it would play into the hands of both Israel and the USA, and help to isolate Iran even further. In other words, the "axis of resistance" (represented by Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria, and Iran) was considered by the authoritarian left-wing as something positive for the region (even though its component bodies were reactionary forces).⁵⁹³

Fidel Castro, for example, who forged alliances with a number of authoritarian foreign governments during his time in power, has been one of the voices on the left-wing to officially back Assad and his regime. In 2013, he called Syria (and by extension its

⁵⁹³ <http://libcom.org/blog/syria-imperialism-left-1-08082012>, <http://libcom.org/blog/syria-imperialism-left-2-09082012>, and <http://libcom.org/blog/syria-imperialism-left-3-10082012>

government) “valiant” for Assad’s commitment to “resist up to the last breath any attack on his country”.⁵⁹⁴ While his support for Assad could be considered as opposition to the perceived alternative (i.e. reactionary and anti-secular Islamism), however, his stance essentially encourages tolerance of the crimes committed by the also-reactionary Ba’athist regime.

Critical of both Western imperialism and Islamic extremism, Castro actually claimed that figures like John McCain had “participated with [Mossad] in the creation of the Islamic State”.⁵⁹⁵ The anti-terrorist website Cubadebate, meanwhile, created the image (which was largely correct) that opponents of Assad were primarily “Islamist extremists”,⁵⁹⁶ and that they had prepared “chemical attacks”.⁵⁹⁷ At the same time, the site affirmed that Assad had achieved “electoral”,⁵⁹⁸ “moral and military” victories in Syria, showing a clear pro-regime bias.⁵⁹⁹ In short, such a stance failed to recognise the legitimate demands of Syrian workers for freedom and justice; the negative and dictatorial aspects of Assad’s rule; and the small number of positive examples that had come from opposition to the Ba’athist government (like the Rojava Revolution).

Just Cause for Revolution

Rebels in Syria have been called, often accurately, tools for Western interests by certain figures on the Left. In other words, they have been seen as forces that would benefit capitalism, Zionism, and “conservative pro-Western regimes like [Turkey,] Qatar and Saudi Arabia”. In effect, they believed the civil war had become a “proxy war against not just Syria, but mainly Iran”. Although, to a certain extent, these assertions were true, says Peter Storm at LibCom.org, they do not mean that “a defeat of the armed revolt should be applauded”.

Storm asserts that “the anti-imperialism of Syria [was] doubly fake”, insisting that the “Assad dynasty [had] collaborated with the US empire as it saw fit” in the past. In its hatred of Saddam’s Iraqi Ba’athism, for example, the Syrian leadership sent “Syrian soldiers alongside the US, UK, Saudi and other troops, to fight the Iraqi state in the Gulf War in 1991”. Later, Bashar al-Assad “accepted prisoners [that] the US [had] sent to Syria to be “interrogated””. According to Storm, “the Syrian state, and its business backers”, far from being progressive, simply represented “local capitalist interests”. Support for the resistance movements of “the Hezbollah and Hamas connection”, meanwhile, just gave the dictatorial Iranian-Syrian bloc “extra power” and credibility in Arab communities angry at Israeli war crimes in Palestine and Lebanon.

At the same time, Russia also had economic interests at stake in Syria (which had “been armed by Russia for a long time” and even hosted a Russian naval base). Having lost many trade partners to the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia did not want to lose Syria too, Storm stresses. Meanwhile, Russia’s proximity to the Middle East (and its southern border with Muslim nations) meant that it had greater cause to fear the spread of Wahhabi Islamism than the West. The “officially secular Syrian regime – which smashed a Muslim Brotherhood revolt” in 1982 – was therefore seen to be on the ‘right side’ of the fight against Wahhabi-inspired fundamentalism.

Russia’s alliance with Syria, however, is not proof of the latter’s anti-imperialist characteristics. Both, essentially, were capitalist nations and, while defending Syria may

⁵⁹⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/ultimas_noticias/2013/08/130828_ultnot_fidel_castro_siria_snowden_mr.shtml

⁵⁹⁵ <http://www.elnuevoherald.com/2014/09/01/1833179/1fidel-castro-arremete-contra.html> and <http://rt.com/news/184340-castro-compares-nato-nazi/>

⁵⁹⁶ <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2014/03/01/decenas-de-heridos-en-damasco-por-atentados-terroristas/#.VAjO02OGcSE>

⁵⁹⁷ <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2014/04/01/rebeldes-sirios-preparan-un-ataque-quimico-para-acusar-al-gobierno/#.VAjO4mOGcSE>

⁵⁹⁸ www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2014/06/04/aplastante-victoria-de-bashar-al-assad-en-elecciones-presidenciales-en-siria/#.VAjO9WOGcSE

⁵⁹⁹ www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2014/05/08/al-assad-triunfa-moral-y-militarmente-en-homs/#.VAjO62OGcSE

have meant opposing Western imperialism, it also meant siding with a Moscow-led form of imperialism (or “imperialism’s weaker wing”, according to Storm). Although the Ba’ath party did indeed enforce reforms in the 1960s (and “some of these reforms benefitted workers and poor peasants”), they were all “bureaucratically controlled from above”, leading to the creation of an “**authoritarian welfare state**”.

Despite giving a few tokens of social justice to the people, then, the Syrian regime soon “became **an enforcer of capitalism and a capitalist in its own right**”. Bashar al-Assad would later go even further, presiding over neoliberal reforms and undermining “the limited economic security that [had previously] existed”. The social contract between the government and the Syrian people therefore began to break down, and anger logically started to grow. According to Storm, it is no coincidence that the 2011 protests against Assad “generally started in poor neighbourhoods”. In fact, while Syrian workers suffered from increasing economic insecurity, however, “people from the business class generally remained supportive of, or at least tolerant towards, the regime”. As a result, Storm stresses, it is completely unfair to describe all Syrian protesters as simply a “proxy force for reactionary powers”.

In short, Storm asserts, we must empathise completely with the “poor and oppressed people in rebellion” against Assad’s government. At the same time, however, we must remember that the civil war is not just “a struggle for freedom and justice”. Whilst legitimately sympathising with “a struggle against oppression”, he says, we must not seek “allies where allies cannot be found”.

Reactionary Rebels

Although arms shipments from pro-Western states in the Middle East and Libya-like NATO plans to bomb Syria were negative in themselves (and far from innocent attempts to help the people), the effect that this interference had on the Syrian Civil War was also to make reactionary forces much stronger than ‘revolutionary’ forces. Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for example, may have opposed Assad, but they also had no interest in creating a liberal or secular regime in Syria. As a result, they were never likely to fund any truly revolutionary or progressive forces in the country. Instead, their arms usually ended up in the hands of reactionary “armed insurgent groups” like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.

Western ally Turkey, meanwhile, with its neoliberal Islamist government, had both an economic and ideological reason to oppose the Syrian government. At the same time, argues Pepe Escobar, a planned oil and gas “pipeline project connecting Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean” would have left Turkey “out of the loop”, while benefitting Iran significantly. As a result, he says, Turkey played host to the “nerve centres of the FSA”, helping fighters to train and giving them the chance to regroup (whilst also giving more radical Islamist rebels freedom of movement across its borders). Moreover, as a member of NATO, it would be naïve to suppose that Turkey had not received support from other NATO nations in the West for these actions.

“The Syrian National Congress”, meanwhile, which was founded in Turkey in August 2011 as a sort of ‘government in exile’, had “spokespeople who [were] connected to all kinds of US government-funded bodies”, representing the way in which US elites were committed to avoiding “thorough change from below” and saw pro-US reforms involving current elites to be much more preferable. The USA, according to Storm, was only supporting the opposition “in order to prevent its development in a revolutionary direction” (much as was seen in Chapter Six of this book). For anyone on the Left to support Western interference, therefore, would be to encourage “the events to develop in a more and more counterrevolutionary direction”.

At the same time, says Storm, “the Saudi and Qatari regimes detest the Syrian regime... because it opposes their ambitions and religious preferences”. They also oppose Iranian (and Shia) influence in the region, preferring instead the formation of “a conservative [read Wahhabi] Sunni identity”, opposed to both Shiite and secular governments. As a result, Qatar in particular supported “the most right-wing, Sunni-based Jihadi forces within the revolt” in Syria (as seen in Chapter Seven). And such “a Western-backed, Saudi-and-Qatari-armed, well-organized insurgency”, Storm argues, would simply see “one oppressive regime [replaced] with another”. In short, the more Western (and pro-Western) interference in the region there was, the more chance there would be that such a reactionary situation would come to pass.

In Libya, the West had claimed to be standing up for “democracy and freedom” against “dictatorship”, but in fact wanted to ensure its own influence on the Arab Spring revolutionaries (whilst ensuring its own access to Libya’s natural resources). The US had already been on “the wrong side” of the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, and now wanted to kill two birds with one stone, by both improving its image (by presenting itself as “freedom's friend again”) and undermining governments in Libya and Syria that were not completely subservient to Western interests. Support from the West for revolts, meanwhile, would also help to ensure that new regimes would buy arms from (and sell oil to) the West after taking power (or at least that was the plan). In summary, “intervening in Libya and Syria” was “a form of business investment”.

Overall, we can say that the Syrian Revolution was indeed hijacked very early on thanks to the support received from pro-Western forces, leading to numerous tales of “sectarian dynamics, attacks on minorities, on non-Sunni communities like Alawites, [and] execution and mistreatment of prisoners”. FSA fighters, for example, were allegedly involved in exacting revenge “on people suspected of sympathizing with the regime”, and in using “bloodthirsty rhetoric against not just regime supporters but against whole communities” such as the Alawites. “These disagreeable aspects of the revolt”, asserts Storm, were “not minor incidents”, but were instead “symptomatic of a [reactionary] right wing of the revolt”. And the horrific violence perpetrated by some Islamist groups (as seen in the previous chapter) would be characteristic of this dark aspect of the Syrian civil war that steadily grew in power after 2011.

Although Storm mentions the positive presence of the “LCC [or Local Coordinating Committees], building community resistance” at the start of the Syrian Civil War, he emphasises that “large parts of the FSA are sectarian outfits, and the various Jihadi groups outside it certainly are”. For him, this fact is a significant reason not to “cheerlead the resistance as a whole” or “talk about “The Syrian Revolution” as mainly a wave of progressive resistance”, which it clearly is not. Instead, he calls on left-wingers to acknowledge that there were “deep social roots” for the rebellion, whilst insisting that “the dominant ideologies, practices and organisations now leading the revolt” must “be exposed and opposed just as ferociously as the regime”.⁶⁰⁰

Hezbollah’s Progressive Characteristics but Reactionary Nature

As shown in Chapters Five and Seven, the Iranian Bloc cannot and should not be considered to be either revolutionary or progressive simply because it tends to employ anti-imperialist rhetoric. The fact that Hezbollah has righteously resisted Zionist invasions of Lebanon (protecting innocent civilians in the process), for example, does not mean that it is not essentially a reactionary force (albeit to a much lesser extent than other reactionary forces).

⁶⁰⁰ <http://libcom.org/blog/syria-imperialism-left-1-08082012>, <http://libcom.org/blog/syria-imperialism-left-2-09082012>, and <http://libcom.org/blog/syria-imperialism-left-3-10082012>

By extension, the group's backing of "Assad's troops in Syria" and the Lebanese government's decision to unanimously support its army's fight against ISIS does not make either the Syrian or Lebanese regimes progressive.

Hezbollah's support for Assad shows, at least in part, that the group does not want to lose funding or arms from Syria and its sponsors in Iran. At the same time, it shows the group's awareness that Wahhabi extremists have a fundamentally anti-Shia agenda, and that it must therefore stop such forces from attacking its territory. Its backing of the government and the Lebanese army, meanwhile, demonstrates to a certain extent that Hezbollah realises that it should not get involved in a direct frontal conflict with Wahhabi terrorists, as such a confrontation could spark sectarian tensions within Lebanon itself. In fact, it even emphasised that "addressing militarily developments on the ground, protecting civilians and confronting terrorist groups were the exclusive responsibility of the Lebanese Army".⁶⁰¹ While Syrian analyst Hassan Hassan insists that "Hezbollah's involvement [in the Syrian Civil War] and rumors that the Americans might work with Assad against jihadists are dangerous ingredients for increased sectarian antagonism", however, he also stresses that Hezbollah's "rhetoric condemning "takfiris" resonates among some of the Sunnis in Lebanon".

While the "anti-ISIS push will benefit Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, who are presenting themselves as the counterweight to ISIS", according to Hassan, their fight against Wahhabi extremists does not make them revolutionaries (just as the West's campaign against the jihadists does not make it revolutionary). Simply speaking, Hezbollah's opposition to ISIS comes primarily because the group has shown itself to be, in the words of Swedish journalist Aron Lund, "very interested in setting Lebanon alight" as a way of attracting prospective fighters and "feeding off of sectarian tension in the country". In order for Hezbollah to come out of the ISIS crisis intact, Lund asserts, it will need to pay careful attention to "reducing sectarian tensions and increasing unity".⁶⁰²

In other words, while too active a participation in the Syrian Civil War could actually be counterproductive for Hezbollah, the group's cautiousness could actually see it play an important anti-sectarian role in Lebanon. Even though 'secular Islamism' is essentially a contradiction in terms, Hezbollah comes close to being a force for unity in spite of its essentially sectarian nature (even if its actions are driven by a desire for self-preservation). Although it has some progressive characteristics, however, the fact that it "looks to the [authoritarian] fundamentalist clerics running Iran as role models", whilst at the same time forging alliances with "first one and then another sectarian bourgeois political force", means that is, ultimately, a reactionary force.⁶⁰³

The 'Anti-Imperialist' Iranian Bloc and its Fight against ISIS

The argument that the Iranian Bloc is revolutionary (because of certain anti-imperialist rhetoric or activity) comes in part from the idea that the Wahhabi extremists of ISIS, as seen previously in this book, are simply "part of a series of militant Islamist movements that gained strength during the Cold War as the USA fought to counter communist or anti-imperialist powers with anti-communist Muslim extremists in the Middle East". It also comes from the idea that, as Seymour Hersh has said, the USA sought to "reconfigure its priorities in the Middle East" in the early twenty-first century in order to "undermine Iran".

To a certain extent, Hersh says, the latter strategy was put into action by the USA "working with Saudi Arabia's government... in clandestine operations that [were] intended to weaken

⁶⁰¹ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Aug-06/266207-hezbollah-denies-role-in-clashes.ashx#axzz39YVAWxES>

⁶⁰² http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Aug-28/268746-hezbollah-must-take-back-seat-in-fight-against-isis-analysts.ashx?utm_source=Magnet&utm_medium=Recommended%20Articles%20widget&utm_campaign=Magnet%20tools#axzz3DjNcettQ

⁶⁰³ <http://www.comunistvoice.org/40cHez-WWP.html>

Hezbollah". It was also implemented through "clandestine operations aimed at Iran" itself, he asserts, along with "its ally Syria". The biggest "by-product of these activities", he stresses, was the "bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that [espoused] a militant vision of Islam and [were] hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda".⁶⁰⁴

For Global Research's Tony Cartalucci, these "well-funded, heavily armed, professionally organized... terror hordes [originating] from NATO territory" aimed to "supplant pro-Iranian political and military fronts across Tehran's arc of influence". Even "as early as 2007", he says, the USA was "arming, funding, and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and a myriad of armed terrorist organizations to overthrow the government of Syria, fight Hezbollah in Lebanon, and undermine the power and influence of Iran".

ISIS, meanwhile, "was armed and funded by US CIA agents with cash and weapons brought in from the Saudis, Qataris, and NATO members themselves", Cartalucci argues. As a "standing army" rather than a guerrilla group, he insists, ISIS always required "state sponsorship", including "billions in cash, gear, weapons, and logistical, intelligence, and political support". As the West handed over "hundreds of millions" to support 'moderate' fighters in the Syrian Civil War, he asserts, it gave "no plausible explanation as to who [was] providing ISIS and other [Wahhabi extremists] with even more resources" - allowing them to become the dominant forces in the conflict. All of this, Cartalucci claims, leaves "no other explanation besides the fact that there were never any moderates to begin with and that the US, UK, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and even Israel, [had] from the beginning, intentionally created a mercenary army composed of Al Qaeda extremists of unprecedented dimensions and capabilities".⁶⁰⁵

The aforementioned extremist organisations, as seen in the Chapter Seven, were indeed incredibly reactionary forces with almost no progressive elements. And with the USA being accused of "having armed, funded, and assisted ISIS into existence", it is very easy to see the Iranian Bloc's opposition to both imperialism and Wahhabi Islamism as revolutionary (although **counter-reactionary would be a much more accurate term**). In short, despite the fact that this Bloc logically sees "the idea of America "intervening" to stop ISIS [as] comparable to an arsonist extinguishing his fire with more gasoline", Iran, Syria, and even Hezbollah can only be described as reactionary forces themselves (though to different extents and in different ways). And we should not be confused into believing (because they are much less reactionary than ISIS and other Wahhabi groups) that they are actually revolutionary forces.

If there is one thing we can say for sure, however, it is that the "artificially created but growing sectarian divide" between Sunnis and Shias in the Muslim World will not end with further US interference in the region. Any government or force forming an alliance with the USA, for example, is likely to be "immediately tainted in the minds of [the opposing] forces". If the Iranian Bloc allied itself with the West, for example, ISIS would likely attract even more support, and "any meaningful attempts on the ground to stop ISIS from establishing itself in Iraq and using Iraqi territory to launch attacks against both Tehran and Damascus" would almost certainly be undermined by such an alliance.⁶⁰⁶ Nonetheless, a coalition like this will never be able to form as long as the USA continues to sanction Iran and Iran continues to spout anti-Zionist rhetoric.

Another point to consider is the fact that the Iranian Bloc itself formed precisely because of US support for Wahhabists in Saudi Arabia (and elsewhere). As seen in Chapter Five,

⁶⁰⁴ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/isis-made-in-usa-iraq-geopolitical-arsonists-seek-to-burn-region/5387475>

⁶⁰⁵ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/washingtons-diabolical-agenda-in-iraq-us-pledges-humanitarian-airstrikes-against-us-sponsored-terrorists/5395190>

⁶⁰⁶ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/isis-made-in-usa-iraq-geopolitical-arsonists-seek-to-burn-region/5387475>

neither Wahhabism nor reactionary Shia anti-imperialism would have gained the strength that they did without Western interference in the Muslim World. Thus, far from being a sign of progress, the presence of both counter-revolutionary Islamist forces simply shows how toxic the USA's presence in the Middle East has been.

As Barry Grey at the World Socialist Web Site says, ISIS has ““Made in the USA” stamped all over it”, having overrun much of Iraq precisely because of “criminal decisions [of American elites] that go back nearly twenty-five years”. As seen already in this book, the superpower could be said to have “deliberately stoked... sectarian tensions... as part of a divide-and-rule strategy” in Iraq, replacing the anti-Wahhabi Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein with a discriminatory Shia regime while subsequently supporting Wahhabi extremists to defeat the governments of Libya and Syria.⁶⁰⁷ For such reasons, claims Cartalucci, the solution to ISIS advances is not US intervention, but rests upon “uniting genuine Sunni and Shia groups together to purge what is [due to the “foreign-funded nature of ISIS” effectively another] foreign invasion of Iraqi territory”.⁶⁰⁸

As Assad's Syria and Islamist Iran have actually intensified sectarianism themselves, however, they are not the correct forces to be in charge of an anti-sectarian strategy. The Shia government of Iraq (created and supported by the USA and sponsored by Iran), for example, forced vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi (“Iraq's top Sunni”) to flee the country in 2012, sentencing him to death in absentia. As a result, Sunnis subsequently felt they had “no political representation”, and “ISIS and al-Qaeda” were effectively allowed to take “advantage and [appropriate] Sunni Islam” in Iraq.⁶⁰⁹

As shown both in this section and previously in this book, neither the USA and its allies nor the so-called ‘anti-imperialist’ Iranian Bloc hold the solution to the problems of the Middle East. Essentially, neither grouping has any moral authority regarding Iraq, and neither can escape blame for the sectarianisation of the civil war in Syria. And, as such, only secular and directly democratic force (independent from both of the aforementioned blocs) could truly forge a much-needed solution for the region.

Independent Does Not Mean Revolutionary

Essentially, the USA's hostility towards the Iranian Bloc is not about the socio-economic ideologies of Iran, Syria, or Hezbollah. It is about the fact that any force expressing anti-imperialist sentiments, whether a truly progressive political force or not, is a danger to ‘US (economic) interests’. Therefore, while the Left must emphasise its anti-imperialism, it must not ally itself with reactionary forces simply because they ‘talk the anti-imperialist talk’.

The biggest enemy of the people of the Middle East is clearly imperialism (and its search for capitalist hegemony), and is represented in the region by the US-funded political regimes of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and elsewhere. However, it is also entirely acceptable, justifiable, and necessary to criticise the crimes committed by the Iranian and Syrian regimes. The presence of ISIS and other Wahhabi jihadists in the Middle East does not immediately mean that left-wingers have to choose between the US Bloc and the Iranian Bloc. It is completely possible to side with Middle Eastern workers whilst opposing imperialism, Shia Islamism, Ba'athism, and Wahhabi extremism. Fundamentally, the issue is that, in the case of ISIS, it appears that the interests of the West, the Iranian Bloc, and the people of the region seem to overlap, with none of them really wanting the violent, volatile group to hold any power.

⁶⁰⁷ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/08/09/pers-a09.html>

⁶⁰⁸ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/isis-made-in-usa-iraq-geopolitical-arsonists-seek-to-burn-region/5387475>

⁶⁰⁹ <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across>

Because of the aforementioned 'overlapping interests', Obama's rhetoric regarding Assad (which spoke of how the latter was "no longer fit to lead after "imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people"" in 2011, and of how the USA "should take military action against Syrian regime targets" in 2013) had to be toned down when ISIS suddenly became the stated priority in 2014. Nonetheless, even in 2012 the US regime knew that "most of the arms shipped [to Syria] at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar" were "going to hard-line Islamic jihadists", showing that replacing Assad only became less of a priority when ISIS finally got media attention in 2014. In fact, Secretary of State John Kerry, having compared Assad to Hitler, even claimed that striking the Syrian regime was "a matter of national security", of "the credibility of the United States of America", and "of upholding the interests of [US] allies and friends in the region". In short, Syria's government (though not progressive) was independent of the USA and its allies, and it therefore had to be overthrown.

Early on in the Syrian Civil War, Western military action against Assad was "thwarted...by overwhelming American public opinion" and "a resounding rejection by the UK Parliament". When ISIS gained more media coverage in the middle of 2014, it was no longer possible to keep up the charade of acting like the opposition to Assad was mostly 'moderate'. But there was also a new opportunity for renewed military action in the Middle East. ISIS may have needed to be the focus, but the end game was essentially the same - increasing US hegemony in the region.

America's credibility was really being shaken, as the war it had been fuelling against a supposedly Hitler-like figure had turned into the kind of slaughter-fest that Hitler himself would have been proud of. After a decade of the 'War on Terror', meanwhile, the USA had happily begun to "fight on the same side" (in Libya and then Syria) as the very Wahhabi jihadists it had allegedly been trying to pummel out of existence, "arming and empowering them" along the way. As damage control (or the final stage of a covert strategy, depending on how we wish to see it), the USA now needed to renew its military activities in the Middle East

In spite of the USA's previous aggression towards the Syrian regime, the supposedly irrational leader of the besieged country (who America and its allies had been seeking to topple for years) now "signaled [his] readiness to work with the United States in a coordinated campaign" against ISIS. In late August 2014, Glenn Greenwald at The Intercept spoke about how "the standard Pentagon courtiers of the US media and war-cheering foreign policy elites" had forgotten about Assad for a while, and were now "dutifully following suit, mindlessly depicting ISIS as an unprecedented combination of military might and well-armed and well-funded savagery" (without delving into where the group got their arms and funds from). As was custom, Greenwald asserts, they spoke about the "brutality and extremism" of one group whilst ignoring, and even actively supporting, "all sorts of brutal and extreme parties [elsewhere] in the region". In other words, the US elites love playing with fire but, when the flames they have ignited periodically go out of control, they try reining them back with even more fire.

According to the New America Foundation's Brian Fishman, "war is the only force terrible enough to hold together a broad and extreme enough Sunni coalition to be amenable to ISIL". Without war, he claims, ISIS would simply be "a fringe terrorist organization". For Greenwald, though, "**US military action in the Middle East is the end in itself, and the particular form it takes... is an ancillary consideration**". The superpower could not enter into Syria to attack Assad without either mass protests at home or the condemnation of the international community (especially after what had happened in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya years before). Fighting against ISIS, however, could easily get the backing of citizens back home and political associates abroad (even if it was an absurd solution to a problem

rooted in foreign provocation and internal political marginalisation, injustice, and oppression).

The USA wanted to be involved militarily in some way in the Middle East, and ISIS finally provided the best way to do so. In fact, the Agence France-Presse even reported in late 2014 that the USA was “sharing intelligence about jihadist deployments with Damascus through Iraqi and Russian channels”.⁶¹⁰ To use John Kerry’s terminology, either Assad was never ‘Hitler’ (and thus US aggression was unjustified and provocative) or he was indeed ‘Hitler’ (and the USA, as a closet fascist, was actually helping ‘Hitler’ by fighting against his enemies). And even if we were to analyse this situation from a pro-imperialist or pro-capitalist perspective, something would not ring true about US rhetoric and action.

For Barry Grey, the choice for the working classes of the world was not between the US Bloc or the Iranian Bloc. Instead, their choice was either to “disarm the warmongers” at the top of their societies, or to face “one war after another”. While recognising that the Iranian Bloc does not provide the solution for the Middle East is a first step, workers must build a “mass international anti-war movement”, and must help others to realise that **overthrowing capitalism** - “the root cause of war” - **is a necessity**.⁶¹¹ US-backed dictatorships have never tried to overthrow capitalism, and neither have Ba’athist Syria and Islamist Iran. And therefore, workers must understand that the anti-imperialist rhetoric of such forces simply distracts the Left from the real struggle: that of replacing exploitation with social justice, oppression with freedom, and war with peace.

Opposition to the USA’s Agenda in Syria

Even the Maoist Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) criticises both the West and Syria’s Ba’athist regime. Larry Everest argues on the RCP website that the USA’s agenda in Syria was always imperialist and never humanitarian, but also emphasises that the uprising in 2011 was a “Syrian people’s revolt against Assad’s brutal, oppressive, pro-imperialist rule” (in contrast with groups claiming Assad was anti-imperialist). Although it included “reactionary Islamists, pro-U.S. exiles, and former members of the regime”, Everest asserts that the “Syrian masses” also took part in the rebellion. At the same time, he insists there is no way the Left could truly justify the regime’s response, with Assad’s forces “firing directly on protesters, arresting and torturing suspected opponents, and indiscriminately shelling neighborhoods”.

Nonetheless, Everest claims, it is clear from the words of “U.S. officials and strategists” that their “motives for intervening in Syria” never had anything “to do with stopping violence in the region or emancipating the Syrian people”. Their “maneuvers and machinations”, he stresses, were simply “aimed at seizing on the Syrian uprising to get rid of a troublesome regime, and strengthen Israel and overall U.S. imperialist control of the Middle East”. Any claims of humanitarianism, meanwhile, merely served as “window dressing to facilitate that goal”.

Regime change in Syria, he maintains, was always a way of getting to Iran, which was key in the “battle for dominance in this region”. And, as the “only Middle East regime [openly] allied with Iran” (and a “conduit for Iranian influence in Lebanon and Palestine”), Syria was considered to be the “front line of defense against the United States and Israel” for Iran. Getting rid of Assad, then, would have severely limited “Iran’s ability to retaliate against a U.S. and/or Israeli attack”.

⁶¹⁰ <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/08/26/fun-empire-fighting-sides-war/> and http://stopwar.org.uk/news/how-syria-s-new-hitler-turned-into-us-partner-in-less-than-a-year#.U_4_v2OGcSG

⁶¹¹ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/08/09/pers-a09.html>

Iran and “Islamist forces like Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon”, Everest asserts, are essentially “oppressive political forces who do not pose a fundamental challenge to global capitalism-imperialism”. However, “their aims and ambitions clash sharply with those of the U.S. and Israel in the region”. The Iranian Revolution, along with the “criminal U.S. and Israeli assaults on the region’s people”, Everest says, had a profound impact on the growth of the anti-Zionist (and arguably anti-imperialist) Islamist groups mentioned above. Therefore, weakening these movements would, in the words of John McCain, be “the biggest strategic setback for Iran in 25 years” (read here the ‘biggest win for Zionism and imperialism’).

Both imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism, Everest argues, are “outmoded forces” which have been clashing more and more in the last couple of decades because of the USA’s search to “solidify its control of the Middle East”. With the “Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis” being “the main obstacle to American and Israeli hegemony in the Middle East... in recent years”, he says, the USA and Israel have sought to weaken the Bloc by “backing various forms of intervention in Syria” (such as “Turkey’s efforts to use Syrian military opposition elements to form an army under its control” and “the money and arms... pouring into the country from Qatar and Saudi Arabia”).

Overall, while Islamism is not the solution for the Muslim World, Everest asserts, “60-plus years of U.S. control” have only brought the Middle East “a cavalcade of horrors from intervention and war, to ethnic cleansing, to torture and tyranny”. The regimes of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, for example, “all had repressive regimes, and the U.S. justified military action as a moral effort to help their peoples”, but US military action simply “made things exponentially worse by inflicting catastrophic levels of death and destruction and imposing new forms of oppression”. For Everest, “what the U.S. brings to the world is not democracy, but capitalism-imperialism and political structures that support capitalism-imperialism”. And, while the Left must recognise that Syria and Iran are reactionary forces, he suggests, the workers of the world needed to oppose US-led intervention in the region, which would only bring more death, destruction, and oppression to its people.⁶¹²

Summary

In short, there are three enemies of the Syrian Revolution: Assad and his Ba’athists, who want to crush it; the West, which wants to hijack it and ensure it replaces Assad’s regime with a subservient, pro-Western government; and the conservative Islamist right-wing, which persecutes certain ethnic groups and, in its very worst cases, aims to establish an oppressive and quasi-religious political regime. The Left should back none of these forces, and should only back the genuine calls of the Syrian working class for justice, freedom, and democracy.

While Western left-wingers can do very little to support the Syrian Revolution directly, or prevent the counter-revolutionary forces at work within it from gaining even more power, they can work hard at home to oppose Western intervention (and thus a continued ‘counter-revolutionary derailment’ of the revolution). Perhaps the best way of salvaging something positive from the revolutionary process in Syria, however, is to publicise the more hopeful aspects of the Syrian revolt (such as the Rojava Revolution, which will be analysed in much greater detail from Chapter Ten onwards).

B) A Third Way

⁶¹² <http://revcom.us/a/265/US-agenda-in-Syria-imperialism-not-humanism-en.html>

In 2012, PKK affiliates pushed Ba'athist forces out of the Kurdish territories of northern Syria (which are known as Rojava). Knowing that Kurdish autonomy on the Turkish border could cause problems for Turkey (and its attempts to flood Syria with Islamist militants), the majority of the regime's soldiers were sent to fight elsewhere in Syria, with few being left behind in Rojava. Subsequently, the inhabitants of Rojava set about creating a system of democratic autonomy in their homelands. This experience will be discussed in depth from Chapter Ten onwards, but below I will outline the reaction of left-wing groups to the Rojava Revolution, whilst refuting the ill-informed claims of some left-wingers (and other commentators) that Rojavans were supported by Israel.

A Variety of Left-Wing Groups Back Rojava

The Trotskyist and anti-imperialist Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG) (criticised by Permanent Revolution for its "uncritical support for the Cuban regime") insists that left-wingers must support initiatives like those taken in Rojava.⁶¹³ It spoke in early 2014 about how the autonomous region of Rojava was "under attack by the reactionary and colonial forces in the Middle East", which were seeking to "isolate [it] by closing borders". The group also gives an overview of the history of Kurds in Syria, speaking of how they were denied national rights when Syria was controlled by France between 1920 and 1946 (and how things remained the same after the French had left). Kurdish people "were considered as 'foreigners living in the region'", it asserts, and were consistently denied their "rights to education, property and movement".

After the Ba'ath Party had taken control in 1963, it stresses, the newly "Arab country... considered [Kurds] to be migrants from Turkey and Kurdish identity was banned". Effectively, it adds, they "were forced to live as refugees in their own land". As a result of these racist policies, and the imprisonment and exile of Kurdish political figures, significant opposition to Ba'athism grew in Syrian Kurdistan particularly in the early twenty-first century. According to the RCG, Kurds even led an abortive uprising in 2004, showing that the current Rojava Revolution was not without precedent.⁶¹⁴

Even the "anti-revisionist and anti-Trotskyist"⁶¹⁵ communist coalition ICOR, meanwhile, recognised in late 2013 the "movement for freedom, human rights, and the abolition of the state of emergency in place since 1963" in Syria. In doing so, it also recognised "the Kurdish liberation movement in the north of the country", which had begun the "construction of structures of self-government in political, social, economic, military, and cultural fields". In short, the group expressed its solidarity with Rojavan autonomy, and condemned Turkey and Iraq for closing their borders with the newly autonomous region.⁶¹⁶

Israel backs Kurdish Independence, but What Type?

The above support was not echoed by all left-wingers, however, with one big left-wing criticism of supporting Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria being that right-wing Zionists had allegedly given their support to the Kurdish cause because of the fragmentation it would lead to in hostile nations like Iraq, Syria, and Iran. As seen in Chapter Four, though, the Kurdish force that Israel and its allies support the most is that of the Kurdish nationalists of northern Iraq (and not that of the progressive, PKK-affiliated Kurdish movement elsewhere).

⁶¹³ <http://www.permanentrevolution.net/entry/1138>

⁶¹⁴ <http://www.revolutionarycommunist.org/index.php/international/3439-rk190214>

⁶¹⁵ <http://www.icor.info/acerca-de-icor>

⁶¹⁶ <http://www.icor.info/2013-2/contra-toda-agresion-imperialista-2013-defiendan-el-camino-de-la-liberacion-y-de-la-iniciativa-democratica-en-rojava-kurdistan-occidental-en-siria-del-norte>

According to the “right-wing Zionist and notoriously anti-Arab” Daniel Pipes,⁶¹⁷ speaking in September 2014, Iraqi Kurdistan had proven itself to be a secular force, having accepting “hundreds of thousands of refugees” (who sought to “benefit from Kurdistan’s security, tolerance and opportunities”) who had escaped from territory controlled by ISIS. The autonomous rule that the region had gained in the early nineties, Pipes says, had effectively made it “the Switzerland of the Muslim Middle East”.

The key to Pipes’ support, however, along with that of other Zionist allies, is the fact that the leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan are “commercially minded”. He even speaks of how they had rejected the insurgent methods of the PKK in Turkey and their allies elsewhere (suggesting that the ideology of the progressive Kurdish movement was something negative). He also emphasises their “responsible diplomacy” and their “international trade accords”, referring in particular to the fact that they had not taken a firmly anti-Zionist stance and had been prepared to deal with Israel. This “superior record”, Pipes says, made Kurdish nationalists in the KRG a force deserving of Zionist support. It also meant, he insists, that “outside powers” should “encourage its independence” from Iraq.

The prospect of “adding a sizable new [pro-Israeli and pro-capitalist] country and partially dismembering its four neighbors”, Pipes asserts, is simply something that Israel could never oppose. The “regionwide destabilization” that the “emergence of a Kurdish state” would cause is, he claims, “dangerous but necessary”.⁶¹⁸ At the same time, however, he fails to understand that the far more popular force in Kurdish politics is not the KDP of Barzani or the PUK of Talabani, but the PKK and its regional allies (whose autonomy would be very different from that of the ‘commercially minded’ Kurdish nationalists). Therefore, while the current KRG is a force supported by Israel, its ignorance or ‘wishful thinking’ (about what would happen if Iraqi Kurdistan joined together with Kurdish areas in Turkey, Syria, and Iran) is severely premature, as will be seen in the following chapters.

Conclusion

Whether we talk about imperialists claiming to spread democracy, Arab nationalists claiming to be leading a revolutionary process, or Islamists claiming to fight exploitative imperialist influence in the Muslim World, we are essentially talking about different types of the same thing. Fundamentally, all of the aforementioned groups fear the independent voices of the workers they aim to influence, and that is why they usually resort to force or misinformation in order to ensure they have sufficient support to govern. At the same time, they are all top-down movements that claim to know the best way forward for the People, whilst actually representing interests contrary to those of their citizens. For that reason, they aim to keep true democratic control out of the People’s hands. And, essentially, when a population does not have a say in all of the issues that have an impact on their lives, it does not have true democracy. Such a system, whether in the hands of capitalist governments, Arab nationalists, or Islamists, inevitably breeds resistance. And the more that resistance is oppressed, the more violent it becomes.

While the horrors committed by many of the strongest groups in the Syrian Civil War have represented the counterrevolutionary derailment of the rebellion, however, the PKK’s affiliates in the country have been the most powerful force for secularism, democracy, and peace. As such, they are the only real hope for avoiding and destroying the sectarianism created by Assad, the Western-backed Islamist opposition, and the Frankenstein’s monster that is ISIS. And, while debate is necessary, and there should be no blind support for the PKK’s allies in Syria, the facts on the ground show that these forces have protected citizens

⁶¹⁷ <https://occupiedpalestine.wordpress.com/2013/01/30/wefightback-activists-confront-pro-israel-rally-at-university-of-new-orleans/>

⁶¹⁸ <http://www.newsweek.com/its-time-kurds-set-their-own-nation-270815>

from ISIS, and have improved the role of women and minorities in Rojava (issues that will be discussed further in the following chapters).

In Chapter Nine, I will focus on the PKK and the role it has played in Turkish and Middle Eastern politics since its creation in the late 1970s, precisely with the aim of better understanding the context of the Rojava Revolution. From Chapter Ten onwards, I will then examine in much greater depth the alternative system that Rojavans have created in the middle of the Syrian Civil War (which offers hope to the region and the world), and how they have fought hand in hand with the PKK against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq.

9) The Renewal of the PKK in Turkey

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (or PKK) "took up arms in 1984 to fight for Kurdish independence", later revising that goal to autonomy in the largely Kurdish areas of south-eastern Turkey.⁶¹⁹ Founded in late November 1978 in response to the discriminatory and oppressive policies of the Turkish nationalist establishment, the group would launch a full-scale insurgency against the state in 1984, fighting until 1999 when the capture of its leader Abdullah Öcalan forced them into announcing a unilateral cease-fire.

As a "Marxist guerrilla movement" (and opponent of NATO-member Turkey), the USA, the EU, and NATO all officially classified the PKK as a 'terrorist' organisation. At the same time, many "leftists [would] largely write them off as Stalinists", in large part because of the central role of Öcalan in the movement.⁶²⁰ According to historian William Blum, however, "a 'terrorist' – the Nazi's term for World War II resistance fighters" – is simply someone who "fights for what he believes in", while "a soldier [is someone who] fights for what someone else believes in" (which is usually "to kill the poor to keep the wealthy in power").⁶²¹

In short, therefore, the West's classification of the PKK as a terrorist group said little about the nature or legitimacy of the movement and a lot about Western opposition to its belief system. In other words, as suggested in Chapter Five, we must be very careful about accepting the West's definitions of 'terrorism' without critical analysis – as its regimes often include groups with progressive ideas on their lists whilst leaving oppressive, reactionary groups who serve their interests off said lists.

Responding to claims of the PKK being 'Stalinist', meanwhile, Professor David Graeber of the London School of Economics speaks of how the PKK is in reality "no longer anything remotely like the old, top-down Leninist party it once was". After Öcalan's incarceration on "a Turkish island prison", he says, there was an "internal evolution" in the movement, with the leader undergoing an "intellectual conversion" which would see his group "entirely change its aims and tactics". In fact, "inspired by the strategy of the Zapatista rebels" in Mexico, Öcalan "declared a unilateral ceasefire with the Turkish state" in 2005, and the PKK "began concentrating [its] efforts [on] developing democratic structures in the territories they already controlled".

Graeber asserts that, although some "authoritarian elements" clearly remain in the party, the Rojava Revolution in Syria (which will be analysed in greater detail in the following chapters) showed that the libertarian rhetoric of the PKK and its affiliates was "anything but window dressing". Gaining "the chance to carry out... experiments in a large, contiguous territory", for example, the PKK's allies in war-torn Syria soon created "councils, assemblies and popular militias", and turned "regime property... over to worker-managed co-operatives" – all whilst fighting off "continual attacks by the extreme rightwing forces of Isis".⁶²²

In late 2014, meanwhile, the mainstream and centre-right Turkish paper *Hurriyet* spoke of how, for two years, Öcalan had been "in dialogue with [Turkish] state officials, the [pro-minority rights and left-wing] HDP and its predecessor, the [pro-Kurdish rights] Peace and Democracy Party (BDP)", all from his prison cell on İmralı Island (in the Sea of Marmara near Istanbul). In spite of these efforts (facilitated by the Turkish government's transitory desire to present itself as a promoter of peace), little progress would be made with either Kurdish rights or the peace process. And when ISIS attacked "the Kurdish-populated town

⁶¹⁹ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-reveals-pkk-leaders-draft-envisions-autonomy.aspx?PageID=238&NID=75477&NewsCatID=338>

⁶²⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>

⁶²¹ <http://williamblum.org/essays/read/peru-their-terrorists-our-freedom-fighters>

⁶²² <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>

of Kobani in northern Syria, near the border with Turkey”, in late 2014, tensions would rise significantly as a result of the Turkish state’s aggressive treatment of both refugees and the popular militias defending the town.⁶²³ As will be seen in Chapters Eleven and Twelve of this book, Turkish Kurds and left-wing sympathisers would consequently take to the streets, and would be met with violence from state ‘security forces’ and reactionary Islamists.

In this chapter, my main aim is to reveal the context behind the Rojava Revolution, which cannot truly be understood without a historical analysis of the PKK – the biggest ‘progressive’ group in the Kurdish political movement. In the first section, I will look at why the PKK took up arms against the Turkish State, and what the consequences of its struggle were. In the second section, I will give an overview of what the transformation of the PKK after Öcalan’s arrest looked like. In the following section, I will focus more closely on the neoliberal Islamist government of Turkey that took power in 2002, and the impact that its time in power has had on the Turkish State and its relations with its Kurdish citizens. And in the final section, I will argue that the PKK and its allies in the Middle East (and especially in Rojava) are the closest thing to a secular, socialist, and directly democratic mass movement that the region currently has to offer.

A) The Emergence of the PKK

I) Turkish Nationalism and the Oppression of Minorities

The Ethnic Cleansing of Non-Turks and Non-Muslims

As seen in Chapter One, the Armenian Genocide represented one of the darkest moments of both World War One and recent Ottoman history. However, Armenian citizens were not the only targets for ethnic cleansing in the Ottoman Empire during the war. At the Armenian Weekly in 2014, for example, Sabri Atman spoke about how Assyrians referred to the Turkish-led genocide of 1915 as ‘Seyfo’ (or ‘sword’, because of the aggressors’ weapon of choice). While the Armenian genocide was the most well-known, Atman says, the use of the word Seyfo sought to “highlight the Assyrian share of the genocide”, which was directed at all Christians in the region (including Greeks as well). Overall, he affirms, the genocidal project “wiped out more than half the population of the Assyrians” in both southeastern Turkey and “the northwestern town of Urmiya in Iran”. Some scholars, he asserts, claim that “up to 400,000 civilian Assyrians perished in the systematic killings, which were ordered and carried out by the Ottoman state, with the collaboration of its Kurdish subjects and with troops and divisions of the regular Ottoman military and police forces combined”.

The perpetrators of the attacks aimed to “ethnically [annihilate] all non-Muslim citizens living under the Ottoman occupation”, including Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, and Yezîdîs. Consequently, they hoped to “[homogenise] Turkey in accordance with their goal to create “One Nation” of “One Religion””. Ottoman mosques, Atman argues, had declared jihad (or holy war) “against all Christian subjects living within the Ottoman territories... on Nov. 14, 1914”, as part of the hostilities of the First World War, and in spite of the fact that not a single person had been killed by Christian citizens. In short, the “main plot was [simply] to get rid of all the Christian minorities of Turkey”.

The ‘homogenisation’ plan, however, aimed at creating “one Muslim-Turkish nation”, had already begun, with “attempts to assimilate the non-Turkish Muslim populations like the Kurds and... immigrants from the Balkans” having been previously set in motion. For example, “these Muslim groups were relocated to such cities as Ankara, Adana, and Konya, and spread among the Turkish majority”. The “removal of the non-Muslim groups from

⁶²³ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/hdp-reveals-pkk-leaders-draft-envisions-autonomy.aspx?PageID=238&NID=75477&NewsCatID=338>

Turkey”, meanwhile, was simply “the next step” of this scheme, and “neither the architects nor the perpetrators” of the genocide would make “any distinction between any ethnic Christians”. Overall, “two million Christian [citizens] (mainly Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks) were massacred, starved to death and deported as a result of that policy”. Although “a large number of Armenians died during the deportation”, Atman affirms, “many Assyrians were killed in their villages and towns”.⁶²⁴

“Pontian and Anatolian Greeks”, meanwhile, were also victims of the “broader Turkish genocidal project”. According to Rutgers, “a total of more than 3.5 million Greeks, Armenians, and Assyrians were killed under the successive regimes of the Young Turks and of Mustafa Kemal from roughly 1914 to 1923”. And, of this number, “as many as 1.5 million Greeks may have died”, marking “a profound rupture in the long Greek historical presence [in] Asia Minor”. The CUP, Rutgers affirms, “took its own radical initiatives” in order to ethnically cleanse the region, beginning by “singling out all able-bodied Greek men [and] forcibly conscripting them into labor battalions which performed slave labor for the Turkish war effort”. At the same time, the children of Greek citizens were “stolen and forcibly assimilated into Turkish society”.

Meanwhile, “Greek villages were brutally plundered and terrorized under the pretext of internal security”, accused (along with other Christians) of being “disloyal and traitorous ‘fifth-column’”. As a result, “most of the population was rounded up and forcibly deported to the interior”, a “modus operandi [which] was more or less the same for all three Christian victim groups”. Although the “prewar population of Greeks was at least 2.5 million”, around “one million had migrated” by 1923, “some voluntarily but most under coercion”. The remaining 1.5 million, it is thought, died either as “from massacre or exposure”.⁶²⁵

The ‘Neutralisation’ of the Positive Aspects of Atatürk’s Liberalism

According to Abdullah Öcalan in “The Road Map to Negotiations” of 2012, “the forces that constructed the Republic” of Turkey after the fall of the Ottoman Empire “represented a democratic reconciliation”. In the 1921 constitution, he insists, Atatürk’s government insisted that “Turks and the Kurds were the two fundamental components of the Ummah (commonwealth of the Islamic believers), together with anti-imperialism and friendship with the Soviets”. In short, there were certain hopes for ‘progress’ under Atatürk, with the “general consensus of the society” holding that the “British Empire was the main target” which needed to be opposed. Essentially, then, it was a period of bourgeois civic nationalism, with political elites seeking to bring all sections of the regional population together against European colonial rule (rather than against the capitalist socio-economic system it and its supporters advocated).

The “new order” of “Unionist cadres”, however, who were “pro-British”, sought to “neutralise” Atatürk with “plots and provocations”, which “bore fruit from 1925 onwards”. These figures gained in strength, Öcalan says, after the Second World War, when “world hegemony passed to the United States, which offered further help” to them. Under the one-party rule of the Republican People’s Party (or CHP), Mustafa İsmet İnönü would become ‘president’ in 1938 after Atatürk’s death and, leading the country until 1950, he would soon establish “strategic relations with the United States”.

In 1944, for example, “the first group of Turkish military officers went to the United States for training”. As bilateral relations intensified under the Democrat Party (DP), **Turkey entered into NATO in 1952**, partaking in the organisation’s ‘Operation Gladio’, which was a Cold War attempt by the West to organise reactionary paramilitary resistance in Europe in

⁶²⁴ <http://armenianweekly.com/2014/01/08/remembering-the-assyrian-genocide-an-interview-with-sabri-atman/>

⁶²⁵ <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/center-study-genocide-conflict-resolution-and-human-rights/genocide-ottoman-greeks-1914-1923>

preparation for possible Soviet invasions. In the event of Soviet expansion, these groups would assassinate activists and politicians, sabotage their governments, or launch guerrilla campaigns to overthrow the pro-Soviet regimes.

Türk-iş, meanwhile, which was a “confederation of Turkish trade unions” established in 1952 and controlled by the regime, “kept the working class under its control”, just like other bourgeois nationalist forces had sought to do in previous years. The Communist Party and pro-Soviet unions, meanwhile, suffered “relentless pressure” from the organisation, which sought to “crush even the slightest communist or socialist infiltration”. And, because “Kurdishness was associated with these leftist groups” which were oppressed by the state, Kurds in Turkey also suffered increasing repression. In short, the **Turkish nationalist regime was committed to avoiding the destruction of exploitative class relations from which it and its supporters benefitted.**

The state also adopted “strategic and secret relations” with Israel when it was established, while developing relations “with traditional religious and primitive nationalist families and individuals within the Kurdish community” (in an attempt to counteract the popularity of left-wing movements among Kurdish citizens). At the same time, says Öcalan, the Turkish regime “established ties with the Iranian and Iraqi monarchies”, demonstrating how its “overall aim was to prevent the spread of communism into the Middle East”. Following the mandate of the West, Turkey therefore played “a leading role” in this imperialist strategy, “both in its own country and in the [rest of the] Middle East”.

Atatürk’s vision of modernity, more similar to that of the USSR and resting “on strategic friendship with the Soviet Union”, had now been almost entirely replaced by its Western capitalist counterpart. With first Britain and then the USA winning this “hegemonic war”, Öcalan asserts, the West effectively “eliminated democratic reconciliation within the Republic”. In short, Atatürk’s supposed “passion for independence and freedom” was not able to prevent the forces of arrogant economic and political dogmatism from gaining power and making Turkish secularism “despotic and dictatorial”. The aforementioned forces, meanwhile, falsely presented their dogmas as “scientific”, seeking to “propagate them in the name of capitalism”.

According to Öcalan, Operation Gladio’s “Mobilisation Inspection Board” in Turkey had its “budget and administration... provided by the United States”, and US Cold War policy soon “extended itself into economic, social, political, military and cultural areas”, controlling “all the legal political parties”. In 1960, meanwhile, a group of conspirators overthrew the DP in a military coup, arguing that the founding principles of the Republic were being eroded. In reality, however, the reasons for the event may have resided in the fact that the DP had been considering dealing with the USSR once again as a result of a reduction in US aid (though largely out of self-interested pragmatism). Subsequently, the pro-NATO and pro-Western coup plotters officially dissolved the DP and persecuted its members. In fact, former Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was sentenced to death, having been found guilty of ‘violating the Constitution’ by the military junta, along with two of his fellow ministers. They were all executed on İmralı Island in September 1961.

In summary, Öcalan asserts, the “elitist cadres of the Republic of Turkey share a profound ignorance... intertwined with dogmatism”. The USA’s manipulation of Turkey through Gladio, meanwhile, had “disastrous consequences”, facilitating “subversive [reactionary] perceptions and organisations within the state”. Atatürk’s “modernity project” of freedom and independence, therefore, was undermined by both “internal and external forces”, and “was crippled from the very start”. Even when the “founders of the Republic reasserted their presence during the period 1965-1980”, Öcalan says, they simply sought to “secure their own existence”. They were “unprepared in any way to accomplish a revolution”, he

insists, and when progressive elements within the regime did rebel, “they were partially crushed”. In other words, Öcalan suggests that the subsequent insurgency of the PKK was an inevitable result of democratic and progressive forces being kept out of the official political process of the Turkish State.

II) The Birth of the PKK

In the 1970s, Öcalan insists, “the link between nationalist and Islamist organisations and the anti-Communist Gladio tactics” were becoming “much more apparent”. For the former, trying to gain “control over the army and the political structures was the first priority”, and the “thoughts of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk were not sufficient” to counter the tradition of coups and allowance of far-right paramilitary groups that was developing as a result. For Öcalan, this “**problematic structure of the Republic played a determining role in the emergence of the PKK**”.

The 1970s, the Turkish Revolutionary Movement, and the Role of the Kurds

The military coup of 1971, Öcalan asserts, could not stop the “movement toward democracy” of the time from gaining strength, and “forces that had been influential in the establishment of the Republic” (such as “Socialism, Islamism and Kurdish nationalism”) now reappeared, seeking “legitimacy within the Republic”. Öcalan even argues that, if the “many democratic demands” of these groups “had not been suppressed through coups and fascist implementations, a solution through democratisation would have been attained”.

In reality, “increasingly repressive and fascistic methods were employed” by the state, Öcalan affirms, and especially after the coup d’état of 1980. As they were unable to totally suppress the Kurdish activists of the PKK, however, the military leaders believed that “the Kurds, both as a society and as a people, had been terminated”, according to Öcalan. Having crushed early Kurdish rebellions in the twentieth century, he says, the state had long since embarked upon a “brutal period of assimilation” (as mentioned in Chapter Four). As a result, the “new bureaucracy” of Turkey considered such Kurdish forces to have been “wiped out”.

The PKK, however, had “developed relations with the poor peasant and urban dwellers of the Kurmanj section of the Kurdish society”, which had been “devastated under [the aforementioned] conditions”. The movement soon “rekindled patriotism and Kurdishness”, Öcalan asserts, and also “recreated cultural structures”. There was no need, he insists, for “high-ranking diplomatic or political cadres”, because the “Kurdish peoples’ social nature” meant that they only really required “a rapid mobilisation of [such] emotions and concepts”, which were already present in their culture.⁶²⁶

Journalist Baki Gul at KurdishQuestion.com, meanwhile, speaks of how, in the 1970s, “national liberation movements and class struggles across the globe were at the fore”. And in Turkey, “Kurdish and Turkish revolutionary students”, such as Abdullah Öcalan, were heavily influenced by these phenomena. The “massacre of [Marxist-Leninist leader] Mahir Cayan and friends in the village of Kizildere” in 1972,⁶²⁷ however, along with the execution of “Turkish Che Guevara” Deniz Gezmiş and two comrades in Ankara in the same year,⁶²⁸ had led to “a problem of leadership within the revolutionary front in Turkey” (which had been seeking “a joint platform for struggle”). Nonetheless, the founders of the PKK would

⁶²⁶ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/insight-research/abdullah-ocalan/the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk/89-the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk.html>

⁶²⁷ <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/index.php/insight-research/analysis/bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey/66-bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey.html>

⁶²⁸ <http://www.demotix.com/news/4671562/marking-anniversary-execution-turkish-che-guevara#media-4671466>

soon meet with “the leaders of THKP-C (People's Liberation Party - Front of Turkey) and THKO (People's Liberation Army of Turkey)” with the aim of keeping such an alliance alive.

Öcalan and his comrades, including “revolutionary cadres from Turkey such as Haki Karer, Duran Kalkan and Kemal Pir”, headed towards Turkish Kurdistan, whose freedom Pir thought would be essential for “the materialisation of the revolution in Turkey” (an idea which would soon become “one of the inaugural principles of the PKK”). While they organised and “developed an ideological program”, they were called “the Revolutionaries of Kurdistan, Apocular, [and] National Liberationists” though, “ultimately, they became the PKK”.

Out of all the nation states with Kurdish populations, “**Turkey had applied the most intense assimilation, denial and annihilation policies against the Kurds**”. For Gul, “**the headquarters of anti-Kurdish policies was Ankara**”, and “Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus were [simply] following Turkey's lead” with their own nationalist initiatives. At the same time, “Turkey's strategic coalitions with NATO, the USA and the EU” meant that it was the point of greatest confrontation between capitalist imperialism and the Kurdish community. Apart from the economic marginalisation of Kurdish communities, meanwhile, **the country's “official state ideology” was actually based on the assumption that “there was no such thing as Kurds and Kurdistan**”.⁶²⁹ When the PKK began to organise, however, it completely opposed this dogma.

Increasing Tensions, the Coup of 1980, and the Mobilisation of the PKK

In 1977, Haki Karer, one of the leaders of the ‘Revolutionaries of Kurdistan’ was assassinated, and the group’s Halil Çavgun was killed the following year, just shortly before the PKK held its first congress. Reactionary forces, however, would soon force the new party into military action. In late December 1978, Turkish neo-fascist group the ‘Grey Wolves’ committed the **Maraş Massacre**, in which 109 left-wing Alevi Kurds (belonging to a unique branch of Shia Islam) were killed and 176 were injured. There was an atmosphere of great tension between right-wing and left-wing groups in the country at the time, and the Marxist-Leninist DHKP-C, also founded in 1978, had “claimed responsibility for a series of high-profile murders, including the assassination of nationalist politician Gün Sazak and former prime minister Nihat Erim in 1980” (under the name Dev Sol), in apparent retaliation for the counterrevolutionary political assassinations perpetrated earlier in the seventies.⁶³⁰

The 1980 coup regime, according to Öcalan, which had in part responded to the increase in left-wing activism and unrest in Turkey, “used excessive force and suppressed... left wing and opposition forces” after taking power. Together with the junta’s abuse of inmates in **Diyarbakir Prison**, its aforementioned anti-democratic repression created the conditions for an armed, popular uprising. Öcalan asserts that this rebellion “could have been initiated in 1982”, but that it was postponed until 1984 to allow PKK militants more time to prepare.⁶³¹

Having deposed the elected government of Turkey, the country’s army effectively forced most of the PKK’s leadership to move across into Syria as a result of its crackdown on dissidents. At the time, the Ba’athist regime of Hafez al-Assad had a decent relationship with the Soviet Union, and its decision to allow PKK activists into the country was partially a result of this important strategic friendship. A couple of months later, an attack was launched on the Turkish Consulate in Strasbourg, France, which caused material damage but no injuries. Responsibility for the act was claimed by the Armenian Secret Army for the

⁶²⁹ www.kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/analysis/bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey/66-bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey.html

⁶³⁰ <http://www.dailysabah.com/investigations/2014/04/18/extradition-of-suspect-rejected>

⁶³¹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/abdullah-ocalan/the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk/89-the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk.html>

Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), in collaboration with the PKK. The Turkish Consulate in Paris was attacked the following year.⁶³²

In 1982, a number of PKK members, led by Mazlum Doğan, burned themselves to death in Diyarbakır Prison in protest against the treatment of inmates. Others, including Kemal Pir, would start a hunger strike, from which they would die around two months later. Two years on, Kurdish prisoners in Istanbul would also go on hunger strike, with four dying as a result. In short, “**murders, denigration and all sorts of torture** had become part of the daily life of inmates in that prison”, says former Kurdish politician Orhan Miroğlu at Today’s Zaman. “They had faced **dehumanizing conditions**” and “been left with no other choice than death to protect their dignity”, he affirms.⁶³³

In fact, Today’s Zaman claims that “thousands of innocent intellectuals were [also] brutally tortured or killed in this same prison during the post-1980 period simply for expressing their opinions”. A number of them “committed suicide to end the torture to which they were subjected”. At the same time, all of these “**cases of torture that took place in Diyarbakır Prison**” (where PKK “members and sympathizers” had been jailed after the 1980 military coup) were said, according to the Turkish Interior Ministry, to have “**strengthened the PKK and expanded public support for it**”.⁶³⁴

Armed activities had only “played a secondary role from 1973 to 1983” in the PKK, says Öcalan, and “ideology and politics [had been] more prominent”.⁶³⁵ In 1982, however the group decided from Syria that it “would start preparing for an insurgency inside Turkey”, and “training camps were [soon] opened in Syria and in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley”. Meanwhile, “propaganda teams were sent across the border [into Turkey] to make contact with the local populations”. The group finally “launched its first major attacks on August 15, 1984”. It “attacked the gendarmerie station in Erüh in Siirt killing one gendarmerie soldier and injuring six soldiers and three civilians” in the process. It also “attacked a gendarmerie open air facility, officer housing and a gendarmerie station in Şemdinli, Hakkâri”. Two police officers were killed, and another was injured, along with a soldier. Two days later, three of the Presidential Guards of dictator Kenan Evren were killed, along with eight Turkish soldiers elsewhere in the country.⁶³⁶

The PKK’s war against the repressive Turkish regime had now officially begun, even though, according to Öcalan, the group “had not yet become professional guerrillas”. Nonetheless, they forced the dictatorship to counterattack (which it often did in the most horrific of ways), revealing to the Kurdish population the genocidal tendencies of the Western-backed nationalist state. A State of Emergency was soon declared, and the intelligence service JITEM (“responsible for many of the worst human rights violations” during the war) was formed. By 1985, says Öcalan, Operation Gladio “had effectively come into play”, and was attempting “to foil the positive effects of the emergence of guerrillas in Kurdistan” and to protect Turkey’s pro-Western capitalist establishment.⁶³⁷ As a point of entry for the West into the Muslim World, as well as a source of cheap labour and a market for Western products, the Turkish regime was crucial for imperialist interests in the region, and had to be defended at all costs.

⁶³² <http://www.ermenisorumu.gen.tr/english/terrorism/pkk.html> and <http://www.manaz.net/arastirma/english-strategic-articles/armenian-question/>

⁶³³ <http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail.action?sessionId=gsTbyxEj64VRNzN-jJhRPV0O?newsId=296866&columnistId=124>

⁶³⁴ http://www.todayszaman.com/national_interior-ministry-torture-in-diyarbakir-prison-strengthened-pkk_306973.html

⁶³⁵ <http://kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/abdullah-ocalan/the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk/89-the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk.html>

⁶³⁶ <http://en.firatnews.com/news/features/kurds-remember-15-august.htm>

⁶³⁷ <http://kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/abdullah-ocalan/the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk/89-the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk.html>

A Battle of David and Goliath

In 1992, “20,000 Turkish troops” entered PKK safe havens in northern Iraq in an operation which would also act to support Kurdish nationalist forces (like the KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁶³⁸ According to Hurriyet, around one and a half thousand PKK militants were killed in this attack.⁶³⁹ Three years later, meanwhile, another “major military offensive [was] launched against the Kurds in northern Iraq, involving some 35,000 Turkish troops”.⁶⁴⁰ Around five hundred PKK members were alleged to have been killed, while some “15,000 Iraqi Kurds became refugees” as a result of Turkish attack. Another two years on, the Turkish government made a deal with the KDP in the middle of the Kurdish Civil War “to cooperate to remove PKK influences from northern Iraq”, and “30,000 Turkish troops supported by tanks, artillery and air power poured” into the region in May 1997.⁶⁴¹ In this attack, almost three thousand PKK militants were said to have been killed.⁶⁴² Later in the year, Turkish forces once again entered Iraq to prop up its KDP allies, and “reportedly killed 855 Kurdish rebels” in the process.⁶⁴³

Human rights defender Orhan Kemal Cengiz, meanwhile, spoke at Al Monitor in 2013 about his time working for the Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) between 1997 and 1998. The KHRP, he says, took cases before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on behalf of Kurdish victims of violence in Turkey, and the Turkish state “was found guilty in almost all these cases of village destruction, torture and extrajudicial actions brought by the Kurds against Turkey”. In the 1990s, he asserts, “**3,500 Kurdish villages were destroyed by security forces; 17,000 Kurds lost their lives in extrajudicial killings; and thousands and thousands were severely tortured**”.

At the same time, however, the PKK was found guilty of having “executed... many of its members” for being suspected Turkish agents “or just simply for their defiance to any order given by their superiors”. It is estimated, Cengiz claims, that at least “a couple of thousand” of people suffered such treatment. The party was also allegedly involved in kidnappings, and there were also some civilian casualties as a result of its attacks. In short, Cengiz affirms, “they committed so many crimes [just “like Turkish security forces”] which would easily be labeled as “crimes against humanity” if they were to be put on trial before the International Criminal Court in Hague”. However, their wrongdoings could never be placed on the same scale as those of the Turkish State.

In fact, while Öcalan has mentioned on numerous occasions “the need of establishing “Truth and Reconciliation Commissions” to address past atrocities in Turkey”, the Turkish government has not.⁶⁴⁴ And it is also important to emphasise that the PKK, whilst far from perfect during the war, emerged within a context of horrific state crimes, authoritarianism, and total military control of the country. In other words, if the PKK is to be considered a ‘terrorist’ group for its actions during this period, then the Turkish State deserves that title infinitely more.

The Human Cost of the War and Attempts at Peace

Öcalan, meanwhile, was arrested by Turkish forces in 1999, with suspected US and Israeli support. Although smaller attacks would occur after his incarceration, the majority of deaths

⁶³⁸ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1023189.stm

⁶³⁹ <http://fotoanaliz.hurriyet.com.tr/GaleriDetay.aspx?cid=6755&p=1&rid=4369>

⁶⁴⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1023189.stm

⁶⁴¹ <http://www.refworld.org/cgi->

<bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&category=&publisher=MARP&type=&coi=TUR&rid=&docid=469f38e91e&skip=0>

⁶⁴² <http://fotoanaliz.hurriyet.com.tr/GaleriDetay.aspx?cid=6755&p=3&rid=4369>

⁶⁴³ <http://www.refworld.org/cgi->

<bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&category=&publisher=MARP&type=&coi=TUR&rid=&docid=469f38e91e&skip=0>

⁶⁴⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/turkey-kurdish-human-rights-pkk-violations-ocalan.html#>

and injuries were suffered between 1984 and 1999. Tensions did intensify between 2004 and 2009, but the PKK made significant efforts to establish dialogue with the state during this period. Secret talks eventually took place between the Turkish government and the PKK between 2009 and 2011, though the regime's **arrest of "thousands of Kurdish activists, intellectuals and politicians"** in the same period soon led the PKK to end its ceasefire. Fighting intensified once again and, between 2011 and 2012, there were "death tolls unseen in more than a decade".⁶⁴⁵

In 2013, a Turkish parliamentary commission report claimed that over 35,576 people had been killed in the war. A "total of 5,557 civilians", the report claimed, had "lost their lives in clashes between 1987 and 2011". Around "7,918 officers and public sector workers" were said to have died during the same period, with around "11,795 Turkish military forces" also killed. "The major loss of lives", however, belonged to the PKK, which had "lost at least 22,101 of its members between 1984 and 2012". Meanwhile, "a total of **386,360 people [had] been forced to migrate from 14 provinces**" due to the conflict, with "only 187,861 of them having "returned to their hometowns" since the end of the first insurgency in 1999."⁶⁴⁶

In late 2013, the ECHR criticised the "on-going failure of Turkish authorities to address abuses by security services" and awarded around 2.3 million Euros to victims of "Turkey's bombing of [the] villages of Kuşkonar and Koçağil in March, 1994" (which had "killed more than thirty people and injured many more"). The Court criticised Turkey for its "extremely inadequate investigation into the incident", its withholding of "vital evidence", and the fact that it "had not provided even the minimum of humanitarian aid to deal with the aftermath of the attack".⁶⁴⁷

In 2012, meanwhile, Human Rights Watch (HRW) had argued that "the Grand National Assembly of Turkey should establish an independent parliamentary truth commission to investigate disappearances, killings, and other serious human rights violations by suspected state perpetrators in the period since the September 12, 1980 military coup".⁶⁴⁸ In particular, it reflected on the lessons of accountability "from the ongoing trial of retired Colonel Cemal Temizöz and six others for the murder and disappearance of 20 men and boys between 1993 and 1995" – the "first such trial of a senior member of the gendarmerie for serious human rights violations committed in the course of the conflict between the state and the PKK".⁶⁴⁹ It also claimed that there were "thousands more cases to investigate", insisting that "coming to terms with the past" (and the "abuses that took place during that conflict") was "an important element of solving Turkey's Kurdish problem".⁶⁵⁰

Summary

Overall, while those opposed to oppression should not try to justify the crimes of the PKK during its conflict with the Turkish State, we must always take sides with the oppressed. In short, while we should seek and tell the whole truth about the past of the PKK and other groups resisting persecution and subjugation, **we must never equate the oppressed and the oppressor as equal evils**, because they simply are not. In the case of Turkey, for example, the simple fact is that the countless horrors perpetrated by the oppressive Turkish nationalist establishment led to an inevitable reaction from the tyrannised population. And when citizens were denied their democratic rights to speak freely and determine their own fates, being forced to witness the barbaric repression of peaceful activism, the only option which seemed available to them in order to bring about change was violent resistance.

⁶⁴⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/18/world/europe/turkey-war-within/>

⁶⁴⁶ <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/01/30/286352/over-35000-dead-in-turkishpkk-conflict/>

⁶⁴⁷ <http://humanrightsturkey.org/2013/11/12/european-court-of-human-rights-issues-important-verdict-on-1994-bombing/>

⁶⁴⁸ <http://www.hrw.org/node/109656/section/3>

⁶⁴⁹ <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2012/09/03/time-justice-0>

⁶⁵⁰ <http://www.hrw.org/node/109656/section/9>

In the end, however, the ruling regime had immensely greater financial resources and firepower, and committed 'terrorist' acts much greater than any resistance group ever could. Therefore, we simply cannot liken the responsibility of the Turkish government to that of the PKK when we talk about the conflict and its consequences. In short, there is no 'chicken or egg' dilemma here, for it is absolutely clear that the oppression of Kurds (along with that of workers, peasants, and non-Kurdish minority groups) by Turkish political, economic, and military elites came long before the resistance movement of the PKK. In other words, while we can and should blame the previously vertical organisational structures of the PKK for the crimes committed by some of its members in the past, the ultimate blame for the violent war that started in 1984 (and would continue for almost thirty years) must fall on the Turkish State and its leaders' refusal to democratise society.

III) The Repression of Kurds in Turkey and Neighbouring Countries

Disappearances, Cultural Oppression, and Political Persecution

In 1998, The New Internationalist (NI) wrote about the situation of Kurds in Turkey, emphasising that "anyone discussing the [problems of the] Kurds [was] accused of supporting the PKK... and [faced] imprisonment under 'anti-terrorism' laws". The magazine gives examples of this state of affairs, speaking firstly about Abdurressak Ipek, a Kurd from Tirali in south-east Turkey who spoke no Turkish. The Turkish Army, it says, "entered his village" in 1994, "accused the village of supporting the outlawed PKK", and "torched the buildings and killed the livestock". Six men, including Ipek's sons, were arrested, though the authorities would soon "deny knowledge of their whereabouts". The Turkish Human Rights Association in Diyarbakır, meanwhile, had their offices "raided by 'anti-terror teams'" when they tried to look into the disappearance of these detainees. And this was not an uncommon occurrence, the NI emphasises. In fact, mothers would "hold a vigil at noon every Saturday" in memory of all of the Kurds "disappeared" by the Turkish State.

Meanwhile, as part of a Turkish campaign against the Kurdish New Year celebrations of 'Newroz', some "109 Kurdish civilians were killed" at a peaceful gathering in 1992 by Turkish authorities. The aforementioned festival, which remembers "a successful people's revolt... against a tyrannical ruler" led by a Kurdish blacksmith called Kawa in around 612BC, had been banned in Turkey "since the 1920s" (with anyone daring to resist this prohibition being punished). Another example of state repression of Kurds was the closing down of journalist Umur Hozaltı's "pro-Kurdish newspaper Demokrasi" in 1997, for alleged "crimes against public security". This publication was just "one of a long line of Turkish newspapers closed down for their pro-Kurdish stance", however, and the NI even speaks about how it was an incredibly "dangerous business being a journalist in Turkey", with newspaper offices often being "bombed" and "journalists [being] harassed, attacked and imprisoned".

Kurdish intellectuals were also targeted, though, the NI asserts. In 1995, for example, composer Sanar Yurdatapan (of the 'Coming Together for Peace' campaign) "published the book Freedom of Thought", in which two hundred writers came out in support of imprisoned novelist Yasar Kemal. The result of this action was the "prosecution of nearly 200 intellectuals under the Anti-Terrorist law", with Yurdatapan himself being "arrested and detained for [allegedly] 'supporting the PKK'" in 1997. Politicians, meanwhile, would also be prevented from raising their voice about the state's repression of Kurds. In December 1995, for instance, Selma Tanrikulu of the HADEP (People's Democracy Party) was "voted in as MP for Diyarbakır", but was "prevented from taking her seat because a party [needed]

ten per cent of votes nationally” in order to have MPs (something which was incredibly difficult to achieve in such a large and politically divided country).

For Tanrikulu, politics was not always her first choice of career, though. When her husband, a “prominent consultant... at a local hospital” was murdered in 1993, however, she was forced into the political arena. She told the NI of how: “we do not have the right to life in this region..., but I want my children to live in an environment of peace and I am willing to take risks for that”. Later in 1998, she was arrested for her activism. As the HADEP was the “only [legal] political voice for Kurds in Turkey”, the NI stresses, such treatment was not unusual. The party’s members, for example, had been consistently persecuted by the Turkish State over the years, with 92 of its members being killed by 1998 and its offices in eastern Turkey having been bombed.⁶⁵¹

Leyla Zana, meanwhile, “was the first Kurdish woman to win a seat in the Turkish Parliament in 1991”. When she decided “to give the Parliamentary Oath in Kurdish” (being the first person to ever speak Kurdish in the Turkish Parliament), however, ruling nationalists immediately called for her arrest.⁶⁵² Wearing “the Kurdish colors in the ribbons in her headband in Parliament”, she had said “I swear by my honor and my dignity before the great Turkish people to protect the integrity and independence of the State, the indivisible unity of people and homeland, and the unquestionable and unconditional sovereignty of the people”. This comment in itself was nothing out of the ordinary but, when she said the final sentence of her oath in Kurdish (saying “I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people”), she invoked the wrath of an establishment that had long sought to suppress Kurdish culture and assimilate Turkish Kurds into Turkish society.⁶⁵³

Despite the uproar, however, she could not be arrested because of the diplomatic immunity bestowed upon her by her position as an MP. Finally, though, when her “Democracy Party (DEP) was banned by the Turkish government in 1994, her parliamentary impunity was [also] lost”. Soon afterwards, she would be detained “along with five other DEP deputies”. Having been “sentenced to 15 years in prison”, she was eventually “released in 2004 due to international pressure, having suffered through weeks of hunger strikes in protest against her imprisonment”. In 2011, she would be re-elected to parliament.⁶⁵⁴

Historical Repression and Resistance in the Early Twentieth Century

In 2012, Professor Aylin Ünver Noi at Istanbul’s Gedik University spoke about how, although Western colonial powers had initially “supported the idea of a future Kurdish state” in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the “resistance movement” of largely Turkish nationalists had made sure the agreement was “never ratified”. Instead, she asserts, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 led to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and the division of Kurdish areas into the new nations of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. In its new constitution, meanwhile, Turkey “designated a single nationality for all Turks..., which did not recognize ethnic groups”. Nonetheless, Kurdish nationalists “did not renounce their goal to establish an independent Kurdish state”, and although the Shaykh Said Rebellion of 1925 was suppressed by the Turkish establishment, Kurds continued to resist “government efforts to assimilate them”.

In Syria, meanwhile, whose division “along tribal and other lines [was] reinforced by the French” after the First World War as part of a divide and conquer strategy, “all promises of minority rights made by France and Britain were forgotten”. Just like in Turkey, “Syrian

⁶⁵¹ <http://newint.org/features/1998/01/05/kurd/>

⁶⁵² <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/leyla-zana/>

⁶⁵³ http://www.democracynow.org/2004/6/10/kurdish_political_prisoner_leyla_zana_released

⁶⁵⁴ <http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/resources/leyla-zana/>

Kurds were expected to be easily assimilated into an Arab majority”, and “demands for a Kurdish identity came only from leading land-owning families responding to their loss of traditional power in the new state”. In other words, far from being a popular resistance movement at the beginning, the Kurdish movement was largely led by bourgeois nationalists in Syria.

At the same time, there was an “exodus of a substantial number of Kurdish rebels to Kurdish regions in Syria” after Turkey’s repression of the Shaykh Said rebellion, and these were forces that “continued to retaliate against the Turkish government” in the following years. This **exile community**, Noi asserts, soon sought to unite **Syrian-Kurdish intellectuals** and encourage debate “about issues of nationalism, self-determination, and oppression”. Effectively, she says, these attempts provided a “**foundation for the emergence of the Kurdish political movement throughout the Kurdish region**”.

In Iran, Noi affirms, Reza Shah Pahlavi “recaptured lands that Kurdish leaders had gained control of between 1918 and 1922”, and subsequently began to enforce his own program of ethnic assimilation on the Kurds. However, the latter managed to “spread their control in western Iran when Iran was occupied and divided into three zones in 1941 by the United States, Britain, and the USSR”. In fact, having little control outside of Tehran, the government was unable to stop the KJK (Committee of Kurdish Resurrection) from being set up in 1941 in Mahabad.

In 1945, the KJK changed its name to the KDP and, with Soviet support, managed to create the short-lived **Mahabad Kurdish Republic** in 1946. After 11 months, Noi says, the “Iranian government recaptured Mahabad and eliminated the Kurdish leaders involved” in the uprising. Over the next few decades, meanwhile, the land reform programme of the nationalist regime in Tehran “further reduced the political power of Kurdish landowners”, though the country’s elites could not suppress opposition to the oppressive assimilation and marginalisation policies directed at Kurds in Iran.

In Iraq, Noi describes how there were many “tribal Kurdish uprisings” between 1919 and 1932, all of which were “suppressed by the Iraqi monarchy implementing an assimilation policy”, supported by the colonial powers of Great Britain (as seen in Chapter Four). “After the creation of the modern state of Iraq in 1932”, Noi adds, Iraqi Kurds were “subject to political and cultural repression, ethnic cleansing, and genocide because of their struggle to gain autonomy”. This campaign, she asserts, would intensify under Saddam Hussein, when Kurdish nationalists sought to take advantage of the Iranian advance on Iraq after the latter’s initial successes in the Iran-Iraq War.

The Cold War and Regional Political Games

When Syria gained its independence in 1946, meanwhile, repression of Kurds intensified there as well. However, Noi notes, “**Kurdish-Soviet relations were on the rise, and interest in “nationalism” was diminishing**”, meaning that the **Syrian Communist Party would soon gain popularity in Kurdish communities**. Although ethnic and economic repression would occur under the Ba’athist regime in Syria, “Damascus considered [Kurds] to pose little threat”, instead seeing them as “sources of leverage” in Iraq and Turkey. It thus supported “opposition groups in Saddam’s Iraq”, allowed “the opening of PUK offices in Damascus in 1975”, and “formalized relations” with the KDP in 1979. The Assad regime’s support for Kurdish nationalists was far from ideological, though, and was focussed primarily on trying to “weaken the [rival Ba’athist] regime in Baghdad by bringing the rival factions among the Kurds of Iraq together”. In fact, Kurds in the east of Syria were actively recruited to join the Peshmerga forces of the PUK and KDP.

Uprisings in Turkey, meanwhile, were repeatedly suppressed by the Turkish army, and societal elites assumed that the Kurdish Question would eventually go away by itself. With Kurdish intellectuals attempting “to establish Kurdish-language journals and newspapers” in the 1960s and mid-1970s, however, there was a revival of Kurdish demands for change. Although such publications “were soon shut down”, opposition to government attempts at “linguistic homogeneity” in Turkey “was spurred by agitation in neighboring Iran and Iraq on behalf of an autonomous Kurdistan”.

Out of the aforementioned context of cultural revival, and in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war (a turning point in the recent history of the Middle East), the PKK took up arms against the Turkish State. Until 1991, though, Noi claims, “the majority of Kurds... continued to participate in Turkish political parties, in particular the Social Democratic People’s Party or the SHP, the party most sympathetic to their goal of equality for all citizens of Turkey”. However, no party was truly serious about ending attempts to assimilate Kurds into Turkish society. And, while ideas of one’s own ‘ethnic purity’ could never be positive, the complicity of these Kurds with their own cultural assimilation into the dominant Turkish society certainly did not create a more effective struggle for workers’ rights in the country. Instead, these citizens risked losing a cultural diversity capable of creating innovative solutions for successfully dealing with the unjust socio-economic dichotomy between exploiters and the exploited.

After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, meanwhile, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) launched a “well-organized rebellion” against the state, though Tehran “responded harshly with the banning of the KDPI, followed by an armed campaign against the Kurds”. At the same time, the Iran-Iraq War would soon allow the regime to undertake a “systematic campaign of repression” against Iranian Kurds as part of its war effort. As a partial result of this oppression, the PUK agreed in 1983 “to cooperate with Saddam [against Iran] by signing an autonomy agreement [which the KDP opposed]”.

A PUK-KDP alliance in 1985, however, at a point when the Iraqi Ba’athist regime was very much on the back foot in the Iran-Iraq War, “led to widespread guerrilla warfare in Iraqi Kurdistan [against the Baghdad regime] until the end of the war in 1988”. Back in Iran, meanwhile, Kurds attempted “to negotiate a settlement on Kurdish autonomy with the Iranian government” after the conflict ended, but the regime responded by assassinating a number of Kurdish leaders. In short, Noi says, the regime did not want to concede anything (especially in a country with numerous ethnic minorities), and there was even evidence of “high-level government involvement” in the aforementioned political assassinations.

In Turkey, Noi argues, there was some progress for Kurds in the 1980s, with political leader Turgut Ozal breaking an “official taboo by using the term “Kurd”” for the first time in the public sphere. Ozal even “supported a bill that revoked the ban on the use of the Kurdish language and possession of materials in Kurdish”. Nonetheless, the extreme repression that Kurdish communities continued to suffer soon led several Kurdish politicians to form the People’s Labour Party (or HEP) in 1991, which hoped to campaign “within the National Assembly for laws guaranteeing equal rights for the Kurds”. Little changed as a result of the formation of the HEP, however, and the desperate situation in Turkey in the mid-1990s actually saw some PKK members launch “suicide bombing attacks” against the Turkish State. Consequently, and in addition to the intense pressure already placed on the PKK and its supporters, the persecution of political groups or civilians with ‘alleged links’ to the party (according to the government) was also stepped up.

Syria, meanwhile, “supported the PKK against Turkey”, allowing it to operate “freely in Syria during the 1980s and 1990s”. When “an undeclared war between Turkey and Syria emerged” in the 1990s, however, the Syrian regime decided to place restrictions on PKK

activity (and, eventually, to expel Ocalan from the country) in order to avoid all-out war. Effectively, with the Adana Agreement with Turkey in 1998, in which Syria labelled the PKK a terrorist organisation, the Ba'athists had finally abandoned the Kurdish resistance group. Although the group's aims had previously been of strategic use for the Ba'athist regime, it was now of greater importance for Syria to improve relations with Turkey. As a result, Assad "prohibited [the PKK's] activities and those of its affiliates, and agreed to block the supply of weapons, logistical materiel, and money" to the group. With this move, a "period of relative calm for Syria's Kurds" ended, and Syrian Kurdistan would soon see an upsurge in political activity as a result.

One of the best known campaigns of repression against the Kurds in the Middle East, meanwhile, was the Al-Anfal campaign in Iraq, which in part represented the state's retaliation against Kurds for their cooperation with Iran during the second half of the Iran-Iraq War. Al-Anfal was "an aggressive planned military operation against the Iraqi Kurds" launched in 1988 "under the direction of Ali Hasan al-Majid, who became known as "Chemical Ali" because of his use of chemical and biological weapons in Kurdish towns and villages... [to] eliminate resistance".

Kurdish communities in Iraq now suffered "economic blockades" which "cut them off from all support", and "the evacuation and relocation of Kurds were also planned by the army". Large numbers of men were executed, "while the others were removed to the collective towns"⁶⁵⁵ (in which Kurds were forcibly 'urbanised', being moved from the mountains down into valleys, where they could be controlled more easily⁶⁵⁶) "or to camps in the south of Iraq". During this period, the "Arabization of Kirkuk" also occurred, with the Ba'athist regime seeking to "drive Kurds out of the oil-rich city and replace them with Arab settlers". Nonetheless, the events of Halabja, as seen earlier in this book, were the most horrific part of Al-Anfal, seeing the aforementioned town "attacked with conventional bombs and chemicals, including mustard gas and nerve agents", and "an estimated 17,000 people" die as a result. These actions would prove to have a profound impact on the Kurdish psyche, both in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.

A Middle East in Which Iraq Was no Longer a Western Ally

After Saddam Hussein bit the hand that fed him, however, enraging the West and losing the First Gulf War of 1991, Iraqi Kurds were now seen to be of much more use for the USA's strategic interests in the country. In short, there was now a belt of three countries hostile to the USA in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq, and Iran), and the superpower's method of countering that fact was to renew its support of Kurdish nationalists (which it had already betrayed on a number of occasions in the past). It thus enforced a no-fly zone in northern Iraq, which essentially allowed it to strengthen opposition to the Ba'athist regime in preparation for an eventual military operation (even if this meant temporarily putting its Turkish allies at greater risk from PKK attacks from Kurdish territory in Iraq).

Soon, the "Iraqi government voluntarily and fully withdrew its civil administration" from Iraqi Kurdistan as a result of the no-fly zone, allowing it to "function de facto independently". A year later, in 1992, both "the KDP and the PUK joined forces with Turkey to evacuate the PKK from its sanctuaries in northern Iraq", while "Iran and Turkey cooperated in several ways to limit any autonomy and prevent any independence for Iraqi Kurdistan". This territory soon "became a base for Kurdish separatists in the region", however, and Iran and Turkey responded by signing an agreement in 1993 to "prevent illegal border crossings". Along with Syria, they also tried to "prevent the establishment of a

⁶⁵⁵ <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/the-arab-spring-its-effects-on-the-kurds-and-the-approaches-of-turkey-iran-syria-and-iraq-on-the-kurdish-issue/>

⁶⁵⁶ <http://www.arteeast.org/2012/02/11/spatial-design-and-social-control-collective-towns-in-iraqi-kurdistan/>

Kurdish state in northern Iraq”, though they each sought to support what they considered to be the least damaging parties in the Iraqi Kurdish civil war in the mid-1990s.

While “Turkey supported Barzani’s KDP in order to wipe out the PKK and keep open the Iraqi-Turkish oil pipeline”, Noi says, “Iran supported the PUK in order to interfere within Iraq and to prevent the influence of Turkey and the United States on its western border”. In 1995, meanwhile, the “KDP supported the [35,000-man-strong] Turkish intervention” designed “to eradicate the PKK” in northern Iraq. As a response, the PUK “joined Iran in denouncing Turkey’s actions”, and Iran soon deployed its own Iraqi opposition fighters later in the year. It would also send “2,000 to 3,000 Iranian troops into PUK territory to pursue [the] rebellious Iranian Kurds [of the KDPI] in 1996”, whilst “providing logistical support to the PKK” in the hope that it would weaken Turkey. Essentially, the big regional powers could not agree to coordinate their efforts to stop the region’s Kurdish movement definitively and, instead, they simply tried to balance their own interests both at home and abroad.

The USA, meanwhile, allegedly gave Iraqi armed forces the “green light” to enter into Iraqi Kurdistan to ensure that the more conservative KDP (chosen as the preferable ally by NATO member Turkey) would gain the upper hand in its battle against the slightly more progressive Iranian-backed forces. Iran would claim that this move was a “concerted effort by the US and the Zionist regime... to create another Israel in the Kurdish areas” (a view that would be supported by “Turkey’s growing military ties to Israel in 1997”). In fact, Abdullah Öcalan himself would argue that Turkey’s military incursions into Iraq had been “launched through the cooperation secured between the US, Israel, and Turkey”.

What was really happening, however, was an attempt by regional (and international) powers to direct, in a cynical way, the Kurdish movement towards their own aims. None of these powers truly wanted autonomy for the Kurds (because that would have affected their relationship with their own Kurdish populations), but they were also interested in hedging their bets in case the experiment of autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan ended up turning into a concrete reality.

In 1997, there were “large scale Turkish military interventions in northern Iraq”, as already described in this chapter, with Turkey supporting the KDP “by bombing [both] PUK and PKK positions”. The following year, meanwhile, the West would convince the KDP and PUK to sign the Washington Agreement, which ended the “four year civil war between Iraqi Kurdish factions” (but left the PKK totally out of the equation – in agreement with the Western-backed establishment of Turkey).

In effect, the aim of the West and its allies was not to resolve the Kurdish Question in the region, but to weaken Iraq by creating a more unified Kurdish political elite there (comprised entirely of nationalists opposed to the popular (and much more progressive) forces of the PKK). Eventually, these forces would be a crucial tool for the USA in overthrowing Saddam Hussein in 2003. However, they also secured in the Invasion of Iraq the right to “maintain internal security forces” and to rule autonomously in the “three Kurdish provinces of Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaymaniyya”. And, although Turkey would initially claim to be worried “about the establishment of a federal system [in Iraq], which would cede Mosul and the oil-rich city of Kirkuk to a new Kurdistan federal unit”, it would soon come to terms with the existence of Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, and even forge a strong friendship with the KDP-led government there.

In spite of Turkey’s growing alliance with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), however, the country “began bombing PKK militants in northern Iraq in August 2011 and then even sent troops over the border to pursue them”. It even “asked the KRG for help in

these efforts”, although it was clear that the KRG was reluctant about fighting directly against “fellow Kurds in the PKK” (especially considering that the progressive Kurdish movement had significantly increased its popularity, and that an overt government attack on it could weaken its own claims to legitimacy).⁶⁵⁷ Iran, meanwhile, sought to shell the PKK’s ally PJAK in northern Iraq, though the KRG again refused to react strongly to these foreign incursions. In short, the nationalist regime of Iraqi Kurdistan was seeking to build friendly relations with its reactionary neighbours, whilst also demonstrating, at the very least, complicity in Turkish and Iranian attacks on the PKK and its allies.

IV) The Capture of Öcalan

US Involvement

Since October 1998, Abdullah Öcalan “had been on the run”, thanks to Syria’s strategic and self-interested abandonment of the PKK. His final journey was to the Greek Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, in early February 1999, which Tim Weiner at The New York Times would call a “poor choice of hideouts”. Due to the Wahhabi Islamist bombing of the American Embassy there in August 1998, he says, there were still “more than 100 American intelligence and law-enforcement officers” in the country at the time. And when these officials discovered that Öcalan was in the country, they soon “placed the Greek Embassy under surveillance and monitored his cell phone conversations”.

At the same time, Weiner reports, American officials affirmed that **the USA had “worked for four months to help Turkey arrest Abdullah Öcalan”**, mostly through “diplomatic pressure backed by intelligence-gathering”. The Americans had also “helped to put Mr. Öcalan in flight from a safe haven in Syria, to persuade nation after nation to refuse him sanctuary, and to drive him into an increasingly desperate search for a city of refuge”. In fact, they had first “issued a parallel private demand” after Turkey’s threat of military action against the Syrian regime in October 1998, and had “warned their European and Russian counterparts of the consequences of sheltering Mr. Öcalan”.

Although “Israeli intelligence monitored [Öcalan’s] departure” when he initially flew from Syria to Moscow, the Zionist State took “pains to deny having any part in his [subsequent] capture”. When he was subsequently sent to Rome, he was held in custody as the EU tried to “find a creative way to bring him to justice”, but “none was found”. Returning to Russia in January, he was soon sent to Athens, and then onto Kenya, where “the Greek Government had agreed to shelter him temporarily at its embassy”.

Demonstrating the USA’s “increasingly close military and intelligence relationship with Turkey”, these acts also showed the importance of the Turkish State for US strategic aims in the Middle East. With a “NATO base in Incirlik”, and an “electronic-eavesdropping station for Americans to spy on Iraq”, it seemed like the United States were satisfying Turkey’s requests in order to use their territory as a springboard to attack ‘unfriendly’ nations in the region.⁶⁵⁸ In Turkey, meanwhile, there was a “growing unhappiness about being used as a base for operations against Iraq”, which almost certainly gave Washington “an incentive to help out” with capturing Öcalan.⁶⁵⁹

In Nairobi, the “surveillance information” from the USA “gave Turkish commandos the chance to capture Mr. Öcalan with the help of Kenyan security officers”, according to Weiner. In fact, even the Turkish Prime Minister at the time said that the commando team

⁶⁵⁷ <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/the-arab-spring-its-effects-on-the-kurds-and-the-approaches-of-turkey-iran-syria-and-iraq-on-the-kurdish-issue/>

⁶⁵⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-turkey-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html>

⁶⁵⁹ <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,20031,00.html> and <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,20031-2,00.html>

had been sent to Kenya “after receiving a tip from another country”. Essentially, Öcalan was lured into a trap, having “agreed to be driven to the Nairobi airport by a Kenyan security officer” (who was actually “working with the Turkish squad”). After “two tense weeks in the Greek Embassy”, he had been “told he could fly to Amsterdam”. The Kenyan security office who would drive him to the airport, however, “delivered him into the arms of the Turkish commando team”.⁶⁶⁰ Greek foreign minister Theodoros Pangalos would later say that Öcalan “chose, despite our advice, to go with the Kenyan authorities to the airport”.

Kenyan authorities, though, “were furious at the insinuation that they’d sold [Öcalan] out”. According to Kenyan foreign minister Dr Bonaya Godana, the government “didn't know Ocalan was even in the country”, and it was the Greeks who had “escorted Öcalan to the airport and flown him out of the country”. Nonetheless, “eyewitness accounts cited by Kenya’s Daily Nation newspaper, the Associated Press and Öcalan’s German attorneys” suggested that the PKK leader had been “lured or dragged out of the embassy compound by men who were -- or were at least believed to be -- Kenyan security officials”.⁶⁶¹

Was Israel Involved?

After Öcalan’s arrest, there were “furious protests by Kurdish demonstrators, who attacked Greek consulates and embassies across Europe and tried to storm the Israeli Consulate in Berlin on the strength of rumors that Greece and Israel had been involved in his capture”. The USA, however, was surprisingly not “a target of their anger”.⁶⁶² Tony Karon at TIME Magazine spoke in 1999 about how followers of Öcalan had begun to act on the speculation that Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, had helped to catch him. “Reports on German television”, he says, which were “attributed to unnamed “Western intelligence sources””, had claimed that the Zionist agency “may have played a role in snagging Öcalan”. Nonetheless, considering what had happened in Berlin, asserts Karon, Israel’s denial of involvement “was clearly a good idea” (even if untrue).

Nonetheless, according to TIME correspondent William Dowell, “Öcalan’s capture certainly carried some of the hallmarks of a Mossad operation”, and there had indeed been “strong security cooperation between Israel and Turkey” in the past. Also, while Turkish forces usually acted at home or in neighbouring countries, Mossad had a “well-established capacity to undertake such complex missions in faraway countries”. Israel had even enjoyed a “close relationship with the Kenyan authorities”, and a “history of operating in the region”, with Kenya having been “used as a staging ground”, for example, in Israel’s “1977 rescue of hijack hostages at Uganda's Entebbe airport, and later also for its emergency airlift of Ethiopian Jews”. Israeli personnel, meanwhile, also “took charge of rescue operations in Nairobi following the U.S. embassy bombing”.

In spite of the historical context, which would suggest that Israel did indeed have some involvement in the capture of Öcalan, however, “it is in the nature of covert operations that they’re seldom reported unless they go wrong, or if those responsible want to gloat”. And with “only the Turks... gloating” about Öcalan’s capture (because of the political capital the operation gave to the Turkish regime), it was difficult to know exactly what role other forces had played. For Karon, the “frenzy of protests across Europe” after the event meant that, even “if anyone else [had indeed] helped out, they [would have been] well advised to keep that fact to themselves”.⁶⁶³ As such, it was only the USA (which was powerful enough and further away enough to freely admit its participation) that revealed the part it had played in the apprehension of Öcalan.

⁶⁶⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-turkey-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html>

⁶⁶¹ <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,20031,00.html> and <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,20031-2,00.html>

⁶⁶² <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/20/world/us-helped-turkey-find-and-capture-kurd-rebel.html>

⁶⁶³ <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,20031,00.html> and <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,20031-2,00.html>

Over a decade later, Turkish paper Today's Zaman would report on how PKK leader Murat Karayılan had called on Israel to apologise "for helping [in] the capture" of Öcalan in 1999. Apparently, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman had "offered to hold meetings with leaders of the PKK in response to Turkey's sanctions on Israel", which had come as a result of the latter's "refusal to apologize for flotilla deaths" in 2010. Amidst "increasing tensions between the two countries", Lieberman was allegedly "planning a series of measures to retaliate against Turkey..., including providing military aid to the outlawed PKK". In other words, Israel was considering helping the PKK simply to spite Turkey and push it into dropping its sanctions. The historical ideological hostility between the PKK and Israel, meanwhile, would simply be pushed to one side until Turkey gave in to Israeli pressure (if the PKK allowed that to happen, of course).

According to Karayılan, however, the foreign minister (who had since denied the plans suggested above) had "made a mistake" if he had spoken about cooperation with the PKK. The PKK, Karayılan said, was a "principled organization", and could not be "used against any state". Therefore, he asserted, if the Israeli State wanted "to build relations with the PKK", it would first need to "apologize to Kurdish people and the PKK for capturing PKK leadership with an international conspiracy and surrendering to Turkey".⁶⁶⁴ These comments showed, very clearly, that the PKK held Israel partially responsible for the capture of Öcalan, even if there was no concrete proof of Zionist participation in the event.

V) A Context of Continued Anti-Kurdish Repression in the Middle East

In Syria, the Ba'athist regime's decision to make the PKK illegal in the late 1990s made Syrian Kurds "more politicized than ever before". They soon "protested to demand an improvement in their political and cultural rights since Syria's treatment of the Kurds differed from that of other minorities in the country". The state, for example, prohibited them "from building private schools, teaching in Kurdish, giving their businesses and children Kurdish names, and publishing books in Kurdish". Essentially, the establishment's attempts at assimilating Kurds had been almost carbon copies of those made in Turkey. The "worst injustice" in the country, however, was "the **denial of Syrian citizenship to Syria's 300,000 Kurds** and their resulting deprivation of civil rights".

After Öcalan's arrest, Noi says, many PKK members "relocated to northern Iraq", and Iran allegedly "allowed the PKK to train and maintain logistical support camps on its territory as well as cross the border into Turkey in order to launch attacks and lay mines" (though this cooperation would not last long). Meanwhile, Turkey sought to attack PKK positions in Iraqi Kurdistan, bombing both PUK and PKK positions in 1997 in defence of its KDP allies. In fact, this cross-border operation "of a reported 50,000 Turkish troops" helped to "strengthen Massoud Barzani's KDP", to "balance Iran's relationship with the PUK", and to "counter Iran's growing role in northern Iraq".

After his capture, meanwhile, Abdullah Öcalan was "sentenced to death" (though this would later be "commuted to life imprisonment in İmralı Island Prison" as a result of Turkey's attempts to join the EU). Perhaps because of Öcalan's pushes for change from prison or Prime Minister Erdoğan's attempts to take support away from the PKK through limited 'pro-Kurdish' reforms, the government eventually "announced the Kurdish Opening (later referred to as the Democratic Opening)" in mid-2009. The "use of formerly Kurdish titles for districts was [now] permitted", "legal barriers for speaking Kurdish during prison visits were eliminated", "Kurdish language and literature departments at various universities were established", "giving Kurdish names to Kurdish children was permitted",

⁶⁶⁴ <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-256595-pkk-leader-demands-apology-from-israel-for-ocalan-capture.html>

and “TV channels broadcasting in the Kurdish language were allowed”. And, while these steps essentially changed nothing about the political, social, and economic marginalisation of Kurds in Turkish society, they demonstrated (to a certain extent) just how repressive the Turkish State had been in the past.

In Iran, “pro-Öcalan demonstrations” broke out in the aftermath of the events of 1999, and they soon “turned into protests against the Iranian government”. The following year, meanwhile, there was “repression and serial killings against the Kurdish community” in the country, and “all six members of the Iranian Parliament from Kurdistan province collectively resigned” in response. Then, in 2005, two Kurdish journalists (who had written about Kurdish issues “for a banned magazine”) were “sentenced to death”. And, two years later, “three Kurds were killed and many Kurds were injured by police during a demonstration for Kurdish rights in Mahabad”. In short, the twenty-first century had brought no substantial changes to Iranian Kurdistan.

In Syria, meanwhile, “Kurdish cultural activists joined other Syrian intellectuals in demanding more rights” in what would be known as the ‘Damascus Spring’. And, although they were suppressed, their protests eventually “led to [a] change in the regime’s stance toward the Kurds”. The government soon “removed much of the state security apparatus from the Kurdish regions and ordered Ba’th officials to meet with Kurdish party leaders”. However, when the Iraqi Kurdistan gained autonomy in 2004, “Damascus moved extra security forces into Kurdish areas and placed its troops on alert”, hoping to avoid demands of autonomy from spreading to Syrian Kurdistan.

After clashes between Arabs and Kurds in Qamishli (in north-eastern Syria), riots broke out, and “seven Kurdish football fans were killed” as a result. Unrest then spread elsewhere, from Aleppo to Damascus, and the regime responded “by killing dozens of Kurds and deploying several Arab tribes against the protestors”. The “intense repression of Kurdish cultural and political expression” that followed, meanwhile, was a sign that “the state would no longer tolerate the teaching of the Kurdish language, even in the private sphere”.⁶⁶⁵

Far from being an end to the Kurdish Question, **the autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan simply represented a turning point in the struggle**. Although power was in the hands of corrupt, oppressive, tribalist, and quasi-authoritarian Kurdish nationalists, there had finally been a breakthrough in Kurdish rights in the Middle East – however minimal. And, if the PKK’s Öcalan had not already begun to transform his belief system by 2004, his political shift clearly gained a boost from the events in Iraq. Although military confrontations would still not come to a complete end between the PKK and Turkey, the insurgents were now about to embark on a new mode of struggle, focussing primarily on building direct democracy from below and on pushing forward with a project to unite all ethnic groups behind a project of secular, socialist democratisation in the Middle East.

B) The Transformation of the PKK

I) The Progressive Kurdish Movement Transformed

In 2011, Kurdish activist Ercan Ayboga spoke about how, although “the Kurdish freedom movement [in Turkey] had its ideological sources in the 1968 student movement and the Turkish left’s Marxist-Leninist, Stalinist, Maoist, Trotskyist, and other communist theories”, it “embarked on a critique of the actually existing (state) socialist model... at the end of the 1980s”. In the following years, he says, this process “would be deepened” as a result of the

⁶⁶⁵ <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/the-arab-spring-its-effects-on-the-kurds-and-the-approaches-of-turkey-iran-syria-and-iraq-on-the-kurdish-issue/>

collapse of the Soviet Union. In the 1990s, meanwhile, an emphasis would be increasingly placed upon changing “individuals and society before taking the power of any state”. Meanwhile, it was becoming increasingly clear to the movement that “the relationship between individuals and [the] state” had to be changed, and that “a full democracy should be developed” to replace “big bureaucratic-technocratic structures”, whether capitalist or ‘communist’ (read ‘state capitalist’).

A big influence on this process was Abdullah Öcalan, who (once arrested) “**rejected the existing Marxist-Leninist structure**” of the PKK as “**too hierarchical and not democratic enough**”. He soon began to foster a “political and civil struggle” which would replace the armed struggle “as the movement’s center”, promoting instead “civil disobedience and resistance” from 2000 onwards (with the Intifada in Palestine as an inspiration).⁶⁶⁶ Below, I will take a closer look at Öcalan and the PKK’s ideological shift, and how it affected the Kurdish population in Turkey and further afield.

The Shift towards ‘Democratic Confederalism’

In 2014, libertarian socialist Rafael Taylor spoke of how the PKK had transformed itself “into a force for radical democracy” in the early twenty-first century. With the bourgeois nationalist government of Iraqi Kurdistan having gained the support of nations like the USA, Turkey, and Israel, Taylor insists, the Kurdish struggle elsewhere was “anything but narrowly nationalistic”. He emphasises instead that, although “increasingly few obstacles [remained] to de jure Kurdish independence in northern Iraq” (with the government in Baghdad severely weakened by internal conflict), the PKK was at the same time pushing forward with its own alternative to the model of independence proposed by Kurdish nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan.

US radical Murray Bookchin, Taylor says, who sought to “revitalize the contemporary anarchist movement under his philosophy of social ecology”, would gain “an unlikely devotee in the hardened militant” Abdullah Öcalan in the first years of the new millennium. In solitary confinement, he asserts, the PKK leader would adopt “a form of libertarian socialism so obscure that few anarchists [had] even heard of it: Bookchin’s **libertarian municipalism**”. Having “further modified, rarefied and rebranded” Bookchin’s vision as “democratic confederalism”, Öcalan soon created the Group (or Union) of Communities in Kurdistan (**KCK**), as the body for carrying out a “**territorial experiment in a free and directly democratic society**”. Nonetheless, it was largely “kept a secret from the vast majority of anarchists” and the general international public.

Taylor then speaks of how “a broader renaissance of libertarian leftist and independent literature [had been] sweeping through the mountains” of Kurdistan since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Ayboga, for example, Kurdish leftists had been analysing “books and articles by philosophers, feminists, (neo-)anarchists, libertarian communists, communalists, and social ecologists” ever since the fall of the USSR. Öcalan, meanwhile, had undertaken a “thorough re-examination and self-criticism of the terrible violence, dogmatism, personality cult and authoritarianism he had fostered” during the PKK’s war with Turkey. In fact, he would even say that his “theory, programme and praxis of the 1970s produced nothing but futile separatism and violence”, insisting that: “the nationalism we should have opposed infested all of us”. Although the PKK had “opposed [nationalism] in principle and rhetoric”, he asserted, it had also “accepted it as inevitable” in the end.

In short, Öcalan was admitting that the PKK had been far from perfect, even though the circumstances the group was working with in the 1980s or 1990s were nowhere near

⁶⁶⁶ <http://new-compass.net/article/kurdish-communalism>

conducive to a peaceful political struggle. The PKK leader “now reasoned that “dogmatism [was] nurtured by abstract truths which [had] become habitual ways of thinking””. He admitted that he himself had made the mistake of feeling “like a high priest in the service of his god” whenever he put “such general truths into words”. Finally a “free-thinker”, Taylor suggests, **Öcalan had become “unshackled” from a dogmatic and inflexible “Marxist-Leninist mythology”**. Now, he asserts, the PKK’s symbolic leader was now seeking not only an “alternative to capitalism”, but also a “replacement for the collapsed model of ... ‘really existing socialism’”.

Öcalan’s “democratic confederalism”, Taylor says, “developed out of a **combination of inspiration from communalist intellectuals, “movements like the Zapatistas”, and other historical factors from the struggle in northern Kurdistan (Turkey)”**. And, although he failed to make contact with Bookchin (who had been “too sick for an exchange on his deathbed in 2004”), his party nonetheless celebrated the deceased libertarian socialist theoretician as “one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century” when he died two years later. Essentially, the progressive Kurdish movement had now begun “actively internalizing the new philosophy” of “eco-anarchism” in both its “strategy and tactics”, abandoning “its bloody war for Stalinist/Maoist revolution and the terror tactics that came with it”, while “perusing a **largely non-violent strategy** aimed at greater regional autonomy”.

Remembering the Past

In the context of authoritarian oppression by the powerful Turkish State, the PKK had seen “decades of fratricidal betrayal, failed ceasefires, arbitrary arrests and renewed hostilities”, but it was now seeking, in the new century, to withdraw its forces from Turkey in exchange for democratic reforms. With “long-awaited negotiations between Öcalan and Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan” beginning to take place in 2013, violence between the regime and the PKK decreased, leading to “reasonable calls for the PKK to be delisted from the [West’s] terrorist lists”.

In spite of these developments, Taylor argues, we should not forget the “authoritarian practices which sit ill beside [the PKK’s] new libertarian rhetoric”. Nor, he adds, should we forget how certain PKK branches were accused in the past of “raising money through the heroin trade, extortion, coercive conscription and general racketeering”. For him, “no excuses can be made for this type of thuggish opportunism” (if of course such claims are true). However, he stresses, “the genocidal Turkish state itself was in no-small part funded by a lucrative monopoly on the legal export of state-grown “medical” opiates to the West”, which was “made possible by its conscription and taxation for a massive counter-terrorism budget and oversized armed forces (Turkey has NATO’s second largest army after the US)”.

Essentially, Taylor asserts, when “national liberation movements mimic the brutality of the state, it is invariably the unrepresented who are branded as the terrorists” rather than the powerful elite establishment. And, in Turkey, it didn’t help the PKK’s cause that there had been a “shameful period” (in Öcalan’s own words) when “gangs within our organization” (together with “open banditry”) arranged “needless, haphazard operations, sending young people to their death in droves”. At the same time, however, the PKK’s recognition of its wrongdoings, together with its change in course, demonstrates more political maturity than the Turkish State has ever shown. While Turkish political elites remain stuck in the past, therefore, and still deserving of the terrorist title they have rightly earned, there are significant grounds to acknowledge the PKK’s shift away from its not too magnificent past as the momentous step forward that it is (whilst also learning from previous errors and the ideas that caused them).

Bookchin's Form of Libertarian Socialism

The PKK soon made “explicit overtures to anarchist internationalism”, according to Taylor, and even hosted “a workshop at the International Anarchism Gathering in St. Imier, Switzerland in 2012”. There was a lot of “confusion, dismay and debate online” as a result, but the event nonetheless “went largely unnoticed by the wider anarchist press”. Bookchin’s widow Janet Biehl, however, went to Turkey “to study the KCK on the ground”, and she soon wrote about her experiences on the New Compass website. She shared “interviews with Kurdish radicals involved in the day-to-day operations of the democratic assemblies and federal structures”, and translated and published “the first book-length anarchist study on the subject: *Democratic Autonomy in North Kurdistan: The Council Movement, Gender Liberation, and Ecology* (2013)”.

Some organisations, such as the Kurdistan Anarchist Forum (KAF) – “a pacifist group of Iraqi Kurds living in Europe” – insisted that it would “only support the PKK when they... [denounced and dismantled] centralised and hierarchical modes of struggle” once and for all, and instead turned to “federated autonomous local groups”. The KAF also wanted the PKK to “end all relations and dealings with the states of the Middle East and the West” in order to show its definitive conversion to “anti-statism”. While there is cause to agree with this stance, it also seems like the KAF exhibited a strong element of detachment from reality. In a realistic context of intense hostility from the Turkish State, failing to seek a military détente with Turkey would effectively impede the PKK’s project from taking root on the ground. Although total autonomy would be ideal, the fact is that Kurdish regions in Turkey would be isolated from the solidarity of the rest of the world if they ceased to deal with all of the states surrounding them.

According to Taylor, the PKK and KCK appeared to be “following Bookchin’s social ecology to the book”, including the “contradictory participation in the state apparatus through elections” of PKK allies that was “prescribed in the [Bookchinite] literature. Joost Jongerden and Ahmed Akkaya, for example, wrote that Bookchin distinguished between “two ideas of politics, the Hellenic model and the Roman”. In other words, he made a distinction between “direct and representative democracy”, seeing his “form of neo-anarchism” as “a practical revival of the ancient Athenian revolution” (in the tradition of “the Paris Commune of 1871, the councils (soviets) in the spring-time of the revolution in Russia in 1917, and the Spanish Revolution in 1936”).

The first of the five steps of Bookchin’s communalism, says Taylor, consists of the **empowerment of “existing municipalities through law in an attempt to localize decision-making power”**. The second, meanwhile, focusses on a **democratisation of those municipalities “through grassroots assemblies”**. Then, the third seeks to **create a union of municipalities through “regional networks and wider confederations... working to gradually replace nation-states with municipal confederations”**, with “‘higher’ levels of confederation [having] mainly coordinative and administrative functions”.

The fourth step involves the **union of “progressive social movements” in order to “strengthen civil society and establish “a common focal point for all citizens’ initiatives and movements”: the assemblies”**. This cooperation would not expect that there would always be a “harmonious consensus”, but would be built precisely out of the belief that “disagreement and deliberation” can be positive. For Bookchin, **“society develops through debate”**, though the assemblies would have to be secular so as to ensure the minimisation of “religious influences on politics and government” and that the focus remained on assemblies as an “arena for class struggle” rather than ‘religious struggle’.

The final step Bookchin speaks of is the “**municipalization of the economy**”, which would contribute to the creation of a “classless society, based on **collective political control over the socially important means of production**”. There would also be a “confederal allocation of resources to ensure balance between regions”, he says. In other words, there would be “**a combination of worker self-management and participatory planning** to meet social needs” in Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism. In short, Taylor emphasises, this is all “classical anarchist economics”.

Öcalan’s Turkish Version

Former Bookchin editor and KCK analyst Eirik Eigliad says that, for libertarian municipalism to work, it is necessary “to combine the insights from progressive feminist and ecological movements together with new urban movements and citizens’ initiatives, as well as trade unions and local cooperatives and collectives”. Meanwhile, he affirms, an “**assembly-based democracy**” would “contribute to making this progressive exchange of ideas possible on a more permanent basis, and with more direct political consequences”. And such “communalism”, he stresses, would not just be “a tactical way of uniting these radical movements”, but a genuine, concrete “attempt to bring reason and ethics to the forefront of public discussions”.

Öcalan’s version of Bookchin’s political philosophy, which he referred to as “democratic confederalism”, placed emphasis on a “**democratic, ecological, gender-liberated society**”, and on a “**democracy without the state**”. For him, while “capitalist modernity” was based on “capitalism, the nation-state, and industrialism”, his so-called “democratic modernity” would be based on a “democratic nation, communal economy, and ecological industry”. In order to achieve the latter, he underlines, “three projects” would need to be undertaken: “one for the democratic republic, one for democratic-confederalism and one for democratic autonomy”. As such, his pragmatic search for a “democratic republic” revealed (far from the school of anarchism detached from reality) that he was looking to deal in a practical way with ‘real world’ conditions.

“Attaining long denied citizenship and civil rights for Kurds” in Turkey, for example, would be the project’s main aim within the current state structures. Democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism, meanwhile, would seek to increase the “autonomous capacities of people”, through building “**a more direct, less representative form of political structure**”. For Jongerden and Akkaya, this refers to the creation of “**a bottom-up, participative administrative body, from local to provincial levels**” based on the “concept of the free citizen (ozgur yarttas)” (focussed on ensuring “basic civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech and organization”). The “core unit” of this model, they say, is “the neighborhood assembly”, otherwise known as the “councils”. These then come together at the village (köy) level, urban neighbourhood (mahalle) level, district (ilçe) level, city (kent) level, and regional (bölge) level.

Implementation of the New Model

The councils set up by the KCK soon gained “popular participation” in a number of Turkish provinces, according to Taylor. In Diyarbakır, “the largest city in Turkish Kurdistan”, assemblies sprung up “almost everywhere”. In the provinces of Hakkari and Sirnak, meanwhile, “two parallel authorities” were effectively created – one belonging to the KCK and one to the state. Essentially, Taylor stresses, this reality proved that “the democratic confederal structure [was] more powerful in practice”.

Taylor then describes how “the “highest” level of federation in northern Kurdistan” was the DTK (Democratic Society Congress), which was “a mix of the rank-and-file delegated by

their peers [in the local councils] with recallable mandates” (60 percent) and “representatives from “more than five hundred civil society organizations, labor unions, and political parties” (40 percent). Of the latter, around six percent was “reserved for representatives of religious minorities, academics, or others with a particular expertise”. The number of the civil society groups which were “directly democratic” and “non-statist”, however, was still “unclear”, Taylor asserts.

According to an “informal consensus among witnesses”, he says: the “majority of decision-making [was] directly democratic through one arrangement or other”; the “majority of those decisions [were] made at the grassroots”; and “the decisions [were] executed from the bottom-up in accordance with the federal structure”. As the assemblies and the DTK were “coordinated by the illegal KCK”, however, “of which the PKK [was] a part”, people involved in their activities consistently suffered repression at the hands of the Turkish State.⁶⁶⁷

Ercan Ayboga insists that, in part, the assemblies have not spread as much as might have been hoped because “almost half of the population in Turkey’s Kurdish areas still [did] not actively support [them]”. Perhaps their greatest impediment, however, was the fact that **“about thirty-five hundred activists [were] arrested” between 2009 and 2011**, which “significantly weakened the structures of democratic confederalism”. With a military crackdown on the PKK, meanwhile, activists were also in the firing line. People were arrested simply for participating in the assemblies, and they would not be allowed to speak Kurdish in court to defend themselves because Kurds were still denied that right by the state. And, “of all the thousands of people arrested and charged with KCK membership... in recent years”, Ayboga said in 2011, “only one [had] gone free”.⁶⁶⁸ In other words, one key element discouraging Turkish Kurds from participating in the PKK’s directly democratic experiment was almost certainly the fact that, upon doing so, they risked imprisonment or persecution at the hands of the Turkish State.

The DTK, as coordinated by the KCK, continued to move forward, however, and selected “the candidates of the pro-Kurdish BDP (Peace and Democracy Party) for the Turkish Parliament”, which in turn proposed “democratic autonomy” for Turkey. In essence, therefore, there was a “combination of representative and direct democracy” in the KCK’s political model. Although it was seeking to work within the existing political system, the BDP would nonetheless propose “the establishment of approximately 20 autonomous regions which would directly self-govern” issues of “education, health, culture, agriculture, industry, social services and security, women’s issues, youth and sports”. The state, in this scenario, would simply be left to conduct “foreign affairs, finance and defense”. In short, whilst this proposal did not represent a completely anti-statist stance, such an achievement would undoubtedly be a significant step towards greater democracy and justice for Turkish citizens (and especially those in Kurdistan).

“On the ground”, however, “the revolution [had] already begun”. For example, Taylor says, Turkish Kurdistan had already built up **“an independent educational movement of “academies” that [held] discussion forums and seminars in neighborhoods”**. ‘Culture Street’, meanwhile, was a project which **celebrated “the diversity of religions and belief systems”**, while undertaking projects to “restore a mosque, a Chaldean-Aramaic catholic church, an orthodox Armenian Church, and a Jewish Synagogue”. There was also a campaign to put up municipality signs in both Kurdish and Turkish (a multilingual movement that also gained the support of local shopkeepers).

⁶⁶⁷ <http://anarchistnews.org/content/new-pkk-unleashing-social-revolution-kurdistan> and <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

⁶⁶⁸ <http://new-compass.net/article/kurdish-communalism>

Women's liberation, meanwhile, was being "pursued by the women themselves", with the DTK's Women's Council "enforcing new rules like the "forty percent gender quota" in the assemblies". At the same time, domestic violence was opposed by promising to give the salary of any abusive civil servant directly to his wife in order "to provide for her financial security and use as she [saw] fit". Elsewhere, in the fight against polygamy, "if a husband [took] a second wife, half of his estate [would go] to his first".

There were also "Peace Villages", which were "new or transformed communities of cooperatives", which implemented "their own program fully outside of the logistical constraints of the Kurdish-Turkish war". Along the Turkish border with Iraq and Iran, for example, ""several villages" joined the experiment". In another province, meanwhile, an "ecological women's village" was "being built to shelter victims of domestic violence" and supply them "with all or almost all the necessary energy".

At the same time, Taylor speaks about how the KCK would hold "biennial meetings in the mountains with hundreds of delegates" from KCK-affiliated parties in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq (including the PYD in Syria, PJAK in Iran, and the PCDK (Party for a Democratic Solution in Kurdistan) in Iraq – all of which "promote democratic confederalism as well"). In the Qandil Mountains, meanwhile, Taylor stresses that "radical literature and assemblies thrive" among the PKK and PJAK guerrillas there, in an attempt to reintegrate "the mountains' many Kurds" into the model pioneered elsewhere in progressive Kurdistan "after decades of displacement".⁶⁶⁹

In September 2014, The Rojava Report gave a concrete example of how "certain villages in Colemêrg (Turkish: Hakkari) [had] begun to found village communal assemblies in order to resolve their own problems". Residents in the village of Dizê (or Üzümcü), the site says, had begun "work on the formation of a village commune two years [previously]". The 735 inhabitants of the village, it asserts, would be "represented by two co-spokespersons – one man and one woman- who [would] change every year". Its "**Communal Assembly**", meanwhile, **would meet "twice a month with all residents of the village participating"**, in an attempt to "**determine the problems facing the village and develop projects to resolve them**". According to co-spokesperson Rifat Er, the project had met with a lot of "excitement and enthusiasm", and was "based on developing relationships of communal living".

Having "received no services from the state... for a long time", The Rojava Report stresses, Dizê's inhabitants finally decided to "solve the problems facing [them] together", seeking to ensure that "everyone from the young to the old [could] take part in [assembly] meetings". As a result of "debate and common effort", it insists, they had now managed to build "village roads and... clean drinking water... fountains in common spaces". And, by basing their actions on "a system of duties developed by the village commune", they also took "care of road work and garbage collection". Essentially, there is no-one left without a task, and people only "contribute what they can for the commune". According to Er, the village's inhabitants believe their work "will lead to the founding of a truly democratic system where every village and district and city in our country will solve their problems through their own will".⁶⁷⁰

II) An Anti-Imperialist Socialist Alternative to Kurdish Nationalism

While the PKK has long taken a stance opposing Israel for the role it has played in destabilising the Middle East and oppressing the Palestinian people, more nationalist elements of the Kurdish movement (like the KDP and PUK in Iraq) have not developed such

⁶⁶⁹ <http://anarchistnews.org/content/new-pkk-unleashing-social-revolution-kurdistan> and <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

⁶⁷⁰ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/09/01/village-communes-emerging-in-colemerg/>

a posture. In 2005, for example, The Guardian published about how “Israeli firms [had been] carrying out military training... in Kurdish areas of north Iraq”. Apparently, “dozens of former members of Israel’s elite and covert forces were training Kurdish [nationalist] fighters in anti-terrorism techniques”. The paper also spoke about how, “since the 1960s Israel and the Iraqi Kurds [had] had a [good] relationship”, in spite of Israel officially being at war with Iraq for most of that period.

“Detailed reports in the New Yorker”, The Guardian said, had previously claimed “Israel had become heavily involved with the Kurds from 2003”, as a “strategic... counterweight to Sunni and Shia groups in Iraq” and an opportunity to get “better access to intelligence from Syria and Iran”. Meanwhile, the Zionist State had also “supported Kurdish rebels against the Ba'ath regime in Baghdad until 1975”, because they were considered not to be “as anti-Israeli as many Muslims in other countries”. At the same time, the Kurds’ resentment over “Yasser Arafat’s support for Saddam Hussein” meant that Israel felt it had a strategic ally in Iraq’s Kurdish nationalists.

A KRG spokesman, however, was a lot vaguer about Israeli support for Iraqi Kurds, emphasising “there [were] no official links” between them. One reason for this discretion, though, could well have been the fact that official Israeli influence in Iraq could easily have acted to “encourage extremist groups, such as al-Qaida in Iraq” (which would later turn into ISIS) to increase their attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan. Nonetheless, in spite of the official denials mentioned above, The Guardian claimed that “Israelis [were] regularly seen in the Kurdish towns of northern Iraq, working as security guards and trainers”.

Israeli companies, meanwhile, posing as “agricultural and engineering experts”, had allegedly “set up a base in a remote area of Kurdistan, using it for weapons and anti-terrorism training and bringing in “dozens of motorcycles, sniffer dogs, Kalashnikov-upgrading devices, flak jackets, uniforms and helmets, all Israeli-made”. As already mentioned in this book, Turkey (previously “Israel’s main ally in the region”), along with the USA, Iran, Britain, and Germany also stepped in to help the KRG grow into a pro-Western power after the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, undertaking “development and security projects” in the hope of securing a capitalist alliance with the most prominent Kurdish political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan – the KDP and PUK.⁶⁷¹

At the same time, the PKK and its allies would remain on the blacklists of the countries named above – principally because of its opposition to the authoritarian capitalist status quo in the region. Moreover, as explained in Chapter Four, Abdullah Öcalan has expressed anti-Zionist statements on a number of occasions, and had even more reasons to do so because of the long-standing alliance between Turkey and the Israel regime. Also, the tactical alliances made with both Ba’athist Syria and Palestinian resistance groups at certain points in the twentieth century assured that the progressive Kurdish group would keep its place in the ‘bad books’ of both Israel and the West. In short, therefore, while Kurdish nationalists in Iraq have effectively rolled over for both imperialist and Zionist forces, the PKK and its allies in Kurdistan represent an anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist, and left-wing alternative within the Kurdish political movement.

III) The PKK’s Political and Civil Struggle

In an open letter to The Guardian newspaper following the death of Nelson Mandela, Abdullah Öcalan spoke to the world in January 2014 about how the media had tried to emphasise his domination of the PKK in order to discredit the movement. Referring to an article from December, which compared Öcalan to Mandela, he says that, just like the

⁶⁷¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/dec/02/iraq.israel>

struggle against apartheid in South Africa, Kurds in Turkey had only just begun to have their national identity respected thanks to forty years fighting for freedom. Criticising the assumption that Kurds followed him out of fear, Öcalan affirms that the only fear he has invoked (as proven by his stay on “a prison-island alone and under solitary confinement” for over 14 years) had been in “those who [had] put him into chains”. In this way and others, he says, “Dear Madiba and I have more parallels than contrasts”. The numerous “ludicrous comments made on Mandela’s credibility”, he asserts, just like those made against his own character and role, came from people who failed to make “a close and reasonable analysis” of the “struggle of the oppressed” in the world. While leaders are criticised, he stresses, the fact is that leaders, along with the People themselves, are important for the success of a movement.

The “1980 fascist coup” and other actions that saw increased discrimination against the Kurdish community were largely ignored because of Turkey’s alliance with the West in the Cold War, Öcalan asserts. As happened in South Africa because of Western interference in its politics, “state propaganda” still managed to dehumanise “the struggling leaders held captive” in the developing world, mainly because of “poor intellectual standards”. Because of the continuing international silence regarding Turkey’s treatment of the Kurds, meanwhile, the progressive Kurdish movement had no other choice but to keep searching for justice in its own way, and as best it could. And amidst “changing conditions”, Öcalan emphasises, like the fall of the USSR and the end of Syrian funding for the PKK, the PKK was forced to transform itself “on the basis of the struggle for democratic modernity and the developing direct democracy examples in the world”.

He then adds that “those opposing peace are accusing us of starting negotiations” with the Turkish State, dehumanising him and defaming the PKK in the process. Like Mandela, he says, the PKK had realised, after years of violent struggle, the immense power of a “peaceful and negotiating perspective”, and of international solidarity. He claims that, far from having support grown from ‘fear’, the ideas he had proposed for the progressive Kurdish movement had gained support principally because they had won “the confidence of the people”. Because of the trust of the people, he insists, the PKK was able to continue fighting against injustice during the war with Turkey, and its ideas were now even represented in both the Turkish political system and at a grassroots level thanks to its ideological shift. At the end of his letter, Öcalan refers in particular to “the role of the women in our political movement and the resulting transformative effects”, asking The Guardian and other media outlets to do more research into the movement before misinforming the public.⁶⁷²

The PKK’s Allies and Representatives within Turkish Politics

In 1990, the People’s Labour Party (HEP) was formed, and would overtly promote Kurdish cultural and political rights. It would be banned by the Constitutional Court of Turkey in 1993, but would soon be replaced by the DEP, then the HADEP (as seen in Section A of this chapter), the DEHAP, the OZGUR PARTI, the DTP, the BDP, and then the HDP. In 1994, meanwhile, the PKK would form its own ‘Revolutionary People’s Party’ (or DHP), which would also suffer persecution and be named an illegal party. For example, in 2007 the ECHR was contacted by Evrim Çiftçi, a Turkish national living in Switzerland as a political refugee. Ten years previously, she said, she had been “arrested and taken into police custody in connection with a police operation” against DHP members, and she alleged that the “police had obtained her confession by torture, in the form of suspension by her arms, beatings, insults and sexual assault”. Eventually, the court would find that the applicant’s “symptoms

⁶⁷² <http://stuartjeannebramhall.com/2014/01/23/letter-from-a-modern-day-mandela/>, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/20/abdullah-ocalan-role-kurds-struggle-freedom>, and <http://www.freeocalan.org/>

had [indeed] originated in treatment that had been inflicted on her during her time in police custody and for which Turkey bore responsibility".⁶⁷³

At KurdishQuestion.com, Baki Gul describes the BDP (2008-2014) as "the pinnacle of Kurdish parliamentary politics", being supported by "the struggle of the [PKK] guerrillas, the resistance of the prisoners of thought and the uprisings of the people". The formation of the BDP, he says, soon transformed the long-persecuted HEP movement into "a political force in the politics of [both] Kurdistan and Turkey". Although there were attempts to seek temporary election time coalitions "with the democratic forces of Turkey" in the 1990s and 2000s, he stresses, these attempts had proved to be "largely ineffective". Under the BDP, however, "the democratic forces of Kurdistan and Turkey were [finally] able to come together on a joint platform" called the "Democracy, Labour and Peace Bloc" (a coalition that "entered the general elections in 2011 [and] won a major victory". Out of 61 BDP candidates nominated as 'independents' (mostly in the south-east of Turkey), for example, 29 were elected. This successful platform, Gul says, was "the foundation of the HDP project".⁶⁷⁴

In late 2012, ANF News reported on how the People's Democratic Congress (HDK), "established in October 16, 2011 following cooperation between the BDP and leftist parties and groups in the June 12, 2011 general elections", had argued that its aim was to: "extinguish all kinds of repression and injustice directed against our peoples"; create "a Turkey in peace where we can live humanely"; and show that "our differences are enriching us and [making] us strong". Essentially, though, the HDK was an attempt to form a coalition of Turkish left-wing movements, including those seeking greater rights for Turkish Kurds.

The BDP's Ertuğrul Kürkçü, meanwhile, would insist that the HDK sought to emphasise that "the reality of [a] pluralist society with [multiple] identities [would] be the most important opportunity to hinder the progress of mutual racism caused by war and conflict". This "multi-identity" reality, he said, was "Turkey's most precious treasure in [the] fight against racism". For him, "shoulder to shoulder with women, Kurds, laborers, those fighting for nature and life, youths, intellectuals, [and] workers", the HDK would "show that another Turkey is possible".⁶⁷⁵

The HDP and the Creation of a Left-Wing 'Umbrella Party'

Emre Uslu spoke at Today's Zaman in mid-2012 about how, since 2004, Abdullah Öcalan had been "arguing that pro-Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) parties should open their doors to Turkish politicians and free themselves from the Kurdish question". He suggests that **Öcalan had "urged his lawyers to establish a new political party as an umbrella party to put Turkish socialists and Kurdish nationalist parties on the same political wavelength"**. He hoped that such a party would help to "reach out to the Turkish community to explain the Kurdish question" in a more effective way. The aim of the HDK, Uslu says, was to establish "a base for possible convergence" for the Turkish Left and "the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), the Kurdish equivalent of the HDK".

The common project of the HDK and DTK, Uslu reports, was clear in the fact that "some of the founders of the DTK and the HDK, especially the Kurdish founders, [were] the same people". At the same time, he asserts that "it is a well-known fact that both the HDK and the DTK were founded under the direction of Öcalan". The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), he explains, had formed in 2007 as "an umbrella organization for illegal groups" in Turkey ("such as the PKK, the People's Defense Forces (HPG) and the Self Defense Forces"),

⁶⁷³ http://insanhaklarimerkezi.bilgi.edu.tr/pages/news_full.asp?lid=en&id=149

⁶⁷⁴ <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/index.php/insight-research/analysis/bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey/66-bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey.html>

⁶⁷⁵ <http://en.firatajans.com/news/hdk-becoming-a-political-party>

along with the PKK's allies in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The DTK, meanwhile, was intended to encompass "Kurdish organizations that [were] legally registered, such as the BDP and affiliated civil society groups". Finally, the HDK would include legal left-wing organisations in the whole of Turkey.⁶⁷⁶

PhD candidate Duygu Atlas also insists that "the HDK was established at the behest of [Öcalan], as part of his plans to transform the Kurdish political movement into a 'party of Turkey' in order to become a legitimate political actor by shedding its ethnic-based politics". As the HDK sought to "incorporate the Kurdish question into the general politics of Turkey and bring together a variety of political organizations under one banner", it included "a variety of minority groups, including Alevi, Armenians, Circassians, Laz, Arabs and Assyrians, as well as feminists, socialists, far-leftist parties, environmental movements, communities for the disabled, and lesbian and gay communities". However, it was essentially "a platform for the political unification of these underrepresented groups", which would materialise in 2012 with the creation of the HDP.⁶⁷⁷

The HDP, which "adopted the system of co-chairs [i.e. a man and woman sharing leadership roles] in line with its principle of equality at all levels", also showed its commitment to equality by allocating "a ten percent quota for LTGB individuals" in the party.⁶⁷⁸ It would soon come to represent "the intersection between the social and political consciousness of the Kurdish identity and the wider democratisation of Turkey". Working hand in hand with the BDP, it would seek to "radically change the political system of Turkey" while the BDP sought to increase autonomy in Turkish Kurdistan.⁶⁷⁹

The idea was that, together, the BDP and HDP would be able to democratise Turkey a lot more quickly. In fact, in mid-2014, the HDP would gain even greater strength when the BDP agreed to dissolve into the party. According to Atlas, the HDP project "injected some new life into the heretofore feeble Turkish opposition", and this was partly thanks to the leadership of Öcalan.⁶⁸⁰ Around the same time, HDP Co-chair Sebahat Tuncel would insist that, with the PKK having sought peace with the Turkish State, "now the time [was] of [the] HDP and HDK".⁶⁸¹ And when the BDP joined together with the HDP, Tuncel would say: "our unity will be a great contribution to Turkish politics and to the forces of democracy". With the movement's growing size, however, she emphasised that its "responsibility [was] also increasing".⁶⁸²

The Peace Process

In 2012, Öcalan asserted that the PKK's aim was "not to separate the Kurds from Turks", and that its fight was "not with the Republic" either. Essentially, he had realised that war was simply the cause of perpetual suffering and that there could never be a true military victory for his organisation. Instead, however he stressed that the PKK's fight was "with the anti-democratism aimed at the Republic" from elite sectors of Turkish society.⁶⁸³ In other words, he opposed the form of government within Turkey, but accepted that the destruction of the state itself was, at least for the time being, an unachievable goal.

⁶⁷⁶ http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/emre-uslu/the-pkks-turkish-initiative-hdk_280262.html

⁶⁷⁷ <http://www.cftau.org/news-room/peoples-democracy-party-hdp-a-breath-of-fresh-air-for-the-turkish-opposition/>

⁶⁷⁸ <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/component/k2/the-people-s-democracy-party-hdp-a-short-history/133-the-people-s-democracy-party-hdp-a-short-history.html>

⁶⁷⁹ www.kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/analysis/bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey/66-bdp-for-an-autonomous-kurdistan-hdp-for-a-democratic-turkey.html

⁶⁸⁰ <http://www.cftau.org/news-room/peoples-democracy-party-hdp-a-breath-of-fresh-air-for-the-turkish-opposition/>

⁶⁸¹ <http://www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/407282?from=2910492152>

⁶⁸² <https://rojareport.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/bdp-mps-officially-join-hdp-promise-new-beginning/>

⁶⁸³ <http://kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/abdullah-ocalan/the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk/89-the-republic-s-capitalist-modernity-project-and-emergence-of-the-pkk.html>

Having fostered negotiations with the “chief of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organisation (MIT), Hakan Fidan”, at the beginning of 2013, Öcalan quickly announced a PKK ceasefire. On March 21 of that year, a letter of his was read out “to a crowd of one million [activists] gathered in Diyarbakir - the largest Kurdish city in southeastern Turkey”. It declared that, although the PKK still sought “a solution to the Kurdish issue within Turkey’s borders and through further democratisation”, the “era of armed struggle [had] come to an end”. The struggle for Kurdish rights in Turkey, the letter read, would now “be advanced through political means”.

PKK members would subsequently be withdrawn from Turkish territory, in order to “clear the way for further negotiations and democratisation steps”. According to leaders in the Qandil Mountains of Iraq, this withdrawal “would commence on May 8, 2013”. Upon its completion (as the first of a “three-phased process”), the focus would then lie on the government to “undertake legal, constitutional, and democratisation steps”. Consequently, PKK members would be reintegrated into Turkish society.⁶⁸⁴

In November, however, Al Monitor would report on how it was “not possible to speak of the existence of the dynamism that is needed to make the [peace] process robust and resilient to the stresses of time, external circumstances and pressures”. In short, **the Turkish government had failed “to take reciprocal confidence-building steps”** after the PKK’s withdrawal from Turkey, such as: the “release of at least 5,000 Kurdish activists from prisons”; the improvement of “Öcalan’s conditions of incarceration”; the allowance of “mother-tongue education for the Kurds”; the reduction of “the 10% election threshold”; and the expansion of “the boundaries of freedoms of organizing, assembly and expressions”. As a result, the “PKK military-political leadership” announced in early September that it “was suspending the withdrawal process”.

Later the same month, Prime Minister Erdoğan reacted to the PKK’s decision by unilaterally announcing a “democratization package”, which would make certain reforms but would essentially change very little. For example, he granted Kurds the right to establish private schools for Kurdish language education, restored the names of Kurdish villages that had previously been changed into Turkish, gave Kurds the freedom to launch political campaigns in Kurdish, and abolished “the student’s daily vow of allegiance that [started], “I am a Turk””.

Apart from being considered insignificant by Turkish Kurds, the “unilateral formulation” of the government’s package of reforms was also seen to be “contravening the spirit of the solution process”. In other words, the ruling AKP regime was seen to be playing up to Kurdish voters (with elections in mind) whilst refusing to recognise the role that the PKK’s ceasefire and attempts at peace had played in facilitating its decision to modify discriminatory national laws. In fact, BDP co-chairman Selahattin Demirtaş even claimed he had told the AKP that, if it prepared the package of reforms “without consulting” representatives of the Kurdish movement, Turkish Kurds would “not link it to the [solution] process”.⁶⁸⁵

For Insight Turkey (IT), Erdoğan was simply trying to “maintain and even expand his electoral mandate” with the aforementioned measures, appeasing and satisfying “opposing constituencies” at the same time. By seeming too committed to the peace process with the PKK or conceding too many of the militants’ demands, the organisation says, Erdoğan would have risked alienating other “elements of the electorate” which were “more important” to his party. Far from being dedicated to finding a solution to the country’s military conflict, therefore, the Prime Minister seemed “to have treated the mere agreement

⁶⁸⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/05/2013514154722778273.html>

⁶⁸⁵ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/akp-stall-kurd-peace-process.html#>

to begin the peace process as the goal itself, rather than as a part of a process to address the root causes of the conflict". In short, IT asserts, the 'democratic package' of September 2013 had "failed to implement any of the reforms the Kurds were looking for".

The PKK believed, meanwhile, that "it was now time for the Turkish state and government to take concrete steps and make the required legal arrangements for the second stage of the peace process by presenting a [real] democratization package of legal reforms". Far from doing this, however, "the Turkish government was [actually] constructing new military posts and dams, increasing the number of village guards, and failing to ensure the [negotiatory] connection between the PKK head Abdullah Öcalan and democratic circles". And, by taking these actions, the regime "was raising doubts about the peace process and creating the risk of a deadlock and failure".⁶⁸⁶

IT would insist later in 2014, however, that "the ongoing peace process between the [AKP] government and the Kurdish left, represented by the [PKK] and the [HDP]," was nonetheless "an extraordinary achievement". It was fairly miraculous, the organisation says, that these "two political traditions", which "do not have much in common", managed to find at least some political will for bringing peace to Turkey. On the one hand, there was the AKP, which had broken away "from the old-fashioned religious populism of the former Islamist right" and embraced "the Republican project of integration with the West", amalgamating "the pro-Islamist and pro-Western foreign policy schools". The "BDP-HDP line", meanwhile, represented "a progressive, left-wing party tradition" of secularism, "equal citizenship, democratization, freedom of expression, social justice, gender equality, ecology and labor rights". Far from the moralist stance of the AKP, for example, the HDP had "actively defended LGBT rights in Turkey".⁶⁸⁷ In other words, despite all of the problems and lack of progress in the 'solution process', the fact that it had begun in the first place was, in itself, a significant political achievement.

Social Unrest in 2014

With the "domestic social unrest in Turkey and the deterioration of the security situation in neighbouring Syria" in 2014, though, it would become clear that the AKP's commitment to the peace process was reducing significantly. With little progress being made, "the PKK halted [its troop] withdrawals [again], blaming the AKP [for] not living up to [the] commitments [which had been] made to Öcalan". The ceasefire held, but there would soon be "clashes between protestors and soldiers" as part of "renewed unrest in Kurdish regions". At the same time, Rudaw suggested that the government's stalling of the peace process had, in part, been due to the importance of the Kurdish vote in August's presidential elections. The re-initiation of the process just before the poll, meanwhile, was seen as a cynical political game played by Prime Minister Erdoğan in order to ensure his election as president.⁶⁸⁸

The subsequent social unrest in Turkey towards the end of 2014 (after Erdoğan's electoral victory) was caused to some extent by the government's increasing authoritarianism, but also by its stance on the besieged pro-PKK Syrian town of Kobani. Nonetheless, although the AKP's policies had created this discontent, the party decided to place blame on 'subversive' PKK supporters. In late October, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç even said that, "from now on, we may refrain from speaking about the resolution process in this period. We are not obliged to [this] process". His refusal to speak about "a road map for the peace process" amidst the social unrest, meanwhile, reflected the government's political games regarding

⁶⁸⁶ <http://www.insightturkey.com/the-turkish-kurdish-peace-process-stalled-in-neutral/articles/1394>

⁶⁸⁷ <http://www.insightturkey.com/can-the-kurdish-left-contribute-to-turkeys-democratization/articles/1458>

⁶⁸⁸ <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070720141>

the autonomous pro-PKK region of Rojava in northern Syria.⁶⁸⁹ In short, it was hoping to place the ‘solution process’ as a restraining barrier on Kurdish protesters (to stop them from standing up against internal repression and external hostility to the Rojavan Revolution).

At the time, the Turkish regime was considered (as I will examine in the following chapters) to be, at the very least, indifferent to the Wahhabi Islamist assault on Syrian Kurdistan (due to its desire to stop PKK affiliates there from successfully establishing themselves in power). In fact, I would argue that its inactive stance on the peace process could be seen as the **AKP using the negotiations as a tool to prevent the PKK from waging all-out-war against the Turkish State in response to its hostility to Rojava**. By threatening not to take further steps with the process, I believe that the AKP was playing a dangerous political game, trying to encourage the PKK to rein its Turkish supporters in (and prevent them from protesting against the government) in exchange for further steps towards conflict resolution in Turkey.

C) The AKP, Turkish Islamism, and the PKK

In this section of the chapter, I will look in more detail at the Justice and Development Party of Turkey (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or AKP in Turkish), a conservative and neoliberal organisation which, after its formation in 2001, soon became the most powerful political party in Turkey. Having initially developed from the Turkish Islamist movement, it would soon come to represent a broad coalition of the country’s right-wingers, who emphasised their pro-Western and ‘pro-business’ characteristics whilst maintaining a ‘traditionalist’ social philosophy. In particular, I will analyse the impact of Prime Minister (and later President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s policies and attitudes on the ‘Kurdish Question’ in Turkey, but will also reflect on their impact on Turkish society as a whole.

I) The AKP, Hizmet, and Human Rights

The Gülen Movement, a religious and social movement also known as Hizmet which is led by Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen, “played a [significant] part in driving the electoral success” of the “Islamist-rooted AK Party” from 2001 onwards. As potentially the “biggest Muslim network” in the world, it had funded hundreds of Islamic schools, think tanks, and media outlets (“from Kenya to Kazakhstan”), whilst attracting “millions of followers and billions of dollars”.⁶⁹⁰ Its members soon gained “influential positions in [Turkish] institutions from the police and secret services to the judiciary and the AK Party itself”. In late 2013, however, Erdoğan would alienate this “crucial element of his alliance” after it was alleged that Gülen’s “supporters in the judiciary and the police [had] gone after the prime minister’s allies on corruption charges”.⁶⁹¹ In a thinly-covered retaliation, the Turkish regime “moved to close down a network of private schools run by Hizmet” in November.

Imam Gülen had previously promoted “a tolerant Islam which [emphasised] altruism, hard work and education”. Although his vision (focussed on a “mix of philanthropy and business”) was a powerful element of his participation in the AKP alliance, he had previously been criticised for seeking to “spread socially conservative Islamic attitudes... around the globe, and to suppress any opposition”. In 1999, for example, he had been forced to flee Turkey after a video surfaced in which he was shown telling his followers to “infiltrate mainstream structures”. Although he was accused of trying to “undermine Turkey’s secular state”, he would later be cleared of these charges when the AKP took power. In fact, since the formation of the AKP’s alliance with Gülen, “several of Hizmet’s

⁶⁸⁹ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-govt-says-not-obliged-to-kurdish-peace-process.aspx?pageID=238&nlID=73557&NewsCatID=338>

⁶⁹⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-13503361>

⁶⁹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25428565>

most prominent critics” in Turkey had been jailed, including “a police chief who wrote a book on Gülen’s influence on the police and judiciary”.⁶⁹²

The Gülen-AKP Split

Hürriyet’s Mustafa Akyol insisted in mid-2013 that the Gülen movement needed “to be taken as a serious political force in Turkish affairs”. As such, its position on the peace process with the PKK (a “controversial process” for which the AKP required Gülen’s “political and moral support”) was an important issue to understand. The fact was that the “voters of the AKP (literally half of Turkish society) most certainly [included] many, if not most, [of the] followers of Fethullah Gülen”. Therefore, the movement was “the most powerful (and arguably most modernized) of Turkey’s numerous religious communities, which together [made] up “the religious conservatives” whose natural political choice [at the time was clearly] the AKP”. Nonetheless, the occasional independence of Hizmet from the stance of the AKP leadership saw it take a “more dovish” position towards the West and Israel, whilst taking a “more hawkish” one regarding the “Turkish deep state” (an alleged anti-democratic nationalist coalition composed of high-level intelligence officials, army officers, and other elite figures) and the PKK (a stance that gains greater significance when we consider that Hizmet allegedly had “a strong presence within Turkey’s police forces”).

After the peace process had officially begun, Gülen stated that “nations might need to accept some bitter peace agreements, as far as “the national pride” is not totally overrun”. Today’s Zaman, which Akyol says is “backed by the Gülen Movement itself”, interpreted this statement as demonstrating Gülen’s backing of the negotiations. Nonetheless, other Turkish writers (“known (or believed) to be members of the Gülen Movement”) soon “raised critical opinions” about the process. For example, they paranoiacally asked if, in spite of the PKK’s withdrawal from Turkish territory, the AKP was in fact “being duped by the PKK”. They also revealed the split between “Turkey’s spy agency MIT” (loyal to Erdoğan) and the “allegedly pro-Gülen police”, and the problems that this division presented for the peace process. According to “a senior figure in the [Gülen] movement, meanwhile, **Gülen “believes that while peace with the PKK is a good initiative”, the PKK “is not that trustable**, and that there are ill-willed powers in the region which might interfere in the process”.

According to pro-Gülen columnist Emre Uslu, the “permanent disarmament of the PKK” would indeed be a “wonderful” outcome of the peace process, though the group’s “preconditions” like constitutional reforms could not “be given as hostage to the impositions of an armed group”. In other words, Gülen followers were both sceptical about the potential success of the process and “critical of its methods”, effectively denying “unconditional support” to the leadership of the AKP on the issue. At the same time, they also stubbornly hoped for the PKK to give ‘everything in exchange for nothing’. Nonetheless, as long as both Hizmet and the AKP had “overlapping values and goals (such as a powerful, Muslim, neo-Ottoman Turkey)”, they would generally continue their cooperation, even in spite of “some conflicting interests and views”.⁶⁹³

The Peace Process and Erdoğan’s War against Hizmet

For author Graham Fuller, the peace process in Turkey really “began in the ‘90s with the realization that Kurds [were] different people” from the Turks. Positive relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, meanwhile, soon “influenced the changing of perceptions in Turkey”, becoming “major and forceful motivators of the peace negotiations” with the PKK, according to Fuller. He also suggests there is a “high probability of these talks ending for the benefit of both

⁶⁹² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-13503361>

⁶⁹³ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/gulen-movement-peace-process-pkk.html#> and @AkyolinEnglish

sides". As potentially "close allies", he says, it was necessary for Turks to see how an "unhappy Diyarbakir" (i.e. Kurdish population) could "easily be exploited by Turkey's enemies". A "happy Diyarbakir", meanwhile, would be "a threat to [the governing regimes of Turkish enemies in] Syria, Iran and Iraq". In short, it was in the Turkish State's best interests to give greater rights to its Kurdish population. In fact, Fuller argues, if the Turkish regime "manages the situation wisely, there will be no possibility of independence" (even if Kurds gained "some sort of administrative and cultural autonomy" – which was really the "minimum goal" of the peace process). Independence, he says, would only be on the table "if the Kurdish issue [were] not managed correctly".

Regarding Hizmet, meanwhile, Fuller claims that the organisation had been "forcing Turkey to take irrelevant ideological positions" and damaging the ruling regime as a result. Nonetheless, he also asserts that "a major part of the AKP constituency" was "not happy with the [subsequent] witch hunt against the Gülen Movement". Even though he says Hizmet's influence over the police did indeed grow under the AKP, he insists that "the police and judiciary [were] such massive organizations that they [could not] be controlled by a single ideology". For Fuller, however, Erdoğan's prevention of "corruption investigations" against his own ministers was "dragging the country in a dangerous direction". And the fact that the USA entered into the conflict between the AKP and Gülen by refusing to "label the Gülen Movement as a terrorist organization", he argues, was proof that "the Gülen movement [was becoming more and more] preferable for the United States" when compared to Erdoğan's government.⁶⁹⁴

After the corruption probes of 2013, Erdoğan soon took to referring to Hizmet as a "network of treason", in spite of his previous alliance with the group.⁶⁹⁵ This rhetoric subsequently led groups like the Rethink Institute to claim the AKP leader's statements were "fundamentally incompatible with the principles underlying the concept of human rights". For the research institution, other expressions the Prime Minister had made even amounted to "prima facie hate speech as understood by the European Court of Human Rights". Such terms, it describes, included "perverts", "hashashins", "traitors", "spies", "worse than Shiites", "leeches", and "a terrorist organization".⁶⁹⁶ In fact, in an attempt to stir up nationalist feeling in Turkey, the government even tried to suggest links between Hizmet and the PKK (which were fairly absurd). Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, for example, claimed to "have open and clear documents" showing relations between the two groups (an assertion that seems much less believable if we accept that Hizmet was in fact "against the reconciliation process" in Turkey).⁶⁹⁷

In December 2014, The Guardian commented on how a Turkish court had "issued an arrest warrant for the US-based Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen". The imam had been accused of both "leading a criminal organisation" and "operating an armed terror group". This move was taken in the wake of "a string of orchestrated raids on media outlets with ties to the cleric", which showed a clear "escalation in the battle between Erdoğan and Gülen". As a result of EU criticism, meanwhile, the now Turkish president would say "we have no concern about what the EU might say, whether the EU accepts us as members or not".

In fact, even the USA urged Turkish authorities "to ensure their actions [did] not violate [the] core values [of media freedom, due process, and judicial independence]" in the wake of the crackdown. HRW, meanwhile, would say that "keeping journalists in custody on dubious terrorism charges without clear justification harms media freedom and is likely to

⁶⁹⁴ [http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+\[English\]&utm_campaign=8833cf4508-September_3_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-8833cf4508-102384513#](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-usa-iraq-syria-isis-fuller.html?utm_source=Al-Monitor+Newsletter+[English]&utm_campaign=8833cf4508-September_3_2014&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_28264b27a0-8833cf4508-102384513#)

⁶⁹⁵ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/turkey-media-arrests-escalation-bitter-erdogan-gulen-feud-1479619>

⁶⁹⁶ <http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/hate-speech-and-beyond-targeting-the-gulen-movement-in-turkey/>

⁶⁹⁷ <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/12/15/pm-we-have-documents-showing-pkk-gulen-movement-relation>

further dent Turkey's international reputation". Erdoğan, however, insisted that "the operations and the purges of state institutions would continue", adding that "the judiciary and some others... must yet be "cleansed of all traitors"". ⁶⁹⁸

Turkey's 'Authoritarian Drift' under Erdoğan

In September 2014, HRW reported on how Turkey desperately needed to: "rewrite [its 1982] constitution to protect human rights"; "end arbitrary prosecutions for nonviolent political activity"; "repeal internet measures that facilitate censorship"; "prosecute state agents responsible for unlawful killings"; "end time limit on these prosecutions"; "protect domestic violence victims"; and "prosecute their abusers". Erdoğan, the group stressed, had been "taking far-reaching steps to weaken the rule of law, control the media and Internet, and clamp down on critics and protestors". Such a "rollback of human rights", it insisted, in the light of "mass anti-government protests in 2013 and corruption allegations that [went] to the very heart of the government of the ruling AKP", had made it impossible for HRW not to comment on the situation in Turkey.

The rights group argued that the country needed to: strengthen "the human rights context of the peace process" with the PKK; reform the criminal justice system; end "impunity for past and present abuses by state officials and for family violence against women"; and end "restrictions on speech, media, Internet, and the rights to assembly and association". It also spoke about how the AKP had "responded to political opposition by tearing up the rule book, silencing critical voices, and wielding a stick". These "repressive reflexes", it emphasised, had come "to the attention of the world with the crackdown on the Gezi protests in Istanbul and other cities in May-June 2013", which had shown the world the "excessive use of force by the police" and "the misuse of teargas" in Erdoğan's Turkey. While thousands of people faced legal proceedings for their participation (some on "alleged coup-plot charges"), HRW added, there were "few police officers... held to account for deaths and injuries of protesters".

The "major corruption scandal" that came to light in December 2013, meanwhile, which implicated "senior government officials and members of their families", detonated the "simmering conflict" between the AKP and Hizmet, HRW argued. With the government responding "by adopting laws that [curbed] judicial independence and [weakened] the rule of law" (while seeing "judges, prosecutors, and police officers" reassigned and even arrested), HRW noted, there had clearly been an authoritarian shift in the regime's behaviour. At the same time, there were "intensified efforts to silence social media and traditional media reporting on the issues", according to the group. A revised law regarding the internet, for example, had increased "government surveillance powers and unfettered access to data", had sought to protect "intelligence personnel from investigation", and had amplified "penalties for whistleblowers and journalists who [published] leaked intelligence".

A "failure to address the larger rollback on rights", HRW claimed, would risk "unravelling the embryonic Kurdish peace process". The regime's "clampdown on rights and interference with the judiciary", it emphasised, ran "counter to [the] government's positive commitment to a peace process with the Kurds and may well jeopardize it". The "best way" to ensure the success of the process, it asserted, was for the state to focus on "protecting human rights and strengthening the rule of law for everyone". The "misuse of charges relating to anti-terrorism, crimes against the state, and organized crime against people engaged in nonviolent political activity and protest", it added, would simply lead to a further deterioration in the country's delicate situation. In light of Turkey's desire to enter

⁶⁹⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/19/turkey-fethullah-gulen-arrest-warrant-erdogan-us>

into the EU, meanwhile, it recommended that Europe's governments "publicly elaborate the criteria that Turkey must meet to open negotiations", basing this on HRW reports about the behaviour of the Turkish State.⁶⁹⁹

President Erdoğan's growing reputation of authoritarianism was also partly a result of his jailing of "more journalists than any other country in 2012 and 2013", with Foreign Policy assistant editor Siddhartha Mahanta saying that the AKP leader "didn't let up in 2014". At the end of December 2014, Mahanta spoke of how "prominent Turkish journalist and television anchor" Sedef Kabaş had posted a critical tweet in November after a judge had dropped a controversial case. Having "abruptly" stopped investigating the "major, long-running corruption probe of a group of former Erdogan cabinet members", referred to as the "December 17 scandal", the judge's actions were logically called into question by a number of Turkish citizens.

Kabas, however, would soon be detained by state forces, who claimed her tweet had "put the unnamed judge in actual danger". Meanwhile, journalist Mehmet Baransu "was also reportedly detained for tweeting criticism of an Erdogan advisor". The social media network, says Mahanta, had become "a growing sore spot for Erdoğan", in that it was challenging his efforts to "lock down dissent and criticism".⁷⁰⁰

II) Popular Resistance to the AKP

When the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey soon adopted a "zero problems with neighbors" foreign policy. On the Kurdish Question, this approach resulted in "a shift from confrontation to collaboration" with Syria, Iran, and Iraq. When the Arab Spring arrived, however, **Turkey hopped on the Sunni Islamist bandwagon against the governments of Syria and Iran.** In particular, its "increasing pressure on the Syrian regime" and "its decision to host a NATO missile defense [or offense] system" led to a deterioration of relations with the Iranian regime, which saw Turkey's moves as an attack on its own interests in the region. The AKP's military interventions against the PKK in northern Iraq in late 2011, meanwhile, "strained Turkish-Iraqi relations" yet again.⁷⁰¹

In fact, Erdoğan launched an all-out rhetorical offensive on his Iraqi counterpart, claiming that al-Maliki's "treatment toward his coalition partners" and "egocentric approach" had become serious concerns for the Iraqi population. The latter, meanwhile, responded by saying that Erdoğan's comments had "a sectarian dimension", and that if the Turkish leader stuck to his aggressive "internal and regional policies", it would "harm Turkish interests and make it a hostile state for all" in the long run. With Sunni-majority Turkey and Shiite-majority Iraq taking "sharply different tacks on violence in Syria", then, the public quarrel between the two states only served to "further sectarian tension and division between Sunni and Shiite states in the region".⁷⁰²

Kurds and the Arab Spring

After the Arab Spring had broken out in Tunisia and Egypt, regional elites and international powers began to look for "a role model for these newly established governments". Turkey stepped in with its "'soft power" and its economic, social, and political performance", which had "inspired many [elites] in the Arab world". The Kurdish issue, however, continued to present a "serious handicap for the Turkish model", and an "obstacle to Turkey's regional ambitions and stability". And to add to these difficulties, Professor Aylin

⁶⁹⁹ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/09/29/turkey-authoritarian-drift-threatens-rights>

⁷⁰⁰ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/30/turkey-twitter-erdogan-press-freedom/> and @sidhubaba

⁷⁰¹ <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/the-arab-spring-its-effects-on-the-kurds-and-the-approaches-of-turkey-iran-syria-and-iraq-on-the-kurdish-issue/>

⁷⁰² <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/iraq/al-maliki-calls-turkey-a-hostile-state-1.1011624>

Unver Noi says, “the PKK imitated the Arab Spring”, with Öcalan saying in February 2011 that “the Kurds could only be free if they [poured] on to the streets and [called] for their rights in the Kurdish cities, like Diyarbakir”. In a sort of ‘Kurdish Spring’, therefore, a civil disobedience campaign was set in motion in southeast Turkey. After police repression, though, there was allegedly a campaign of PKK assaults against the Turkish police. The military then retaliated, crossing over the border into Iraq to attack the PKK. And, while the KRG did not want to upset its Turkish allies too much, it nonetheless “urged both sides... to lay down their arms and start negotiations”.⁷⁰³

Meanwhile, the electoral gains of the BDP meant that the AKP sought to show that it was interested in Kurdish issues once again. Therefore, towards the end of November, Erdoğan made the decision to officially recognise the Dersim massacre of the late 1930s (in which up to “70,000 people were systematically killed, displaced into smaller camps and forced to become ‘Turkish’”). In addition to appealing to Kurds, another factor influencing this action was almost certainly Erdoğan’s desire “to shame the opposition party that was in power when the Dersim massacre took place” (Atatürk’s CHP). Nonetheless, it was indeed a small step forward, especially considering that, in 1990, “one prominent Turkish sociologist [Ismail Besikci had] published a book” in which he had “accused the Turkish Government of Genocide in the Kurdish district of Dersim” (which had been renamed Tunceli in 1936) and “was imprisoned for more than 10 years” as a result. And this was an unsurprising occurrence, as the Turkish government had previously gone “to great lengths to deny Kurdish history, and its atrocities towards [the Kurdish people]”. Many books on the massacre, for example, had previously been banned, and a large number of critics had been silenced.⁷⁰⁴

As Erdoğan sought to win Kurdish electoral support, the Ba’athist regime in Syria attempted to quell popular protests by launching a “massive naturalization” campaign, in which it would grant “Syrian citizenship to more than 300,000 Kurds”. Nonetheless, the leader of the Kurdish ‘Future Movement’ would be “assassinated by the Assad regime in October 2011” because he had “openly called for... Assad’s overthrow”. And, on his funeral day, “tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Qamishli” in what would prove to be the “largest protest in the northeast since the beginning of the uprisings”.

The Turkish-led Syrian National Council (SNC) had developed no “clear-cut policies regarding the status of the Kurds in a post-Assad” Syria, but the Future Movement had participated in the SNC regardless (being “the only Kurdish party” to do so). Nonetheless, its request that Syria become the “Republic of Syria” after Assad’s downfall (rather than the “Syrian Arab Republic”) was rejected by the other delegates. Subsequently, the party “walked out in protest”, leaving the SNC largely in the hands of Arab nationalists and Islamists (who generally “[did] not support Kurdish demands for local autonomy”). PKK leader Cemil Bayık, meanwhile, aware of the fact that Kurds in Syria would likely suffer just as much (or more) under SNC rule, warned that, “if Turkey were to intervene against Assad, the PKK would fight on Syria’s side”.

In Iraq, meanwhile, Kurds had had their own ‘Kurdish Spring’, with the Gorran Party (or Movement for Change), which had “split from the PUK” in 2009, calling “for the resignation of the cabinet and the disbanding of the KRG”. Subsequently, “violent demonstrations broke out in Sulaymaniyya on February 17, 2011”, showing the public’s anger over “corruption and the lack of jobs, electricity, and government services” in the KRG, combined with nationalist-imposed “limits on freedom of speech and press”.

⁷⁰³ <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/the-arab-spring-its-effects-on-the-kurds-and-the-approaches-of-turkey-iran-syria-and-iraq-on-the-kurdish-issue/>

⁷⁰⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ruwayda-mustafah/why-did-erdogan-apologise_b_1113732.html

There was “visible anger against the KDP and PUK due to their joint monopoly” of power in the KRG, and this was not helped when the ruling regime “forcibly curtailed” the demonstrations in mid-April. Furthermore, when Turkey entered into Iraq in late 2011, the PKK “accused the Iraqi government of collaborating with Turkey in an effort to empty the villages close to the PKK hideouts in the Kandil Mountains”. Meanwhile, the Syrian counterparts of the KDP and PUK (which “report directly to the leaders” of the Iraqi parties) were not encouraged to participate either in the revolts in Qamishli in 2004 or in the uprising against Assad in 2011 (perhaps reflecting both the pragmatism of the Kurdish nationalist parties and the desire of the Shiite leaders of the central government in Baghdad to forge a working relationship with the Syrian regime).

At the same time, the Iranian regime had been fighting against the PKK-affiliated PJAK guerrillas since 2004, and had “worked together” with Turkey to attack them. Nonetheless, the group had been observing a ceasefire since 2011 – perhaps resulting from PKK leader Murat Karayılan’s release by the Iranian government in August 2011 (a claim denied by Iran). According to Kurdish Labor Group leader Kamal Karimi, though, “the Kurdish areas of Iran [were set to] become the strongest base, after Tehran, for confronting the Islamic regime”.⁷⁰⁵

Although there had previously been collaboration between Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq in an attempt to defeat the Kurdish movement, the states had also considered using different Kurdish groups against each other in order to increase their own power (as seen previously in this chapter). With the Arab Spring, however, any cooperation that existed with regards to defeating the PKK and its allies effectively faded away. With the AKP “imposing sanctions on Syria”, hosting the SNC, and deploying its military along the Syrian border, Turkey soon saw its relations with all of its Shia neighbours deteriorate. Essentially, Ankara was siding firmly with the US-backed Sunni Islamist Bloc in the Middle East, and against the Iranian-backed Shia Bloc (mentioned in previous chapters).

In short, this worsening of relations between Turkey and its neighbours meant that opposition to the establishment of independent or autonomous Kurdish regions could not be transformed into a strong anti-Kurdish strategy. In fact, due to the bickering of the region’s political elites, Kurdish political movements (and that of the PKK and its affiliates in particular) actually gained in strength after the start of the Arab Spring. One example of this new reality was how the almost total withdrawal of Ba’athist troops from Kurdish areas in the north of Syria (which could well have been a way of hitting back at Turkey for its support of the Islamist opposition) essentially facilitated the creation of something that the government in Ankara had feared perhaps more than anything else – an autonomous Kurdish region on its border influenced by the PKK. In the long term, the Assad regime would surely have been far from happy to have Kurdish autonomy in Rojava, but a type of non-aggression pact with Kurds essentially allowed him to kill two birds with one stone. On one hand, it allowed Damascus to divert much-needed government troops to areas elsewhere in Syria under assault from Islamist forces, and on the other hand it created a secular and democratic ideological distraction in Rojava for both Turkey and jihadists to worry about.

The 2012 Hunger Strikes and the Peace Process

On September 12 2012, “nine women prisoners in Diyarbakır E type prison began an indefinite hunger-strike”.⁷⁰⁶ These political prisoners were soon accompanied by over 10,000 others, including “7 Kurdish parliamentarians, the mayor of Diyarbakır and many other

⁷⁰⁵ <http://www.gloria-center.org/2012/07/the-arab-spring-its-effects-on-the-kurds-and-the-approaches-of-turkey-iran-syria-and-iraq-on-the-kurdish-issue/>

⁷⁰⁶ <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/10/17/turkey-hundreds-of-kurdish-political-prisoners-go-on-hunger-strike/>

civilians". Their main aim was to encourage the government to begin peace negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan in order to "end the ongoing war caused by the oppression of Kurds and the denial of their rights". They also asked for "the right to education and legal defense in their mother tongue (Kurdish), a right [still] denied by the Turkish government". Such changes, they said, would "contribute greatly to peace in the Middle East during a period of great instability in the region".⁷⁰⁷

The hunger strikes, according to the BDP, were "directly related to [the] 100-year-old Kurdish Question" in Turkey.⁷⁰⁸ The AKP, however, dismissed them as political provocations organised by its PKK opponents. The domestic media, meanwhile, servile to the government and its interests, "both ignored the hunger strikes, and refused to report on them". The fact was, though, that, in the previous three years, the Turkish State had "arrested more than 10,000 Kurds, who [were] students, children, mothers, activists, journalists, lawyers, doctors, mayors, MPs, and many people who [were] members of Peace & Democracy Party (BDP)".⁷⁰⁹ Therefore, the drastic action taken by the prisoners was far from being a 'provocation', and was instead directly rooted in the constant repression of Kurdish activists and civilians by the state.

On the 18th of November, Abdullah Öcalan called on all Kurdish political prisoners to "end their massive hunger strike". Nonetheless, their actions were "generally considered to [have given] way to the peace negotiations" that would soon begin. In January 2013, for example, "pro-Kurdish BDP... members of the Turkish Parliament" met with Öcalan in prison, and their visit was "considered to be the landmark initiating the so-called peace talks between the Turkish authorities and Abdullah Öcalan".⁷¹⁰

Subsequently, Öcalan called a ceasefire in March 2013, and talks seemingly began to move forward, although very slowly. Between 2013 and 2014, there were "rising tensions" (as mentioned already in this section) "over the construction of military outposts in Kurdish areas by the Turkish army" but, when the Turkish parliament "approved a legal framework for peace talks" (which could be seen as a disingenuous tactical move given that the election that would see Erdogan become president was just a month away at the time), negotiations started to look a bit more serious.⁷¹¹

The 2013 Gezi Resistance

In 2013, the AKP announced "the demolition of Gezi Park, the only "urban forest" in Istanbul's squares", which would be replaced with a shopping mall in the form of "an Ottoman barracks". Then, in the run up to May Day, the government banned celebrations in Taksim Square, saying it would "no longer [be] open to political demonstrations" (which was supposedly "a basic right enshrined in the constitution"). Towards the end of the month, a "civic society platform" called "Taksim Solidarity" "issued an appeal for action", and around a hundred activists arrived "and launched a vigil in [Gezi Park] to save the trees". Subsequently, when bulldozers entered the park, they "were fended off by the environmentalists".

Istanbul residents, meanwhile, were urged on social media "to join the effort to stop the earthmovers and save Gezi Park". The response was huge, and May 27 effectively became "the onset of an unprecedented phenomenon that would soon grow into the "Gezi resistance" and spill across Turkey in an enormous social explosion". The movement climaxed on June 1, "when the resolve of thousands of protesters forced all uniformed police

⁷⁰⁷ <http://www.truth-out.org/speakout/item/12773-kurdish-political-prisoners-on-hunger-strike-in-turkey-an-open-letter>

⁷⁰⁸ http://www.truth-out.org/speakout/item/download/2_fe8a2f47d75696346ed4d578baaf833d

⁷⁰⁹ <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/10/17/turkey-hundreds-of-kurdish-political-prisoners-go-on-hunger-strike/>

⁷¹⁰ http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/15050/sere-giran_being-a-kurd-in-the-turkish-prison

⁷¹¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/turkey-approves-framework-pkk-peace-talks-201471019443811435.html>

to withdraw from Taksim Square and its environs". This action would be hailed as "spontaneous, decentralized action by a new generation of well-educated urban youth seeking to protect [their] city and environment".

The protests soon "grew into a revolt that brought together almost all groups on the opposition spectrum — Alevis, Kemalists, Kurds, leftists, feminists, environmentalists, homosexuals, anarchists and "socialist Muslims"". The reason for this unity was that their fury was principally directed at "the oppressive conservative policies of [the] one-man authoritarian regime" of Prime Minister Erdoğan, and his "contemptuous rhetoric vis-a-vis the opposition".⁷¹² And the tyrannical streak of the AKP leader would be revealed once again in the crackdown on dissidents. The Turkish Doctors' Organisation, for example, would later state that "eight people [had] died" amidst the state's suppression of demonstrators, and "at least four" of these "as a result of police violence". Another eight thousand, meanwhile, were injured, with "104 [sustaining] serious head injuries and 11 people [losing] an eye, most as a result of plastic bullets fired by the police".⁷¹³

Gezi Park and the AKP's Form of Neoliberalism

At Roar Magazine in March 2014, Ali B (a member of Turkey's Revolutionary Anarchist Activity (DAF) group) spoke about how the "June 2013 revolt in Turkey was marked by the heterogeneity of its participants". Arising "from an economic model emphasizing development that acted as a response to a financial crisis knocking at the door", the protests were not simply "sparked by extreme austerity measures" or by a desire to overthrow a dictator (as in the Arab Spring). In fact, Ali says, "heavy neoliberal austerity programs of structural adjustment" had already happened "at the end of the 20th century" in Turkey, making the country now a "post-austerity nation". Starting in the 1980s and 1990s, he asserts, when Turkey "was one of the primary targets of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies", privatization and debt soon became "engrained into the Turkish economy". And, while "debt-incurring measures" were used by the Turkish regime to "keep the [capitalist] crisis at bay" and balance the national budget, a plethora of other problems were left untouched.

The protests of 2013, Ali stresses, were "deeply related to the financial crisis of 2008", but only really because of the government's strategy of diminishing the shock by undertaking a "**massive privatization of land for real estate projects and urban renewal**". In fact, one of these projects led to the redefinition of Istanbul "as an AKP constructed modern metropolis". At the same time, however, "the massive increase in large-scale construction projects was tied to an equally large increase in foreign debt". Therefore, while the Turkish Lira was strengthened against the dollar by "capital influx", 'national revenue' was in reality "produced via privatization..., indirect **regressive taxes** ([such as an] ...increased sales tax for alcohol) and **foreign debt**".

The AKP, Ali argues, was different from other neoliberal regimes in the past in Turkey because of its "emphasis on the city and its transformation of Istanbul into a full-fledged metropolis through the privatization of public land". Approving "exceptional powers for land enclosure... in 2003 to the Turkish Housing Development Administration (TOKI)", for example, it effectively **gentrified neighbourhoods** which had previously "been seen as proletarian eyesores". Marginalised communities like Kurds, transsexuals, and Roma people, it turned out, were actually "occupying some of the prime real-estate zones of Istanbul", and the AKP was desperate to change that fact. At the same time, it pushed forward with an "**ecologically devastating** [and] preposterous new canal", and the "privatization of historic ports... and train stations... with the intention of converting them

⁷¹² <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/taksim-turkey-gezi-park-protest-police-crackdown.html#>

⁷¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey>

into high-end condominiums (“residences”), malls or other centers of commerce”. In short, these projects were destined to become “gated monuments to capitalism”, and would be unsurprisingly “accompanied with militarization”, being “policed by private security guards” to keep ‘unwanted citizens’ away.

Erdoğan’s dismissal of “EU calls for less police violence”, meanwhile, facilitated the flight of foreign capital from Turkey (with ‘investors’ growing increasingly worried about the country’s instability). “Any shrewd politician”, Ali argues, “would have been able to manage this revolt without fanning the flames the way Erdoğan did”, but “his obsession over transforming Taksim Square” was “a sign of anxiety and arrogance due to political weakness”. For Ali, Erdoğan had an “almost feral desire to leave a neo-Ottoman stamp on the city” of Istanbul, creating “a modern yet conservative Islamic Disneyland”. The protesters, however, had a significant amount of “will and perseverance”, driven by their commitment “to resist the enclosure of commons and take back space”. When they took control of the square on June 1st, therefore, it “was not done by pushing the police back with a barrage of rocks but was a result of the determination of the massive amount of people who spontaneously emerged to shock everyone”.

While organised events like those of May Day had little chance of resulting in a popular, democratic victory over the oppressive state infrastructure, “spontaneous eruptions such as those of May 31 and June 1”, Ali says, “are when people are the strongest”. As a result of these actions, “the police had to retreat from the square and Gezi Park... after two days of non-stop fighting..., leaving it to thousands who moved in and started to construct elaborate barricades up and down all the streets leading to the zone”. And demonstrations soon spread throughout Turkey (into “every major city”) and, in Istanbul, “whole districts were in open revolt against the police and the AKP... for almost three weeks”. According to Ali, “the amount of solidarity was unprecedented” and, when teargas was launched at demonstrators, there were already “large jugs of water” standing by, which had been “brought from homes and stationed permanently in neighborhoods waiting for the inevitable to arrive”.

At the same time, however, Ali concedes that the Istanbul Revolt lacked enough “coherence to be a veritable insurrection”. The fact was, he says, that Erdoğan had been “elected fair and square by democratic [sic] elections with a near 50% of the vote”. And, within the corrupt and undemocratic system that existed in Turkey, he had indeed been crowned the victor according to the rules (albeit the rules of a so-called ‘representative’ system in which the interests of the People were not truly represented).

In reality, protesters in Gezi Park were not “asking for more opportunities to vote but for certain “rights” or freedoms such as the freedom of expression, assembly, a free press and freedom to conduct their personal lives without infringement from the state”. In short, they were demanding a form of more directly democratic control over their own lives. At the same time, though, it was also true that Erdoğan’s “democratically-elected government” had become so authoritarian and trampled over so many democratic rights that it now presented its opponents with “an opportunity to critique the [very] democratic system” that had seen the Prime Minister elected.

Faced with such opposition, Erdoğan sought to counter his detractors by holding “Respect the National Will” rallies, with the eviction of Gezi Park having left him to enter into Istanbul “as a triumphant conqueror” and speak “to a massive crowd of hundreds of thousands” of people. Essentially, the reality in Turkey was that the AKP, liked by both capitalists and Islamists, benefitted from “an **incredibly subservient media**” and had “a well-oiled political machine – which amongst other public services [controlled] transportation (routinely offering free transport for its rallies while canceling services for

rival events)". In short, its regime was "incredibly well organized within a patriarchal and nepotistic party structure".

For Ali, however, "the commune created in Gezi Park and the street battles which surrounded it [were] a testament to the limitations of the bourgeois democratic system". It clearly showed the burning desire of many Turkish citizens to take greater control of their lives and their land, even if the state mechanism eventually prevented that from happening. At the same time, Ali asserts, the "mutual aid, solidarity and direct action" which became "the hallmarks of the Gezi Resistance" were the "antithesis to the democratic system run by elections and regulated by representatives". In fact, from his point of view, the protests were "incredibly more democratic" because "people who were not agents of the state could come and go freely as they pleased".

"The closure and militarization of the park by the... AKP for weeks after the police seized it on June 15", meanwhile, did their best to keep people away from what was supposedly a public space. Nonetheless, those who had been evicted from Gezi Park continued to fight, and soon "attempted to recreate [the] spirit [of the movement] in popular assemblies that mushroomed around Istanbul and in other cities". In short, this "experience in direct democracy" had provided "a refreshing form of political being for those who [had] lost hope in a [bourgeois] democratic system".

At the same time, "new military police outposts in Northern Kurdistan (within the borders of Turkey)" had been created and, on June 28, "soldiers opened fire on a demonstration in Lice" (which was protesting against "the construction of one of these outposts"), and they killed one person and critically injured "many others" in the process. In an impressive display of camaraderie, however, members of the Gezi Resistance ("mostly concentrated in the western and non-Kurdish zones of the country") immediately staged "huge solidarity demonstrations against this attack in the Kurdish territory". Before Gezi, Ali says, "it would have been unimaginable for such expressions of solidarity to spontaneously erupt from a non-Kurdish segment of society". Essentially, therefore, these acts were proof that feelings of "revolutionary solidarity" were clearly growing.

A "financial crisis", Ali insists, "pushes democratic governments (in terms of elections) to become undemocratic (in terms of rights)", and Turkish citizens "felt [this] more acutely due to the conservative nature of the government managing the crisis" in 2013. Nonetheless, he stresses, such moments promised "to be more frequent around the globe", and "whoever [was] most organized [would be] able to transmit their ideas and tactics in the most effective manner and become more potent within the rebellion". Also, with organised labour having been decimated by the state in previous decades, it was clear from the Gezi Resistance that, "beyond the classical factory or industrial worker, the formally unorganized, precarious, white-collar and diploma holding proletariat on the brink of unemployment [had] the potential to take many initiatives in social revolts". Therefore, Ali argues, it is incredibly important for "the anti-capitalist and anti-state revolutionaries of the world" to be forever organised and consistently active "so that our valuable muscle memory" and experience do not go to waste.⁷¹⁴

The PKK, Turkish Nationalists, and Gezi Park

Amidst the Gezi Park protests, Kurdish activist Dilar Dirik spoke about 'selective empathy' in the press regarding popular demonstrations. Where was the global media, she asks, when "thousands of Kurdish protests and uprisings" occurred before #OccupyGezi? Therefore, while the "overwhelming demonstrations in Istanbul" and "increasing dissent... against the

⁷¹⁴ <http://roarmag.org/2014/03/crisis-city-democracy-turkey-uprising/>

[Turkish] government's horrid human rights violations and authoritarian rule" were "necessary and positive developments, she says, the world must remember that "Kurds have been killed, beaten up, tear-gassed, arrested, and tortured on their protests (with popular support) for decades in Turkey".

While protesters at Gezi Park made remarks like "the police attacks us like we are terrorists", Dirik insists, such treatment was nothing strange in the south east of Turkey (where the mainly Kurdish areas lie). In other words, she says, if there were one truly positive thing to come out of the Gezi Resistance of 2013, it would be the creation of empathy among a number of Turkish citizens, opening their eyes to "what Kurds face every day in Turkey".

For example, Dirik reminds readers about the silence in Turkey "after the murderous massacres in Roboski (Uludere) or Reyhanli", or the lack of press coverage when Kurdish mothers "were collectively beaten up on the streets, lungs filled with pepper spray, just because they wanted to celebrate Newroz". Large sectors of the Turkish population, she asserts, had long been mute about "lynchings of Kurds and Alevis in Istanbul", or about the 'scorched earth' campaign in eastern Turkey, in which the "military burnt every tree in the Kurdish East". In short, she says, it was to the shame of Turkey and the world that Kurdish demonstrations ("attended by millions of people over decades") had never been "worth being fashionably termed as a "spring"". For real change to occur in the country, she insists, such "selective empathy" had to end.

Another point emphasised by Dirik, meanwhile, was that the "rise of anti-AKP Turkish secular nationalism" was something to be very worried about. The mentality of being "Atatürk's soldiers", she asserts, had already been "responsible for prevalent racism and numerous human rights violations" in the past, and should not be welcomed back. The nationalists' fear of losing their "Turkishness" under the AKP (because of Erdoğan's increasing Islamisation of the country and his acting like an "authoritarian Ottoman sultan"), she stresses, was simply a distraction from the truly important political issues. In fact, Erdoğan actually "continued to oppress non-Turkish groups... just [like] his secular predecessors", whilst reinforcing "punishments on those that [insulted] Turkey or Turkishness". As such, his actions showed him to be just as much of a Turkish nationalist as many other politicians on the country's right-wing. Fundamentally, Dirik argues, the events around Gezi Park may have fostered (among many citizens) a greater sense of empathy with Turkish Kurds, but they were also exploited to a certain extent by nationalists who saw them as an opportunity "to raise anti-AKP momentum for their own gains".

In summary, Dirik says, reducing political dialogue to "political religion versus secularism" was wrong. While "secularism is desirable", she stresses, it "has violated human rights" on numerous occasions when "accompanied by [a] harsh nationalist chauvinism that ethnically discriminated against all non-Turks". This latter ideology was essentially, she affirms, just another form of discrimination (albeit ethnic rather than religious), which made nationalists just as bad as their Islamist successors. In other words, she emphasises, "replacing one sort of fascism [with] another would only turn the clock of Turkish history back a couple of years" rather than forward.

Democracy, Dirik asserts, "can only come through unity and equality" between all people (regardless of ethnicity or religion), and "not through nationalism and "Turkism"". Turkish citizens, she underlines, must therefore develop a consciousness "that is democratic and secular without crushing the heads of the many ethnic and religious groups that don't fit into the myth of the glorious Turk". In fact, given its "mass-murderous history", she says, "even a small rise of Turkish nationalism could be dangerous". And, while "many revolutionary quotes and pictures that [were] normally associated with the Kurdish

movement and the leftist spectrum of Turkish politics were widely shared” on Twitter during the Gezi Park protests, she admits, two hashtags trending worldwide were “Good thing you are here, Atatürk” and “Good thing you are here, Tayyip” (representing nationalists and Islamists respectively).

As I have sought to emphasise throughout this book, Dirik insists that, “in such an ethnically and religiously diverse region, the people shouldn’t have to pick between two evils”.⁷¹⁵ For her, a choice between ethnic discrimination and religious discrimination is no choice at all, and should not be made to appear like one. In short, therefore, without an all-inclusive secular revolution (with all minorities and marginalised sectors of society directly involved), tyranny is just likely to change its face over and over again.

III) The New Sultan

The Legacy of Gezi Park and Erdoğan’s Consolidation of Power

In August 2014, with Turkey’s “first ever direct presidential elections” approaching, Volkan Aran wrote at Counterfire about the time that future President Erdoğan had already spent in power as prime minister. Most recently, Aran describes, the AKP leader’s mismanagement in May 2014 of “one of the deadliest industrial accidents in the history of the country - which killed 301 miners according to official figures” - had “triggered a wave of protests in Soma” in Western Turkey, and then “throughout the country, mirroring [the previous] summer’s unrest” in the Gezi Resistance. A month after the mining disaster, meanwhile, “two people were killed by Turkish soldiers”, who had “opened fire at a protest... in the Kurdish province of Lice, a district of Diyarbakır”. Just like a year before in the same province, Kurds had been demonstrating “against the construction of a **new military outpost**”, which essentially “showed that the **Turkish government was not honest about the peace talks being held with the PKK**”. And the “new, high technology, bullet proof, elevated outpost” that was being built “was quite simply an investment for [a] coming war”.

In spite of the intensification of “protests against the new military outposts”, however, the “resistance that [had] started [the previous] year with Occupy Gezi [had] experienced an attenuation”. Aran explains this phenomenon, though, by insisting that Erdoğan had “not maintained his popularity despite his abuses of power, manipulations and anti-democratic manoeuvres, but because of them”. He would defend his “**twitter and Youtube ban** [during local elections]”, for example, by arguing that his country was involved in a battle between “global private companies” and “Turkey’s vital interests”. And, through “his power over the media and the petit bourgeoisie”, he managed to ensure general acceptance of the prohibition.

The Gezi Resistance of 2013 essentially “came as a surprise” for the ruling regime, Aran stresses, because “the urban educated middle class youth was never supposed to be so politicised”, and because it was “‘wrongly’ timed vis-a-vis the Kurdish peace process, which was looking more promising than ever”. For this reason, some speculated at the time that Turkish nationalists may try to use the protests as a way of derailing the ‘solution process’. Nonetheless, Bosphorus University Professor Nazan Üstündag (also a consultant for the BDP) asserts that the negotiations with the PKK had actually “opened up a space for the Gezi protests”. The new, “non-military, civil space” that had been formed as a result of eased tensions, he says, now allowed “the accumulated discontents of the masses [to] pour onto the streets”.

⁷¹⁵ <http://dilar91.blogspot.de/2013/06/selective-empathy-and-dangerous.html>

Before 2013, Aran explains, “political tension on the street [had] mostly [been] defined by the polarisation between nationalists and supporters of the Kurdish cause, leaving no space for another binary opposition”. Any “protest against the state or the government”, for example, would “immediately [be] stigmatised as [having been] organised by] PKK supporters, without any proper discussion or debate”. Negotiations with the PKK, however, “made political and civil protest possible, even if it didn’t prevent the use of violence by the police and para-military forces”. Although protestors were not and could not be “moulded into a unique ideology or framework”, Aran says, they separately showed “one [general] direction: Democracy and peace”.

According to Aran, criticism of media censorship and “the political bias of the judicial system” were to be “effectively muted as the political dogfight intensified approaching Election Day” in 2014. And it was precisely this desperately undemocratic situation, he asserts, which had led “a counter-parliamentary [street] democracy opposed to the centralisation and concentration of political forces” to take a central role in the Gezi Resistance a year before. At the same time, however, “political actors of mainstream opposition parties... took the movement as an extension of the secular, nationalist, republican discourse, and tied [their] hopes to the idea of a grand coalition against the AKP’s candidates in the mayoral elections”. Such an alliance, however, “never had a chance of involving left wing parties”, and would be “far removed from the HDP” platform (which was established after Gezi to unite “left wing party factions, LGBT groups, trade unions, and ethnic initiatives” – as seen in Section B of this chapter).

After Gezi, meanwhile, there were “novel youth initiatives surrounding the elections”, from “poll control initiatives” to “emergency re-counting teams”. As in all mass movements, politics had suddenly become “a matter of everyday life”, and many activists had witnessed something they had not seen before – the power that their directly democratic voice could actually have. However, “when the everyday struggle [had been] set back”, and “**‘high’ politics [had replaced] everyday politics**” again, Gezi veterans would not receive “the opportunity to join the political debate” that they deserved.

The masses, as always, simply received “little more than briefs, propaganda and headline politics”. And, while a small number of citizens continued “the struggle of everyday politics with an ideal of a direct democracy and a free, communal life”, others simply merged back into the corrupt, anti-democratic Turkish political system. In fact, many even made the regular ‘strategic vote’ for “the second most likely candidate” (which was usually the ‘Republican Party’ (or CHP) – the Turkish nationalist, ‘capitalist light’ party).⁷¹⁶

Turkey’s Deficient ‘Democracy’ Exploited by the AKP

After Erdoğan’s predictable victory in the 2014 presidential elections, Aran spoke about how “the normal elements of democracy which [were] supposed to [have been] a pre-requisite for genuine elections [had] long been absent or deficient” in Turkey. In particular, he refers to the **absence of “an independent media and judiciary, and autonomous regulating bodies”**. Actually, he says, “media black-outs [had become] nearly habitual” during the Gezi Resistance, while “corruption allegations [would later be] effectively suppressed, with the prosecutors pursuing the cases [being] swiftly replaced along with thousands of police officers [who had] supposedly [been] involved in telephone tapping”.

At the same time, Aran asserts, “one in five people in Turkey [continued to] live below the poverty line” in spite of “economic growth” between 2002 and 2013 (which had “never really [been] healthy or sustainable” because it was based on debt and privatisation). In

⁷¹⁶ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/17365-where-has-the-resistance-gone-turkey-between-two-elections>

2014, he stresses, the country's "growing credit bubble", together with "a large national deficit", was "causing alarm", and was not helped by the fact that "political favour [had] become the pre-condition for doing business with governmental institutions". Expected to "show their loyalties to the government and the prime minister...", private holding companies as well as small businesses, just like the media and judiciary, now had to "operate under close monitoring and sometimes with strict orders from the state".

Many AKP supporters, meanwhile, had a "non-economic bond" with the party, based on "cultural identification", Aran argues. According to sociologist and political scientist Şerif Mardin, Turkish republicans (advocating "centralised power") had formed "a bureaucratic class" after the creation of Turkey in the early twentieth century, demonstrating "almost no identification with the periphery, namely the peasants of Anatolia". And, while the regimes of Russia and China would soon latch onto "the idea of mobilising the peasantry", it "was never seriously considered" by the nationalist elites of Turkey. Consequently, therefore, "a counter-elitist, counter-bureaucracy, rural mass remained open to a populist, anti-democratic, [and] authoritarian direction".

In the 1950s, for example, the Democratic Party (DP) opposed the "delegitimisation of Islam and traditional rural values" in order to get voters 'on side', and this philosophy would later also be "key to how the AKP established its solid base" in the early twenty-first century. The approach of politicians towards Islam, therefore, has long been an "important debate" in Turkey, with the AKP getting conservative Muslims on side with "the lifting of the anti-scarf ban", for instance (which the CHP was opposed to). Even "the main opposition movements both in Kurdish politics and the Turkish left" were today "engaged in ongoing debates about the role of Islam", says Aran, "with a focus on either anti-capitalism or democracy". In fact, Muslims proclaiming themselves to be 'anti-capitalist' actually "established a new relationship with the Left" after the mass protests around the Gezi Resistance.

While some anti-capitalist Muslims "define Islam as a revolutionary, communist movement", Abdullah Öcalan has proclaimed that he sees it "as a history of political struggle" (making an important "distinction between the Islam of the state and the Islam of the people ([and] especially of oppressed peoples)"). Perhaps because of the PKK's move towards establishing "bonds with the rural and urban masses via a cultural and political identity oppressed by the state", Aran affirms, the progressive Kurdish movement has managed much more successfully than other left-wing groups to forge a "solid link with the periphery" in Turkish society.

The CHP, Aran argues, simply could not connect with rural masses and, "between two military coups of 1960 and 1971", it was instead Turkey's socialists who "built strong links" with these citizens. In 1967, for example, the DİSK (Confederation of Revolutionary Trade Unions of Turkey) was formed "as an alternative trade union confederation under the leadership of some of the TİP [Workers Party of Turkey] members", and it successfully "mobilised the working class". At the same time, "the discontent of poor peasants translated into massive protests". And, overall, this increase in social activism almost certainly led to the eventual military coup of 1980, which favoured societal elites and significantly divided and weakened the Left. Today, Aran insists, the fact is that "the AKP has no other rightwing party to share its votes with", and the Left still remains largely divided (in spite of the HDP's efforts). As a result, he says, the Islamist party has managed to monopolise the conservative vote.

According to Aran, however, "the contradictions between people's demands and high politics can [often] lead to major ruptures", and both the Soma mining disaster and "the destruction of Gezi Park" revealed to Turkish citizens "the void [of justice] that parliamentary democracy and neoliberal capitalism [had] failed to fill". The AKP, for

example, “walks hand in hand with employers in exploiting labour”, Aran stresses, even while claiming it is “on the side of the poor” (a laughable affirmation when we consider how police ended up “chasing and kicking people in order to stop them protesting” when Erdoğan visited Soma after the 2014 catastrophe).

Finally, Aran quotes Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who stated that **freedom was “a feeling most experienced when man acts in collaboration with his equals in search for the common good”**, with peace existing “not as an armistice arising out of deadlock, but a joy of living together without hatred”. True democracy (when directly in the hands of the people), therefore, “might be considered an instrument for peace and freedom”, according to Aran. In Turkey, though, suggests Aran, such a system has not yet been brought into being, and only when it has will there truly be justice in the country.⁷¹⁷

Erdoğan’s Male Chauvinism

Authoritarian techniques and exploitation of Turkey’s ‘deficient’ political system, however, were not the only flaws of the AKP and its leader. In August 2014, for example, Erdoğan openly made “sexist and offensive remarks to... prominent female journalist” Amberin Zaman, who writes for The Economist. The latter had apparently incurred the Prime Minister’s wrath by asking a secular opponent of the AKP “whether any Muslim society was capable of challenging its authorities”. Erdoğan responded by claiming the reporter was a “militant in the guise of a journalist”, and that she should “know [her] place”. In turn, The Economist countered the comments of the AKP leader by speaking of how he led a nation which had “more reporters behind bars than any other country in the world” and that, under his leadership, Turkey had “become an increasingly difficult place for independent journalism”.⁷¹⁸

At the same time, Stop Women Homicides and other women’s rights groups insisted that “**a culture of indifference toward violence against women** [was being] condoned from the top, as Erdogan and others in his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) [had] publicly [made] **discriminatory and misogynistic statements**”. In July, for example, “Bulent Arinc, the deputy prime minister and a co-founder of the AKP..., told a crowd at a religious holiday celebration that women... “should not laugh in public””. Online Turkish news and advocacy site Bianet, meanwhile, would report on how men had “killed 184 women in the first eight months of 2014”, and on how “an additional 417 [had] women suffered some other form of violence at the hands of a man” in that period. In fact, rights activists would claim that Erdoğan’s “increasingly sexist views”, and those of his AKP colleagues, had been “perpetuating and leading to more [such] violence against women”.⁷¹⁹

In November 2014, however, now President Erdoğan showed that his rhetoric was not going to change, and continued to make chauvinist statements. Telling a meeting of Turkey’s Women and Democracy Association that “gender equality was contrary to nature”, the president argued that “feminists did not recognize the value of motherhood”. **Women’s “delicate” nature”, he said, “meant it was impossible to place them on an equal footing with men”**. While they should be equal “in the eyes of the law”, he insisted, “our religion gave woman... the station of motherhood”, and women’s “different role in society” (from men) therefore “had to be recognized”.

Such “divisive rhetoric”, according to Dasha Afansieva and Daren Butler at Al Arabiya, had long been successful in winning Erdoğan and the AKP “the support of the country’s pious Anatolian heartlands”. However, they say, it had also revealed the essentially sexist outlook

⁷¹⁷ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/17373-what-s-next-for-turkey>

⁷¹⁸ <http://www.inquisitr.com/1401858/turkish-prime-minister-erdogan-sparks-outrage-over-sexist-comments-tells-woman-know-your-place/>

⁷¹⁹ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/9/30/turkish-women-strugglewitherdoganlegacy.html>

of the country's leader. For Gonul Karahanoglu of women's rights group KA.DER, meanwhile, the fact that "women are not physiologically equal" was not a justification for the president's discriminatory language. Equality, she affirms, is not about physical equivalence but "about having equal rights, equal status and equal opportunities". Erdoğan's definition of women "only as mothers", meanwhile, effectively contradicted these principles, "discriminating against all the women [in Turkey] who [didn't] have children" in the process.⁷²⁰

In fact, "eight groups [soon] signed a statement condemning [the president's] remarks as violating the national constitution and international agreements", in which they insisted that he was seeking to "denigrate decades of effort by women's movements for gender equality". They also "argued that the rejection of universal equality [was] an important factor in increased violence against women" in Turkey. And such comments would be backed up by the fact that, "in the latest World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report", the country came "120th out of 142 countries in 2013" (making it "the lowest-ranking country in the whole of the Europe and Central region").⁷²¹

In Turkey, says Alev Scott at The Guardian, "only 28% of women are in legal employment, an estimated 40% of women suffer domestic violence at least once in their lives", and "millions of girls are forced into under-age marriage every year". Although "exact figures on domestic abuse and rape [were] hard to come by because it [was] socially frowned upon to complain about husbands", she asserts, police had often told "women and girls who [had] been threatened with murder by their partners to go home and "talk it over"". Meanwhile, many working class women worked "unregistered on farms or in factories" because their families "could not survive without this second income" (thanks to the neoliberal politics adopted by Erdoğan).

Instead of seeking greater democracy and socio-economic justice in Turkey, Scott affirms, Erdoğan actually urged women in 2008 "to have "at least" three children and preferably five", regardless of the harsh economic conditions they and their families were facing (and would face in the future). **The result of his chauvinist statements**, Scott stresses, was effectively "to encourage a divide between believer and non-believer, man and woman, mother and non-mother". In other words, far from creating a more unified and democratic society, the president had in reality been fostering a hazardous partition in the Turkish population. In fact, Scott underlines, citizens would underplay Erdoğan's "appeals to the conservative instincts of a country grappling with entrenched patriarchy and inequality" at their own peril.⁷²²

A New Palace for the 'New Sultan'

In early November 2014, The Independent's Adam Withnall spoke of how accusations of Erdoğan "acting like a "sultan"" had intensified after the president had "built himself a palace that [was] bigger than the White House or Buckingham Palace", and which occupied "more than 1.6 million square feet of land and cost almost £400 million" of taxpayer money. Another £85 million, meanwhile, had been "allocated for the Ak Saray - or White Palace - [for] the coming year, which [would] take it to almost double the estimated cost to Turkish taxpayers". With "1,000 rooms, advanced security systems, [the] lavish use of marble and even... silk wallpaper in the bathrooms", the palace would also be bigger "than the vast Palace of Versailles in France". The smaller Cankaya Palace previously occupied by the Turkish president, meanwhile, would now be used by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

⁷²⁰ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/24/Erdogan-women-are-not-equal-to-men.html>

⁷²¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/25/world/europe/turkey-erdogan-women/>

⁷²² <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/25/impossible-laugh-appalling-sexism-turkish-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan>

At the same time, “other properties in the presidential portfolio” were also set to be renovated in 2015, “including Istanbul’s Huber Palace and a guest house on the Aegean coast”. A further £115 million, meanwhile, would “be spent on a new Airbus A330-200 to be used as the presidential jet”. And, apart from the controversy generated by Erdoğan’s bestowal of such wealth and property on himself (while most Turkish citizens had increasingly less purchasing power and fewer rights), the new palace mentioned above would be especially provocative because it had been “built on land set aside as a nature reserve”. In fact, its construction “on a forested hill overlooking Ankara” even breached court orders, leading the CHP’s Kemal Kilicdaroglu to criticise “the so-called sultan” for having “cut down hundreds of trees” to build himself a luxury palace “in a country where three million people [were] without work”.⁷²³

Summary

In 2014, HRW insisted that “**the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) [had] demonstrated a growing intolerance of political opposition, public protest, and critical media**” since the beginning of its time in power. While the group mentioned the “important initial steps” which had been made (starting in 2013) regarding the peace process with the PKK, it also insisted that “bolder steps to address the rights deficit for Turkey’s Kurds [were needed in order to] address the root causes of the conflict and help further human rights for all ethnic and religious minority groups in Turkey”.⁷²⁴

In December 2014, meanwhile, Al Arabiya reported on how Russian President Vladimir Putin had “praised his Turkish counterpart as a “tough man” for not being intimidated by the West”, and for making a deal with Russia to “replace a gas pipeline [project through Bulgaria] with a route through Turkey”. While Putin hoped to “negotiate a face-saving solution to the Ukrainian crisis”, the news outlet said, he had “no intention of conceding defeat in his standoff with the West”. With Russia’s “overwhelming dependence on oil and gas exports” being exposed, and the EU attempting to hit “Russian Black Sea oil and gas exploration” in retaliation for “Moscow’s annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region in March”, Putin was clearly desperate to find a country he could deal with which would not bow to Western pressure.⁷²⁵ And Erdoğan’s Turkey, which seemed to be increasingly distancing itself from Western policies in the Middle East (whilst maintaining its NATO membership), seemed like it could be that country.

Essentially, the early twenty-first century saw Erdoğan and the AKP add new problems to the already authoritarian and anti-democratic structures of the Turkish State. Having been an oppressive bourgeois nationalist state for many decades, Turkey was now witnessing the increasing dominance of an ideology which fused neoliberal economics with Islamist social policies. And, while small steps were made towards peace with Turkey’s Kurdish communities under this new regime, the ‘solution process’ could only really be considered a consequence of the PKK’s ideological transformation after Öcalan’s imprisonment, as the AKP’s desire for social justice, freedom, and direct democracy was just as inexistent as its support for women’s rights. In short, the ruling party demonstrated once again that Islamism was not a belief system committed to progressive socio-economic change and that it was, like elsewhere, simply a reactionary response to years of secular authoritarianism, military and bureaucratic rule, the marginalisation of Islam, and political instability.

D) The PKK’s Role in Rojava and the Fight Against ISIS

⁷²³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/recep-tayyip-erdogan-the-new-sultan-now-has-a-new-palace--and-it-has-cost-turkish-taxpayers-400m-9841319.html>

⁷²⁴ <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/turkey>

⁷²⁵ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/19/Putin-hails-tough-man-Erdogan-for-defying-EU.html>

I) Legitimising the PKK in the West

If the continuation of human rights abuses, economic injustice, and authoritarian techniques in Turkey under the AKP were not worries for the West, other issues would be. And one of the AKP policies that would increase tensions between the Turkish regime and its NATO allies the most would be the former's tactical allegiance with Hamas. With Prime Minister Erdoğan seeking to back 'moderate' Islamists from 2011 onwards in Syria, for example, it must have appeared a logical step (to encourage sway within militant Islamist circles) to back the Palestinian resistance organisation.

Al-Monitor's Pinar Tremblay would assert in late August 2014 that Erdoğan had been allowing "high-level meetings" with Hamas operatives in Turkey, and had been supporting their anti-Zionist rhetoric, all in spite of the fact that the group was considered a 'terrorist organisation' by Turkish allies in the USA, EU, and elsewhere. In short, though, supporting Hamas was seen to be worth standing up to Western pressure, as it would be both an extension of the AKP regime's attempts to undermine the power of Syria and Iran in the region and an attempt to play on the opposition of many Turkish citizens to Israeli crimes and occupation in Palestine. Therefore, the government was "rather frank and "proud" of its engagement with the organization despite all financial and political repercussions", according to Tremblay.⁷²⁶

Essentially, the AKP regime's biggest enemies were seen to be the forces of secularism in the region – whether that was authoritarian secularism in Syria or the democratic and socialist secularism of the PKK (and its allies in the region). While Turkey had long been an ally of Israel, then, the AKP had exploited internal opposition to Zionism by emphasising its Islamist credentials, and thus ensured the support of Turkish Islamists necessary for gaining and maintaining political power. This strategy would not come without a price in the international community, however, and tensions would soon begin to grow between the Turkish government and its NATO allies.

AKP Wary of the Increasing Legitimation of the PKK

According to Sedat Laciner (from pro-AKP Turkish newspaper The Star), "no country in the world" was watching the PKK "as closely as Israel" was. Speaking in early 2013, Laciner spoke about how the Israeli State had effectively "turned the PKK camps into reality TV shows". The country showing "the second most interest in the PKK", meanwhile, was the USA, he says. For him, America had "weapons that could penetrate the PKK's caves and destroy them", but just "[did not] want to give them to Turkey". He alleges that the West was worried about the power that the country could have if it succeeded in "getting all the Kurds on its side". Although, in reality, such an achievement would be unlikely (given the AKP regime's hostile stance to the PKK and its noticeable indifference to the peace process), Laciner asserts that Ankara could "become a force that [the West] can't control" if it managed to appease the inhabitants of Turkish Kurdistan.⁷²⁷

From Laciner's point of view, Erdoğan's negotiations with the PKK were actually a sign that the prime minister wanted to reduce Kurdish resistance in order to prevent the organisation from being used by the West against his increasingly uncontrollable regime. By trying to link the USA and Israel with the PKK, Laciner was seemingly trying to suggest that Turkey's souring relations with its former allies were a result of a US-Zionist conspiracy to keep the Turkish population divided and the Turkish nation weak (when in fact diplomatic tension was much more to do with the AKP's adoption of an increasingly anti-Zionist stance). Contrary to Laciner's arguments, however, the Erdoğan regime's authoritarianism, sectarian

⁷²⁶ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/turkey-palestine-israel-gaza-hamas-meshal-kidnapping.html#>

⁷²⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/01/israel-monitoring-pkk.html#>

rhetoric, and increasing (and ill-advised) abandonment of Turkey's long-standing alliance with the West were the factors that were really dividing the Turkish population and hindering the country's progress. If the West was truly reconsidering its previous hostility to the PKK, therefore, it was almost certainly because of political problems that Erdoğan had himself fostered.

In essence, the interests of the West were indeed coming into alignment with those of the PKK in 2014, as Wahhabi jihadists showed that they had definitively taken over the Syrian Civil War from 'moderates', taking advantage as they did of mass discontent among marginalised Sunni communities in both Iraq and Syria. Thus, the West could no longer pretend that it would be a positive thing for Assad to be violently overthrown or that those it had previously been supporting in Syria were worthy of support. And, at the same time (as will be seen in Chapter Eleven), the PKK was effectively rescuing pro-US KRG forces (or citizens) in northern Iraq who were faced with the brutal advance of ISIS.

Rafael Taylor, for example, speaks about how PKK militants had "come down from the northernmost mountains to fight alongside the Iraqi Peshmerga against ISIS", and how they had even been "visited by [President] Barzani in a public display of gratitude and solidarity, much to the embarrassment of Turkey and the United States."⁷²⁸ Gradually realising that cooperation, or at least coexistence, with the PKK (and its affiliates) was more in its interests than conflict or repression, Barzani's KDP was very much increasing the PKK's legitimacy with his actions, flying in the face of the West's designation of the group as a terrorist organisation. With Western hopes of overthrowing Assad now disappearing, and allies in Iraq at risk from the jihadists that Western allies had brought into existence, the PKK and its allies were looking more and more like a force that could bring stability to the region. The AKP regime in Turkey, meanwhile, seemed like a force that could only bring more sectarianism and instability.

The Impact of the PKK's Fight against ISIS

According to Amberin Zaman, writing at Al-Monitor in September 2014, the PKK and its YPG allies in Syria had become "two potentially critical players" in the fight against ISIS. Having "proven [themselves] to be the most effective forces in the battle against IS both in Iraq and in Syria" by shepherding "tens of thousands of Yazidi Kurds marooned on Mount Sinjar" to safety and helping Iraqi Peshmerga "retake the town of Makhmour", they had significantly increased their own standing in the region, she says. And neither the KRG nor the West could reasonably ignore this phenomenon.

Although the PKK and the YPG were frowned upon in Western circles because of the former's previous fight against the Turkish State, they were both "pro-secular" forces which had "never targeted the West". Furthermore, while they each sought to maintain their own ideological independence, they also claimed they were "eager to cooperate with the West" in its fight against ISIS. Subsequently, the West would be forced into debating, at the very least, the possibility of cancelling the PKK's designation as a 'terrorist group'. The biggest obstacle to such a change, however, was Turkey, according to Zaman.

The fact that Turkey itself was "talking to the [PKK] rebels" should effectively have made it harder for the NATO member to complain about the West considering 'engagement' with the movement, especially when the country was clearly much more reluctant to fight ISIS than the PKK and its allies. Turkey, however, claimed that "any Western moves to legitimize the group" before a "lasting peace agreement" was reached "would weaken the government's hand". At the same time, though, US think tanks (such as the Center for

⁷²⁸ <http://anarchistnews.org/content/new-pkk-unleashing-social-revolution-kurdistan> and <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

American Progress) had suggested that Washington needed to “deal with Kurdish organizations that [were] helping define the reality on the ground” if it was truly interested in defeating ISIS. In fact, the aforementioned organisation even argued that “dangling the carrot of delisting [could actually] help move the peace talks [in Turkey] forward” rather than backwards.

The reality, however, was that the Turkish regime was not really interested in a resolution to the problems that gave rise to the PKK’s war against the state. Instead, it simply wanted the PKK to disarm and disappear, allowing the authoritarian government forces once again to definitively obtain a monopoly of violence. According to Zaman, though, such an “insistence that the rebels surrender their arms and disband as part of any final deal” was “utterly unrealistic”. And this was especially apparent given that the PKK was actually “looking to expand its forces and upgrade its weapons” in the fight against ISIS, and that its “prowess on the battlefield” had been increasingly “propelling it to international legitimacy”.

The KDP’s Masoud Barzani, however, as a key Western (and Turkish) ally, had many reasons to oppose such a diplomatic change. With Barzani effectively seeing himself as “the true leader” of the Kurds (and resenting “any suggestions that Öcalan and the PKK might have a similar claim”), yet another “hurdle to Western dialogue” with the PKK and its allies was put in place in the KRG. In fact, the only reason he was forced to thank the PKK was because his own forces had “put up no resistance and fled when IS forces stormed Sinjar in August” (putting themselves in an “unfavorable light compared with the battle-hardened PKK/YPG”). In short, even though the rebels had different aims from those of the KDP in the long term, Barzani knew that he could not afford to risk insulting them from his own weakened position.

Although PKK sources reported that the progressive Kurdish rebels had “had informal contact with “junior level” US Army officials and CIA operatives on Mount Sinjar”, the existence of unremitting Turkish pressure on the USA meant that it still refused “official contact” with PYD co-chair Salih Muslim in Syria and denied him a visa. A “fig leaf for future cooperation” with the West’s campaign against ISIS, however, would arrive with the creation of an “anti-IS alliance” between the YPG and “various groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA)”, known as the Joint Action Centre. The aim of this coalition, Zaman suggests, was perhaps to take advantage of the “fresh batch of moderates” that the USA claimed it was “planning to arm and train” in Syria.

Another step towards international recognition for the PYD and YPG, meanwhile, was their signing of “three “deeds of commitment” with Swiss-based NGO Geneva Call in mid-2014, in which the YPG “pledged to ban anti-personnel mines, work against gender discrimination and sexual violence and not use children under the age of 18 to fight in its ranks”. And similar pledges also came from the PKK and the HPG (its military section). In fact, Geneva Call’s Anki Sjoeborg would soon say that “both the PKK/HPG and the PYD/YPG [had] proven a willingness to implement” their pledges, and to respect and learn more about international humanitarian law.

At the same time, HRW also had a “favorable experience with the PYD/YPG”. After the organisation had claimed certain rights abuses had been committed by the Syrian groups (which claimed there were “inaccuracies” in the report), “YPG spokesman Redur Xelil acknowledged in a tweet that they had to do “a better job””. HRW’s Emma Sinclair-Webb subsequently responded to this statement by saying that the NGO had been “encouraged by their response.”

Zaman claims that it is “only a matter of time before [Western] governments initiate formal ties if not with the PKK then certainly with the PYD and the YPG” (which are not on any terrorist list). In fact, Turkish security analyst Nihat Ali Ozcan even suggests that, in spite of the fact that “the PKK and the YPG [were] branches of the same tree”, Turkey may eventually “resort to pragmatism and treat them differently, at least until the IS threat subsides”, in response to Western pressure. He also says the country may well “ditch its demand that the Syrian Kurds take up arms against the Assad regime as a condition for dialogue”, mostly for the same reasons. These measures, however, would depend very much on how conducive the internal political context in Turkey was to such acts at any given time.⁷²⁹

Politically Selective ‘Terrorist’ Lists and the Illogical Blacklisting of the PKK

As seen earlier in this book, the ‘terrorist’ lists of the West and its allies are often used to demonise movements that go against their economic or political interests. In late 2014, the American Enterprise Institute’s Michael Rubin analysed the incongruous presence of the PKK on the West’s political blacklist. In fact, “through some careless legislative language”, he says, “the United States government had [even] labelled [its PUK and KDP allies in Iraqi Kurdistan]... to be terrorist groups” at one point. Having been “modified after 9/11”, he asserts, the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) was using “a definition of terrorism so broad that virtually any resistance group that [had] in the past engaged in armed conflict against its government [would be] considered a so-called “Tier III” terrorist organization”, giving “automatic grounds for denial of admission to the U.S.”. Although the KDP and PUK had “for years worked hand-in-glove with the United States”, therefore, being “America’s most faithful allies in efforts to stabilize Iraq” after 2003, they were still given a terrorist rating by the superpower’s bureaucracy. Nonetheless, it was eventually in the USA’s interests to get around this problem, while it was not in its interests to delist the PKK.

In fact, Rubin speaks about how such “ham-handed terror designations” had also affected American relations with Syrian Kurds, who were “—or could be— [the USA’s] best friends inside Syria” (due to the fact that they are “secular, tolerant, and aspire to democracy”). While Rubin ignores the (pro-PKK) socialist tendencies of Kurdish communities in Syria, he is right to a certain extent in his assertion above, presuming of course that we believe the USA is genuinely interested in secularism, tolerance, and democracy in the Middle East (which, according to the evidence in this book, it is not). Nonetheless, assuming that US elites did indeed want ‘peace, justice, and democratic rule’ in the region, Rubin’s claim that the Syrian Kurds would be natural allies for the USA makes perfect sense.

Because the PKK was designated as a terrorist group, Rubin says, America had not been able to take advantage of the fact that (theoretically) its interests overlapped with those of the group’s PYD allies in Syria (which had implemented a form of autonomous, democratic rule in the north of the country in the middle of its civil war). In particular, he looks at how the PKK was only put on the USA’s terrorism list in 1997, “largely out of deference to Turkey”, and how, unlike other groups (such as the Mujahedin al-Khalq which was de-listed in 2012), **the PKK had “never targeted Americans”**.

Rubin also asserts that the PKK’s commitment to organising ceasefires and negotiations with the Turkish government showed that the group had an interest in shifting away from a focus on armed revolution. At the same time, he suggests that, with Islamists in power in Turkey, it was “self-defeating to defer to Turkey on the PKK when Turkey [rebuffed] anyone concerned about its ties to Hamas, its ambassador’s endorsement of Al Qaeda in the Islamic

⁷²⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/turkey-kurdistan-iraq-syria-us-isis-pkk-global-legitimacy.html>

Maghrib, and its now president's (and his son's) embrace of a man designated by the US Treasury Department as an Al Qaeda financier".

For Rubin, the "faction-ridden" nature of the Kurdish movement, in addition to international terrorist designations, was also a factor that undercut the "collective standing" of the Kurdish people. The fact that the nationalists in government in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, had rarely been able to find common ground with the left-wing PKK and its allies had ultimately served to impede the campaign for rights and justice for the region's Kurds. In collaboration with imperialism and reactionary regimes in the region, therefore, the KDP and PUK had essentially prevented the achievement of social and democratic rights for the Kurdish people as a whole.

In the case of ISIS and other Wahhabi extremists in Syria and Iraq, meanwhile, the "KDP's constant labeling of the PKK to be a terrorist group" (in an attempt to gain or maintain favour with Turkey) not only undermined the position of the PKK and its allies, but also that of all of the region's Kurdish communities. Ultimately, Rubin asserts, this reactionary tactic resulted "not in [a] KDP victory but [in a] tragedy for the Kurds". Comparing the KDP, PUK, PKK, and the Turkish State (and finding that the PKK is the least nepotistic, least corrupt, least tribalist, and least reactionary force of them all), Rubin concludes by saying that "any of the Kurdish groups could arguably make better allies than the Turks". Therefore, he argues, it is time "to reconsider our default "PKK is a terrorist group" position given that the facts no longer merit that designation".⁷³⁰

The Campaign to 'Delist' the PKK

In early September 2014, Channel 4's Symeon Brown spoke about how the PKK had "had a resurgence since its war with IS". The PKK, he says in his report, was "widely supported by displaced Kurds across Europe and the Middle East" and, although its forces had "fought... Islamic fundamentalists since the early 2000s", the growth of ISIS had "led to [even] British Kurds joining the PKK to fight" in Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish People's Summit's Turkan Budak, for example, asserts that "family men with kids", who had seen "civilians dying every day" in the news, had been inspired to go and "fight terrorism". London-based Kurdish activist Memed Aksoy, meanwhile, affirms that he has "raised funds for the PKK" and that it is "**a movement growing in confidence and numbers**" - in spite of its illegality in the UK and the rest of Europe. The fight against ISIS, he insists, had "raised the Kurdish consciousness".

Thanks to the fact that the PKK was now, in part, "aligned to western interests" (in the fight against Western-created terrorism), Brown suggests that "a new generation of British and western European-born Kurds believe the Kurdish question can now be solved with diplomacy rather than arms". Aksoy, for instance, even asserts that "the series of police raids that [had] "criminalised" and "marginalised" British Kurds in 2011 [had] stopped", implying that "authorities [were] turning a blind eye whilst the PKK [was] an asset in the war against the Islamic State". Raffaello Pantucci from the Royal United Services Institute, however, argues that this lack of government action against progressive Kurdish activists has probably been due to "Isis taking all the resources".

Finally, Channel 4 quotes PKK Commander Cemshid Mardin as saying that "there are British citizens fighting with us, which also include non-Kurdish people". Nonetheless, this reality did not necessarily mean that the West would support the PKK and its ideological allies in the Middle East. Brown emphasises, for instance, that even South Africa's ANC only gained support from the West in its fight against apartheid "after [it had] embraced free

⁷³⁰ <http://www.aei-ideas.org/2014/09/on-kurds-and-terror-lists/> and <http://kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/analysis/on-kurds-and-terror-lists/222-on-kurds-and-terror-lists.html>

market capitalism".⁷³¹ And for that reason, he suggests, there is little cause to believe that the PKK would be treated any differently, even if temporary strategic alliances were to be formed in order to defeat ISIS.

II) Legitimising the PKK in Libertarian Left-Wing Circles

Doubts about the PKK's Credibility As Libertarian Socialists

At Roar Magazine, there have been some lively discussions about whether or not the PKK should be accepted into the libertarian socialist fold given their more 'hierarchical' left-wing past. On August 18, 2014, for example, one critic claimed that it was "a little fantastic" to believe that the PKK had suddenly become "Bookchinite anarchists", considering that it still maintained a "hierarchical command structure with a leadership cult... on all serious, overarching issues". They also allege that it did "not tolerate rival left-wing organizing in its own areas of strength, not to mention any alternative Kurdish nationalist movements".

Another criticism, meanwhile, was that the group had engaged in a peace process with the increasingly autocratic Erdoğan, when it should really have been fighting against it. The commentator also criticises the BDP and HDP for having sought to work 'within the system' in Turkey on a platform that was not clearly anti-capitalist. In each case, the detractor believes, the PKK and its legal allies had "[shied] away from upsetting their dictatorial negotiation partner".

They also argue that the PKK's talk of "the grassroots, values of multiculturalism and other liberal niceties" was simply "instrumentalized for an overarching nationalist project" that involved "co-optation into the Turkish State and rapprochement with Barzani's Iraqi Kurdistan". In other words, they believe that the PKK was being used as a tool in the "regional imperialist power-game", in which Turkey and Iraqi Kurds sought to keep "Kurdish oil flowing to Western markets over Turkish pipelines". Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, given their generally hostile attitude towards the progressive Kurdish movement, the writer claims not to be "very knowledgeable" about the PKK's PYD allies in Syria. Their belief that the PKK was currently 'co-optable' and authoritarian, meanwhile, suggested that they were 'not very knowledgeable' about the modern PKK either.

On August 26, another critic of the PKK referred to how the "large yellow flag" with Öcalan's picture on it had appeared regularly at Kurdish demonstrations in Britain and elsewhere, leading them to insist that this showed "the cult of Öcalan [was] alive and well". He also claims that the "unpleasant habit... of killing political opponents - especially ex-members" was still "alive and well" in the PKK,⁷³² mentioning in particular the death of former PKK commander Osman Balic (who was murdered by "two unknown militants" in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2014⁷³³). At the same time, the critic's comments refer to the "roadside bomb planted by suspected Kurdish rebels" which had killed "five policemen and three civilians, including a child" in October 2011.⁷³⁴ Nonetheless, in spite the complete validity of criticising both the murder of innocent civilians and political dissidents, the fact is that (in both cases mentioned) there is no significant evidence that the attacks were carried out by the PKK, or on the orders of the group's leaders.

At the same time, a reply made by 'Hubertus' on August 28 to the criticism of the PKK's supposed 'personality cult' emphasised that "people in Barcelona 1936 worshipping... [Buenaventura] Durruti" could still be considered anarchists, just as those with photos of

⁷³¹ <http://www.channel4.com/news/pkk-kurdish-workers-party-islamic-state-syria-iraq-uk>

⁷³² <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

⁷³³ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/8/kurdlocal1695.htm>

⁷³⁴ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2011/10/20111019164441520246.html>

[Mikhail] Bakunin on their walls could. In such 'cults', the writer says, "the identification with the ideas" that the personality in question represented was "the main factor". It is also important, he insists, "to take into account the realities of the people", and the fact that "they have different references and cultural experiences [from] western marginalised anarchists".

As far as violence is concerned, Hubertus argues, "the Spanish CNT committed various crimes of war during the civil war", but that did not "make their goal less libertarian or antifascist". Anarchists in Italy, Russia, and Britain, meanwhile, also killed "their own comrades when they were scared they could give information to the state", he asserts. Unfortunately, he stresses, "these are [simply] the **inhuman consequences of a long term armed struggle**", and "**one should not have illusions about the realities of war and militant underground activities**". In summary, he says, the new goals of Öcalan and the new Kurdish movement were honest, and "Öcalan's theoretical work" was some of "the best and largest about the failure of Marxist-Leninism and national liberation".⁷³⁵

Öcalan, Stalinism, and the Shift

In early December 2014, the Anarchist Federation (AF) revealed its views on the PKK and its allies in northern Syria. At the movement's birth, the AF argues, it "adopted a leftist nationalist stance", in which "Öcalan was... seen as a charismatic figure to which the leadership elements and the base of the party [would] pay obedience". Previously described as ""the sun" around which the various political and military organisations [in the progressive Kurdish movement would] revolve", Öcalan's position did not change, the AF claims, "with his apparent adoption of Bookchinite confederal municipalism". He was still seen as the ultimate leader of the movement, it asserts, and "the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites" had simply made it impossible to keep looking "towards a discredited state capitalism" for inspiration and necessary to change the ideological stance of his organisation.

According to the AF, the PKK had already tried to become a political chameleon at numerous points in the past. For example, the group argues, when it "met problems with the Kurdish peasantry" in Syria (because many "still held to Muslim religious beliefs at odds with PKK leftism"), Öcalan began "to talk about Kurdistan as "the cradle of international Islam"". He also "talked about becoming Turkey's "most powerful ally"" after his capture in 1999, and about how "the war on behalf of borders and classes [had] come to an end". For the AF, then, Öcalan's subsequent recommendation that his followers read Bookchin and practise his ideas was simply "an intensive marketing campaign by the PKK towards Western leftists and anarchists in order to look for support and allies". As proof that this was not an organic shift in ideals, the AF claims, the new ideology was "handed down by Öcalan through the PKK command structure".

Arguing that the PKK was therefore just "posing as born again libertarians", the AF insists that the group was advocating "the setting up of Democratic Islam Congresses to accommodate the Islamists and to religiously legitimise the PKK". And at the same time, Öcalan's efforts to encourage his "brother believers" that Kurds could not be "defined by western concepts such as communism and atheism", meanwhile, caused the AF to doubt the leader's commitment to secularism. The organisation also asserts that the "structure of the PKK" was still "extremely centralised", and that there was "no evidence whatsoever" to suggest that a form of "libertarian federalist organisation controlled by the membership" had been adopted by the party.

⁷³⁵ <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

Similarly, the AF criticises the PKK for not questioning the class system, quoting Öcalan as saying that the PKK's "Democratic Confederalism" was "a system which takes into consideration the religious, ethnic and class differences in society". It also denounces the fact that the KCK "defends private property in its Contract" and approves of "mandatory military service" in extreme circumstances.

Finally, the AF quotes Turkish anarchist Zafer Onat as saying that, in the Rojava Revolution in Syrian Kurdistan, "the aim [was] not political power" but nor was it "the destruction of the state apparatus". In short, this goal of "autonomy within existing nation states" (whether temporary or not), the AF insists, was nothing "beyond a bourgeois democratic system". In fact, it even compares the revolution with Gaddafi's Libya, insisting that the leader's 'Green Book' had also used "radical language" (saying that the masses needed "to put an end to all forms of dictatorial rule... to all forms of what is falsely called democracy - from parliaments to the sect, the tribe, the class and to the one-party, the two-party and the multi-party systems") but that the ideologies had not been put into practice. Gaddafi, for example, had said that there would be "no democracy without popular congresses and committees everywhere", but in reality his "repressive regime" still controlled the lives of the Libyan people. For the AF, therefore, we should not be surprised if the progressive rhetoric of the Rojava Revolution was not transformed into reality on the ground.⁷³⁶

PKK No Longer Organised Along Leninist Lines

Comments at Roar Magazine also criticised the PKK by calling it a "traditional Leninist national liberation organisation, with a cult of the personality".⁷³⁷ One critic, called 'SamFantoSamotnaf', quoted on July 27, 2014 an Iraqi Kurd who had spoken about the PKK in 1991, in the middle of its war against the Turkish State (and amidst the hostility between Iraq's Kurdish nationalists and the PKK). The PKK, he said, had killed former members and people they had "minor ideological disputes with", whilst "attacking collaborators" and killing "peasants from the same villages as the collaborators" in the process.⁷³⁸ However, this statement came once again from a very difficult period in the PKK's past, was backed by no evidence, and said nothing about the group's present behaviour. Awareness of such claims, though, is indeed important to bear in mind when considering the errors committed during the PKK's war against the Turkish State.

On August 5, another observer emphasised that the "Kurdish liberation movement [was] no longer organized in a Leninist line". Calling themselves 'Komunalist', this commentator insists that "non-guerrilla organizations of the Kurdish people" were now much more important in the movement. Along with "legal political parties" and "different modes of civil disobedience", they say, there were also "the beginnings of an autonomous mode of federative governance" in PKK territory. This transformation, they argue, may indeed have a long way to go still, but "it seems that [the PKK is] trying to eliminate old Leninist practices".⁷³⁹

In light of the comments seen above, we must indeed criticise the cult of personality around Öcalan and the PKK's past. However, we must also emphasise that it is not Öcalan who lives in a lavish palace, passes down restrictive laws, or resides over an unjust economic and political system (like President Erdoğan does). The fact that he lives in a jail cell because he fought for the creation of a different system does not make him a hero, but it does mean he is not comparable to the leader of an oppressive state. Errors were indeed committed during his time at the head of the PKK's war against the Turkish State, but left-wingers should at

⁷³⁶ <https://libcom.org/news/anarchist-federation-statement-rojava-december-2014-02122014>

⁷³⁷ <http://roarmag.org/2014/07/kurdistan-rojava-syria-autonomy/> - contact the author at ali@riseup.net or follow @breakingkurd

⁷³⁸ http://dialectical-delinquents.com/?page_id=412

⁷³⁹ <http://roarmag.org/2014/07/kurdistan-rojava-syria-autonomy/> - contact the author at ali@riseup.net or follow @breakingkurd

the same time be able to empathise with his struggle against all odds to ensure his fellow citizens received justice (even if we disagree with the methods he used in the process).

In short, Öcalan is not a dictator and he does not control a state. Instead, he is a figure of inspiration for a great number of people – just like Nelson Mandela was in Africa or Che Guevara was in Latin America. The fact is that, although violent and authoritarian tactics have on many occasions proven themselves to be counterrevolutionary, they have often seemed like the only ones that would work in a world of horrific oppression and exploitation. Recognising the negative side of this path, though, and accepting that there are others (as Öcalan appears to have done), is an important first step towards creating an alternative approach. And if Öcalan has managed to encourage countless numbers of PKK members or sympathisers to adopt a libertarian form of rule, then surely we must accept that he has made a step forward (even if we believe that further steps must be taken).

There may not have been an extreme shift to the absolute limits of libertarian socialism in the PKK, but the party now, at the very least, represents a mixture of directly democratic thought and the beliefs of progressive state power that existed before. And such a shift can only be considered as something positive, whether we still believe errors were committed and changes still need to be made or not. Below, I will refer to what I believe is one of the best and most comprehensive anarchist responses to criticisms of the PKK and its allies in the progressive Kurdish movement of today.

An Anarchist Communist Perspective on the PKK and Its Allies

At the start of November 2014, the Anarkismo.net Editors Group (AEG) wrote a comprehensive response to the 'Rojava: An Anarcho-Syndicalist Perspective' – an article which had been critical of both the PKK and its allies in the Rojava Revolution of northern Syria. The original post, which had been written by a member of the North America-based Workers Solidarity Alliance (WSA), had encouraged the AEG to “clarify and share” its own thinking regarding what it saw as “a very important and inspiring struggle playing out in the Middle East”.

Having “attracted world attention for its heroic battle against the murderous ultra-rightwing forces of... ISIS”, the AEG says, the PKK had given its own ideology much greater exposure (though seldom in the world’s mainstream media). The group begins its response to the WSA member (known as K.B.) by quoting Öcalan as saying in 2005 that “the democratic confederalism of Kurdistan [was] not a State system” but “the democratic system of a people without a State”. Taking “its power from the people”, the PKK leader had said, the system aimed “to reach self-sufficiency in every field including [the] economy”.

As a result of the PKK’s transformed ideology, the AEG insists, “the large platformist and especifista network around Anarkismo.net” had decided to support the progressive Kurdish movement, “although not uncritically”, in spite of the fact that it was “not explicitly, or even thoroughly, anarchist”. The group then defends its stance by asserting that its members “support struggles against oppression in principle, and this includes struggles against national and racial oppression”. The reason for this position, it explains, is that it defends the right of those fighting against oppression “to choose approaches we might not agree with”.

The posture taken above means that the AEG defends “the right of colonised peoples to resist and overcome imperialist repression of projects of liberation by means of... independent liberal democratic or state-socialist statehood”, even if it believes these models “will ultimately fail to fully emancipate proletarians and peasants”. Essentially, though, says the AEG, **the issue of “taking sides with the oppressed” is one “of principle”**, even if such

an approach comes into conflict with a “purist” anarchist viewpoint (which “in practice equates oppressed and oppressor as equal evils”), which is extremely objectionable.

For the AEG, a “blanket endorsement of every position or action or current taken” in national liberation struggles would be irrational, and its members would **never “accept the position that refuses to make any criticisms”**. Silent and unquestioning support “on the basis that only “the oppressed” can decide, or on the grounds [of] “solidarity””, the group asserts, are also intolerable. “**All struggles**”, it says, “**are internally contested and imperfect**”, as “the oppressed are not politically or socially homogenous”. **Solidarity**, therefore, “**is about comradely assistance**”, not about “**closing dialogue or excusing errors**”.

Essentially, the AEG argues that “**there is a sliding scale**” of the acceptability of currents **struggling against oppression**, and that some of these will logically receive more support from its members than others. In other words, the group stresses, “the closer an organised current is to our positions, the more we support them and show solidarity”. At the same time, though, “there are some political positions that are simply unacceptable”. As far as “strategy and tactics” are concerned, therefore, the AEG underlines that it seeks to “prioritise, in practice, relations with some groups over others, and deliberately [chooses] not [to] establish any relations at all with others”.

At the same time, the AEG asserts that it would “not “liquidate” [its] politics or [its] project”, to the point of “becoming uncritical supporters” of the groups with which it shows solidarity. Instead, its stated aim would be merely “to align with struggles against oppression, while also aiming to influence those struggles” through comradely debate and productive criticism. In the end, it would always believe that “only anarchist-communism [offered] the conditions for a reconstruction of human societies that [would] enable a complete resolution of various social evils, including various types of oppression”. The point it wishes to make, however, is that this belief would not mean refusing solidarity to progressive forces that did not share it. In short, the AEG maintains, “engagement is an issue of strategy”, and libertarian socialists must therefore seek to “retain [their] political independence and critique”, whilst proposing, and seeking to “win influence for, [their own] methods, aims and projects”.

In the campaign to defeat ISIS and the oppression of Kurdish communities, the AEG states, “the Anarkismo.net network aligns itself with fighters” against Assad, Turkey, and ISIS. The “PKK’s partial embrace of anarchism”, meanwhile, lent “additional grounds for support”. In spite of “its limitations”, the group insists, “the PKK project [was] one that in some respects [aligned] with anarchist ideals”. The party and its allies were “far from a top-down authoritarian regime in the making”, the AEG asserts, and were, in the end, “fighting on the right side”. For that reason, the group insists, they deserve critical support. Essentially, it stresses, the “issue is not whether the PKK is 100% anarchist”, because “it is certainly not”, even though there are definitely “elements of the PKK programme that anarchists [could] gladly support”.

In summary, the AEG criticises a ‘purist position’, which holds that “anarchists can only ever engage with forces that are purely, unambiguously anarchist”. Instead, it argues that anarchists should always “**stand with the oppressed against the oppressors – without renouncing their differences with other currents**”. And they should also “engage with movements that are, if not completely anarchist, at least in some ways closer to our goals”. The reality is, the AEG maintains, that “**politics is a messy situation, based on debate, conflict and compromise**”, and that the wait for a perfect movement or moment to arrive would be an incredibly long one. Instead, it says, libertarian socialists must try to

“navigate”, whilst maintaining their own principles, “a more complicated reality, marked by partial gains and messy struggles”.

Dispelling Ill-Informed Myths about Rojava and the PKK

The AEG then moves on to criticise the flaws in K.B.’s article ‘Rojava: An Anarcho-Syndicalist Perspective’, insisting first and foremost that the writer did not share the AEG’s own approach (as outlined above). The group asserts that K.B. had portrayed the PKK and its allies “in the worst possible light, as “authoritarian,” “patriarchal” and “ethno-nationalist,” and [even gone] to the extent of raising several serious charges against Öcalan”. And their conclusion that “anarchists should distance themselves from the Rojava Revolution and the PKK”, the AEG stresses, was based in large part on an unfair “judgement that the PKK and its project [was] neither against oppression, nor in any sense compatible with anarchist goals”.

This dogmatic stance, the AEG insists, is very obstructive, and is unfortunately followed by “a sector of the anarchist movement that routinely dismisses everything that is not purely anarchist – and in practice, confines itself only to engaging with other anarchists”. While the approach may indeed point out correctly “the dangers of uncritically supporting non-anarchist movements”, it effectively sees its proponents cut themselves off “from engaging any movement, and taking any really concrete position on most immediate struggles”. Instead, the AEG says, this position favours “general slogans and appeals that have not much concrete application”.

Apart from criticising K.B.’s ideological posture, the AEG also argues that many of the author’s claims did “not derive from a balanced engagement with the evidence”. Whilst “extremely sceptical of the credentials of the PKK” and its allies, the group asserts, K.B. is “far more credulous whenever the evidence paints the PKK in a poor light”. For example, with the “assertion that Öcalan [was] a “rapist””, the sources used were actually linked “to a Turkish ultra-nationalist website hostile to the PKK – and a book attacking Öcalan” (whose author “provides no evidence except what he admits are “rumours” without confirmation”). For the AEG, this is a very “unfortunate way of arguing – scouring the internet for unfounded and defamatory claims by dubious sources, and accepting these uncritically”.

With regards to K.B.’s criticism of the PKK as an “ethno-nationalist” organisation, meanwhile, the AEG insists that, both “in its Marxist and now its democratic confederalist phases”, the PKK has “never really fitted [such a] mould”. For example, the party has not aimed for “multi-class unity and class society”, and is not a narrowly and exclusively Kurdish movement. In fact, “the Movement of the Democratic Society (TEV-DEM)” in the Rojava Revolution, according to the Kurdish Anarchist Forum (KAF), has asserted that it “has the involvement of many people “from different backgrounds, including Kurdish, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Assyrian and Yazidis””. While K.B. seeks to present the PKK and its allies as a “xenophobic” movement, therefore, they actually end up severely misrepresenting it, as both Öcalan and other PKK militants stress that “democratic confederalism [is] part of the liberation of all peoples of the Middle East – not just the Kurds”. Moreover, they have even “come to reject nationalism itself strongly”, undertaking significant critiques of ‘the state’ in the process.

K.B.’s presentation of the PKK “as somehow a “patriarchal” (that is, male-dominated) movement”, meanwhile, is also slammed by the AEG. While men have a “prominent role... in leadership positions” in the party, the group argues, “**there is more to a movement’s position on women’s liberation than a head count**”. Although the PKK and its allies operate “in a context in which the subordination of women is actively promoted by many forces – not least the Islamic State/ISIS – **the PKK has nonetheless actively promoted**

equality for women in its armed forces, structure and ideology". For K.B. and others to demand that "women's liberation in Rojava [and elsewhere]... be carried out by some sort of "autonomous" women's movement", the AEG asserts, is simply "abstract, since such a movement does not exist". At the same time, such a position also ignores the fact that, **"to the extent that any force is fighting for women's liberation in Rojava, it is the PKK"**.

The reality, the AEG argues, is that **"the PKK pioneered the movement for women's liberation in Kurdistan"**, and that **"those areas where the PKK does not have a major presence are very patriarchal**, whereas those where the PKK has a presence are not". And this statistic is no coincidence, the group emphasises, with the PKK seeing "the domination of women as closely linked to other forms of exploitation and oppression" and believing that **"the struggle against women's oppression, therefore, must be at the heart of any progressive struggle"**.

Regarding the PKK's past, the AEG says, K.B. focussed primarily on the party's Marxist-Leninist origins or influences. Although "that may indeed be the case", the group affirms, it does not mean "that is currently the case". As an example to support this point, the AEG refers to how the Zapatistas in Mexico originally "came from a Maoist approach", and how "Mikhail Bakunin himself was originally a Slavic nationalist". Therefore, the group asserts, **"the past is not always a good guide to the present, especially when other aspects of the past are ignored"**. It also stresses that "people and organisations change politically and it is [sometimes] irrelevant what they were". Essentially, it argues, only "what they say now and what they do now" truly matter.

If we look at the PKK's past as a guide to what it is now, the AEG adds, we must also examine its transformation in the early twenty-first century. Under the leadership of Öcalan, the group explains, the party significantly "critiqued its past" in this period and, whilst "trying to change its politics", has sometimes been **"brutally honest about [its] own past flaws"**. Such analysis, the AEG emphasises, "is very promising and shows **political maturity**". In short, then, the fact is that, "while the PKK were not perfect, and still are not, they have reflected and changed". Therefore, stressing that "they were Marxist-Leninist thirty years ago, as if nothing has changed", gives very little extra credence to the argument about the present day PKK.

Critical Engagement or Dogmatic Isolation?

If libertarian socialists always engaged situations and movements "by what the militant would like them to be", the AEG says, such situations and movements would never be engaged with "as they are". And this is very much the case with K.B., the group asserts, who holds a "fairly abstract schema of demands and programmes" as the only path, "regardless of the actual PKK record, regardless of the context, regardless even of what the women in the PKK and in Rojava do". Such a stance, it claims, "does not deal with the complex realities" in the Middle East, and "makes it very hard to grapple with this reality" in an effective way.

The fact is, the AEG insists, that **"most major movements today are not anarchist, or purely anarchist"**. And, in such a context, anarchists following the type of dogmatic approach outlined above would almost always "isolate themselves, and do so proudly". At the same time, their detached position would simply 'compound their isolation', cutting them off from "audiences and potential anarchist influence". Therefore, while "not every battle requires anarchists to take sides", the AEG accepts, "some do". And the Rojava Revolution, it argues, is one of those "key battles" in which they should be participating, and from which their absence could be a disastrous error.

The AEG gives the example of apartheid South Africa to support its argument, emphasising that, “whatever the limitations of the forces that led the anti-apartheid struggle..., they were progressive compared to the apartheid regime”. In short, they were “fighting against a monstrously oppressive system”, and were thus “infinitely preferable to that system”. If anarchists were to have remained neutral under such circumstances, the group insists, they would have been acting “as if there was no difference at all between oppositional popular forces, like trade unions and community movements, and the apartheid regime”. Just as such indifference would have represented a “serious loss of perspective” back then, it asserts, it represents a serious loss of perspective today (with regards to Rojava).

In summary, the AEG affirms, **the PKK has, “in all of its incarnations..., fought against the severe national oppression of the Kurds in Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey”** from the very beginning. On top of the oppression they received as “workers and peasants”, it stresses, they faced “additional oppression” for simply being Kurds. Therefore, “the fight against that oppression is progressive, and is surely an important fight that any anarchist can support”.

However, there should not be a “blank cheque endorsement of the PKK”, the AEG insists, and anarchists should never “liquidate [their] politics behind any non-anarchist force – becoming cheerleaders and blind supporters, or silencing [their] criticisms or closing down [their] independent activities”. Nonetheless, the group says, anarchists must engage, “as an independent current, with other forces” in order to stay true to anti-oppression principles.

Although there is little proof for the claim that the PKK is “ethno-nationalist”, the AEG asserts, “anarchists should and could still support [its] fight” even if it was, because it has fought a long battle “for an end to national oppression”, and anarchists should on principle support struggles against oppression. The fact that the PKK has “come closer to anarchism”, meanwhile, simply expands even further “the grounds for critically supporting it”. Overall, the AEG argues, libertarian socialists should not set conditions for the support of “popular struggles for national liberation”. Even if such restrictions were put in place, it says, the PKK’s rejection of nationalism and the state (asserting that “the nation-state can never be a solution”), along with its view of “women’s liberation as being irrevocably tied to the abolition of the state”, means that there are clearly aims with which anarchists can sympathise.

In showing solidarity with the PKK and the project of its allies in the Rojava Revolution, however, the views of libertarian socialists must be made clear, and there should be attempts to encourage independent, critical thought (or its continuation) within the progressive processes underway in the region. Overall, the AEG asserts, anarchist influence on the phenomena mentioned above “cannot come from purist isolation, nor can it come from liquidationist cheerleading”. Therefore, the only way to relate to them is through “critical engagement”, in which libertarian socialists stand alongside “the PKK and the Rojava Revolution against the forces of the Islamic State/ISIS, of Turkey, and of Western imperialism”, all whilst not becoming an uncritical “PKK auxiliary”.⁷⁴⁰

Conclusion

For anthropologist David Graeber, “if there is a parallel today to Franco’s superficially devout, murderous Falangists”, it would be ISIS, and “if there is a parallel to the Mujeres Libres of Spain” during the Spanish Civil War, it would be “the courageous women defending the barricades” in the cities and towns of Rojava. And for him, as with the AEG, the international left must not be “complicit in letting history repeat itself”.⁷⁴¹ This time, in

⁷⁴⁰ <http://anarkismo.net/article/27540>

⁷⁴¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>

other words, the forces of reaction must not be allowed to win, and the forces of progress must be defended.

Overall, whilst seeking to maintain as objective an analysis of the PKK and its role in the Middle East as possible, I have sought to echo the point made above. In short, the PKK and its allies are not perfect, but they are without a doubt on the 'right side of the battle' – fighting against oppression, exploitation, and ethnic and religious discrimination. Apart from laying the foundations for understanding the Rojava Revolution (by outlining the historical and current struggles of the PKK and its allies), the aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate that the Turkish State is far from being a positive, democratic force in the Middle East. At the same time, I have argued that the PKK, while not perfect, is the most progressive mass movement active in the Muslim World today.

Earlier in this book, I sought to show that imperialism, nationalism, and political religion (in this case Islamism) do not create pathways towards true, direct democracy or social justice (whether in the Middle East or anywhere else in the world). In this chapter, I have demonstrated that President Erdoğan's style of neoliberal Islamism has not been the way forward either. As an exploitative, oppressive, and chauvinist force, for example, his AKP government has strived to gain the support of a variety of Turkish citizens whilst at the same time driving a religious and social divide between them.

The PKK, meanwhile, in spite of all its previous and present flaws, has sought to bring Turkish society together. Its success in opening negotiations with the AKP government, for instance, was a significant step towards ending violence in Turkey, even though the latter's stated commitment to cooperation, democratisation, and justice was extremely questionable. At the same time, the decline in the levels of military confrontation between the PKK and the state in the early twenty-first century has allowed the progressive Kurdish movement in Turkey to reconsider its tactics and recognise errors committed in the past. And, as a result, it has been able to focus on building directly democratic structures (and cooperative political consciousness) in Kurdish communities from the bottom up, increasingly leaving armed insurrection behind. In short, the PKK has changed (along with its allies) and, although there may still be some negative elements of its past that need to be overcome, it is clearly moving in the right direction – towards democracy, justice, and equality.

In the next chapter, I will take a look at how the PKK's allies in northern Syria, the PYD, have had the opportunity to create the type of system that Öcalan and the PKK adopted and adapted after 1999, in cooperation with other progressive forces in Rojava. I will also analyse how, although the PKK has played a key role in fighting ISIS, its turbulent history with Turkey has led the Turkish regime to treat the democratic autonomy of Syrian Kurds (who were inspired in large part by the PKK's libertarian socialist ideology) in a very aggressive manner. And, taking this hostility into consideration (along with that of many Arab nationalists in Syria, reactionary Islamist groups in both Syria and Iraq, and Kurdish nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan), the aim of the final three chapters of this book is to emphasise, and examine in much greater depth, the hope that the Rojava Revolution brings to the Middle East and the wider world, whilst also considering the obstacles in its way and the forces that seek to derail it.

10) The Example of Rojava

As seen in my essay about Israel's war crimes and occupation of Palestine,⁷⁴² it is sometimes difficult to separate religion from politics, especially considering that religions almost always provide the faithful with a guide for relating with other human beings (including rules about what is acceptable and unacceptable). Furthermore, politics is defined as the set of "activities associated with the governance of a country or area", and no such 'governance' could ever take place without interaction between human beings.⁷⁴³ Consequently, as politics could be seen as 'the way in which humans relate with each other', and the guidance that religious or philosophical beliefs give people often has a significant impact on how they interact, political behaviour can be directly linked to such dogmas (if, of course, the open-minded and peace-loving will to respect personal differences does not exist).

Political authoritarianism and violence, however, do not belong to intolerant religious groups alone, as my analysis of imperialism, nationalism, and Stalinism has shown throughout this book. Instead, the above phenomena arise whenever one societal group attempts to exercise social or economic domination over another (which usually tries to resist). And such efforts can be driven by hunger for power and resources, hatred or disrespect for the other group, an irrational faith in the righteousness of a belief system, or a combination of these factors. Religion, meanwhile, usually enters primarily alongside the latter explanation, though it can also play a role in the other two.

Personal religious faith is an understandable human attempt to fill in the gaps left unfilled by science, and to bring order to an often chaotic universe so as to feel more 'in control'. The lack of empirical evidence for spiritual belief, however, is not necessarily a problem in itself (as the latter can console followers and ease their pain). Nonetheless, such unscientific ideas can lead to highly irrational behaviour when applied to politics. At the same time, though, many figures following such convictions tend to cherry-pick' the aspects of their religion's behavioural framework that are most beneficial for their own material or political aims (thus misrepresenting the core principles of that belief system). And for evidence of this reality, we only need to look at the violent, self-interested behaviour of so-called Christians like George W. Bush or Anders Breivik, so-called Jews like Benjamin Netanyahu or Baruch Goldstein, and so-called Muslims like Saudi Arabia's King Salman or Osama Bin Laden. Each of these figures, for example, has been condemned for their distortions of religious thought by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim academics respectively.

The aim of this essay, therefore, has not been to criticise religion as a whole, and much less to attack those who choose to follow particular faiths. In fact, it is important to emphasise that many inspirational figures in human society have come from religious communities, and their convictions have been shown to be a force driving forward attempts to bring about social justice in the world. Consequently, it would be ridiculously illogical and unnecessarily divisive to make generalisations about religions or those who follow them. At the same time, however, I strongly believe that religion should remain a personal issue, and should not be allowed to dominate political discourse as, where it has become dominant (usually in extremist forms), it has led to increased social conflict, attacks on personal freedom, and even genocide. Following a particular belief system, meanwhile, should be a choice made by a consenting adult, and one that should not be advocated in a child's educational process.

And, in Rojava, it appears that religion has largely taken a back seat, while freedom and social justice are the driving forces. Having suffered from the social and ethnic divisions exacerbated by Western imperialist intervention after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the

⁷⁴² <http://ososabiouk.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/gaza-a-capitalist-genocide-essay/>

⁷⁴³ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/politics>

Kurdish community in Rojava now seems to be taking steps towards ending domination and discrimination of all sorts in their territory – whether capitalist, ethnic, or religious. Necessarily, they have chosen to create secular structures which encourage unity and cooperation and, in doing so, they could well be setting the course for a true political revolution in the Middle East.

While the capitalist West has supposedly believed that bombing Assad, and now ISIS, will solve the cycle of violence in the Middle East, Rojava has proposed an alternative solution, consisting of transforming a system of authoritarianism and injustice into one of freedom and pluralism. The success of the Rojava Revolution, however, will depend on international solidarity, which will not come from the capitalist governments of the West but from conscious citizens throughout the world. Therefore, the aim of this chapter (and the following two) is to explain to the reader exactly what the Rojava Revolution is, and why it represents a truly progressive political model which calls out for recognition and support.

In the first section of this chapter, I will outline the features of the Rojava Revolution, and the context in which it has arisen. Then, in the following section, I will take a look at the accounts of sympathetic activists who have visited the region and seen the political process in Rojava with their own eyes. Finally, in Section C, I will analyse the reaction of Turkey, Kurdish nationalists, the USA, the international media, and the world's left-wingers to the revolution. Overall, though, the chapter aims to explain the political system set up in Syrian Kurdistan, without delving too deeply into the region's fight against Wahhabi extremism (which will be covered in the final two chapters of this book).

A) What is the Rojava Revolution?

I) Kurds in Syria and the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Uprising and Civil War

As seen in the previous chapter, "Syria was the PKK's largest patron and harbored the PKK's leader Abdullah Ocalan" in the 1980s and 90s but, when Turkey threatened military intervention, Hafez al-Assad withdrew his support for the group in 1998. Since then, says the University of Arizona's Christian Sinclair, Syria and Turkey "co-operated" against the PKK and its progressive allies in the region, wary of the effect that increasing Kurdish autonomy in a post-Ba'athist Iraq would have on their own Kurdish communities. And their worries were perhaps justified, as Syrian Kurds responded in kind after Saddam Hussein had been overthrown and "Iraqi Kurds [had] declared autonomy". Riots broke out in Syrian Kurdistan, and the "Syrian security forces killed 34" people in response, subsequently keeping an even closer watch on "all Kurdish political, cultural, and social activity" in the country.

In fact, at the start of the anti-Assad protests in Syria in 2011, **Syrian Kurds were among the "first to demonstrate"**, with protesters in the north-eastern city of Hesiçe being locked up in January and Kurdish parts of the north-western city of Aleppo experiencing a "heavy military presence" from very early on. Having previously been some of the "most quiescent" Kurds in the Middle East (as a result of the "hard hand of the state and... its security apparatuses"), they had now taken their opportunity to demand reform and the "recognition of their political and cultural rights". In short, after decades of heavy restrictions on their rights under the Ba'athist Arab nationalists, they were sick of having their identity denied and of being treated like "second class citizens" or *personae non gratae* in their own country.

According to Sinclair, a “vast network amongst Kurdish youth” (which was also linked with Arab youth groups) secretly formed “local coordination committees” in the early months of the Syrian uprising, and helped to organise regular demonstrations in places like Qamişlo, Amûdê, and Efrîn. Nonetheless, the Kurdish community was still divided at this point. In fact, the Assad regime had managed to infiltrate a number of Kurdish parties, and “over a dozen” others had been made illegal. And this repression of opposition organisations in Syrian Kurdistan essentially meant that it was difficult to forge a unified resistance movement, especially considering that the Arab opposition was already incredibly fractured. To make matters worse, meanwhile, **the Assad regime stoked “fear amongst Arabs of Kurdish separatism” in an attempt to isolate Kurdish protesters.**⁷⁴⁴ As a result, Syrian Kurds would largely end up following their own path in the ensuing civil war, rather than joining the mainstream, Western-backed battle against the Ba’athist State.

Furthermore, the PYD had made it known from very early on in the Syrian Civil War “that its activities were independent of the wider Syrian opposition”. Therefore, “when the latter began conferring with Turkey and, with Western support, took up arms against the Syrian government and started calling for foreign military intervention, the PYD spoke out against such outside intervention and stressed that **a democratic Syria could only be the collective project of all Syrians**”. Subsequently, it set about defending Syrian Kurdistan from outside attacks, while implementing “democratically decided price controls, a constitutional justice system, and free schooling in any student’s mother tongue”. In spite of the “exceedingly adverse conditions”, though, the region “managed to sustain its people on the basis of self-organized production collectives”. The autonomous political administration, meanwhile, “declared that the natural resources of Rojava [would] remain the collective property of the region’s people”, and that “any potential revenues from them [would] be invested back into the people”. From the very start, then, progressive Rojavans were challenging the neoliberal structures sought after by the West and its regional lackeys.⁷⁴⁵

Kurds and the Political Crisis in Syria

At KurdishQuestion.com in late 2014, Sabanci University’s Yasin Duman insisted that “the complexity of ethnic and religious diversity of the Middle Eastern countries” was one of the most important reasons for conflict in the region, along with “the interests of international powers seeking control over Middle Eastern politics, resources, military and economic opportunities”. For him, the political “inability to embrace diversity and [the] uniqueness of the [region’s] multicultural societies, guarantee basic human rights and political participation..., and get rid of nation state ideologies” had been the main cause of “suppression, inequality and injustice” in the Middle East. Quoting Abdullah Öcalan, Duman asserts that the idea that “every nation [read ethnic group] must have its own state” is an obstruction to justice, and could “not solve the problems” of the region.

According to Duman, certain Kurdish politicians even sought to rename the Arab Spring a “People’s Spring”, arguing that “Arab geography [did] not include only Arabs” and that, “if there [was truly] going to be a spring, it should embrace all people in those countries”. With this in mind, Duman subsequently seeks to analyse in more detail the nature and consequences of the Syrian Civil War (one of the “most intense” in the region since 1945). In particular, he speaks of how Syrian Kurds had “followed a different strategy [from their Arab compatriots] since the beginning of the conflict”, and thus “became one of the [war’s] most important actors”.

After Syria became independent from France in 1945, Duman affirms, the country’s nationalist political elites sought “an ethnic unification that resulted in repression of non-

⁷⁴⁴ <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2011/09/15/turkey-and-the-syrian-kurds/>

⁷⁴⁵ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/the-battle-for-kobane/>

Arab identities”, much like that which had occurred in Turkey under Atatürk after the First World War. In fact, Syrian Kurds actually ended up living “under worse conditions” than before, he insists, in spite of having helped their Arab neighbours gain independence. Essentially, then the “multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the country” was never truly recognised, he asserts.

For the reasons stated above, Duman suggests that it seemed unimaginable before the Syrian Civil War that the country’s Kurds would ever “be able create their own autonomy” in the country (“after [such] a long [period of] suppression by the Baath Regime”). The minority ethnic group, situated mostly in northern Syria, “organized themselves in a very short time”, he explains, and began by forming “their own armed defence units that [recruited] only the Kurds at the beginning”. This decision stemmed primarily from the fact that they soon had to “defend their regions both against the opposition groups that [wanted] to take some cities from the regime and against the regime that [wanted] to keep control over the country”. In other words, they opposed occupation whether it was at the hands of regime troops or anti-Assad troops.

Soon, on July 19, 2012, “**Kurdish armed groups seized many state institutions including police centres and military headquarters**” in the northern city of Kobanî. They then spread out, heading both westwards and eastwards to support other Kurdish communities in Syria. In both Aleppo (in the “Sheikh Maqsood and Ashrafiyah districts”) and Qamişlo, for example, “clashes broke out” between Ba’athist soldiers and Kurdish militias but, as a general rule, the latter met little opposition. Declaring that they did not want Kurdish territory in Syria (i.e. Rojava) to turn into a battlefield, they soon sought to “create their own administration” and self-defence forces.

The YPG (or People’s Defence/Protection Units), which had become the armed wing of the PKK-affiliated PYD after 2004, was now brought into action to defend Kurdish territories in Syria, and “the YPJ (Women’s Defence Units, a unique women’s wing of the YPG), Public Security Forces (Hêzên Asayîşê), [and] Women’s Security Forces (Hêzên Asayîşa Jinê)” were formed soon after as the official security bodies of Rojava. At the same time, KRG President Masoud Barzanî oversaw the formation of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) on October 26, 2011 in Hewlêr (Erbil), though the pro-KRG parties in Syria did not wish to cooperate with the PKK-linked Democratic Union Party (PYD). “Founded in 2003 and co-chaired by Asya Abdullah and Salih Muslim”, Duman says, the latter soon became “the strongest party among twelve Kurdish political parties in Rojava and Syria”, seeking to create “democratic autonomous regions that [did] not seek independence or [the creation of] a nation state”. [Muslim, who had initially sympathised more with the KDP whilst studying engineering in Istanbul and working in Saudi Arabia, finally returned to Syria in the 1990s, where he temporarily joined the KDP’s Syrian branch. When the PYD was formed, however, he soon became a member on its executive council, and was elected party chair in 2010 (and then co-chair with Abdullah in 2012).]

A Brief History of the Kurds in Syria

Duman explains how, in 1957, nationalists in Syrian Kurdistan had formed the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (or KDPS), which was linked to Mustafa Barzanî’s KDP and would be banned a few years later. The reason for this prohibition was that, according to the Ba’athist constitution, “all Syrian citizens [were considered to be] Arab and all social, cultural and educational [systems therefore referred] to Arab identity”. The country’s Kurds were simply considered to be “refugees coming from Turkey and Iraq”.

According to the PYD co-chair Salih Muslim, the “de-identification policies” of Syria “started in [the] 1960s and the number of people who were not given an identity [was]

around 300,000". Being disenfranchised and "forced to live under [a] stateless status", Kurds in Syria "did not have access to medical services", could not "have their own jobs", and were unable to "get support from the state".⁷⁴⁶ Place names, meanwhile, were changed from Kurdish into Arabic. In 1973, wrote Naila Bozo at KurdishRights.org in early 2015, "the Syrian government implemented a twelve-point plan drawn up by Lt. Muhammed Talab Halil in 1963 when he was the internal security chief of al-Hasakah governorate" in the largely Kurdish north-east of Syria. "The plan", she says, "was part of the Arabization measures carried out in Syria and based on the ideas Halil had formed about the Kurdish people". The Ba'ath Party official had apparently called "on the Arab conscience to save" 'Jazira' (where the north-eastern Cizîrê Canton lies in Rojava today) and "to purify it of all its scum". For him, the "Kurdish question" was "simply a malignant tumour", for which "the only remedy" was "excision".

Halil had suggested that the Syrian regime: "displace Kurds from their lands"; deny them education and employment; "return "wanted" Kurds to Turkey"; "promote anti-Kurdish sentiment through propaganda"; "replace Kurdish religious leaders with Arabs"; "ensure Arab settlement of Kurdish areas"; "implement a 'divide and rule' policy in Kurdish society"; "establish an Arab cordon sanitaire [or buffer zone] along Syria's border with Turkey"; deny Kurds and all non-Arabic speakers the right to vote and hold political office; and "deny Syrian citizenship to non-Arabs wishing to live in the region".⁷⁴⁷ As a result of these horrifically racist policies, Syrian Kurds began to move to other countries and cities, while Arab populations were placed in formerly Kurdish areas. By the start of the civil war, for example, over 500,000 Kurds lived in Aleppo and Damascus.

Duman also speaks of the Arabisation of Kurdish territory, asserting that the Ba'athist regime "seized the fertile lands in Rojava and either distributed them to the Arab citizens or registered them as national treasury of [the] Syrian state". Through this "dispossession policy", he says, the government "deprived Kurds [of] their basic source of [income]". And, as Syrian Kurds were "not allowed to have their own [industries]" or "take place in economic activities" in the country, "agriculture was the only legal source for [them] to earn money". The Rimêlan oil fields of Cizîrê Canton, meanwhile, provided "60% of Syria's oil", and were "controlled by the Baath Regime for decades" before finally coming under the control of the autonomous Kurdish-led system implemented after the Rojava Revolution.

As Kurds had not been considered Syrian citizens, Duman stresses, they officially had no "right to found their own parties" or "participate in Syrian politics". Thus, the state had effectively "colonized" Rojava, perpetrating "systematic violence" against its largely Kurdish population. In the city Amûdê in December 1960, for example, "500 Kurdish children went to see an Egyptian film in the only cinema of the city", and there were reports that "the cinema was burned in the middle of the film and [the] children could not get out because Syrian soldiers [had] locked [the doors]... and prevented people [from] trying to rescue their children". This, Duman says, was the first time that Kurds took to the streets to protest against Ba'athist policies. In March 1988, meanwhile, Kurdish citizens wanting to celebrate Newroz were prevented from doing so by Syrian state forces, which "killed dozens of Kurds in Kobanî".

Over a decade later, in March 2004, the Qamişlo Uprising began after supporters of an Arab football team provoked Kurdish supporters of the opposing team by chanting "the second Halabja waits for you in Syria". Clashes soon broke out and "spread to the city centre where thousands of Kurds protested [against] Arab nationalism" and Ba'athist policies. By the end of the day, however, eight Kurds had been killed and "many more [had been] wounded by

⁷⁴⁶ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/syrian-civil-war-emergence-of-a-kurdish-autonomy-in-rojava/126-syrian-civil-war-emergence-of-a-kurdish-autonomy-in-rojava.html>

⁷⁴⁷ <http://kurdishrights.org/2015/02/01/from-damascus-street-to-kurdistan/>

the state forces". The subsequent attacks and protests, meanwhile, saw "more than 40 Kurdish people" killed. According to Salih Muslim, Kurds "started getting organized both politically and militarily" after these events (with the PYD gaining popularity and the YPG being formed), and more and more people attended Newroz celebrations in the following years.

The Key Players in the Syrian Civil War

In the Syrian Civil War, Duman says, the state, the Syrian National Council (SNC), the Kurds, and Wahhabi jihadist groups like ISIS were the main players. Faced with mass demonstrations, he affirms, the Assad regime responded violently and tortured some protesters for days in 2011, with the country's Ba'athist leader seeking to "defend himself against the opposition groups" by saying that "western countries [were supporting] the opposition to re-colonize Syria", and that radical Islamist groups formed a significant part of the opposing forces. And when autonomous cantons were formed in Rojava from 2012 onwards, suspicions arose that the regime was colluding with "radical Islamist groups [in their fight] against Kurds" (in the hope of preventing the region's autonomous structures from becoming established bodies).

The SNC, meanwhile, which was "announced in November 2012 as a coalition of opposition groups during the meetings held in Doha, Qatar", was supported politically and militarily by the USA, France, and Turkey. For example, it was given ammunition, money, and diplomatic support by these forces, among others. The PYD, however, refrained from joining this coalition because it was based on "Arab nationalism and Sunni sectarianism". Other Kurdish groups that did join it, though, formed what they called the Syrian Kurdish National Coalition (or ENKS), which was backed by KRG president Masoud Barzanî and alleged that the PYD was "cooperating with Assad and [did] not allow other parties work in Rojava". At the same time, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed as part of the SNC.

The Rojava People's Assembly (MGRK), meanwhile, which was formed by the PYD and its allies in Syrian Kurdistan, sought to forge a pact with the opposition ENKS block in July 2012 in Erbil, but the Barzanî-inspired ENKS asserted its opposition to the creation of an autonomous Kurdish system in Rojava. Nonetheless, "Rojava declared self-rule in January 2014" without the latter, forming "governmental bodies for [the] Efrîn, Kobanî and Cizîrê Cantons" and announcing that assemblies were "open to all ethnic and religious groups". At the same time, local assemblies were formed in cities, counties, and villages, with communities electing their own representatives to send to the cantonal assemblies.

Wahhabi jihadists, meanwhile, gradually increased in strength thanks to the support they received from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and defectors from Western-backed rebel forces. ISIS, for example, "appeared in April 2013 and carried out some suicide attacks against military bases of Assad forces", whilst also targeting "other opposition groups in different regions and Kurdish civilians and military bases in Rojava". And its "ability to defeat Syrian opposition (FSA) in many regions" soon "led to a new phase in [the] involvement of [the] USA in the conflict", Duman asserts.⁷⁴⁸

Secondary Forces in the Conflict

According to one YPG volunteer in Efrîn Canton, "two main things [had] corrupted the opposition" to the Assad regime by early 2014, and they were "Erdoğan and the *takfiris*".⁷⁴⁹ And anti-Assad forces had indeed been significantly influenced by external forces in the

⁷⁴⁸ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/syrian-civil-war-emergence-of-a-kurdish-autonomy-in-rojava/126-syrian-civil-war-emergence-of-a-kurdish-autonomy-in-rojava.html>

⁷⁴⁹ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/18202>

region, as had the Ba'athist regime's fight against them. Among these secondary parties in the conflict in Syria, for example, was Russia (which had actively obstructed "international attempts to remove Assad", had naval bases in Syria, and believed that the latter would be threatened if the USA or its allies were to conduct a military strike against the country).

The Assad government, meanwhile, was also a big client for Russian arms, and if a US-backed opposition gained power, Moscow would almost certainly lose this business. Russia's "financial and military relations" with Iran, meanwhile, along with the two countries' support for "each other's positions in international arenas", was another key element of Russia's stance in Syria. As Assad's regime was Shiite, and had been attacked primarily by Sunni militants, Iran had a significant reason to defend it in the war. Nonetheless, neither Russia nor Iran really showed "any... support [for] or opposition [to] the Kurds in Rojava", perhaps reflecting their understanding of the importance of Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS.

Meanwhile, Duman says, the "Kuwait-Iraq War and intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq can tell us what the US wants and why it supports the Syrian National Coalition". In the absence of a possibility to intervene militarily in Syria, he suggests, the superpower had to settle for a proxy force. It had tried to intervene, however, arguing that doing so was its moral responsibility because Assad had supposedly used "chemical weapons", but this plan was "eliminated by Russia and China" due to a lack of evidence.

Turkey, meanwhile, sought to take advantage of the Arab Spring just like the USA did, seeking to "boost diplomatic ties and set financial relations" with new governments in the region. Erdoğan, having previously called Assad "his brother", now broke off relations with his counterpart, calling him a killer and demonising him in his speeches. And, whilst seeking to shape the opposition to Assad for its own benefit, the Turkish regime also sought to debilitate the autonomy of Kurds in northern Syria. Thus, "with the help of Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq", Duman says, the country "set trenches", dug ditches, and "built walls" on its border with Rojava "to prevent Kurds interacting with and [getting] help from each other". These frontiers, which were "open to al-Qaeda affiliated and Syrian opposition groups", were being closed to the Kurds (although Turkey had "never been attacked from Rojava") solely because the Turkish State was opposed to any kind of 'progressive' Kurdish autonomy in the region (and especially if it was linked to or inspired by the PKK).

"Qatar's motivation" for getting involved in the Syrian conflict, meanwhile, came from Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who believed that his country could play a "further role in the changing Arab world" and in the "reconstruction processes" after the Arab Spring. His regime's support for groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, was considered to be "pan-Arab" and a reflection of Qatar's central role in the "unification of Arab geography". Saudi Arabia, however, saw Syria as a means of strengthening Wahhabi-inspired Sunni Arab policies in the region, aiming to break the Ba'athist State's alliance with Iran – Saudi Arabia's "chief rival for dominance in the Persian Gulf and the wider Middle East". Nonetheless, Salih Muslim would assert that the Wahhabi jihadist groups that sprang up in Syria had "been supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, [and] Turkey", and that even Assad had "started providing them [with] arms to fight the Kurds in Rojava".

The UN's role in the Syrian conflict, meanwhile, was reduced partly because of "security issues" surrounding the absence of a trustworthy ceasefire. In 2013, for example, it was "given a mission" to investigate chemical weapon usage in Ghouta, but "weapons experts were attacked". The Assad regime claimed that the attacks had come from the opposition, but the West sought to use this event as an excuse to intervene militarily in Syria. At the

same time, the UN met with Kurds from Rojava to discuss how it could help people there and, starting in 2012, it allegedly sent humanitarian aid to the region on several occasions.

Meanwhile, the Arab League would suspend Syria's membership. However, it was widely suspected, Duman asserts, that Saudi Arabia and Qatar's roles in the organisation effectively impeded it from collaborating in the search for a peaceful resolution to the Syrian Civil War. At the same time, the organisation's opposition to Rojavan autonomy could be seen clearly in its preparedness to meet with the ENKS but not with the region's PYD-led administration.

Rojava and the Effective Partition of Syria

With Kurds having been denied their rights in Syria for decades, Assad's decision to give increase their standing in Syrian society after the start of the civil war was simply not enough to make up for the damage caused. For that reason, Kurds refused to "recognize Assad's authority in Rojava", deciding instead to "seek self-rule". The Ba'athist leader, meanwhile, rejected Kurdish autonomy but could not do much to stop it from materialising (as a result of his ferocious fight against other opposition groups). In 2014, nonetheless, there were some intensified clashes between Rojavan and regime forces around the Cizîrê Canton (where the government still had control over the airport and border crossing of Qamişlo, along with a number of government buildings and Arab neighbourhoods in both Qamişlo and Hesîçe). At the same time, though, the fact that the SNC would not accept Kurdish autonomy and the jihadist opposition groups called Kurds heretics essentially left Rojavans with no other choice apart from following their own independent path.

As the cantons of Rojava have "important oil resources... and fertile lands (especially in Cizîrê and Kobanî) irrigated by the Tigris and Euphrates", Kurdish control of these lands since 2012 has meant that "an important change in power relations between Assad and Kurds" has occurred. Kurds were no longer "the same as they were before the conflict", asserts Duman. They were now in a stronger position than ever before, and precisely for that reason they were perceived by other groups in Syria and elsewhere to be more dangerous than ever before (as far as the latter's own interests were concerned).

Although the progressive Kurdish movement in Rojava "never refused dialogue with any party" inside or outside of Syria, therefore, it was left largely without allies (apart from the PKK) until 2014, fighting against "the FSA, Jabhat al-Nusra, the ISIS and Assad Forces since the beginning of the conflict". And, in response to attacks from such organisations, the YPG/YPJ was forced to "launch military operations against [the] headquarters of the ISIS and [the] Baath Regime in different regions including Kobanî and Hesekekê" (Hesîçe). One step towards reduced hostility would be taken on February 17, 2013, however, when the FSA and YPG signed an agreement in which the groups decided "to defend some regions together and not attack each other" elsewhere.

According to Duman, one way of potentially solving the conflict in Syria (a "multi-ethnic and multi-religious" country) would be to separate it "into three states: an Alawite state in the west, a Kurdish state in the north and a secular or Islamic Arab state (depending on whether the FSA or radical Islamic groups [advanced]) in the remaining parts of Syria". However, he insists, Kurdish communities had made it very clear that they did not seek secession from Syria but instead demanded "a democratic and federal Syria where Kurds and other ethnic and religious minorities [could] enjoy their rights". In fact, as a result of this policy, the Autonomous Cantons of Rojava sought "to involve all... groups" in their attempts to "re-structure the society" and prevent Rojava from being turned into yet another battlefield. And they managed to remain "relatively calm and stable" until ISIS intensified its attacks on them in 2014.

Since the proclamation of Rojavan autonomy, however, there had “always been a harsh embargo” on the Kurdish territories in northern Syria. Thanks to effective self-management and solidarity from Kurdish citizens from Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere, however, Syrian Kurds managed to “meet basic needs” and “solve their problems on their own” in spite of the blockade imposed on them by Turkey and the KRG (with the complicity of their US allies). Unlike other forces in Syria, they were unique in seeking to avoid the “creation of new conflicts” and focussing instead on protecting their own land and human rights.

Overall, Duman stresses, the autonomy of Rojava was “unique”, and it represented in large part the “political and administrative solution” to the Kurdish Question proposed by the PKK. In fact, the Rojava Revolution was an incredibly important event for the latter, because it showed PKK supporters and other Kurds in the Middle East that “democratic autonomy works and has [the] potential to solve [the] protracted issues” of the region’s marginalised populations. It also definitively placed into the Middle Eastern political debate the idea that “a community [could] get its freedom only if the women in that community [also became] free”, by showing in Rojava how women, who experienced “equal representation in all institutions”, had played such “an important role” in the construction of democratic autonomy. In short, Duman argues, success for the Rojava Revolution could “change the whole system in Turkey, Iraq and Iran, too”.⁷⁵⁰

In summary, the Rojavan communities of Cizîrê (or Jazira), Kobanî (or Kobanê), and Efrîn (or Afrin) had responded quickly to the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, and protests “in those three cantons [had been] very strong and effective”. In fact, says Zaher Baher of Haringey Solidarity Group, this robust Kurdish response was a major factor which “caused the withdrawal of the Syrian army” from these areas.⁷⁵¹ In the following two sections of this chapter, I will analyse in greater depth what happened after these cantons were abandoned by the Syrian regime, and how the system that sprang up in its place offered the region (and the world) an alternative and progressive form of political organisation.

II) The Nature of Rojava’s Direct Democracy

As analysed earlier in this book, the fight of nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan for autonomy from Baghdad may have shown that more localised rule was possible (if the right alliances were made), but it also showed that, under a conservative bourgeois nationalist regime, justice and direct democracy could never truly be in the hands of the People. And, precisely for this reason, Jerome Roos commented at Roar Magazine in August 2014 that it was “very important to make a proper distinction between the nationalist-conservative government in charge of the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq, and the libertarian-socialist experiments of the new PKK [and its allies] in Syria”.

Rojavan Autonomy Providing Hope

As seen in Chapter Nine, the PKK changed after the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. And, with its transformed ideology having spread into Syrian Kurdistan, its PYD allies “followed Turkish Kurdistan’s lead” after the start of the civil war in Syria (as seen in the previous subsection). According to Rafael Taylor (writing for Roar Magazine in 2014), “after “waves of arrests” under Ba’athist repression, with “10,000 people [being taken] into custody, among them mayors, local party leaders, deputies, cadres and activists”, the PYD had finally “ousted the Baath regime in northern Syria”.

⁷⁵⁰ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/syrian-civil-war-emergence-of-a-kurdish-autonomy-in-rojava/126-syrian-civil-war-emergence-of-a-kurdish-autonomy-in-rojava.html>

⁷⁵¹ <http://libcom.org/news/experiment-west-kurdistan-syrian-kurdistan-has-proved-people-can-make-changes-zaher-baher-2> and <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/27301>

Suddenly, Taylor says, “**local councils popped up everywhere**”, and “**self-defense committees were improvised**”. Meanwhile, “the first school teaching the Kurdish language” was established, and “councils intervened in the **equitable distribution of bread and gasoline**”. Women, meanwhile, were “now free to unveil”, and were “strongly encouraged to participate in social life”. For Taylor, “old feudal ties” were now being broken, and people were “free to follow any or no religion”, with “ethnic and religious minorities [living] together peaceably”. Rojavan autonomy, he affirms, as driven by the PYD, created the possibility (along with increasing PKK influence in other countries) of a “**profound explosion of revolutionary culture and values**” in the Middle East.

On June 30th, 2012, Syria’s PYD-led “revolutionary leftist coalition” (known as the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCB)), embraced “the project of democratic autonomy and democratic confederalism as a possible model for Syria”. Meanwhile, “hundreds of KCK (including PKK) fighters from across Kurdistan [crossed] the border to defend Rojava”. In response, Turkey “threatened to invade Kurdish territories” in Syria if the PKK were to set up bases there. For the PYD, this hostility invoked suspicions that Turkey was “already engaged in a proxy war against them by facilitating the travel of international jihadists across the border to fight alongside the Islamists” in the Syrian Civil War.

With the “positive development” of the PKK and its allies adopting “libertarian socialist ideas”, Taylor argues, the Kurdish struggle could now “form a silver lining in the dark clouds gathering over the Islamic State and the bloody inter-fascist wars between Islamism, Ba’athism and religious sectarianism that gave birth to it”. In his opinion, members of the progressive Kurdish movement were now “defending radical democratic values with their lives”, and deserved the gratitude of all of those who valued “the idea of civilization”.⁷⁵²

In October 2012, Foreign Policy spoke about how “cultural centers [were blossoming] and new courts and local councils [were opening]” in Derik (in north-eastern Rojava), in spite of the fact that there was still some tension between the nationalist Kurds of the region and the progressive Kurds leading the Revolution. The “political infighting”, the media outlet affirmed, was “threatening to derail efforts to build the foundations of an autonomous region”. Furthermore, at a point when the FSA was intent on destroying PYD-led attempts to create autonomy in Rojava, PYD affiliate Hassan Kojar spoke about how there were “some Kurdish traitors who [were] in contact with the Free Syrian Army and [had] asked them to come to this area”. Others, he said, had “been in contact with the government”. And, while neither the regime nor the FSA were friendly towards the developing Rojava Revolution, Kojar said that the latter were ‘not Kurds’, and would therefore “sell out all of Kurdistan for five Syrian pounds”.⁷⁵³ In short, progressive forces in Rojava were trying their best to stop reactionary chauvinist forces from taking control of the Revolution in Syrian Kurdistan, whilst creating structures that would ensure equality and grassroots democratic participation.

The Key Role of Women and the Anti-Wahhabi Resistance

In October 2013, Glen Johnson at VICE spoke about how the YPG/YPJ militias in Rojava had “battled al-Qaeda-linked militants... for much of the [previous] year”, mentioning how ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and FSA militants had all been fighting for “control of the oil-producing province” of Hesîçe. In particular, he speaks of how “the active participation of a large number of female fighters” in the Rojavan defence forces was an illustration of how Kurds in the country were “experiencing a resurgence of their culture after decades under the heel

⁷⁵² <http://anarchistnews.org/content/new-pkk-unleashing-social-revolution-kurdistan> and <http://roarmag.org/2014/08/pkk-kurdish-struggle-autonomy/>

⁷⁵³ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/25/the-war-for-free-kurdistan/>

of the Syrian regime". A few years ago, he says, it would have been "unthinkable" to have schools teaching Kurdish or Kurdish language newspapers being printed in northern Syria. Women's participation in the Asayish (Asayîşê/Asayîşa), or "community-driven police force", and in politics, meanwhile, had also been a notable feature of the Rojava Revolution. One female fighter, for example, affirmed that, "before the revolution, most Kurdish women were staying in their homes", but that "these attitudes [had] been changing" ever since it began.

The attacks of "al-Qaeda-linked fighters" on Serêkanîye (Ras al-Ayn), Johnson asserts, presented "an acute challenge to both Kurdish dreams of autonomy and to their hopes of establishing a more equitable society". Because of Rojava's "shared border with Turkey and Iraq", he stresses, the city and the region were of "strategic value" for militant groups in Syria, which saw their potential for "smuggling and trafficking operations" (in addition to the possibilities of oil production there). A successful ISIS campaign in Rojava, Johnson insists, would effectively give the jihadists "a contiguous corridor linking fighters in western Syria deep into Sunni areas of Iraq, the homebase of [their] fighters". As a result, their attempts to take control of the region were aggressive, causing an "estimated 50,000 Kurds" to flee from Syria into Iraqi Kurdistan "in August [2013] alone". One of these refugees, Johnson says, insisted: "most of us are Muslims, but ISIS' ideas are not compatible with how we live in our town".

Having "largely avoided being drawn into the country's civil war", Johnson affirms, many Syrian Kurds had "opted for a "third way"" when they saw how the anti-Assad opposition in the country was becoming increasingly Islamist in its outlook. And this path, he adds, was presented by the PYD, which consolidated control "over swathes of north-eastern Syria" when Assad's regime "expended resources fighting insurgents elsewhere in the country". At the same time, however, he reports that, according to the PYD, "the Turkish government [had] allowed – by removing landmines and razor wire – ISIS and JN fighters to enter Ras al-Ayn from Turkish territory to assault YPG positions" there.⁷⁵⁴

A Secular, Feminist, and Anti-Extremist Foe for the West

Doctor of philosophy Saladdin Ahmed⁷⁵⁵ wrote in May 2014 about the key points to remember about Rojava and its struggle. While other Kurds were called 'friends of the mountains', he insists, Rojava lacked "mountainous terrain, which [was] perhaps one of the main reasons Syrian Kurds [had] never engaged in an armed struggle prior to the 2012 collapse of the Syrian state". With the intensification of the Syrian Civil War, he says, they knew they had to defend themselves, and thus decided to take the opportunity to govern themselves too. **Because of the PYD's key role in the process, however, "Syrian Kurds [were] dismissed not only by Western powers, but also by the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq".**

Ahmed starts his summary about Rojava by saying that, in spite of a lack of media coverage in both Syria and the wider world, Kurds had often stood up for their rights in Syria. The "March 2004 Qamishli events", for example, which "forced thousands of Kurdish refugees to flee fearing persecution", was one instance of such resistance, he notes. Meanwhile, the lack of knowledge about (or sympathy for) Kurdish rights led Rojava to focus on self-defence rather than on getting involved in the Syrian Civil War. At the same time, the fact that the "nationalist and Islamist Arab opposition" in the conflict "did not intend to recognize Kurdish rights in Syria post-Assad" also added to this decision.

⁷⁵⁴ <http://www.vice.com/read/meet-the-kurdish-female-freedom-fighters-of-syria> @GlenAJohnson

⁷⁵⁵ @sKajarvzad on Twitter

Kurds in Rojava, Ahmed says, **had been “singlehandedly resisting Islamist fundamentalists”** in Syria, who had grown in power thanks to foreign interference and who, ironically, were actually helpful to the Assad regime (which hoped to portray the opposition’s uprising as a largely “jihadist campaign”). Unlike the Alawite or Sunni areas of Syria, he asserts, Rojava enjoyed “no material or symbolic support” from elsewhere “on sectarian bases”, while “Arab forces engaged in the civil war” generally agreed upon “their enmity towards the Kurdish liberation movement”.

The revolution in Rojava, Ahmed emphasises, was largely ignored by Western politicians and media outlets principally because its ideology did not fit into the ‘oppress or divide’ mentality of imperialism in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the libertarian socialism practised by PKK affiliates in the region did not hold the same type of “popular anti-western sentiment” that other imperialist foes did (in spite of its clear opposition to imperialism and capitalism). In short, its principal enemies were injustice, discrimination, and oppression, rather than a specific nation state. As described previously in this book, however, the progressive movement of Rojavan Kurds was disliked by the West primarily because of its perceived “separatism (as if there [were] a united Syria on the ground)” and its “affiliation with the PKK”.

For Ahmed, a key element of the Rojava experiment was the way in which “Kurdish women [were] leading a revolutionary movement of social liberation from entrenched patriarchy”. In the Efrîn canton, for example, an “Alevi Kurdish woman named Hevi Ibrahim” rose to be the prime minister, Ahmed says. In fact, he asserts, Rojava is “**the only region in the world where women have organized themselves to ideologically and physically fight Islamist forces to protect civilians from fanatic religious rule**”. And, in the process, he stresses, they were “transforming the entire society of Rojava and setting an inspiring example for the rest of the Islamic world, and wherever women [were] oppressed”. At the same time, he adds, there was also **ethnic and religious inclusiveness in Rojava**, and “minorities [had] joined Kurds in civic activities in the cantons as well as in the new administrations”. In the Cizîrê Canton, for example, “the co-vice presidents [were] an Assyrian Christian woman and an Arab man”.

In spite of (and probably because of) the positive experiences in Rojava, a “**humanitarian and economic embargo [had been] imposed on Rojava**” by the KRG, Turkey, and Syrian Islamists, Ahmed affirms. This situation, he asserts, was appalling and, from a “secular, feminist, humanist, and humanitarian point view..., Rojava [deserved] international support and protection”.⁷⁵⁶ For cynical political and economic reasons, however, the elites of the world wished to prevent that from happening.

The YPJ and Women’s Liberation

In August 2014, KurdishInfo.com also spoke about how women had “played a key role in the defence of [the city of] Kobanî” since the Rojava Revolution began. Posting an article from the PKK-linked Firat News Agency (ANF), the site asserts that women had contributed significantly to creating “a revolutionary transformation in social attitudes”, with YPJ fighters in particular “**demolishing taboos based on male domination**”. Insisting that the YPJ is a “source of freedom”, the site quotes one female militant as saying that, before joining the defence of Rojava, her “life was between 4 walls”, and she “had no social or economic life”. After the Revolution, though, she and her cousin joined the YPG, and then the YPJ.

⁷⁵⁶ http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/opinion/10-things-you-must-know-about-kurds-from-the-other-syria_23527

The aforementioned fighter, known as Destan, says: “I never used to believe a woman could be the equal of a man before”. In her family, she asserts, “the man was always deemed the dominant one and I always considered that normal and legitimate”. In the YPJ, however, she learnt that “male domination was not a normal part of life but was... against the natural order”. For her, therefore, **“being in the YPJ [was] not just a matter of defending the land, but [was] also [about] a love for freedom”**.

Berfin, meanwhile, joined the YPJ when ISIS attacks on Kobani began to intensify in 2014. “Before joining the YPJ”, she stresses, “we experienced serious assimilation”. Being previously “alienated from our language and our culture by the regime which imposed Arab culture”, she affirms, “here I have become acquainted with my own language and culture”. In short, the group changed her old perception that “women [were] lacking and [could not] do anything”. Without the revolution, she insists, she would “probably have got married and been a child mother”.

At the same time, YPJ fighter Roza claims: “the most important gain of this conflict has been, in my opinion, the **breaking of feudal value judgments** in Kobani”. With women inflicting “the most crushing blows on the ISIS gangs”, and some dying in the process, Roza emphasises that the YPJ would seek to do justice to those of its ranks killed by jihadists by ensuring that women would no longer be subjugated in Syrian Kurdistan.⁷⁵⁷

According to TEV-DEM head of diplomacy Chenna Saleh, the Rojavan administration believed that politics was “one of the duties of a society” rather than “just the duty of a government”, and that citizens therefore had to make steps forward regarding women’s liberation themselves. Because of reluctance in some sectors of society, however, one local human rights worker said that there were “significant challenges to realising these ideals”, especially “in a region where tribal politics, religion and culture still [played] a powerful role”. For example, she said, “we are having difficulties in getting women out of the house, [and] in working out how to develop their specialisations and get them into work”. Society in the area, she stressed, was “very masculine and very feudal” and, while “many women [had been] joining the YPG and... playing a big role in the political struggle”, it was still necessary to bring about “a change in the classic family structure” in order for such advances in female participation to expand. Furthermore, “with so many men dying in the fight against IS”, leaving “a significant number of households in Rojava... headed by women”, this need had become increasingly urgent. Having “become the sole economic support for the family”, they now desperately needed “help [to] find work”.⁷⁵⁸

Women and Religion in Rojava

Henife Husen, a member on the coordinating body of the women’s Star Union Organisation (or Yekitiya Star), spoke in early March 2014 about how Abdullah Öcalan had told female followers that “the emergence of women’s free will and a free women” would lead to “the emergence of a free society”, and that such a society would subsequently lead to a “liberated humanity and nature”. As a result, she asserts, women in Rojava had accepted the idea of “neither the free individual of Europe nor the slavery wrapped in a black sheet within the tradition of the Middle East”. Instead, she insists, truly free women remove themselves “from the status of property” and take “natural morality as the [main] principal” in their lives. In Rojava, she says, a “women’s education that works towards developing a science of ‘jineology’ (women’s studies)” was gradually being implemented, and the Yekitiya Star was supporting “the formation of free women’s organizations” in the region.

⁷⁵⁷ <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/ypj-fighters-demolishing-taboos>

⁷⁵⁸ <http://www.theage.com.au/world/kurds-unite-to-build-kurdistan-in-defiance-of-islamic-state-20150314-141xwp.html>

While “thousands of women [had] received education” in Rojavan academies about jineology and their rights, Husen asserts, “work around cooperatives [had also] started in order to include women”. For her, “we as women are not against any religion and there is no crude feminism in our approach”. Instead, she says, “we have taken the cultural dimension of the religion of Islam as our base but not its political dimension”. In other words, she and her comrades were aware of the “curse [that] the political dimension of religions [had represented] for humanity”, and that extremists like ISIS militants were just an example of that. Nonetheless, she stresses, many Arab women had “accepted the slavery of women as a form of worship”, and therefore had “no serious organization”. And, although Kurdish and Syriac women had been “decisive in the formation of the cantons”, they were also seeking to encourage greater female organisation within Arab communities in Rojava.⁷⁵⁹

In fact, Hediya Ali Yousif of the Star Union Organisation asserted that “the need for women to organize was crucial in order to collectively voice [their] rights and to claim [their] rightful place in society”. In order to achieve these aims, she said, her group had “nurtured and utilized the newly won rights of congregation in Western Kurdistan to organize”, to educate women, and to educate society as a whole, seeking mostly to “gain recognition [for women] as equal members at home and active participants of society”. Formed “by feminist movements that [had] decided to join efforts and come together in order to gain and protect the rights of women”, she stressed, the group was at the forefront of the Rojava Revolution.⁷⁶⁰

Dilar Dirik on the PYD and the Kurdish Women’s Movement

In late October 2014, Dilar Dirik spoke to Asheville FM’s ‘The Final Straw’ about how the “PYD [had] been attempting to create a dual power situation” in northern Syria, based on an “**anti-state, anti-capitalist, feminist & ecological critique**”. As a Kurdish refugee herself, living in Germany and studying as a PhD candidate, Dirik emphasises how “a series of communes, councils and alternative representational structures” had been set up since the PYD and its allies took the reins of the three independent cantons of Rojava in 2012. She also refers to “the methodologies of the Kurdish Women’s movement in Rojava to autonomously push the PYD... to center on gender balance in all functions, moving to **shift things often called “women’s issues” to the fore and make them issues for the movement at large**”.

She reaffirms, as seen in the previous chapter, that the PYD is part of the PKK-led shift in the Kurdish movement which focusses on the “embracing of a stateless status and an attempt to invite and include as many ethnic, religious and national communities and individuals of the region into the implementation of Democratic Confederalism” as possible. In fact, for Dirik, the system could expand “into a **self-sustaining, directly democratic society in tension with the state and capitalism**”.

The Final Straw suggests that the US public probably hadn’t heard of Rojava before “because it [challenged] the stability of U.S. allies like Turkey”. At the same time, it emphasises that its support for Rojava is not due to the fact that “the revolution is by name an anarchist project, but because it teases some boundaries between philosophies and attempts to put them into practice in the midst of a warzone and [a] fight for their lives”.⁷⁶¹

An Inclusive Secular Solution to the Syrian Civil War

⁷⁵⁹ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/03/07/women-will-not-leave-their-freedom-for-after-the-revolution/>

⁷⁶⁰ <http://www.kurdishinstitute.be/star-union-organization/>

⁷⁶¹ <http://www.ashevillefm.org/the-final-straw/10/2014/dilar-dirik-on-the-rojava-revolution-part-1> and <http://dilar91.blogspot.com/>

Although Syrians initially hoped to stay out of the Syrian Civil War, the increasing violence led some to support Assad's regime. However, the Syriac Union Party soon decided to work alongside the PYD, thus increasing Syriac representation in Rojava's cantons. In fact, according to the European Syriac Union (ESU), the region's democratic autonomy "increased the moral of our people".⁷⁶² Syriac Orthodox Priest Şemun Demir, meanwhile, who lives in Germany, insists that "**when religion becomes a part of politics it opens the way to disaster**". Because Syrians had previously "shared the same fate" of oppression, he says, "we look at Kurds as being closer to us". The struggle of Kurds in Rojava, for Demir, was "in the service [of] humanity", and he emphasises that Syrians and Kurds could "live [together] as brothers in line with the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan".⁷⁶³

In August 2014, a Syriac fighter from Derik in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava spoke about how she had joined the fight to save the Rojava Revolution in 2012. Having been raised in Damascus, Sena İbrahim (also known as Zin Zagros) says it was "not possible to talk about a Syriac culture" in the Syrian capital. "We all grew up", she asserts, "heavily affected by Arab bourgeois culture". With the outbreak of the civil war, though, she insists, it became "impossible for Syrians to live in much of the country". As a result of "large-scale massacres", she asserts, she and her family soon "moved to Rojava", where **the system of democratic autonomy made it "possible for all segments of society to live a free life"**.

Many local Christians, she stresses, initially viewed the Rojava Revolution "with scepticism", but "**Armenians and Syrians [soon] came to understand that they had a place in this order**", and thus "began to take part in the administration of the cantons and locally autonomous governments". It was a system "in which people accepted one another and showed respect for one another whatever one's cultural or religious background", and in which the seeds of a "**culture of a common life**" had been sown. Furthermore, when it became clear that Wahhabi attacks on Rojava "were entirely targeted against Syrians, Armenians and Kurds", these communities "realized [more than ever] the need for a life of cooperation and stronger organization". In short, Zagros says, "there is [now] no need, as in the past, to go and introduce someone to the [ideology of the] PKK", because people can "see these realities with their own eyes", and they know exactly what the PKK and its allies stand for.⁷⁶⁴

According to Yasin Duman, meanwhile, "Kurds and Assyrians in [the] Cizîrê Canton" both believed that the attendees of the Geneva I and Geneva II conferences (which were supposedly aimed at finding a solution to the Syrian Civil War) had not been "representatives of the people" but rather "sought interests of international and regional states and powers". For that reason, he says, these communities were not surprised that the meetings failed to "find a political resolution" to the Syrian conflict. In Rojava, however, the Movement for a Democratic Society (or TEV-DEM) had proposed an alternative to these conferences by declaring the democratic autonomy of "three autonomous cantons; Efrîn, Kobanî and Cizîrê" in January 2014. Essentially, the absence of a progressive presence in the Geneva conferences had led the PYD and its allies in Syrian Kurdistan to take matters into their own hands.

Living in the largest and most diverse canton in Rojava, citizens of Cizîrê had the biggest challenge in its search to ensure cooperation between the numerous ethnic and religious groups present in the territory. Duman says, however, that the directly democratic government there has largely been "successful", with "members of the Kurdish parties (10 Kurdish parties), an Assyrian party (Assyrian Union Party) and some independent Kurdish,

⁷⁶² <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/04/21/european-syriac-union-democratic-autonomy-has-increased-the-moral-of-our-people/>

⁷⁶³ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2013/10/17/syriac-priest-let-us-build-a-life-around-ocalans-philosophy/>

⁷⁶⁴ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/08/12/syriac-guerilla-now-is-the-time-to-join-the-revolution/> and <http://www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/414970?from=3534286294>

Arab, Assyrian and Chechen individuals” being assigned government positions “based on a general consensus”.

While “an election committee launched a census to register the citizens to vote” in 2014, Duman asserts, the instability in Rojava caused by ISIS attacks soon saw plans for elections delayed. Nonetheless, he stresses, “**Rojava does not promote the superiority of any single ethnic or religious identity**”, and therefore seeks to include all groups in order to emphasise that responsibility for governing the region “is shared” and to ensure that “cooperation among the groups increases”. In fact, he adds, multiple identity is actually “considered an advantage” in the canton, as it encourages people to keep an open mind and learn from different social groups. And for Duman, this solidarity and unity in diversity is the only way in which “regional and international powers who are against democracy and equality in Rojava and Syria” can be prevented from gaining influence there.

Finally, Duman asserts that “the people of Rojava (around 80%) support and own the revolution”, with a significant part of the “remaining 20%” feeling reluctant primarily because of fears that Assad’s forces would eventually return and seek vengeance on those who had been involved in the revolutionary process. (A smaller number, meanwhile, simply wanted “to live their identity and social status as it was before, superior to minorities”.) The aforementioned fears, Duman insists, are likely to be “overcome in time”, though “nationalistic ideas” which “do not accept the equality of ethnic and religious identities” are those “with which democratic autonomy [will have] to struggle the most”.⁷⁶⁵

Rojava’s Independent Path

In 2012, says Alastair Stephens at Counterfire, as “civil war, imperial intervention and sectarianism” began to “undermine the Syrian uprising”, Syria’s Kurdish community in the north began “moving towards centre stage”. Their region had been “relatively quiet” and had not seen “the levels of violence that [had] marked the struggle elsewhere in the country”, he says, and their struggle had been largely ignored by the media as a response. Another reason for the omission of the progressive Kurdish struggle in Syria, however, was the fact that **Kurdish autonomy did not “fit the narrative... being developed... by forces both inside and outside the country”**. Mainstream news outlets, guided largely by the stance of their respective governments, focussed primarily on a fight between different sects, speaking mainly of the struggle between an orthodox Sunni population and the unorthodox Alawis in Assad’s government (along with the Druze and Christian minorities which were collaborating with them).

Although the Kurds were largely Sunni, Stephens asserts, the fact that they were not Arabs meant that they were considered to be “the largest minority group in the country”, with around 2.5 million people and representing roughly 10% of the population. As a result, he says, their quest for autonomy would almost certainly go against the interests of whoever won the power struggle in Damascus. And, although Syria’s Kurds had been a lot quieter than those of Iraq, Turkey and Iran (partly because of the repression of the Ba’ath regime in Syria), the “common Kurmanji language” they shared with Turkish Kurds (along with the historic presence of the PKK in Syria) meant that they had been more influenced by the progressive Kurdish movement of Turkey than by the reactionary nationalist movements of Iraq and Iran.

Imperialist policies of “divide and rule”, Stephens stresses, have often meant that “minorities can end up as... privileged elites, as was the case in with the Alawis in Syria”, but Syrian Kurds had never held such a position. He insists that, although Kurds had

⁷⁶⁵ <http://kurdishquestion.com/insight-research/analysis/rojava-unity-in-diversity/214-rojava-unity-in-diversity.html>

traditionally been isolated from the regional empires ruling over them (allowing their ancient culture to remain largely protected from assimilation), the fall of the Ottoman Empire and separation of Kurdish communities into new nation states suddenly pushed them into closer contact with hostile ruling elites.⁷⁶⁶ And with different varieties of Arab nationalism dominating politics after the Second World War, Kurds found that they did not fit in with the dominant political model.

After the census of 1962, in which “some 120,000 Kurds in Hasaka”⁷⁶⁷ were “deprived of Syrian citizenship” (and were thus left without even a second-class role in Syrian society), Kurds would suffer for decades under Ba’athist rule.⁷⁶⁸ In fact, only in 2011 did Bashar al-Assad, “under pressure from pro-democracy protests”, finally issue a decree to grant stateless Kurds the right to Syrian nationality.⁷⁶⁹ On top of being treated as a ‘stateless’ people by the Syrian state, Stephens says, “education in the Kurdish language” was banned, along with publishing, and Kurds were simply expected to assimilate into Arab society and forget about their own culture.

Since the start of the 2011 uprising against Assad, though, Stephens describes the relationship between Syrian Kurds and “the rest of the opposition” as “strained”, in spite of their common desire for changes in the political structure of the country. The fact was, he says, that the main anti-Assad opposition was not willing to accept the unified Kurdish demand that a “federal Syria” be created (“in which their region would be self-governing”). The Free Syrian Army, for example, stated that it would “not allow the formation of federal regions in Syria”. Consequently, the main Kurdish groups in Rojava chose not to participate in the Turkish-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) - “the main umbrella group bringing together [pro-Western/capitalist] exile leaders” (as described in the previous sub-section). And, although some individual Kurds (who had lived in exile and enjoyed few links with Kurdish parties within Syria) did indeed participate in the SNC, they did not represent the will of the majority of inhabitants in Syrian Kurdistan.

Another reason for the Syrian Kurds’ refusal to participate in the SNC, meanwhile, was because of the latter’s links to Turkey, which one Syrian Kurdish party leader asserted was “against the Kurds... in all parts of the world”. He continued, saying: “**if Turkey doesn’t give rights to its 25 million Kurds, how can it defend the rights of [Syrian Kurds]?**” In short, by distancing themselves from the mainstream, Western-backed opposition, therefore, Rojava’s Kurds were aiming to avoid becoming “tied into alliances with forces which could turn on them later”. And their independent opposition to Assad thus began in earnest in mid-2012, when they pushed government forces out of Rojavan territory and took “effective control of the majority Kurdish areas in the north east of the country, setting up checkpoints and their own defense force”, the YPG/YPJ.

The departure of Assad’s regime from Rojava, Stephens says, left it under the control of Kurdish political parties which, because of their lack of participation in the mainstream opposition, were perhaps perceived to pose less of a danger to the Ba’athist government. At the same time, the tactical withdrawal of government troops from Rojava allowed Assad to “concentrate all [his] forces to crush the centres of the uprising in the West of the country”. However, the PYD was the force to gain the most from the exit of Ba’athist forces.

As “the only Syrian Kurdish party to maintain an armed infrastructure”, the PYD was quickly able “to fill the vacuum left by the Ba’athist security withdrawal”, and set up an effective defence of Rojava. Nonetheless, according to one PYD leader, it was necessary to

⁷⁶⁶ <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/16052-the-kurdish-question-in-syria-a-lithmus-test>

⁷⁶⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12995174>

⁷⁶⁸ <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/16052-the-kurdish-question-in-syria-a-lithmus-test>

⁷⁶⁹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12995174>

have “a de facto truce between the Kurds and the government” in order to achieve this, as the PYD still needed to build up its own forces enough to truly defend Syrian Kurdistan from both government and anti-government aggression. Also, with the party “busy establishing organizations [and] committees”, it could not afford to bog itself down in an armed conflict with the government (and the government felt the same way, preferring to fight in Syria’s Arab territories against the mainstream, Western-backed opposition rather than bog itself down fighting Kurds who had no real desire to get involved in a drawn-out campaign against regime troops).⁷⁷⁰

Revolution in a Sea of Western-Born Reaction

In July 2014, Toronto-based activist and PhD student Sardar Saadi wrote about how Kurdish rebels were “**establishing self-rule in war-torn Syria, resembling the Zapatista experience and providing a democratic alternative for the region**”. This event, he asserts, was incredibly revolutionary, considering that “one cannot ignore how marginalized [left-wing groups] have become” in the Middle East as a result of imperialist policies during the Cold War. When Western regimes undermined Arab nationalist governments with left-wing tendencies, he stresses, they also undermined “radical student groups, feminist organizations, national liberation and anti-colonial struggles, labor and peasant movements, and leftist intellectuals”. And these were precisely the forces on “the front-line of struggle against authoritarian regimes, regressive religious beliefs, and imperialist powers’ domination in the region”, he says.

The defeat of the left wing in the Middle East, Saadi emphasises, had “deep roots in the history of colonialism and imperialism in the region”, but this reality was totally ignored by the “mainstream media’s coverage” of the “brutal advance” of ISIS, as its outlets did “not bother to look at the role of their governments in the current chaos”. He also criticises the portrayal of the region’s inhabitants as divided, sectarian fanatics who “cannot co-exist together and have no respect [for] humane values”. For him, in order to understand current divisions, it is necessary to look back at the “1916 Sykes-Picot secret agreement that divided the Ottoman Empire into artificial nation states”, and at how “colonial domination [was] followed by corrupt governments in the hands of oil lords and controlled and supported by imperial powers”.

This “system of control” outline above, Saadi says, only “intensified during the Cold War”, where it was implemented primarily “in order to prevent the former Soviet Union’s influence in the region”. The result of this imperialist strategy, however, resulted in a “massive wave of oppression, arrest and slaughter of leftist activists and intellectuals”, especially in the 70s and 80s. These actions, Saadi asserts, have “had irreversible effects on the social dynamics and movements in the region”.

As leftists were repressed, imprisoned, or exiled, Saadi explains, “jihadist groups started to rise because of the major support they received from Western powers in the role of proxy organizations”. In short, these militants were part of an imperialist strategy determined to “erase all traces of the political left in the region”. As seen in Chapter Five, Afghanistan was the clearest example of this interference. After “silencing the left”, however, these groups “started to grow like cancer cells in every corner of the region”. More recently, as a result of Western invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Saadi says, such organisations have even “gained a legitimate presence and status”, because they are seen as effective resistance to “foreign invaders”.

⁷⁷⁰ <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/16052-the-kurdish-question-in-syria-a-lithmus-test>

Just as the USA tried to portray “Islam as the natural enemy of the left” during the Cold War, it began to “promote “moderate” political Islam in accordance with the neoliberal world economy” after 9/11. And Turkey’s AKP government would be a perfect example of this tactic, as it reconciles “the people’s rage against the West” whilst actually working as an “[agent] of global capital in the region”. For Saadi, though, the “power and confidence” that the AKP gradually gained led it to search for “a leading role in the Sunni Islamic global community”, which subsequently just “brought [even] more devastation and sectarian violence between Shias and Sunnis”.

With the conflicts in Syria and Libya in recent years, Saadi asserts, this increasing sectarianism has become particularly apparent. In fact, he claims, “the Turkish government has played a key role in worsening the situation” in Syria, by allowing its borders to function as a “transit location for extreme Islamists from all around the world on their way” to the country. Furthermore, on top of providing a “safe haven for (aspiring) jihadists”, Turkey has also been criticised for giving them “logistical and military support” (with both ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front being thought to have benefitted from Turkish aid).

In short, Saadi says, the so-called “moderate” Islamist agenda in Turkey had been successful in defending neoliberalism, cracking down on “secular and leftist opposition” in the 2013 Gezi protests and fuelling reactionary Islamism. At the same time, however, it had lost control of the Wahhabi-inspired militants in Syria who it had once championed. And these jihadists, who trivialised the value of life and left “a trail of death and destruction in their wake wherever they go”, were a danger for all inhabitants in the Middle East. For Saadi, therefore, the time had now passed for discussing “what [was] to be done” to end their onslaught, and an “immediate response” was necessary. However, he argues, it was key to recognise that “these groups are one part of a larger problem”, which included the counter-revolutionary “violence and suppression of authoritarian regimes and imperialist rule”. Alternatives, he asserts, needed to be set up, and needed to be “transformative for everyone”.

A Directly Democratic Alternative for the Middle East

According to Saadi, the Rojava Revolution was a genuine, long-lasting solution to reactionary Islamism. Nonetheless, he says, Syrian Kurds had received “most of [their] guns and military equipment” from fellow Kurds in Turkey in their fight to resist Wahhabi jihadists (in spite of the fact that “the border between the two Kurdish regions [had] been closed, and many new military posts [had] been built”). In fact, Saadi asserts, regardless of the anti-revolutionary hostility from surrounding state and militant forces, Rojava’s Kurds could still “propose an alternative for the future of the region”.

Having “shown their ability and willingness” to build a path forward, Saadi insists, the PYD and its allies finally announced in November 2013 “that they had finished all the preparations for declaring autonomy”, and they would subsequently propose “a constitution called the Charter of Social Contract”. The three cantons of Rojava, which “each [enjoyed] democratic autonomous self-administration”, were thus set up in January 2014, as mentioned earlier in this sub-section. The goal of self-government, Saadi asserts, was to form “**an alternative for all**” which would avoid pursuing only the “demands and interests” of one ethnic group (as had been the case under the Ba’athist regime). In an intelligent decision (given their lack of resources), they “declared that they would **only use their military forces to defend themselves**” from both government forces and “NATO-supported opposition groups, including jihadist groups such as ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front”. And as each canton was bombarded by ISIS from January 2014 onwards, with the Kobanî canton facing the biggest attacks, the YPG/YPJ militias were certainly not left without work to do.

For Saadi, the “status and political situation” of the Kurds in the Middle East could “be compared to that of some indigenous populations in Latin America” who had found their land consumed by a colonial or capitalist state, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico. Although there were “some political differences” between the Zapatistas and the PYD, he asserts, there were also “many similarities... in terms of their position in both regional and international affairs”, such as: **the creation of autonomous government, popular assemblies, and gender equality; anti-imperialism and anti-authoritarianism; ecological preservation and respect for all living creatures; and self-defence.**

Rojava’s Charter of Social Contract, meanwhile, represents a “historic breakthrough... in terms of the democratic principles that guide social and political life”, according to Saadi. It is the “most democratic constitution”, he says, that people in the Middle East have ever had, as it claims “Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians (Assyrian Chaldeans, Arameans), Turkmen, Armenians, and Chechens, by [their] free will, announce this [autonomy] to ensure justice, freedom, democracy, and the rights of women and children in accordance with the principles of ecological balance, freedom of religions and beliefs, and equality without discrimination on the basis of race, religion, creed, doctrine or gender”. In short, its aim was to facilitate the creation of a “democratic society” that would “function with **mutual understanding and coexistence within diversity and respect for the principle of self-determination and self-defence of the People**”.

More dangerously for the maintenance of nation states in the region, however, was the fact that the Charter claimed that Rojavans did “**not recognise the concept of a nation state... based on the grounds of military power, religion, and centralism**”. In particular, such a belief could seriously threaten US economic hegemony in the Middle East, whilst dealing a significant blow to the governing elites of the region. In spite of this fact, however, many conservative American citizens would soon unexpectedly praise the YPG/YPJ militias in Rojava (out of anti-terrorist fervour, ignorance regarding the actions of the ruling economic elites of their own country, or lack of knowledge about the political system that the Rojava Revolution advocated).

On a daily basis, says Saadi, the Democratic Society Movement (or TEV-DEM) is the body “responsible for implementing [the above] principles”, and it recognises that **the path to an ideal society is a long one that will take time to build** (especially in the current environment of hostility from all sides). Nonetheless, left-wing Turkish MP Ertugrul Korkcu (from the pro-Kurdish HDP) would soon insist that Syrian Kurds were “playing the role of the Russians in Europe in the aftermath of World War I”, refusing to get involved in ‘divide and conquer’ tactics in the region and trying to create an alternative to the authoritarian and imperialist order (even though the Soviet project would eventually be derailed by Stalin’s rigid and dictatorial state bureaucracy).

Overall, asserts Saadi, in seeking to challenge the “oppressive rituals within religious communities” and propose a “working pattern of co-existence with all the cultures and beliefs in the area, without violating the rights of any”, Rojava could truly be the ‘model to follow’ in the Middle East. And the fact was, he emphasises, that it was not just a utopian dream on the horizon but a **real-world experiment that had “proved its viability through practical solutions and the everyday realization of the ideas presented in The Charter of Social Contract”**.⁷⁷¹

The Progressive Kurdish Movement and the Task of Replacing a Broken System

⁷⁷¹ <http://roarmag.org/2014/07/rojava-autonomy-syrian-kurds/> and <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/25266-rojava-revolution-building-autonomy-in-the-middle-east>

ROAR Magazine's Ali Bektaş, meanwhile, echoes Saadi's words about solidarity and autonomy in Rojava, emphasising how "thousands of Kurds" had tried to "break down the Turkish-Syrian border" to join their besieged comrades in the "autonomous Kurdish enclave of Kobani". And this situation, he says, resembled other parts of the world, where nation states had also tried to block free movement and separate populations with walls (like, for example, "the militarized wall between the US and Mexico" and "Israel's apartheid wall around the West Bank").

At the root of the broken political system in the Middle East prior to 2011, Bektaş asserts, was the division of Kurdish communities into four different countries at the start of the twentieth century. The "creation of an artificial national identity" in Turkey after 1923, for example, hit Kurds the hardest, and they "found themselves being erased by the budding Turkish nationalism".⁷⁷² In subsequent years, meanwhile, rebellions and massacres followed (such as the Dersim massacre of 1937-38, which saw up to 70,000 people killed).⁷⁷³ At that was precisely why the PKK was formed in 1978 "by Marxist-Leninist students and led by Abdullah Öcalan". And, because of decades of genocidal and oppressive state policies, the PKK soon gained in popularity and became "a formidable enemy of the Turkish state as it waged a guerrilla war of independence" in the 80s and 90s (as seen in Chapter Nine).

With the PKK originally hoping to "create a unified Kurdistan along socialist principles", with the help of training camps in both Iraq and Syria, the "PKK and its leader Öcalan left a deep mark", and particularly "on Kurds in Western Kurdistan, located in northern Syria". Furthermore, with tens of thousands of Kurds being killed in Turkey and "4,500 Kurdish villages [being] evacuated and burnt by the Turkish military", the state's definition of the PKK as a terrorist organisation seemed ever more absurd to many Kurdish citizens. Then, when the PKK-led "Kurdish struggle started to take a new form" after 1999, Bektaş says, Öcalan made "references to the Zapatistas and even to the relatively obscure social ecologist Murray Bookchin" from solitary confinement, gaining the support of more libertarian socialists in the process.

Bektaş explains how the PKK's aim now turned from national independence to a system focussed on autonomy, self-governance, and cultural freedom. More emphasis, he describes, now fell on the use of "legal political parties" and "different modes of civil disobedience" (such as the formation of groups focussed on local organisation) to simultaneously bring about change from within the existing political system and from the grassroots. Meanwhile, however, nationalist secularism (which "had [long] been steadfastly preserved by... the Turkish Armed Forces") was now being replaced with the AKP's mixture of neoliberalism and Islamism, which had the "rabid yet shrewd Erdoğan as its chief". And, having been oppressed themselves by the Turkish regime for years, Erdoğan's Islamists soon decided to enter into dialogue with the PKK from 2008 onwards, though (as seen in Chapter Nine) it was not truly committed to improving the situation of Turkey's Kurdish population, or co-existing with its generally secular, PKK-inspired model of political action.

Having had ample experience of arbitrary barriers, though, "the radical Kurds of Turkey and Syria" finally began to take "advantage of the geopolitical shake-up in the region" in the midst of the Syrian Civil War, and the Democratic People's Revolution in Rojava soon saw Syrian Kurds declare "their regional autonomy". Inspired by the twenty-first century ideology of the PKK, they now aimed to "implement democratic autonomy and self-governance with assemblies that [extended] down to the neighborhood level". In fact, the January 2014 Charter would guarantee "**decentralization, free education in the native tongue, healthcare, housing and an end to child labor and any discrimination against women**". And, to ensure the implementation of the latter point, "nearly all political

⁷⁷² <http://roarmag.org/2014/07/kurdistan-rojova-syria-autonomy/>

⁷⁷³ <http://www.pen-kurd.org/almani/haydar/Dersim-PresseerkIC3A4rungEnglish.pdf>

organizations" formed in Rojava would "have **two leaders, one a man and another a woman**". The "autonomous force" of the YPJ, meanwhile, would be "formed within the YPG" in April 2012 in order to make sure female fighters were held on an equal level to their male counterparts.

Revolutionary Kurdish Unity amidst Reactionary State and Islamist Onslaughts

From 2013 onwards, Bektaş asserts, ISIS "quickly became the reigning address for Islamic extremists looking to join the holy war" in Syria and Iraq. And, when the group captured Mosul in June 2014, he explains, the Western media could no longer ignore its expansion, even though Rojavan militias had already been defending itself from ISIS for over a year. The increase in media coverage, however, coincided with an ISIS "siege of Rojava's central canton of Kobanî" in July 2014, in which the jihadists used "military equipment and munitions captured following their victory in Mosul". Surrounding the canton "from the east, west and south", the Wahhabi army soon presented Rojava with its most serious challenge to date.

Because of the links between the PKK and PYD, Bektaş says, a threat to Syrian Kurds in Rojava was also considered to be a "serious threat" to Turkish Kurds. In fact, many Kurds in the region believed that **Turkey was "using ISIS for a proxy war against Kurdish autonomy [in Rojava] by supplying them with arms and intelligence and free movement across its borders"**. As will be seen in Chapters Eleven and Twelve, there was soon a considerable uproar in the Kurdish community about the alleged links between the Turkish State and the jihadist attacks on Kobanî and elsewhere in Rojava.

"Kurdish and Leftist political actors in Turkey", for example, such as the HDP and BDP, subsequently "mobilized to intervene in the situation", Bektaş stresses. They immediately sought to "set up four different encampments along the border in strategic locations to prevent regular ISIS movements in and out of Turkey", in which the group had brought its "wounded to Turkish hospitals", where they had also been (allegedly) receiving "logistical support from the Turkish state". At the same time, Bektaş says, these solidarity camps also functioned as crossing points for Turkish Kurds wishing to join the anti-ISIS resistance of the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî.

According to Bektaş, "**the current climate within the Kurdish movement in Turkey [was] one of a wartime mobilization**", and there were "daily calls by party members for the youth to remove the borders and join the defense forces in Rojava". On July 14 alone, he asserts, around three hundred Kurdish youngsters crossed into Kobanî, where they "were greeted by YPG members on the other side who would guide them across the minefield between the border and Kobanî".

On the "second anniversary of the revolution in Rojava" (on July 18, 2014), Bektaş notes, "thousands of Kurds flooded into the encampment in the township of Pîrsûs (Suruç in Turkish)" to "celebrate the revolution in Rojava and to remove the border so as to join their compatriots on the other side in their war against ISIS". The following day, Bektaş adds, "people kept coming", and this movement soon attracted "more and more tanks and armored personal carriers of the Turkish military", along with "water canons and other armored vehicles of the police". Nonetheless, he asserts, the "Kurdish villagers and militant youth were not intimidated by the show of force and remained **determined to destroy this border between them and their comrades under siege**". At night, for example, the barbed wires on the border were clipped, and "a few hundred Kurdish youths crossed into Kobanî".

Meanwhile, the celebration of the revolution continued, in spite of the fact that Turkish security forces had launched “hundreds of teargas canisters into the area” and assaulted the crowd “with batons and water cannons”. All types of people, according to Bektaş, “joined the resistance against the forces of the Turkish state with rocks, Molotov cocktails and fireworks”. After two hours, however, police and soldiers “forced their way into the area with the tents and set fire to it all”. Furthermore, over the next couple of days, an encampment 30 kilometres away (which was “strategically placed to sabotage ISIS movements and provide support and solidarity to the YPG”) would also be attacked, in a clear demonstration that the Turkish government either wanted to help ISIS with its advance on Kobanî or to destroy the Rojava Revolution (which were basically the same thing).

In spite of all of these events, however, says Bektaş, the most famous Kurds in the Western media were those of Northern Iraq. And these citizens were under the rule of KDP nationalist Masoud Barzanî, whose idea of political sovereignty had only a “minimal affinity with the radical revolutionary one launched by the PYD in Rojava”. Actually, Bektaş insists, **“the PYD and PKK often find themselves in open conflict with Barzanî’s vision for the Kurds”** (which includes cooperation with imperialist powers and the Turkish regime). And, while the government of Iraqi Kurdistan sought to destabilise the Rojava Revolution, Turkish Kurds saw “the defense of Kobanî as... crucial... to keep the battle for Kurdish autonomy alive”, comparing it to the “defense of the Spanish Revolution against the fascists in the late 1930s”. In fact, Bektaş asserts, **“the perseverance of the revolution in Rojava” was “the only remote hope for a different kind of Middle East, where peoples [could] come together in solidarity with each other rather than at war under sectarianism stoked by colonial powers”**.⁷⁷⁴

The Hopes of a “Peaceful Democratic Transformation”

In her own summary of the Rojava Revolution, University of Manchester PhD candidate Ulrike Flader emphasises that the “population of Rojava... [had] long been a stronghold of the PKK” before the Syrian Civil War. Syrian Kurds’ opposition to decades of “denial of basic citizenship rights under the Assad-regime”, however, was “not a question of independence”, she insists, and it did not see them calling for the creation of “yet another nation-state”. Instead, Rojava deliberately declared itself an autonomous region instead of a state, she asserts, focussing on a “critique of existing nation-states with their homogenising and exclusionary principles of citizenship, centralism of government and non-democratic structures”.

The PKK’s new project of “democratic autonomy”, Flader adds, sought to replace “the earlier struggle for independence” before 1999 as a more viable option. And she describes in particular how this new progressive ideology had been influenced by Murray Bookchin’s “decentralised, radical democracy within or despite the given nation-states”. This alternative model, she explains, “abides by principles of equality between genders, religious and ethnic affiliations, as well as ecology”, and in fact seeks to actively build unity between all different faiths and ethnic groups without attempting to assimilate them.

Within Rojava, Flader stresses, certain elements of “the old regime have been dismantled”, with “the legal and education system [having been significantly] transformed”. The new system, meanwhile, has focussed on introducing **“direct self-government through communes”**, on assuring **“equal participation in all areas of decision-making for all faith and ethnic groups”**, and on **strengthening “the position of women”** in society. For example, “village or street communes” have been set up with the aim of **“decentralizing**

⁷⁷⁴ <http://roarmag.org/2014/07/kurdistan-rojova-syria-autonomy/> - contact the author at ali@riseup.net or follow @breakingkurd

decision-making and realizing self-rule”, and they determine how electricity and food are administered, whilst also “discussing and solving other social problems”.

There are also “commissions for the organisation of defence, justice, infrastructure, ecology, youth, as well as economy”, Flader says, and some “communal cooperatives” have also been created. The “poorest of the community”, meanwhile, are supported with “basic nutrition and fuel”. And, overall, Flader insists, each of these communes assures that its own voice is heard by sending delegates to “a council for 7-10 villages or a city-district”. Subsequently, the city councils are “made up of representatives of the communes, all political parties, the organisation of the fallen fighters, the women’s organisation, and the youth organisation”. At the same time, **each council has “a 40% quota for women”**, both “a female and male chairperson”, and **decisions must be made by consensus**. The members of the councils, Flader says, are both “suggested and elected by the population”.

Flader then quotes PYD co-chair Salih Muslim, who asserted that “this radical change from dictatorship to this form of self-rule [would not be] an easy process”, and emphasised that the People were still “**learning how to govern themselves**”. At the same time, however, a parallel legal system had already been in place in Syrian Kurdistan since the 1990s, albeit underground. These “peace and consensus committees” had been “developed as leftist Kurdish underground institutions”, and “were severely repressed in the 2000s”. Since 2011, though, they “have resumed their importance”.

The above committees, Flader explains, aim to deal with “all general legal questions and disputes apart from severe crimes such as murder”, in order to “achieve a consensus between the conflicting parties” which leads to “a lasting settlement”. In every commune, she says, “5-9 members” are elected to these committees, “according to their ability to facilitate such a consensus in discussion between the parties”. In order to deal specifically with “crimes against women”, meanwhile, there are “parallel women-only committees”, which attend to cases of “domestic violence, forced-marriages and multiple marriages”. If a consensus is not found at the local level, however, the case will then move on “to higher institutions which exist on city, regional and canton level”.

Regarding Rojava’s **Social Contract**, meanwhile, Flader describes how it works as a type of constitution, and how it was “**developed out of meetings among representatives of different ethnic and belief groups**”. Its aim, she reports, is “**to secure safety and self-rule to all groups**”, whilst ensuring their “**right to organise themselves autonomously on other levels**”. And, although citizens in Rojava are “supported in participating in the... YPG”, for example, they are also helped in the “founding [of] their own self-defence groups, as the Assyrians [had] done most recently”. At the same time, the establishment of the YPJ sought to ensure that women would have an important role in the self-defence of Rojava’s communities.

According to PYD co-president Asya Abdullah, Flader says, “the women’s question [could not] be left until after the revolution”, and was therefore something that the Rojava Revolution had sought to focus on. And, as a result of these efforts, she asserts, women in Rojava were “playing a leading role in politics, diplomacy, social questions”, and “in the building of a new democratic family structure as well as in self-defence”.

In summary, Flader insists, Rojavans hoped that, by emphasising their “**co-existence with the state, but on the premises of grassroots self-determination, pluralism and gender-equality**”, they could have “a peaceful democratic transformation” in their territories.⁷⁷⁵ At the same time, however, their hope of avoiding war was made a lot more difficult not only

⁷⁷⁵ <http://www.movements.manchester.ac.uk/the-alternative-in-syria/>

by the Syrian State's opposition to their self-rule, but by the attacks they had suffered at the hands of ISIS. The onslaught of the latter, for example, which was angry at progressive Kurds in Rojava for refusing to kneel down and follow its strict Wahhabi 'philosophy', had created a significant setback for the Revolution. Furthermore, the fear of the Turkish State that Rojavan autonomy would inspire Kurds in Turkey to step up their fight for self-rule meant that the revolution in Rojava had yet another enemy from which it had to defend itself.

III) A Libertarian Socialist Stance on the Rojava Revolution

The positive and progressive measures taken by citizens of Rojava after 2011, as detailed to a certain extent above, were not enough to convince all activists on the Left to give the Rojava Revolution their full support (and nor should they have been). As seen in the previous chapter, there has been both severe criticism of and critical support for the PKK and its allies in Rojava from within the anarchist community in the last couple of years. With this in mind, I will take a closer look in this sub-section at what different libertarian socialist groups have said regarding the Rojava Revolution.

The links between Chiapas and Rojava

On February 6, 2015, Petar Stanchev spoke at ROAR Magazine about the similarities between the Zapatista movement in Mexico and the Rojava Revolution. With "the mainstream media [being] forced to break [its] silence over... Kurdish autonomy" in Syrian Kurdistan with the Battle for Kobani, he says, "numerous articles and news stories were [soon] broadcasted and published" (though the "attention [given] was very often selective and partial", and "the very essence of the political project in Rojava... [was] left aside"). Therefore, he asserts, it was very important to emphasise that "the autonomous cantons of Rojava [represented] a **home-grown solution** to the conflicts in the Middle East".

The struggle for Kobani, Stanchev says, "managed to captivate the imagination of the left and specifically of the libertarian left as a symbol of resistance and struggle". The Turkish Marxist-Leninist group MLKP, for example, joined the YPG/YPJ in the city, and would raise "the flag of the Spanish republic over the ruins of the city [on] the day of its liberation", calling for "the formation of International Brigades", much like the Spanish revolution had. Meanwhile, Stanchev argues, the comparison between the autonomous government of Rojava and that of the Zapatistas in the south of Mexico "might be crucial in order to understand the paradigm of the revolutionary struggle in Kurdistan". With the Zapatista movement having "echoed around the globe to inspire international solidarity and the emergence of the Alter-Globalisation movement" after 1994, the "notion of [a] historical vanguard as opposed to revolution from below" was definitively challenged. And it was the idea of a grassroots transformation, aiming not "to take power but to abolish it", that subsequently became "central to most mass anti-capitalist movements" (including that of Rojava).

Just like the progressive Kurdish movement, Stanchev asserts, the roots of the Zapatistas (who would become "famous for their autonomous government and rejection of the notion of historical vanguard") were "also related to Marxism-Leninism", with "the idea of self-governance and revolution from below [being] a product of a **long historical evolution**". The EZLN, for example, was "founded in 1983 by a group of urban guerrillas, predominantly Marxist-Leninists, who [had] decided to start a revolutionary cell among the indigenous population in Chiapas, organise a guerrilla force and take power through guerrilla warfare". Eventually, however, "they realised that their ideological dogma was not applicable to the indigenous realities and [thus] started learning from the communal traditions of governance of the indigenous people". In other words, Stanchev says,

“Zapatismo was born as a fusion between Marxism and the experience and knowledge of the native population that [had] been resisting both against the Spanish and later the Mexican state”.

In both the Middle East and Latin America, “this shared ideological trajectory [demonstrated] a **historical turn in the understanding of revolutionary process**”. And while “the Zapatista uprising and establishment of the autonomy in Chiapas marked a **break with traditional guerrilla strategies**”, the philosophical shift of the PKK would soon represent “an evolution of the organisation **from a movement for the people to a movement of the people**”. In short, “it was not [for] the vanguard to lead the people now; it was [for] the people themselves to build the revolution from below and sustain it as such”. The subsequent “social and political reorganisation” in both Chiapas and Rojava, then, would prove to be the “most important similarity” between the two processes.

With Zapatistas having created “five rebel zones, centred in five Caracoles (or snails in English) that [would] serve as administrative centres”, the three cantons of Rojava would effectively seek to follow a similar model. In Chiapas, the Caracoles (consisting of “three levels of autonomous government - community, municipality and Council of the Good Government”) would represent the concept of “doing it ourselves”, learning “in the process”, and advancing (albeit slowly). The first two levels of the Zapatista administration would be “based on grassroots assemblies”, while “the Councils of the Good Government [would be] elected but with the intention to get as many people as possible to participate in the Government over the years through a principle of rotation”. According to one Zapatista quoted by Stanchev, “freedom [can] only be practiced here and now and revolution [is] a process of constantly challenging the status-quo and building alternatives to it”. And, in short, Stanchev says, “the Rojavan cantons indeed resemble the autonomy in Chiapas”.

Like the Zapatistas, Stanchev asserts, “the Revolution in Rojava envisions itself as a solution to the problems in the whole country, not as an expression of separatist tendencies”. And that would be precisely why “the first Rojavan university” would seek to “challenge the hierarchical structure of education, and to provide a different approach to learning”. Meanwhile, the important role of women within the Rojava Revolution was also something present in Zapatista communities. In fact, Stanchev says, “gender has always been central to the Zapatista revolution”. Prior to the revolutionary indigenous movement, he argues, women’s lives in Chiapas were often “marked by exploitation, marginalization, forced marriages, physical violence and discrimination”. With the “Womens’ Revolutionary Law in 1993”, however, “the framework for gender equality and justice” was created, “guaranteeing the rights of the women in the rebel territory to personal autonomy, emancipation and dignity”.

Under Zapatista autonomy, Stanchev adds, “women participate in all levels of government and have their own cooperatives and economic structures to guarantee their economic independence”. In fact, women “were and still form a large part of the ranks of the Zapatista guerilla force and take high positions” in its command system (with “the takeover of San Cristobal de las Casas... during the uprising in 1994” having been “headed by comandanta Ramona, who was also the first Zapatista to be sent to Mexico City to represent the movement”). Over in Rojava, meanwhile, female participation in the YPJ defence militias was the “product of a long tradition of women’s participation in the armed struggle for social liberation in Kurdistan”, according to Stanchev. Having “played a central role in the PKK”, he says, there was actually a “theoretical framework that [put] the dismantling of patriarchy at the heart of the struggle” (known as “jineology”). And this concept, he stresses, “resulted in an unseen empowerment of women not only in the context of the Middle East but also in the context of western liberal feminism”, with “women’s assemblies, cooperative structures and women’s militias [forming] the heart of the revolution” in Rojava.

As far as environmentalism was concerned, meanwhile, there were also similarities between Zapatista and Rojava communities. Murray Bookchin's concept of "social ecology", for example, related to the idea that "the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human", would form an important part of the philosophy driving the Rojava Revolution. At the same time, "such a holistic approach [had also] been advocated and implemented by the Zapatistas... after the creation of the caracoles in 2003". In Chiapas, Stanchev says, the "autonomous government has [long] been trying to recuperate ancestral knowledge, related to the sustainable use of the land, and combine it with other agro-ecological practices". In short, the aim was "not only... improving the living conditions in the communities and avoiding the use of agrochemicals", but "a rejection of the whole notion that large-scale industrial agriculture is superior to the 'primitive' way the indigenous people work the land". And, in this way, the philosophy represents "a powerful defiance of the logic of neoliberalism".

Overall, Stanchev argues, "the similar path the Kurdish movement and the Zapatistas have taken demonstrates a decisive break with the vanguardist notion of Marxism-Leninism and a new approach to revolution, which comes from below and aims at the creation of a free and non-hierarchical society". Meanwhile, "the very fact that the only major and successful experiments in radical social change" have originated from "non-western, marginalised and colonised groups", has essentially come "as a slap in the face to the white and privileged dogmatic "revolutionaries" of the global north who have hardly been successful at challenging oppression in their own countries" (but at the same time believe they know best "what is and what is not a real revolution"). Consequently, Stanchev says, "the revolutions in Rojava and Chiapas are a powerful example for the world, demonstrating **the enormous capacity of grassroots organisation and the importance of communal links as opposed to capitalist social atomisation**". And they should represent, he asserts, a call for "many on the left, including some anarchists, [to] trash their colonial mindset and ideological dogmatism".

Both Zapatismo and the progressive Kurdish movement in Rojava, Stanchev stresses, are examples of a political emphasis on true pluralism and secularism. And, while some have criticised the Zapatista ideal of a "**world where many worlds fit**" as "utopian" and "unrealistic", the fact is that "this world is not some future mirage" written in a textbook, but a real-world example being practised today in both Chiapas and Rojava. In other words, then, the libertarian socialist systems being built in both regions should serve as "a powerful weapon to reignite our capacity to imagine a real radical change in society", argues Stanchev. And, in an attempt to summarise in one word the message sent out by these examples, he insists that "what brings these two struggles together" the most is a commitment to autonomy.⁷⁷⁶

The PKK and the 'Anarchist Party Model'

Brazilian professor Bruno Lima Rocha spoke on February 19, 2015, began to publish "a series of short articles" on KurdishQuestion.com "to expose (and prove) the similarities between the western (and not western too) anarchist tradition and democratic confederalism". If studies relating to the "anarchist party model" (aimed at promoting "self-management and direct democracy") had "not become an object of study", Rocha asserts, it was in large part "because of the absence of debates within the left wing community, the academic spectrum and the mainstream media". Nonetheless, he writes with the purpose of explaining in greater detail this phenomenon.

⁷⁷⁶ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/exclusive-on-kq-from-chiapas-to-rojava-more-than-just-coincidences.html#edn3> and <http://roarmag.org/2015/02/chiapas-rojava-zapatista-kurds/>

In 2011, Rocha says, Abdullah Öcalan wrote about how “nation-states [had] become serious obstacles for any social development”, and how democratic confederalism was a “social paradigm... not controlled by a state”. Although Rocha asserts that the PKK is “not a mass organisation” and is “structured within cadres”, he stresses that “nobody should understand this as a kind of “good intentions only party””. Instead, he argues, it (and the TEV-DEM in Rojava) should be considered as “a strategic conception guaranteeing that party cadres and structures will be put in [the] service” of the People, with the duty of helping to build “new political institutions based on a horizontal and egalitarian society”.

The “anarchist party model”, meanwhile, being named “organicism, platformism, [or] specifism”, was also focussed on “a federal and non-mass model”, with party cadres having the responsibility of “[reinforcing] the mass struggle which must be taken up by the whole communities, allowing people to lead their own destiny by and through the people’s assemblies. Therefore, the “two seemingly distant traditions” of the newly libertarian PKK and the ‘anarchist party model’ were “actually so close to each other”, according to Rocha. And “this closeness”, he asserts, “can be easily detected in a simple reading of documents from both the PKK and anarchist traditions”. Therefore, he stresses, “the tradition and experiences in Kurdistan led by the PKK can feed anarchist traditions around the world and vice-versa”.⁷⁷⁷

We Must Not Load All of Our Hopes on Rojava

Zafer Onat of the Turkish anarchist group Servet Düşmanı warned in early November 2014 that if activists did not “analyze what [was] happening [in Rojava] in all its truth”, their “dreams [would soon] turn to disappointment”. For example, Onat insists that **there is not yet a strong enough revolutionary consciousness or movement in the world to allow an alternative political system like that of Rojava to survive in its most progressive form**. As a result of this global situation, he asserts, hopeful movements often “fade either through being violently repressed or by being drawn in to the system”.

Therefore, Onat asserts, it is “unfair” for the Left to “load the burden of our failure... on to the shoulders of the persons struggling in Rojava”. Surrounded as it is “by imperialist blocs”, “repressive, reactionary and collaborator regimes”, and “brutal jihadist organizations”, he argues, it is “problematic to attribute a mission to Rojava that is beyond what it is or what it can be”. In short, he calls on activists on the Left to keep their feet on the ground and not be unrealistic about the experience in Rojava. At the same time, he asserts that they should not “blame those people engaged in a life and death struggle [in Rojava] for expecting support from Coalition forces” or for “not carrying out “a revolution to our liking””. In other words, like the AEG suggested in Chapter Nine, it is important to embrace the Rojava Revolution as it is out of solidarity for its positive elements, whilst remaining critical about its negative elements.

While Onat claims there are “progressive features” in Rojava, he says it is worrying that it “does not aim at the elimination of private property” (i.e. “the abolition of classes”) and that “the tribal system remains”. As such, he asserts, it clearly had not made a significant attempt at “the removal of feudal or capitalist relations of production”. At the same time, he says there is an increasing “influence of elements that belong to the ruling class inside of the [progressive] Kurdish movement” as a result of the PKK’s peace process with Turkey. This fact is reflected, according to Onat, in the KCK Contract, which says it “takes into account ethnic, religious and class differences on a social basis”. Essentially Onat argues, this means that “class society will remain” under the Rojava Revolution (which was visible in the fact that Article 8 “defends private property” and Article 10 “defines the constitutional basis of

⁷⁷⁷ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/bridges-between-anarchism-and-democratic-confederalism.html>

mandatory military service"). Nonetheless, while the "the destruction of the state apparatus" was not the KCK's aim, neither was "political power" (with the group aiming (pragmatically) for "autonomy within existing nation states").

Although it would be easy to say that Onat was rushing to criticise the PYD and its allies very early on in a political process that they themselves had affirmed would 'not be an easy process' and would 'take time', it is possible to understand his desire to remain objective and not allow very emotional events to overtake deep, reflective analysis. At the same time, however, it seems in the above comments that Onat was essentially criticising the PKK's pragmatic theory of building revolutionary structures 'from the bottom upwards' rather from the top. While he himself asserts that left-wingers should not blame Rojavans for not creating 'a revolution completely to their liking', therefore, he actively appears to criticise the long-term methodology implemented by the PKK and its belief that grassroots revolution is more effective than trying to take on the military might of the state and its capitalist benefactors before implementing any progressive measures.

For Onat, it is important to recognise that those resisting ISIS in Rojava "do not at this point have the same goals and ideals as the workers and poor peasants that fought within the CNT-FAI [in the Spanish Civil War] in order to remove the state and private property altogether".⁷⁷⁸ He does not mention, however, that the CNT-FAI (like the Rojavan militias) ultimately felt that it had to forge alliances during the Spanish Civil War and accept that taking total control of state institutions and destroying the existing societal structures would be precisely the type of authoritarian tactic they claimed to oppose. He also ignores the fact that, because of the war against fascism in Spain, grassroots social revolution was simply not enough to defeat reactionary forces (a task that Marxists argued would require the temporary creation of "a workers' government capable of suppressing the forces of reaction"). One "moderate Catalan republican" at the time, for example, claimed the "CNT concept of libertarian communism was devoid of realism and was silent as to the road it should follow in a revolutionary period".⁷⁷⁹ And with histories like that of Spain in mind, the PKK in Kurdistan effectively proposed a 'middle path' between immediately abolishing the state and temporarily taking over the state, a fact that Onat omits.

Onat does correctly assert, however, that, in light of the life-or-death battle in Rojava against Wahhabi reactionaries, "we must neither be surprised by, nor blame the PYD if they are forced to abandon even their current position, in order to found an alliance with regional and global powers to break the ISIS siege". In short, he calls on left-wing activists to be wary of the PYD's war-time actions, as they could well lead to a 'watering down' of progressive measures. He also insists once again that the global revolutionary movement is not strong enough for Rojava to be expected to "abolish the world scale hegemony of capitalism or to resist this hegemony for long" - a task which "can only be realized by a strong worldwide class movement and revolutionary alternative". And with this comment, Onat almost comes to the point of justifying the PKK-affiliated Kurdish movement's 'pragmatic' stance towards the state and private property (in accepting their current existence and seeking to build up grassroots structures in spite of them).

With capitalism in crisis at the global level, says Onat, imperialists were "trying to transcend [the ISIS] crisis by exporting war to every corner of the world", while supporting repressive local regimes in their fight to prevent alternatives from arising. In such an authoritarian environment, he asserts, "racism and fascism" were bound to rise with great speed in the region and elsewhere, and the deepening "ethnic and sectarian division" in Turkish society was one example of that situation.

⁷⁷⁸ <http://www.servetdusmani.org/rojawa-fantasies-and-realities/>

⁷⁷⁹ http://www.isreview.org/issues/24/anarchists_spain.shtml

In summary, Onat says, it is important to remember that, while the Rojava Revolution provided a certain amount of hope for progressives in the Middle East after 2012, it was ultimately under not only the “military siege of ISIS”, but also “the political siege of forces like Turkey, Barzanî and the Free Syrian Army”. Therefore, if it were “not backed by a worldwide revolutionary alternative”, it would “not be easy” for its alternative system to survive for too long. Essentially, Onat asserts, in order to defend Rojava and what it represents (while “preventing laborers from sliding into right-wing radicalism in the face of capitalism’s world level crisis”), **the international Left needs to create** “a class based grounds for organizing and struggle, and **a related strong and globally organized revolutionary alternative**”.⁷⁸⁰

The Anarchist Federation in Favour of Solidarity, But Not With the PKK

In early December 2014, the Anarchist Federation (or ‘AF’, which is a synthesist anarcho-communist group) claimed that, if the struggle to save the Rojava Revolution from jihadists were lost, it would “probably result in far greater repression and tyranny than workers in the region already [faced]”. Whilst there were other forces (including those of the Assad regime) claiming to fight against ISIS, the AF says, libertarian socialists must keep “class-consciousness... at the forefront” of their actions. In other words, it was important for them to side with workers’ movements rather than movements driven by bourgeois sectors of society. And the organisation considers the progressive Kurdish movement to be representative of the latter rather than the former, criticising certain anarchist groups for “lauding the PKK... as a party that [had] somehow morphed... into being a near-anarchist catalyst for social revolution” and for “describing the situation in Rojava as similar to the revolutionary situation in Spain in 1936”.

For the AF, the “parliament structure” (or “Auto-Administration”) which the PYD had set up in Rojava after 2012 “with allied parties” would not end exploitative class-based relations in the region, and that it therefore ought to be opposed. At the same time, it criticises the “conscription law” passed in an attempt to strengthen the resistance to jihadist assaults on Rojava, focussing in particular on the fact that this law was allegedly “passed without consulting with other political formations in Rojava” (such as the reactionary Kurdish nationalists there). The “cantonal assemblies and grassroots bodies”, meanwhile, were “under the sway of the PYD”, according to the AF, while the Auto-Administration had the power to “either approve or block any decisions [made] by these bodies”.

With these points considered, the AF claims “there [was] no real direct democracy” in Rojava, as “workers and peasants [did] not control these bodies”. Equally, “no genuine workers and peasants militias [had] developed”, and there had been “no socialisation and collectivisation of the land and the workplaces, as happened, for example, in Spain in 1936”. With the “working class and the peasantry [having] no autonomous organisation”, the group insists, “the local structures are in fact not much different from municipal councils in the West, where they act in their role as the local state”. Consequently, the group suggests that “a better analogy” for the Rojava Revolution would be that of “the Bolsheviks in 1917”.

“Signs of feminist influences” within the YPJ, meanwhile, did not detract from the fact that “women’s fighting groups [were] segregated from male units”, the AF argues. In fact, it insists, other groups (which are far from committed to women’s liberation) had also “had women’s military brigades” (like in Iran and even ISIS’s “al-Khansaa and Umm al-Rayan”). This viewpoint, however, which essentially compares the progressive Kurdish movement with reactionary Islamists, seems to ignore the context of the PKK and its allies’ evident

⁷⁸⁰ <http://www.servetdusmani.org/rojava-fantasies-and-realities/>

commitment to ensuring equality and freedom for women as a crucial part of their social revolution.

Overall, however, the AF stands with Zafer Onat's remarks about how "we must identify that the Rojava process has progressive features such as an important leap in the direction of women's liberation", the way in which "a secular, pro-social justice, pluralist democratic structure is attempting to be constructed", and how "other ethnic and religious groups [were being] given a part in the administration". Nonetheless, it also shares Onat's criticism of "the fact that the newly emerging structure [did] not aim at the elimination of private property", and that "tribal leaders [partook] in the administration". In short, it appears to criticise the Rojava Revolution for not having sought to end capitalism and tribalism overnight (something that in the past was attempted by more authoritarian left-wing groups and usually ended in widespread abuses of human rights). Whilst attacking the process in Rojava theoretically, therefore, the AF does not seem to understand the complexities of political realities in the region, and the way in which inclusion (of all people, whether they are 'progressive' or not) is the only possible way of avoiding violent conflict and creating an environment conducive to cooperation, co-existence, and further revolutionary progress.

The AF also quotes Syrian-Kurdish anarchist Shiar Neyo as saying that the PYD saw "a golden opportunity to impose its authority and expand its sphere of influence" when Assad's forces withdrew from Rojava in 2012. Neyo, for example, criticises the party's "political pragmatism", its "thirst for power" (although political power was, as described already in this section of the chapter, not an aim of groups belonging to the KCK), and its alleged suppression of "independent activists and those critical of the party's policies". In particular, he mentions the events of Amûdê in July 2013, where supporters of nationalist Kurdish parties were supposedly fired upon by the YPG (in a period when tensions between Kurdish groups were high because of competing aims and intense jihadist offensives on Rojava, as described previously in this book). Furthermore, he refers to the temporary (one-day) "closure of the new independent radio station Arta in February 2014, under the pretext that it was not 'licensed'", and to the "controlling [of] food and financial resources" (which he alleges to have been distributed unevenly "on the basis of partisan favouritism").⁷⁸¹

As is visible above, Neyo has little positive to say about the PYD and the Rojava Revolution that it spearheaded. In fact, he even seems to take a significantly hostile position towards the party, insisting that its actions "recall the practices of the Assad regime and other oppressive, totalitarian regimes like it" (though he also made it clear in early 2014 that he had not been living in any of the Rojavan cantons). He also claims "the PKK is a nationalist party... based on a strict... notion of one party that leads society and the state", and that it "is not very different from many Arab leftist parties that have been riddled with these Stalinist-Leninist plagues". As seen in Chapter Nine, however, the claim that the PKK is still a nationalist party first and foremost is highly problematic considering its rhetoric and activities so far in the twenty-first century (though some nationalist sentiments will almost certainly remain on an unofficial level among some followers of the movement). At the same time, the PKK's criticisms of the state, and of the failures of the Marxist-Leninist methods it used during the 1980s and 1990s, also make it difficult to believe that Neyo's comments are based on a deep analysis of the party's ideological shift. In fact, it seems much more likely that his misgivings about the Rojava Revolution are an extension of ideas about what the old PKK represented.

For Neyo, it was clear that "the experiment [in Rojava] may well end with the strengthening of the PYD's dominance and the increase of oppression in the name of protecting [the] gains" made in the revolution. He also asserts that the PYD would, 'without a doubt', "re-

⁷⁸¹ <http://www.afed.org.uk/blog/international/435-anarchist-federation-statement-on-rojava-december-2014.html> and <https://libcom.org/news/anarchist-federation-statement-rojava-december-2014-02122014>

produce an oppressive, totalitarian regime” like those of “the Ba’th party or the two ruling parties in Iraqi Kurdistan”. Through pure conjecture and, apparently, a lack of trust in the grassroots and pluralist structures being built in Rojava, he asserts that this is “a real and possible danger”. While a number of eventualities could be considered ‘real and possible’, I feel that Neyo’s stance in general is influenced more by a prior dogmatic stance than actual knowledge of the situation on the ground in Rojava.⁷⁸²

In summary, meanwhile, the AF stresses that the task of libertarian socialists regarding Rojava should be to: “highlight the conditions in the refugee camps and of Syrian refugees in Turkish cities forced to beg or to turn to petty criminal activities in order to live”; “provide humanitarian aid to Rojava via IFA [the International of Anarchist Federations], which [had] direct contact with [the] DAF” (Turkey’s ‘Revolutionary Anarchist Action’ group (or Devrimci Anarşist Faaliyet); and “encourage and support any independent action of workers and peasants in the Rojava region”, arguing for unity in diversity and against “any nationalist agitation”.

For the AF, “independent initiatives must free themselves from PKK/PYD control, and equally from aid by the Western allies, from their clients like the Free Syrian Army, Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Turkish state”.⁷⁸³ In other words, the suggestion made by the AF is that relations between the people of Rojava and any of the aforementioned groups would be equally counterrevolutionary. Instead, Rojavans would seemingly be advised to cut themselves off from all actually existing forces in the region, considering them to be just as toxic as each other. Unlike the AEG’s reference to a ‘sliding scale’ in Chapter Nine, the AF does not clearly state any desire to define ‘levels of acceptability’ between different forces. In my opinion, that is one of the major errors committed by the anarcho-communist group in its analysis.

Far from the AF’s dismissive rhetoric regarding the progressive Kurdish movement, I would argue that it is important to emphasise that the PKK and PYD ought to be considered much more acceptable than, say, the FSA, which in turn would be more acceptable than the KDP (depending on which FSA group we are talking about, of course). The latter, meanwhile, should be deemed more acceptable than the Turkish State, which is one of the most poisonous political forces in the Middle East. For me, the fact that the AF appears to insist on a blanket dismissal of all of these forces in equal measure suggests a significant loss of analytical perspective and an overly-idealistic view of the reality on the ground.

Anarcho-Syndicalists, Dual Structures, and Solidarity with the Masses

A member of the anarcho-syndicalist group Workers’ Solidarity Alliance (WSA), known as K.B. and criticised by the AEG towards the end of Chapter Nine, made the following comments about the Rojava Revolution. Firstly, they quote the Solidarity Federation (SF) on the concept of a “national liberation struggle”, saying that such fights are “inherently statist”, even if they believe in smaller, more localised states. For the SF, this focus is a “fundamental flaw” in such struggles. K.B. then quotes anarchist theoretician Alfredo Maria Bonanno, who said that anarchists should only ever “participate in class fronts” rather than in “national liberation fronts” (even though the former may “be involved in national liberation struggles”). There must therefore be, he suggests, a clear socio-economic project for a movement beyond the simple liberation of territory, with “economic, political and social structures” necessarily being changed as a result of revolutionary action (and these changes being “based on federalist and libertarian” forms of organisations).

⁷⁸² <https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2014/04/07/syria-on-the-syrian-revolution-and-the-kurdish-issue-an-interview-with-syrian-kurdish-activist-and-journalist-shiar-navo/>

⁷⁸³ <http://www.afed.org.uk/blog/international/435-anarchist-federation-statement-on-rojava-december-2014.html> and <https://libcom.org/news/anarchist-federation-statement-rojava-december-2014-02122014>

For K.B., it was necessary to see the liberation of Kobanî and Rojava from ISIS militants, and thus the progressive development of the Rojava Revolution unhindered by war, before being able to “objectively discuss the situation... without the emotional reflex to a population under siege, facing a humanitarian disaster”. They also affirm that they are wary of the shift of the PKK and its allies away from Marxism-Leninism towards libertarian socialism, stating that such a theoretical change at the top does “not automatically translate to full adoption within a populace”.

Nonetheless, K.B. refers to Zaher Baher’s first-hand testimony about Rojava (which will be seen in more detail in Section B), acknowledging that TEV-DEM had created committees in Rojava which had “been known collectively [in the past] as workers’ councils”. Whilst sympathising with this achievement, however, they also speak of the constituent assembly (known in Rojava as the Democratic Self-Rule Administration), which they claim is a more ‘statist’ structure. Quoting Bookchinite publishing collective New Compass, meanwhile, they claim that there are some people in the Kurdish population of Rojava who simply wished “to organize in classical parties rather than in councils” (and that the aforementioned assembly provided them with an opportunity to do so). According to the above publication, this issue was one of the driving forces behind the creation of a “dual structure” in Rojava, in which “a parliament [would be] chosen” in “free elections”, effectively forming “a parallel structure to the councils”. The “structuring and rules of this collaboration”, however, were still “under discussion”, K.B. asserts. The major problem with parliaments, though, the writer claims, is that democratic “participation is atomized” in such a structure, and power is “really held by executive powers above the people”. Therefore, they emphasise their critical view towards such developments in Rojava.

Another point K.B. brings up is that “Kurdish women out of their own experience through the last few decades [had] started to organize themselves autonomously” in “groups like the Kurdish Free Women’s Movement (KJB) and the Free Women’s Units Star (YJA Star)”. These organisations, the WSA member says, “call for worldwide solidarity between women’s movements against the patriarchal nation-state”. Activist Dilar Dirik, for example, who is close to the YJA-Star, has affirmed that “**Kurdish society at large has come to the conclusion that forming a new nation state should no longer be part of the Kurdish liberation project, as the nation state is an inherently patriarchal institution**”.

Dirik has also said, however, that the Rojava Revolution is not yet “in favor of the general abolition of the State”, most likely because of the reactionary conflict that such a goal could create in the region. As a result, revolutionary forces were simply **organising autonomy** (for the moment at least) ‘**in spite of the state**’. K.B., meanwhile, argues that this policy is counter-revolutionary, and that the continued existence of states around Rojava “must be actively fought and smashed, by the masses within every nation”. As the AEG responded in Chapter Nine, though, such a purist stance (which would require the presence of a strong global movement in order to be successful) simply leads to an ineffective understanding of the complex reality on the ground in the Middle East.

In fact, far from making a reactionary decision by choosing to convince the world to follow their model through concrete actions rather than wage an unwinnable war, the progressive Kurdish movement in Rojava actually appeared to have learned from the bloody experience of the PKK’s battle against the Turkish State (which resulted in massive levels of destruction and death). In other words, these forces had decided it was much more important to lead by example, showing that it was possible to create an alternative system, even if that involved temporary co-existence with the repressive state forces surrounding them.

In conclusion, K.B. believes we must “be hesitant to put too much emphasis on the official leadership” of the autonomous project in Rojava, and instead place our focus on solidarity

with the working people involved in the project. For example, they affirm, it is important to recognise the “bright spots” of “resistance and self-activity of the masses and the women’s movement” that can be found within the Rojava Revolution. They also stress that “social processes of transformation are complicated and often rife with internal conflicts and dynamics”, and that one can therefore not simply dismiss what is happening in Syrian Kurdistan because of some negative elements. Overall, however, they insist that sympathisers must always focus their attention on showing solidarity with the masses rather than with the official organisations which are guiding them.⁷⁸⁴

Simply speaking, hierarchical party structures, heavy-handed treatment of dissidents, the near-idolisation of Abdullah Öcalan, and wartime conscription have all been alleged elements of the PYD’s participation in the Rojava Revolution about which the libertarian left has been critical. And, whether many of these components have helped to repel the brutal expansion of ISIS into Rojavan territories or not, citizens of Syrian Kurdistan and the wider world must indeed remember that, effectively, such realities can also infringe on the right of people to decide for themselves what the best way forward is. Far from coercion or dogmatic obligation, it should ideally be citizens themselves who independently decide whether or not to participate in either the revolutionary project or its defence. At the same time, however, while the PYD is not perfect, its fight against ISIS, Ba’athist oppression, and social injustices definitively places it on the ‘right side of the struggle’, and that is something more than worth actively supporting.

The Rojavan Struggle between Parliamentarians and Democratic Confederalists

As expressed in Chapter Nine, the AEG is one anarchist group that believes libertarian socialists should support the PKK-inspired Rojava Revolution. However, the organisation also stresses that there are indeed reasons for caution regarding the PYD leadership and what they represent. It emphasises, for example, that **there are two “parallel – and potentially rival – structures and projects in Rojava** and contestation around these”. The first is, as described above, the “representative parliament with something akin to a cabinet”, and the second is “democratic confederalism of a sort based on assemblies, councils and communes”.

According to the AEG, there seems to be “a faction in Rojava politics, including in the leadership of the [PYD], that wants what amounts to a state structure” (i.e. the parliamentary body mentioned above), “rather than the more radical PKK vision” of democratic confederalism. This faction’s interests, the group asserts, can be seen in the attempts “to implement representative democracy based on a parliament, with basic human rights, where an executive [would] have quite a lot of power”. Tactically, however, these forces could not “call it a state” because “it appears the idea of democratic confederalism is widely held as an ideal amongst many Kurds”.

In the opinion of the AEG, it is “still possible that Rojava could become a system based on democratic confederalism”, namely “because **assemblies, councils and communes do exist** (and because **clearly there are also people that want this**)”. The “tensions and possibly conflicting outcomes” between the two parallel structures, however, also exist, according to the AEG, “and will exist as part of any revolution”. The job of libertarian socialists, though, is to actively play a role in deciding “which one will gain the upper hand”. If the progressive experiences in Rojava are not “wiped out by ISIS or the Peshmerga (the armed units of the KRG)”, the AEG asserts, the battle to see which of the structures mentioned above wins out will begin in earnest. And that, the group stresses, is a battle in which libertarian socialists need to participate. In the end, it says, “the mighty forces required [for a] ...global anarchist

⁷⁸⁴ <https://libcom.org/blog/rojava-anarcho-syndicalist-perspective-18102014>

revolution... do not currently exist”, and they will not “come to exist if anarchists insist on keeping their hands too clean, failing to engage real world moments and movements”.

Realistic Outcomes and Meeting the Working Class ‘Where It Is’

The “**best outcome in the real world Rojava**”, the AEG emphasises, “**would be the victory of democratic confederalism**, opening up space for further changes, and inspiring rebels elsewhere”. The “second best”, meanwhile, “would be a PYD-led state, and the third best would be a victory of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)”. While the latter is basically “a fully-fledged state (although not internationally recognised) that is corrupt and overtly authoritarian”, it would still be better than Rojava falling under the control of Western and Turkish-backed Islamist rebels in Syria. Therefore, such a **sliding scale of acceptability is an important concept to visualise**. “At the worst end of the spectrum” of realistic outcomes of the Syrian Civil War, the AEG insists, “would be the victory of the Syrian dictator, Assad”, while the very worst outcome “would be the victory of the Islamic State/ISIS”. And these, the group stresses, are the only truly possible outcomes of the conflict.

According to the AEG, “there is no real anarchist contender in this battle, and no prospects for an anarchist pole of attraction while anarchists do not engage with forces like the PKK”, which is the closest mass movement to anarchism that exists in the region today. K.B.’s article, meanwhile, the group says, seems to have been “written in a kind of vacuum, as if some sort of pure anarchism [was] the only thing that [could ever] be supported”. In the real world context in which “any anarchist society is a very distant prospect at best”, the AEG insists, **the libertarian socialist movement “will have to be forged and shaped in the reality of struggle, and may differ in some ways from the ideal vision”**.

In short, the group stresses, any viewpoint on the libertarian left which does not grapple with actually existent movements is one “divorced from reality”. And K.B.’s article, it says, was “written based on what exists in the writer’s head and not **what is happening in reality** – which is what we as anarchists and social revolutionaries have to deal with if we and our ideas are to have any relevance in progressive popular struggles”.

“Even if democratic confederalism is defeated in Rojava internally by PYD elements and they implement a state”, the AEG says, “that state (from what we have read of the PYD) would [still] be better than the other options that are real possibilities, being ISIS, Assad, or the KRG”. Therefore, the group asserts, K.B. makes the error of presupposing “the existence of a perfectly libertarian and revolutionary subject”, and premising “any support for [real] popular movements on this non-entity instead of acknowledging that **the actually existing working class – and its movements – is full of contradictions**”. Libertarian socialists, the AEG stresses, “need to **meet [the working class] where it is** if our ideas and practices are to have any relevance”.

The Downsides of the PYD and the Need for Solidarity with Existent Struggles

The AEG does criticise the PYD, however, emphasising that, if its struggle is not “accompanied by a massive reconstruction of the economy and of social life along the lines of workers’ self-management and community control”, there will have been an “incomplete national and gender liberation for the Kurdish masses”. A “strictly political solution”, paying insufficient attention to “economic and social inequalities”, the group points out, could easily “give rise to a new Kurdish elite”. Nonetheless, this would only be comparable to “the democratic transition that occurred in South Africa in 1994” which, “while not ideal, would certainly constitute a massive advance for the Kurdish working class – just as it was for the South African working class”.

In reality, the AEG says, the “most promising prospects for struggle in the direction of complete liberation lie” in “the self-activity of the grassroots masses and women of the PKK and allied structures”. Taking this into consideration, the group asserts, it would “be a mistake to reject or refuse support to organisations like the PKK on the grounds that they are flawed”. Instead, it stresses, libertarian socialists must “**align with – and try to influence – actual real world movements and struggles, as a matter of principle** (because these struggles are just), as a matter of **practical politics** (because without engagement, anarchists will remain isolated) and as a **mode of analysis** (which grapples with situations, rather than hammering them into pre-set schemas)”.

Essentially, the AEG argues, in order to achieve the “full national and class liberation of the Kurdish masses”, and in order to prevent “the ascendancy of an oppressive Kurdish elite... under the guise of narrow nationalist interests”, libertarian socialists must support “a Kurdish working class-centred struggle – on a working class programme – against national oppression, capitalism, the state and women’s oppression simultaneously”. And, although it is “not enough”, the group asserts, “the PKK’s programme of democratic confederalism... represents steps towards such a programme”. In other words, the Rojava Revolution “is a start”, with which libertarian socialists around the world can and should engage.

In summary, the AEG insists once again on its support for the struggle of the PKK and its allies against oppression, and these groups’ right to exist. It also reasserts its opposition to all of the reactionary forces which have tried to undermine the progressive democratic experiment of Rojava. Meanwhile, it encourages libertarian socialists to show solidarity “on a sliding scale, with Kurdish anarchists and syndicalists at the top, followed by the PKK, then the PYD, and [with a line drawn] at the KRG”. At the end of 2014 in particular, the group underlines, support needed to be given to Rojava with the main purpose of halting “the ultra-right Islamic State” and defending the progress made by the Rojava Revolution. Beyond that backing, the AEG says that **libertarian socialists should align themselves within the revolution with the “model of democratic confederalism” against incursions of a “more statist approach”,** whilst at the same time aiming “to propose and win influence for [their own] methods, aims and projects”. The group concludes by saying “we are with the PKK against the KRG, but we are for the anarchist revolution before all else”.⁷⁸⁵

Overall, says Professor David Graeber, there may be “a thousand differences between what happened in Spain in 1936 and what is happening in Rojava” today, but “some of the similarities are so striking, and so distressing, that... it’s incumbent... to say: we cannot let it end the same way again”.⁷⁸⁶ In other words, as the AEG asserts, the fact is that the PKK and its allies in Rojava are simply the most progressive mass movements on the ground at the moment in the Middle East. While it is important to place criticism where it is due, therefore, those who wish to show solidarity with forces fighting against oppression and for justice, peace, and democracy must accept that the progressive Kurdish movement is the greatest beacon of hope in the region, and that **it deserves the critical support of libertarian socialists the world over.**

IV) Rojava’s Fight against ISIS

Establishing ‘Facts on the Ground’

In September 2014, Michael Stephens of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) spoke about how it was “not just the Islamic State that [was] rearranging borders hastily and breaking down all that was put in place 100 years ago” by European colonialists. The

⁷⁸⁵ <http://anarkismo.net/article/27540>

⁷⁸⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoring-revolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>

“vacuum left by the withdrawal of both the Iraqi and Syrian states”, he says, had “been filled by others”, and he gives as an example “the crossing point between Syria and Iraq at Fishkhabour”, which was maintained at the time by Peshmerga forces on one side and by YPG forces on the other (“with not a single Iraqi or Syrian government officer in sight”).

Stephens also points out how the YPG were fighting “across the international boundary at Yaroubia border crossing” further south, venturing “some 2km into the Iraqi city of Rabia” to fight against ISIS. Even further south, he stresses, the YPG was maintaining “a security corridor that [ran] from Syria into the Sinjar Mountains” with the support of the PKK and “trained Yazidi militias”, all with the aim of protecting the local population “against regular IS incursions”. At “military training camps in [northern] Syria”, meanwhile, “young [Iraqi] Yazidis eager to avenge the slaughter of their people at the hands of IS” were expressing “loyalty to Syrian and Turkish Kurds” linked to the PKK.

In short, Stephens says, both the progressive Kurdish movement and the Kurdish nationalists in the KRG were “doing what local actors in the Middle East do when the international community moves too slowly” - establishing “facts on the ground, while everyone else debates last month’s political problem”. Rather than national borders, however, he stresses that it was “lines of influence and control” that were emerging in the region. For example, although the “KRG [had] spent some time and expense digging a trench between itself and Rojava to try and establish a vague border”, it had ended up being a “pitiful construction, easily crossed”. For Stephens, therefore, the future of the territory was unlikely to follow the borders set in the Sykes-Picot agreement, and would instead see “a collection of statelets” in power, “autonomously run by quasi-governments that [would] maintain full security control”. And, as these statelets struggled “to form independent sovereign entities”, he asserts, boundaries would frequently change as a result of low level conflicts fuelled by regional powers over territory.

Meanwhile, Stephens speaks about how the Turkish and KRG embargo on Rojava (along with the “huge numbers of refugees” and the “constant fighting” there) had sucked “resources and manpower away from developmental needs”. Nonetheless, he insists, Rojavan citizens had managed to get by using their own resourcefulness. “Water and electricity”, for example, ‘functioned’ (“albeit irregularly”), he affirms, and the region’s citizens were adapting to a new reality. Essentially, he stresses, this was not a temporary autonomy. “The old regional order”, he notes, had “gone and it [would] never return”. For him, “Syria and Iraq [had] permanently changed”. However, he asserts, the appearance of the “new regional order” would very much depend on “how the world [responded]”. At the same time, though, he assures us that the **“emergence of autonomous enclaves is certain to be the future”**.⁷⁸⁷

Rojava on the Frontline of Anti-ISIS Resistance in Spite of Western Hostility

Dilar Dirik wrote in early September 2014, meanwhile, about how ISIS and other Wahhabi jihadists had been carrying out “massacres in Syria for almost two years, without global outrage or action”, when the West finally began to pay attention to the phenomenon. In fact, she insists, they were “even supported by several governments in the enthusiastic attempt to topple Bashar al-Assad - no matter the cost”. And only after ISIS’s “vicious attack on Sinjar in August”, she points out, did the West finally decide to supply the KRG (an “important partner of the West and Turkey”) with weapons to fight the Takfiri militants.

At the same time, however, Rojava was effectively ignored, in spite of the fact that it had seen hundreds of fighters killed by ISIS (particularly in Kobani and Serêkaniye) over the

⁷⁸⁷ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/blurred-lines-and-rise-autonomous-enclaves-1915973931>

previous year. In fact, ever since progressive Kurdish forces took control of the region in 2012, they had been **“marginalised, as regional and international powers imposed political and economic embargoes on them”** for being allies of the PKK. Regarding ISIS, meanwhile, Turkey had facilitated jihadist advances by creating “open supply and recruitment channels” for them, while the KDP leadership in northern Iraq “did not take the threat of the Islamic State seriously”. And both of these factors essentially strengthened the Wahhabi terrorists and their assault on innocent civilians in Rojava and elsewhere.

After “thousands of Yazidi Kurds [had been] killed, hundreds of women raped, kidnapped, and sold as sex-slaves, and tens of thousands stranded on the Sinjar mountains, without food and water”, then, Yazidi citizens justifiably “expressed their anger at the KDP Peshmergas’ withdrawal from Sinjar in early August”. Instead of the KRG, it had been the YPG/YPJ forces which had “crossed the now meaningless Syrian-Iraqi border to rescue the stranded Yazidis”, and would soon be “joined by the guerrillas of the PKK”. And, having created a “humanitarian corridor to lead the refugees to Rojava” and having “established a refugee camp in Derik”, the progressive militants now held posts in Iraqi Kurdistan until the “US-backed Peshmergas” finally returned.

In short, Dirik insists, **if policy makers had listened to the warnings of Rojava, “let alone supported their efforts to establish secular, democratic structures”, ISIS “would definitely not have come so far”**. The reality, however, was that “the Kurds [had been] **excluded from the Geneva-II peace conference in early 2014...**, repeatedly denied visas to EU-countries and the US, and the embargoes” on their communities had continued. At the same time, Dirik points out (in order to create context and perspective), it was the “US “war on terror”, [the] global arms trade, [the] sectarianism exploited by different governments, [the] hijacking of the so-called Arab Spring, Islamophobia, and global patriarchy” that had led the Middle East to where it was in 2014.

As a result of the factors noted above, Dirik says, it was illogical to think that further intervention by existing states and economic elites would succeed in destroying the popularity of ISIS. Attacking ISIS, she asserts, could not undo the trauma of previous US-led wars or the marginalisation of populations under sectarian and authoritarian regimes. Nor could it “take back all the financial and military resources poured into radical groups via Gulf States”. Simply speaking, a Western foreign policy which had “exploited sectarian divides, established hegemonic proxies, and thus perpetuated a system of complete dependency in the region, [could not] be genuine in its claim to support “freedom and democracy””, Dirik argues, and could not provide a legitimate alternative. The real solution, she claims, lies with “those outside of these parameters of dependency”, such as the YPG/YPJ and the PKK. They were the forces who had been fighting against ISIS effectively, and they had done it “without relying on anybody's weapons or approval”. In essence, she asserts, they were **“teaching the international community a lesson in [genuine] humanitarian intervention”**.

Dirik criticises the West for labelling both ISIS and the PKK as terrorists, especially given that the latter had saved countless civilians from massacres at the hands of the former. In fact, she says, the real reason for the latter’s designation is that it **“advocates regional autonomy or “democratic confederalism” through grassroots democracy, gender equality, and ecology, while rejecting the nation-state as an oppressive, backward institution”**. For Dirik, therefore, it is **“intellectually and journalistically lazy and factually fraudulent to keep calling the PKK a separatist [or terrorist] organisation, as many news outlets do”**. The reality, she insists, is that “the PKK [has long since] condemned civilian attacks that were committed in their name, declared several unilateral ceasefires”, and sought to engage in peace talks with the Turkish government.

At the same time, Dirik argues, the PKK's **“terror” label also criminalises entire communities and millions of ordinary people**” who support the group’s fight against ethno-political oppression and marginalisation. Meanwhile, it stands opposed to the “countless accounts of Yazidi refugees, who express their gratitude to the PKK for saving them”. The group must therefore, she says, “be recognised as a political actor” in the region, and be taken off the so-called ‘terror’ lists of the USA and EU. Furthermore, “Rojava must be recognised internationally”.

The three autonomous cantons in northern Syria, Dirik asserts, seek greater gender and ethnic equality and, in the process, have set up “22 ministries with one minister and two deputies each, one Kurd, one Arab and one Assyrian, at least one of which has to be a woman”. A number of “schools, women’s academies, working, living, and farming cooperatives, and women’s and people’s councils”, meanwhile, have also been established, she affirms.

In short, **the PKK and its allies in Rojava are the “oldest and most experienced opponents of the Islamic State”**, and the “embargoes on Rojava [simply] oppress the region in which ten thousands of refugees are now stranded”. In other words, Dirik claims, “if hegemonic powers would quit hijacking” the “visions of freedom and democracy” created in the Middle East “for their own gains”, it would be much easier to defeat the phenomenon of Wahhabi extremism. “Heavy weapons”, she says, are not the way to truly defeat ISIS. The **“democratic, gender-egalitarian, autonomous organisation of the people in the Middle East”**, however, is.⁷⁸⁸

The Search for Recognition and Solidarity

At the same time, PYD co-chair Mohamed Salih Muslim recalled how, in March 2011, Syrian citizens had hit the streets with “legitimate demands concerning the Assad regime”, and had led a “revolt against a system that [had] for decades suppressed and tormented [its] population”. Soon after, he stresses, the PYD and its allies had “driven the regime forces from... the north of the country”, and were “determined... to shape [their own] future”. Facing “objections” from “both the regime and various Islamic groups”, he says, inhabitants of Syrian Kurdistan had been forced to invoke their “legitimate right to self-defence”. In short, he insists: “there was no other choice open to us”. He then explains how first Jabhat Al-Nusra and then ISIS had taken “the leading role in the fight against” the Rojava Revolution after 2012, attracting militants “from regions and countries such as Chechnya and Egypt, but also from Europe or even Australia”.

Echoing Michael Stephens’ comments, Muslim asserts that “nothing [would] be as it was before the outbreak of the civil war” in Syria. In Rojava, for example, he describes how citizens had “developed solutions and initiated related projects”, whilst emphasising that the “right to self-determination [was]... paramount”. In this “revolutionary phase” in the region, he says, the focus had not been “to do with dividing people and groups, but [with] bringing them together”. Within the Rojavan system of Democratic Autonomy, he explains, “the Syrians, Armenians, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds from Rojava are all involved and... they participate equally”. Insisting that the Rojava Revolution was not a separatist one, meanwhile, he stresses that the project of Democratic Autonomy was “part of a future democratic and pluralist Syria” – one that, in Rojava, was “an issue that [was] fully alive”.

The Rojava Revolution, Muslim asserts, had not been a unilateral project of the PYD, but one which had involved **“more than 50 parties and organisations involving the Syrians, Armenians, Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds”**, which had “come into this system and [had

⁷⁸⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/other-kurds-fighting-islamic-stat-2014928753566705.html>

begun to] participate in it on a daily basis". He also speaks of how, in January 2014, "those supporting Democratic Autonomy" had "decided (with the consent of the population) on the implementation of this model of society in the three cantons of Efrîn, Kobanî and Cizîrê", and in doing so adopted a "social contract".

In fact, for Muslim, Rojava represented the "**last glimmer of hope for the Syrian revolution**". The reason, he says, is that, amidst a country "dominated by war and violence", **Rojava had provided many "suffering people from the rest of Syria... with a safe haven"**. At the same time, however, he is very careful to emphasise that **the process in Rojava was "not a "national revolution""** but "the expression of the constant insistence on the **principle of the brotherhood of nations** [read ethnicities], quite contrary to the philosophy of all of the ethnically and religiously fuelled conflicts in the region".

In spite of the Revolution's secular and democratic principles, Muslim stresses, Rojava had been "**abandoned by the international community**", receiving "neither the necessary political support nor sufficient humanitarian aid". Furthermore, it had been "confronted with an even greater flow of refugees", who had been "exposed to the attacks of the inhuman "Islamic State" organisation". Without their own "self-defence units", he says, these civilians had "little chance of opposing their attackers" and thus "no choice but to flee or to expose themselves to the danger of being massacred".

If the YPG/YPJ had not "hurried over the Iraqi border into Şengal", for instance, Muslim insists that "200,000 Yezidi Kurds from the city would not have survived the advance of the IS". Fortunately, though, the militias "succeeded in rescuing these people, despite dozens of losses in their own ranks". And this example of solidarity, along with the "social system that we are putting together in this area", Muslim emphasises, "represents the other face of this region". Simply speaking, Rojava had "played... a vital role", he says, in providing refuge and offering "protection from inhuman organisations" like ISIS and, if it hadn't been for "the inhuman and barbaric attacks" of ISIS and "the embargo against Rojava", the autonomous region would have had "much [more] to offer the hundreds of thousands [of refugees] who [had] fled to Rojava". As things stood, however, these asylum seekers were in a "life and death situation" and, according to Muslim, the "wall of silence" in the world desperately needed to be broken down.

International discussions, he concludes, generally did "not result in more than a show of apparent sympathy for the suffering of the people". In order to show that concern for human life was genuine, therefore, he argues that the international community had a responsibility to recognise "the autonomy of Democratic Rojava". For essentially, he asserts, the "artificial boundaries" in the region had "long lost any significance". In short, he stresses, limiting "aid to Iraq alone", and "stopping at the gates of Rojava, would be fatal" for the region's citizens.⁷⁸⁹

Finally, in order to resist ISIS advances, the YPG/YPJ formed a "Joint Operations Command" with sections of the previously hostile (and Western-backed) FSA in early September 2014. "All major opposition groups" active in the Euphrates region, a communique said, would participate in the alliance. The coalition also called on those "deceived by or [who] had joined ISIS to abandon the organization". It also implored the international community to "fulfil its responsibilities in the fight against ISIS" by offering "material and moral support to the Joint Command".⁷⁹⁰ Fundamentally, this alliance marked a step forwards in the fight against ISIS. Although Rojava was still largely isolated and marginalised, both regionally and internationally, reaching an anti-jihadist understanding

⁷⁸⁹ www.another-green-world.blogspot.co.uk/2014/09/appeal-from-rojava-on-world-day-of.html and <http://en.firatajans.com/news/news/saleh-muslim-calls-on-world-public-to-break-down-the-wall-of-silence.htm>

⁷⁹⁰ <http://rojavarreport.wordpress.com/2014/09/10/ypg-and-fsa-form-joint-operations-command/>

with parts of the FSA had created the type of dialogue that was necessary in order to truly coordinate military efforts against ISIS. More on the YPG/YPJ's fight against the Wahhabi group, however, will be seen in Chapters Eleven and Twelve.

B) First-Hand Experience Of Autonomous Rojava

In March 2014, photographer Fabio Bucciarelli published images taken in “Kurdish areas of Syria and Iraq in October 2013”. Having spent three weeks in Kurdish territory (two of them solely in Rojava), he witnessed life in the north of Syria just before “a de facto Kurdish government was established in the region”. He received, for instance, the opportunity to see the “front lines at Ras al-Ain [Serêkanîye] and Ramelan, both along the border [with Turkey and Iraq respectively], where [the] YPG was battling fighters from [both] the Nusra Front and ISIL”.

He also reports on how he saw “thousands of refugees fleeing the war”, a YPG training camp, and met the PYD's Salih Muslim. Speaking to “dozens of local people about daily life amid the fighting”, meanwhile, he discovered that Syrian Kurds wanted a territory where they could “respect their own law, speak their own language and have economic independence”. At the same time, Muslim told him that Syria's civil war had now “transformed”, and was “no longer... to do with the struggle for freedom”. For that reason, he emphasised that, in spite of temporary truces with opposition groups, Rojava's Kurds could not truly form a permanent alliance with any force that did “business with our enemies”.⁷⁹¹

Another person who got to see the Rojava Revolution with his own eyes was Zaher Baher, who spent two weeks in Syrian Kurdistan in May 2014. He speaks at LibCom.org of how **he was given “total freedom... to see and speak to whoever [he] wanted to”**, including “women, men, youth, and the political parties” (of which there were over twenty in the region. He met, for example, “members of the different committees, local groups and communes” that had been set up, “as well as businesspeople, shopkeepers, workers, people in the market and people who were just walking in the street”.

TEV-DEM Instrumental in the Early Stages of the Rojava Revolution

Explaining how the people of Rojava had taken advantage of the deteriorating political situation in Syria during the civil war, Baher says **TEV-DEM** (the Movement of the Democracy Society, or Tevergera Civaka Demokratîk) was formed “with the support of the PYD & PKK” with the aim of directing the region's revolutionary process. Soon, he affirms, it became “**very strong and popular among the region's population**”. With the withdrawal of Ba'athist forces from Rojava, he adds, a vacuum had been left behind, and TEV-DEM had stepped in “to implement its plans and programs... before the situation became worse”. From the very start, however, their programmes were “**very inclusive**” and **comprehensive**.

To begin with, **TEV-DEM set up “a variety of groups, committees and communes on the streets in neighborhoods, villages, counties and small and big towns everywhere”**. The project aimed to involve all citizens in resolving problems and making decisions that would affect them. One of the groups organised, for instance, was one designed at solving “disputes among different people or factions to try to avoid these disputes going to court”. Soon, this group and others began to meet every week, and had their own representatives “in the main group in the villages or towns called the “House of the People””.

⁷⁹¹ <http://lightbox.time.com/2014/03/17/rojava-syria-fabio-bucciarelli-in-the-land-of-the-kurds/#1>

Baher believes that TEV-DEM was effectively “the most successful organ in [Rojavan] society”, and that its participants “could achieve all the tasks they have been set”. He justifies his opinion by explaining how the group was determined, hopeful, and committed to “working voluntarily at all levels of service to make the event/experiment successful”. He also speaks about how it had been instrumental in setting up the YPG/YPJ (as a common Rojavan self-defence force) and the “Asaish (a mixed force of men and women that [existed] in the towns and all the checkpoints outside the towns to protect civilians from any external threat)”. There was also a special police unit, he says, which was “for women only, to deal with issues of rape and domestic violence”.

According to Baher, there were two main differences between the Rojava Revolution and the Arab Spring. The latter, he says, showed how “people [were] powerful and [could] be the heroes of history at a particular time”, but also that “they were not in a position to achieve what they wanted in the long term”. Rojavans, on the other hand, found themselves in the unprecedented position of being able to govern themselves. At the same time, the majority of inhabitants “were prepared and knew what they wanted” – a revolution that had to “start from the bottom of society and not from the top”. They also believed that their struggle must be “**against the state, power and authority**”, and geared at giving all civilians “the final decision-making responsibilities”. TEV-DEM’s four principles, for example, which Baher praises, encapsulated these principles. In Arab Spring countries, however, the main unifying force between people was often their desire “to get rid of the current government but not the system”, as explained in Chapter Six. As a result, local directly democratic groups were only set up “by a tiny minority of anarchists and libertarians”, while the majority of protesters hoped change would come from above – whether from a political class, a religious class, or a military class.

‘Democratic Self Administration’ and the ‘Social Contract’

Baher says that “a lot of hard work, discussions and thought” went into TEV-DEM’s decision that a Democratic Self Administration (DSA) was needed to govern the Rojavan cantons of Cizîrê, Kobanî, and Efrîn. Finally, in mid-January 2014, the “People’s Assembly elected their own DSA”, which had the autonomy to “implement and execute the decisions” of the main TEV-DEM committee (known as the “House of the People”). The DSA would also “take over some of the administration work in the local authorities, municipalities, education and health departments, trade and business organizations, defence and judiciary systems etc”. Composed of 22 representatives, each with a male and female deputy, the DSA sought to ensure “people from different backgrounds, nationalities, religions and genders [could] all participate”. Essentially, Baher describes, this policy had managed to create an atmosphere of “peace, brother/sisterhood, satisfaction, and freedom”.

The **Social Contract** approved by the DSA, meanwhile, asserted that “the areas of self-management democracy [**did**] **not accept the concepts of state nationalism, military or religion or of centralized management and central rule**”. Instead, it insisted they were “open to forms [of political and social organisation] compatible with the traditions of democracy and pluralism, to be open to all social groups and cultural identities”. In order to facilitate such a multi-cultural system of government, the contract also established: the separation of church and state; the prohibition of marriages under the age of 18; the recognition and protection of women’s and children’s rights; and the banning of female circumcision and polygamy. It also proclaimed that “**revolution must take place from the bottom of society** and be sustainable”, and that equality, freedom, equal opportunity, and non-discrimination were the rights of all men and women. All languages, meanwhile, would be recognised, while prisons would be places of dignity, rehabilitation, and reform. Furthermore, the rights of refugees would also be guaranteed.

Life in Cizîrê under the Rojava Revolution

In Cizîrê Canton, 80% percent of the population was Kurdish, but there was a significant number of minority communities too, which meant that inclusiveness had to be a central part of the revolution's nature. Occupying an area "bigger than Israel and Palestine combined", the territory's population had been submitted to a "Greenbelt" policy by the Ba'athist regime. From the 1960s onwards, for example, the state had sought to bring Arab citizens "from different areas to settle in Kurdish areas", as described earlier in this chapter. As part of this official Arabisation policy, the newly-arrived Arabs were given permission "to confiscate Kurdish lands" and divide them between themselves (much like what the Zionists did in Palestine in the early twentieth century). The government also argued that the area "should only produce wheat and oils", to ensure that its population could not diversify economically and challenge government domination.

As a result of the economic restrictions placed on Cizîrê's inhabitants, no factories or companies would be set up in the region and the "majority of people were [primarily] involved in agriculture in the small towns and villages" as a result, while residents also worked "as traders and shopkeepers in the bigger towns". Consequently, living standards were generally "very low", although there was no extreme poverty, according to Baher. Today, he explains, the situation is similar, but primarily because of Turkish and KRG sanctions. Nonetheless, he says, Rojava's communities can just about survive.

For example, citizens in Cizîrê had enough wheat "to make bread and pastries" at a very low cost, and also had easy access to oil (which they had been able to export (clandestinely) and put into storage). Electricity, however, was produced elsewhere under the control of the Syrian regime, and was therefore a significant problem for Rojava, especially considering the heavy jihadist presence in large swathes of Syrian territory. People only had around "6 hours a day" worth of electricity, Baher explains, but it was very cheap (thanks to TEV-DEM selling diesel at low prices "to anybody with a private generator on the condition they supply power to local residents at a very cheap rate"). Phone communication, meanwhile, was free, as "land lines [were] under the control of the TEV-DEM & DSA". Shops and markets still opened, Baher says, though "many of the goods" were fairly expensive because they had been "smuggled into the region" from abroad or from elsewhere in war-torn Syria.

In a couple of towns in Cizîrê, meanwhile, Baher speaks about how Assad's army retained their presence. For example, "over half of the main town (Hassaka)" (or Hesîçe) was still under government control, and so was a small area in the centre of Qamişlo, the region's second town, where the government controlled both the airport and the post office. According to Baher, both sides generally "[refrained] from clashes or confrontation", with the leaders of local Arab tribes helping to ensure that the two sides coexisted peacefully. While allowing government forces to save money, he asserts, this détente also left the YPG/YPJ to do most of the fighting in the area, saving the regime the effort of protecting it "from other opposition forces" (like the jihadists of ISIS). In fact, these largely Kurdish militias often did this job "much better than the Syrian army" anyway, says Baher.

Although the truce with the Syrian regime had helped to save many lives and ensure less property was destroyed, meanwhile, the government "still [paid] the wages of its old employees", even though most were now "working under the control of the DSA".⁷⁹² At the same time, the more peace and autonomous democratic experience Rojavans had, Baher asserts, the more it would be able to strengthen its alternative system. Another benefit was that the YPG/YPJ could generally focus on dealing primarily with the advance of ISIS and other Wahhabi jihadists, rather than having to engage with Ba'athist troops.

⁷⁹² <http://libcom.org/news/experiment-west-kurdistan-syrian-kurdistan-has-proved-people-can-make-changes-zaher-baher-2> and <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/27301>

Politics in the Cizîrê Canton

Politis Daily foreign correspondent Evangelos Aretaios spoke on March 15, 2015 about how the “Rojava model [was] based on two main pillars”. The first, he says, was “direct democracy as the basis of a communalist system in which citizens participate actively in decision-making and the management of the polis, from the neighborhood to the municipality and as far as the government”. The second, meanwhile, was “the denial of the nation state structure and philosophy as such”. And blossoming out of these principles was the commitment to giving “to minorities a participatory role unprecedented in the Middle East – a role as equals in the management of the polis”.

Travelling to Qamişlo, Aretaios describes the road as being “full of potholes”, with “checkpoints of heavily armed [YPG/YPJ] fighters... every few kilometres”. Upon arriving, his friend Masud explained that the city had “electricity three hours a day”, but that “those who [could] afford it [lived] with generators”. While this fact showed that there was still not total equality in the city, the local autonomous administration was at the same time “trying to distribute electricity from generators” to those who did not have enough money to buy their own. While life in Qamişlo was “trying to seem and to be normal”, Aretaios says, “everybody [lived] on permanent standby” because “the front line with the jihadis of Daesh [was only] about 25 km” away.

On the front line, Aretaios explains, there was “a pervasive and persistent dust that [entered] everywhere with the blowing wind”, passing by the “abandoned villages, ruined houses, [and] stables without animals”. He also speaks about how “even the holy tombs of the Nakshibendi mystics [had been] desecrated by jihadists”. Meanwhile, 20-year-old YPJ fighter Nupelda told him about how ISIS ‘wanted women to be slaves’, considering them not to be human beings but “objects to serve men and to satisfy [their] specific needs”. And, for that reason, she said: “we, women, are fighting on two fronts. One is here, [and] the other is against the conservatism and the sexism of the traditional Kurdish society that does not recognize the equality of the sexes”. At the same time, twenty-two-year-old heavy weapons’ platoon leader Heza asserted that she and her comrade were fighting “a war for freedom... not only for the Kurds but also for the Christians and Arabs and all the other communities living here in Rojava”. Additionally, she said, they were fighting “to have for all women equal rights with men in a society of equality and mutual respect”.

The women and men that Aretaios had seen, he says, “had something very different from other fighters”, because they were **fighting both “against the threat of pure annihilation” and “for a better society”**. In this way, he stresses, “they are the only fighters in the region who are not fighting for the preservation and the continuation, in one way or another, of a status quo, but for a radical change”. In fact, he argues, it was perhaps “ideology [that was] the most effective weapon of the Syrian Kurdish fighters, women and men, against the barbaric indoctrination of Daesh”.

Back in Qamişlo, Aretaios was accompanied by a budding journalist called Judy who asserted that “along with the fear, we have hope for... a future that will bring peace to all people living in Rojava”. The young Rojavan also said that, while “we all help in one way or another..., we are free to get organized in the Tev-Dem or not”. In other words, there was “no obligation” and “no social pressure to be part” of the progressive movement. “It’s the first time we [have been given an] experience [of] democracy”, she stressed, and she insisted that she and others were trying their best “to make it so that all the inhabitants of Rojava [would] have a good reason to live [in the region] without being oppressed”. At the same time, she claimed it was: “the first time across the region we women know what it is to have real, legal rights and to play a real role in public life”. [Such efforts had been made in the

past, but not “from bottom to top”, as “changes in women’s status [had previously been] imposed by authoritarian reformers such as Atatürk, Shah Reza or the Baathists”.

According to Judy, residents in Qamişlo and other large Rojavan cities were ‘clearly freer’ “in comparison to the countryside and the rest of Mesopotamia”, but it was nonetheless “still very difficult for women even” in these urban areas. There was “still violence”, she said, and “still a lot of sexism”, while activists still had “a long way to go to change attitudes”. Although it would take years of improved education “to break the centuries-old traditions”, however, she stressed that Rojavans had “entered for the first time on a forward path”.

In the People’s Court of Qamişlo, meanwhile, “judge Ibrahim, his assistant and three lawyers” told Aretaios about how “justice [was now working] much better than during the Assad regime”. Now, one of the lawyers said, “I feel like a real lawyer and not like the decorative accessory of a fake justice ceremony”. For example, explains Aretaios, the new autonomous administration had “adopted a law that [had] expressly [forbidden] men to marry more than one woman”, and another which had made “women legally equal to men before the courts”. This development, he says, was “completely revolutionary” in a country in which “Islamic tradition” had previously been incorporated into law, making “the testimony of a man in front of a court... equal to the testimony of two women”. In addition to “the legal and institutional changes”, he stresses, “the widespread organization “Sara Against Violence” [had also] launched a huge fight to change attitudes in society and to stop physical and psychological violence and social pressures against women”.

An Unbreakable Spirit of Solidarity

According to the uncle of one dead YPG fighter, the war against ISIS was not just one of survival but one born out of a desire to stop “the rest of the humanity [from being] infected by the barbarism of the jihadis”. And this humanitarian spirit could be seen in the words of preacher at a Syriac church in Qamişlo. When Jabhat al Nusra fighters had arrived in Serêkanîye two years before, he said, they had “proposed to the fighters of [the] YPG to leave them 24 hours in the Christian neighborhoods of Qamishli”, insisting that they “would [then] withdraw without touching the Muslims”. In their search to avoid a sectarian slaughter, however, “the YPG refused and continued the war”, eventually liberating the city completely.

Another Christian, named Peter, would assert that “**the government system of Rojava is the best for us Christians**” and “for all peoples of Rojava, Kurds, Arabs, [and] Chechens” alike. “It is a model for all of Syria”, he stressed, and one that “could be a model for the entire Middle East, which is emptying itself today of its last Christians”. Maurice, meanwhile, insisted that, in Rojava, “all [people] live together as brothers”. Speaking about how he participated in patrols in his neighbourhood “with [his] brothers the Kurds and the Arabs”, he emphasised: “no one will separate us”. One Kurd on patrol would then say that “the groups of citizens to protect neighborhoods [were] composed of volunteers who [patrolled all night”, stopping any cars entering the area that they did not recognise. Overall, though, Maurice added that there were “no dividing lines between Kurds and Christians and Arabs”, with everyone helping each other, fighting for democracy, and hoping for a future “together”.

According to Maria, the “new administration [had given] Christians a status that [they had] never had” in the past. They had “always lived on very good terms with the Kurds and Arabs”, she asserted, but they had “never had such equality in administration and politics”. The head of a Syriac Military Council (MFS) unit, meanwhile, who was “a veteran specialist sergeant of the Swiss army”, stressed that, “in this war we are not just allies, we are

brothers". The thirty-two-year-old fighter, called Johan, insisted that there were not "two different military forces working together", but parts of "the same body" that were fighting against barbarism together. "We believe in a better society", he said, and that had "already started with the building of the administration".

Abdulsalam, meanwhile, who worked as a translator, affirmed that progressive Rojavans believed they could "change mentalities and traditions", and "make a difference in society". The fight against jihadists, therefore, was just "one aspect of Rojava", he said, and was all part of the "effort to build... a third way between [Islamism] and secular authoritarianism". And, although things would not change "from one day to another", he stressed, the revolution had been "a radical break with the past", and had "put down the first stones" in the struggle for "change and [a] democratic society".

Building Democracy 'Stone by Stone'

At the same time, TEV-DEM member Cinak Sagli spoke about how the Rojava Revolution aimed to enable people "to have a direct say in the government and to participate actively in the various public services needed for the well being of community life, from the collection of garbage to the security of neighborhoods and from the distribution of heating petrol and electricity to women's rights and education". And, while "the communalist structure" of the TEV-DEM was "running parallel to and fully integrated into the government(s) and the parliament(s) of the three Cantons", Sagli asserted that there would be no chance of any party exerting totalitarian domination in the region "if all the checks and balances... of the Rojava model... [were] successfully implemented". On his way to the "central administration" of Cizîrê Canton in Amûdê, Aretaios was told by Abdulsalam that progressive Rojavans had been seeking to "build [their] democracy stone by stone", and that he would see this for himself in Amûdê. Upon his arrival, he saw the government building, which was "a cultural center transformed into offices, meeting rooms and [a] parliament".

Parliament co-chair Chakram Halo would soon tell Aretaios about how the Rojavan administration was "made up of all different ethnicities and religions that [had] an immediate and weighty role in the operation of democracy and government", insisting that this model "may be the model for the rest of Syria". And, indeed, Aretaios would see "a medley of Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Yezidis, even Chechens... in the rooms and the corridors of the Parliament and the government". With the system of "co-presidents or/and vice presidents", he stressed, there was an "obligatory" presence of women and "representatives of different ethnicities or religions" in the government. This principle, in turn, would make it "**very difficult for one ethnicity or religious group to overshadow the rest**", whilst "[**guaranteeing**] **the role of women**". In fact, in the "31st assembly of the Parliament, after the proclamation of the self-government in Rojava", Aretaios witnessed "three secretaries... keeping the records of all the proceedings... in three languages: Kurdish, Arabic and Syriac".

Although "the practical difficulties caused by the war" had meant the three Cantons of Rojava had have separate governments at the moment, the general idea, "according to the majority of the people involved in the government", was to have, at some point, "a (con)federate government for the three cantons". Also written in the region's "Social Contract", meanwhile, was that the "democratic administration [did] not recognize the concept of the nation state and the state based on military force, religion and centralism". And, for Aretaios, "**this official renunciation of the nation state [was] one of the most important and deeply revolutionary dimensions of the Rojava experiment**".

Nonetheless, Aretaios explains, the Rojava Revolution also had "a **strategic vision of regional realities**", being ever aware that, "if Kurds in Turkey and Syria insisted on a

Kurdish independent state, they would immediately spark hostile reactions from Ankara", Damascus, and most likely Tehran. At the same time, he says, such a demand would almost certainly "trigger reactions also from the international community". The fact that even the nationalist, pro-capitalist Kurds of Iraq had encountered so many difficulties in "persuading regional powers but also the US and the international community of their cause of independence", he stresses, "highlights the **realistic limits** of such efforts today in the region". Meanwhile, a search for Kurdish independence would suggest the desire to create a united Kurdistan, which would gloss over the fact that the four different Kurdish entities had long "lived under very different regimes", experiencing "separate histories and trajectories". In particular, Aretaios asserts, "the dominant socialist/radical ideology inspiring Kurdish politics in Turkey and Syria is very different to the dominant neo-liberal/traditional ideology of the Kurds in Iraq".

"Getting organized in line with autonomy", Aretaios argues, was "a form of realism and of acceptance of complicated pan-Kurdish dimensions and the regional and international challenges". It was also realistic because the fact remained that Kurds were "not alone" in Rojava ("with Cizîrê Canton being the less homogenous of the three cantons" in the region). Therefore, a "classical" form of chauvinist and reactionary Kurdish nationalism (which "would try to create a nation state") would perhaps open the path to "acts of ethnic cleansing". In short, Aretaios claims, "the nation state is not the prerequisite for democracy any more", and the Rojava experiment is an acknowledgement of that fact. Furthermore, by stepping away from such 'nationalist' rhetoric, the cantons were "making a historical step in the region".

The "biggest challenge of the people of Rojava", suggests Aretaios, was the fact that it had been "starting from square one and without any substantial help from [the] outside" world. Therefore, as Executive Council president Akranes Kamal Chakoun would insist, Rojavans were "still [at] the beginning" and would "make mistakes", primarily because they were "trying to build a democracy from scratch". And, indeed, Aretaios says, "people in Rojava are making a ground-breaking effort to work their way through" their difficulties, and "towards democracy", in spite of the fact that no world power was "actually interested in acknowledging that in the middle of a barbaric war something new [was] trying to thrive" – an attempt to "accommodate different needs and aspirations and to establish a multi-ethnic, multi-religious democracy".

Nonetheless, Aretaios speaks about how "everything in Rojava [seemed] to be still in a grey area, somewhere between the old Syria and something new that [had] not yet taken shape". In other words, it was stuck "between gradual change and revolutionary overthrow", and was "like spending time in a living laboratory where everything [was] on its way to being created". Using Qamişlo as a case in point, he speaks about how "a large city block in downtown Qamishli [was] still under the control of Assad's forces". Although "over 500 regime soldiers and policemen [controlled] the airport of Qamishli, the only official way leaving Rojava", Aretaios explains, the regime forces nonetheless seemed "largely to accept that Qamishli [was] under the control of the autonomous administration of Rojava". In part, he says, Damascus simply wanted to maintain its presence in the city (and to continue paying "the salaries of the civil servants, like teachers") as a sign that it did not "recognize the complete loss of the Kurdish areas" and wanted to "keep acting as if the Syrian state [was] present" in the region.⁷⁹³

The Formation of Communes

⁷⁹³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution#.VQbpYzPC9KE.twitter>

To ensure gender equality in Rojava, the DSA, TEV-DEM, and PYD had led by example, creating a system of “Joint Leaders” and “Joint Organizers” at “the head of any office”. And, as a result of this feminist philosophy, women were “heavily involved in every section of the House of the People, committees, groups and communes”. In fact, Baher even says that **women in Rojava had become the “most effective and important half of... society”**. Their input, he stresses, had been vital, and a large number of them were “very tough, very determined, very active, very responsible and extremely brave”. In short, he emphasises, the philosophy of the PYD (and the PKK) was that the **“equal participation of women in rebuilding society” was essential for bringing out “the best of human nature”**.

Rojava’s communes, Baher says, are “**the most active cells** in the House of the People”, and the TEV-DEM manifesto asserts that they are formed “on the principle of **direct participation of [all] people**”. According to Baher, these bodies aim to develop and promote the different committees, and “search for solutions” regarding social, political, educational, and security matters, emanating from their own power and “not from the state”. **By organising themselves into “communes, cooperatives and associations”**, he says, **they “create their own power”**. All decisions, meanwhile, were made “openly” by all members of the community “older than 16 years old”.

In Qamişlo, Baher speaks about how he had been to a commune meeting, where “there [had been] 16 to 17 people”, of whom most were young women. They told him that their neighbourhood had ten communes, each consisting of 16 people, and that their job was to: meet people; attend weekly meetings; find out about problems; protect people and help to resolve their problems; collect rubbish; protect the environment; and attend “the biggest meeting to report back” about what had happened since the last meeting.

The commune members also insisted that they made “all the decisions collectively” and that no one intervened in that process. In one case, they wanted to create a small park, but the Mayor of the town could only offer them \$100. As a result, they “collected another \$100 from the local people”, and many of them “collectively worked on it to finish it without needing more money”. In another case, “the Mayor wanted to initiate a project” but the commune members told him they would have to “get opinions from everybody” before allowing it. Some people could not attend the meeting, though, so other commune members visited them to get their opinions. And in the end, the project was “unanimously rejected”.

Opposition Parties in Rojava

In spite of the progressive nature of the aforementioned experiences in direct democracy, however, sixteen parties in Rojava did not join the DSA. In fact, says Baher, the majority of political parties in Cizîrê were “in opposition to the PYD, the TEV-DEM and the DSA” when he visited. Nonetheless, he insists that they had “**total freedom to carry out their activities**”, though they could not have fighters or militias (outside of the YPG/YPJ). The reason behind this stance was that, while Rojavans would generally be able to choose their own political path, there would be certain principles that were unnegotiable, such as unity in the self-defence and security of the region.

Twelve of the parties mentioned above, Baher explains, had joined together and called themselves the “Patriotic Assembly of Kurdistan in Syria” (and were supportive of the bourgeois nationalist policies of KRG President and KDP leader Masoud Barzanî). In the 1990s, he stresses, “there [had been] heavy fighting” between the PKK and KDP (which was backed by Turkey) in Iraqi Kurdistan, and thousands had been left dead as a result. With the Barzanî family claiming to be the leader of the Kurdish national struggle, the challenge which Abdullah Öcalan’s group had posed was not taken lightly. For this reason, Baher says, the followers of Barzanî and Öcalan were “still not on very good terms” at the start of

the Rojava Revolution. In fact, Baher asserts, **the KDP was still helping “some Kurdish people in West Kurdistan financially and with weapons training** in an attempt to set up militias for some of the political parties in order to destabilize the area and its plans”. In other words, the KDP-backed Kurdish nationalist movement in Syria could be seen (as asserted previously in this book) as a reactionary force trying to impede the progress of the directly democratic and socially-minded revolution underway in Rojava.

When Baher met with the majority of opposition parties, he asked them about the relationship they had with the PYD, DSA and TEV-DEM. All of their responses, he says, were positive. **No arrests had been made**, and there had been **“no restrictions on freedom or organizing demonstrations”**. At the same time, he stresses, each party reasserted that they did not wish to participate in the DSA. For some, there was certain resentment about the fact that half of Hesîçe and a section of Qamişlo were still under government control, and some alleged that the PYD and TEV-DEM had “compromised with the Syrian regime badly”. At the same time, however, Baher suggests that these compromises with the Ba’athist regime had been tactically necessary in order to stabilise Rojava and focus Rojavans on the task of defeating extremist groups like ISIS. If Kurds had continued to fight Assad, he says, they would have risked “losing everything achieved so far”. Upon sharing this argument with the Kurdish nationalists, he asserts, they “had no response”.

These opponents also told Baher that the PYD had cooperated with Assad’s regime (a claim for which there was no evidence) and that it was a bureaucratic, authoritarian party (even though the PYD had “almost the same numbers and positions as any other party in the DSA”). Additionally, they claimed that the PYD had withdrawn from the KRG’s ‘Kurdish National Conference’, which had been an attempt to unify all of the Kurdish forces in Rojava. The PYD and TEV-DEM refuted this assertion, however, insisting they had “evidence of a written document which [showed] that they [had] committed to the pact but that the opposition [had] not”.

The Kurdish nationalist parties also reaffirmed that they wanted “to establish their own army”, as mentioned above, but had “not [been] allowed to by the PYD”. Nonetheless, the PYD and TEV-DEM stressed that they “could [indeed] have their own fighters”, but that they would have to be “under the control” of the YPG/YPJ (which were officially the defence forces of Rojava as a whole rather than just those of the PYD). TEV-DEM, Baher explains, had taken this stance because it did not want competing militias to exist in Rojava, especially considering that such a situation had previously led to “many fights between different Kurdish organizations” in Iraqi Kurdistan towards the end of the twentieth century. In short, Baher asserts, the nationalist opposition parties in question were simply stubbornly and dogmatically committed to the Iraqi KDP’s stance, and were unwilling to accept a more popular alternative in Rojava. For him, the justification for this criticism could be seen in the fact that, in their interviews, “they were [often] silent and had no response to our suggestions” for more effective co-operation between Rojavan social formations.

Other opposition parties, meanwhile, came from Christian communities, which had not joined the DSA or TEV-DEM but said “they [got] on well” with them and were “fine with their policies”. They also affirmed their gratitude to the **YPG/YPJ**, who they said **had “sacrificed their lives” to protect “everybody in the region” from both the Syrian army and Wahhabi terrorist groups like ISIS**. At the same time, however, the Christian Youth Organisation in Qamişlo claimed that there was not “enough electrical power” and that youngsters did not have “much... to do or be involved in within the town”. Nonetheless, Baher states, “the head of one of the political parties who was present in the meeting” asked the youngsters to remember they were “in the middle of a war”, and that the most important thing was being able to “[sit] at home with no fear of being killed, [leave their] children on the streets, [and play] with no fear of being kidnapped or killed”. In summary,

this politician insisted: “**there is peace, there is freedom, and there is social justice**”, and all of the other citizens present agreed. Baher also spoke “to shopkeepers, businessmen, stall holders and people on the market”, all of whom had a “positive view and opinion of the DSA and TEV-DEM”, stressing they had “peace, security and freedom”, without “interference from any parties or sides”.

The Syrian Revolution and International Hostility towards Rojava

In 2013, Baher explains, the Iraqi government and the KRG decided to “dig a 35-kilometre long trench, over two meters deep and about two meters wide, on the Iraqi/Syrian border of Kurdistan”. They claimed at the time that this was a “necessary measure because of fears over peace and security”, but Baher insists that it was “impossible for groups like Isis/Is to get into Iraq or KRG [territory] through that part of Syria” because the YPG/YPJ forces had been valiantly protecting the area. He then suggests, as many other Kurds did, that the real reason for the trench was “to stop Syrians fleeing the war from reaching Iraqi Kurdistan”, and to prevent PKK and PYD members from increasing their influence on the Iraqi side of the border. This “**shameful trench**”, as many Kurds called it, also aimed to “increase the effectiveness of the sanctions used against West Kurdistan in an attempt to strangle and pressurize them to the point of surrender” (where they would supposedly be expected to reject their ideals and submit to KDP domination (or so the Barzanîs hoped)).

KRG sanctions, Baher asserts, effectively “crippled Kurdish life” in Cizîrê, leaving it without sufficient “medicine, money, doctors, nurses, teachers, technicians and expertise in industrial areas, especially in the oilfield and refining industry”. At the same time, in spite of the canton’s preparedness to sell wheat to Iraq at a very low rate, the Iraqi government remained committed to the blockade. As a consequence, a “large, peaceful demonstration was held in Qamchlo” on May 9, 2014, at which “a few thousand people” turned out to protest against “the shameful trench”. There were also calls for peace, freedom, and cross-border unity and cooperation, and people ended up “dancing happily and singing”.

For Baher, if the Syrian Revolution was ever set to “benefit the Syrian people”, it would not have taken too long to unite Syrians both inside and outside the country behind the cause. Nonetheless, when foreign-backed terrorist groups “got involved and changed the direction of the people’s uprising”, he says, Assad’s manoeuvres both strengthened his regime and made it look like the more attractive option. His withdrawal from Rojava, for example, effectively took the Kurds out of the civil war, while his opening of the Syrian border allowed Wahhabi jihadist groups to enter the country. And, whether this move was machiavellically planned or not, it clearly changed the course of the civil war. Non-Islamist anti-Assad protesters were subsequently weakened and isolated, and the Syrian dictator was able to portray the opposition as a uniform body of extremists. At the same time, however, the opposition was increasingly hijacked by Islamists, who capitalised on the genuine popular anger (about “oppression, lack of freedom and social justice, corruption, discrimination, lack of human rights, ... low incomes, ... homelessness, and unemployment”) for their own self-interested aims.

While Western intervention, in the form of support for rebels from Gulf States and Turkey, boosted the anti-Assad opposition, Baher asserts, “Russia and China’s interests and support for [Assad also made] the war longer than expected”. And, as a result of their business interests in Iran (and therefore in Syria), for example, “**there [was] no support for the DSA and Tev-Dam from China [or] Russia**”. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that it was in the West’s economic interests to get rid of pro-Iranian forces in the region, **the DSA also received no support from “the US and Western countries”**, primarily because it did not support a bureaucratic capitalist model of governance (and had links with Turkey’s arch-enemy, the PKK).

“Although Russia [had] become much smaller and less powerful than before”, Baher asserts, “it still [had] weight and power, in competition with the US and Western countries, over its interests”. And, in spite of certain Soviet support in the 1980s for the PKK, the Syrian Ba’athist regime “was [also] always in the Soviet camp” and, as a close ally of Russia’s trading partner Iran, was a country that Moscow was interested in protecting. China, meanwhile, had interests “especially with Iran”, and it was therefore “not to their benefit to see Assad go because it [knew] that next it [would] be Iran”.

The West, Baher says, demonstrated its hypocrisy very clearly by claiming to fight authoritarianism and terrorism while failing to support the direct, secular democracy of Rojava. Western governments and their allies in the region, he concludes, “are not serious [about] fighting... terrorism because they themselves... created and supported them”. He also asserts that they “support, financially and morally, all reactionary faiths under the name of equal opportunity, freedom and recognizing different cultures”. At the same time, he stresses, they cannot bear the thought of people in the region showing “they can rule themselves through direct democracy without [a] government and support from the US, Western countries and global financial institutions, like the IMF, WB and CBE (Central Bank of Europe)”.

According to Baher, there was a risk that the nationalist KDP elite of Iraqi Kurdistan (backed by the West, Israel, and Turkey) could enter into a direct conflict with Rojava in order to get rid of PKK and PYD presence there. And one issue that could precipitate such a conflict, he says, could be Abdullah Öcalan’s continued challenging of Masoud Barzanî’s role as the ‘great leader’ of Kurdistan. Although Öcalan had “denounced and rejected the state and authority” for a number of years, he asserts, he had not yet clearly “rejected his own authority” or denounced “those people calling him a great leader”. In order for him to be consistent in the beliefs he advocates, therefore, Baher insists that he must declare his opposition to “his own authority and leadership”.

The PYD, TEV-DEM, and the Chances of ‘Success’

TEV-DEM, Baher explains, has been responsible for setting up the communes and the DSA, seeing the latter “as the executive body” which simply implements the decisions made by TEV-DEM organs (rather than actually making top-down rulings). The PYD and PKK, meanwhile, retain a hierarchical form of organisation, Baher says, with the leaders largely determining the actions of the rank and file. At the same time, however, their discipline (coming from years of underground resistance) had meant they had become a strong force in guiding the revolutionary process in Rojava.

At the same time, however, **TEV-DEM is not like these organisations**, Baher asserts, and it actually **includes many people who “have not been members of the PKK or PYD”**. Essentially, he stresses, **TEV-DEM is all about consultation, with its members making all of the decisions from the bottom-up**. And only then, after making collective decisions, does the organisation finally tell the DSA what to do. A question that many on the libertarian left have asked, and that Baher echoes, is “who controls who?” Do the PYD and PKK influence TEV-DEM? Is it the other way round? Or is it neither?

For Baher, the world will see precisely what role dogma and ideology have to play as the revolution in Rojava grows older. We will also see, as the regional conflicts die down, what role adapting “to the current problem or situation” will have played in the development of the revolutionary process. In the PYD and TEV-DEM, Baher asserts, there are indeed ideologues, especially regarding the beliefs of Öcalan. To a certain extent, Baher says the

PKK leader is almost “sacred”, though at the same time he believes “everything can be criticized and rejected”.

Another issue Baher mentions is the fact that, in “the House of Children and Youth Centers” in Rojava, children were being taught about Öcalan’s ideas and principles, and about “how great he [was] as the leader of the Kurdish people”. And here, Baher makes a good point, emphasising that children “should not have teaching on religion, nationality, race or colour”. Instead, he says, they should be allowed to decide on which ideology or philosophy they wish to follow when they reach intellectual maturity.

In order for the progressive elements of the Revolution to thrive, Baher stresses, “**the communes must increase their roles, duties and powers**”. For example, they should involve themselves more in managing the cultivation of wheat and the extraction of oil, primarily in order to ensure that these tasks are not taken on by self-interested political or socio-economic forces in Rojava. Once they have control of these crucial resources, Baher says, they can ensure that enough food and energy is distributed to everyone in the community. Then, and only then, he asserts, would they be able to “sell it, exchange it for necessary materials for the people or just simply store it for later when needed”.

“Even if the revolution succeeds”, Baher asserts, “there are still possibilities that there will be a desire for authority, with it remaining within families, inside factories and companies, in schools, universities and many other places and institutions”. Equally, “a selfish and greedy culture will still remain”, as habits cultivated in capitalist societies take time to fade away, and there is no immediate solution to that issue. In order to strengthen the revolutionary process, therefore, **there “must be a revolution in social life, in our culture, education, the mentality of individuals** and individual behavior and thought”, he says. And these changes must happen alongside the transformation of “the economic infrastructure of society”. Essentially, he argues, the desire for profound change within the current system must be fostered, and “the consciousness of being used and exploited” must be cultivated.

Overall, however, Baher insists that, in present-day Rojava, **people are experiencing peace, freedom, and cultural change, and the Revolution in thoroughly underway**. People there, he says, are adapting to: “a culture of living together in peace and freedom”; “a culture of tolerance and give not just take”; “a culture of being very confident and defiant”; “a culture of belief in working voluntarily and for the benefit of the community”; “a culture of solidarity and living for each other”; “and a culture of, you are first and I am second” (so that people are driven more by the common good than by selfish goals). Life is indeed difficult in Syrian Kurdistan, he insists, but “the gap between rich and poor is small”, and people are generally upbeat and happy. At the same time, citizens know that they no longer want to live under a dictatorship, that “they will resist suppression”, and that they will vehemently oppose “other people making decisions for them”. For that reason, he argues, they “will resist surrender, stand again on their own feet, fight for their rights and resist the return of the culture they used to live with before”.

What has happened in the Rojava Revolution, Baher insists, “was not [only] Öcalan’s idea, as many people want to tell us”. While it was indeed inspired by his works, it was consciously taken on as a project by the people. If they follow his conviction, therefore, that “the state, whatever its name and form, is a state and cannot disappear when replaced by another state”, they will not allow counterrevolutionary forces to divert the revolutionary process for their own advantage, as has happened in past revolutionary processes.⁷⁹⁴ Essentially, then, in spite of libertarian socialists’ opposition to Öcalan’s position as a

⁷⁹⁴ <http://libcom.org/news/experiment-west-kurdistan-syrian-kurdistan-has-proved-people-can-make-changes-zaher-baher-2> and <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/27301>

revered leader of the Kurdish Left, the most important thing is that the People take control of their own lives, and make their own decisions. And if the teachings of the PKK leader have inspired people to do that, then they can only be considered as revolutionary.

Overall, if Öcalan were to leave prison and seek to dominate the progressive political experience in Rojava (or elsewhere) according to his own whims, such actions should obviously be opposed by activists on the Libertarian Left. This concept, however, is highly hypothetical, and is very unlikely to happen, and is therefore almost irrelevant to the discussion. Moreover, as time passes, and the directly democratic process of their Revolution strengthens, the people of Rojava are much less likely to allow such a process of bureaucratisation or authoritarianism to develop.

The Facts and Figures behind Rojava's Communes and Councils

At the end of January 2015, Janet Biehl spoke at New Compass about how her Academic Delegation to Rojava had met two representatives of TEV-DEM in Qamişlo over a month before. Abdulkemir Omar and Çınar Salih, she explains, told the visitors about how progressive Rojavan activists were seeking to “emancipate themselves from the state”, and work against a “concept of freedom [which] remains within the limits of the state”. Furthermore, they insisted that they “[understood] as Kurds that [their] problems [would] not be solved by creating a new nation-state”, and that they were trying to “**overcome [the] chaos [around them] with as little bloodshed as possible**”, and “**in spite of the existing state borders**”. For that reason, they asserted that they “prefer autonomy”, and that “**the solution has to be at the grassroots level**”.

According to Omar and Salih, “the nation-state system [had] created many prejudices, so people think Arabs and Kurds and Turks can't get along”, and had reinforced the idea so that it became “wired into people's brains”. Therefore, it was necessary to “create conditions for common life” and fight “to get rid of these prejudices”, they said. Furthermore, they stressed, “**a revolution that does not open the way for women's liberation is not a revolution**”. As a result of these beliefs, Rojavan activists had created a system that “rests on the communes, made up of neighborhoods of 300 people”. In every commune, they explained, “there are five or six different committees”.

Overall, Omar and Salih said, “communes work in two ways”. Firstly, they sought to “resolve problems quickly and early – for example, a technical problem or a social one” that, if sent to a state, would usually “get caught in a bureaucracy”. Secondly, they explained, decisions had to be “made at the bottom and then go up in degrees”. And the communes aimed to be the closest thing to grassroots decision making, which would subsequently send their orders up to “district councils and city councils, [and then] up to the canton” level.

Qamişlo, for example, had “6 different districts”, and “each district [had] 18 communes” (which in turn were “made up of 300 people”). In other words, then, there were 108 communes in Qamişlo alone, serving (theoretically) 32,400 people. Each commune would have their own committees, like a health committee, and there would be “similar committees at higher levels” where the needs of each commune would be discussed. “That's how they make sure the canton administration's health committee has [a] direct connection with the needs of the commune”, Omar and Salih stressed. Each of these communes, meanwhile, had “2 elected co-presidents”, who would then come together with other commune co-presidents “to make up the people's council of that district”. Subsequently, the city's six councils would elect two of their own co-presidents, who would come together in the “citywide people's council of Qamişlo” (consisting of twelve people). In this city council, however, there are two hundred seats, so the remaining 188 would be filled by direct elections.

On the next level up, Omar and Salih explained, the 12 cities of Cizîrê Canton would come together to form the “cantonwide people’s council”. The members of the city councils would elect two co-presidents, and then the other delegates for each city would be “allocated according to population”. As Qamişlo was the biggest city, for example, it would get “more delegates than others”, with twenty. In addition to the co-presidents of this city, then, eighteen more would be sent from Qamişlo to the canton-level council. “It’s like a parliament”, the two TEV-DEM members said, “but **the ties between the commune and the councils are not severed**”. At the time of the Delegation’s visit, however, a census was still being done, and the cantonwide council still did not yet exist.

“Women’s councils”, meanwhile, existed “in parallel” to the people’s councils “at all levels, the commune, the district, the city, and the canton”. According to Omar and Salih, the councils would “discuss issues that [were] specifically about women”. For example, in the case of “a social dispute, say about interpersonal conflicts”, the regular committees would try to resolve issues immediately but, if the women’s council at that level saw “in this committee an issue that [concerned] women, like a domestic violence dispute”, they could step in. For instance, if they disagreed with the people’s council, their authority would be respected in the final decision (even though the people’s council itself had a 40% quota for female members). In other words, then, they had “veto power on issues concerning women”. Meanwhile, if an issue could not be solved at a lower level, the issue would then go to court.⁷⁹⁵

A Women’s Rights Perspective

In December 2013, international human rights lawyer Margaret Owen travelled to Rojava, just three weeks before the region officially announced its system of democratic self-government. Two months later, she reported on her experiences, speaking about how ‘internally displaced people’ (IDP) from the Syrian Civil War had seen their lives ruined and been forced to migrate to Rojava. Many of the women she met were widows, with husbands who had been “killed years before by the Turkish security forces” for being PKK members. In fact, she says, “many of the older widows” now had “children with the PKK in Northern Iraq”, and claimed to be very “proud of [their] husbands, [their] sons and [their] daughters” who were fighting for their freedom and against the advances of jihadist reactionaries. There were also Arab families who had fled to Rojava, though, Owen affirms, and “several Arab villages on the border with Rojava [had even] joined the [PYD] and allied themselves with the YPG [in order] to oust al Qaida affiliates from their land”.

Although it was “the only relatively safe region” in Syria, Owen asserts, “only a very few people, journalists or aid workers, [had] been able to visit” Syrian Kurdistan, with Turkey having “closed its border with Syria so the only entry point [was] through Northern Iraq” and “the semi-autonomous KRG [having] imposed restrictions on who could come and go” ever since 2012. Owen, however, had been “invited to spend a week in Rojava... by the co-chairs of the PYD..., Salih Muslim and Asiyah Abdullah”. And, as an “advocate for women’s, and especially widows’, rights in conflict”, she insists: “everything I learned about the PYD administration... impressed me”. In particular, she praises the system of male and female co-chairs in “all associations, political, educational, medical, military, police, social and financial services”. For her, this was “an excellent method of ensuring gender equality across the whole spectrum of society”.

Owen also speaks of how, in each town and village, there was “a Women’s House, where women and girls [could] access advice, counselling, protection, and shelter, in the face of

⁷⁹⁵ <http://new-compass.net/articles/rojavas-communes-and-councils> and <https://armsforrojava.wordpress.com/2015/02/02/rojavas-communes-and-councils/>

many forms of gender based violence, honour killings, post-traumatic stress, and physical and mental health problems". She asserts that "domestic violence [was] widespread, especially among the IDPs, and many women [had] been victims of sexual violence". They had also experienced the "traumatic deaths of close relations, in prisons, on the battlefield, and through abductions and torture". Therefore, the significant support available for women in Rojava was a very positive development.

In addition to the "Women's Houses", she states, there were also groups called "Women's Academies", the "Families of the Martyrs", and "the Peace Mothers", which **"all [worked] together to address this endemic violence and support the displaced without any outside humanitarian aid and on a completely voluntary basis"**. These associations, she stresses, had been **"as crucial to the maintenance of Rojava's relative peace** in the last few years as the armed fighters" of the YPG/YPJ. Nonetheless, the latter were also more than necessary, as Rojava was "fighting a continual war on its borders... against the mercenaries of al Nusra, ISIS, and other militias tied to al Qaida". Some Kurdish women, for example, had even told Owen about how they had witnessed or been submitted to "gang rapes" initiated by these Wahhabi jihadists "after they had seen their husbands and brothers shot dead".

For author Showan Khurshid, commenting on Owen's article in February 2014, Syria and the wider Middle Eastern region effectively had to choose between Rojava's secular and democratic model, a continuation of the pre-Arab-Spring status quo, or the rule of Islamists (and probably violently discriminatory Wahhabi ones, at that). For him, there was no other realistic option on the ground. In fact, "even if ISIS [was] being rejected" by the FSA, he insists, "the jihadist mentality [still permeated] within most of their organisation". If the battle for human rights (with an emphasis on women's rights) in Rojava were lost, therefore, "the freedom loving world [would also] lose a lot", he asserts.

After visiting "many survivors of massacres, [the] burning [of] villages, and evictions", Owen visited "the training centre for the YPJ, set up in 2011 as the armed militia of the PYD and the female cadres of the YPG". She reports on how they were "trained in one month in "ideology" ... and military strategy", and how their "aspirations for self-determination" in Rojava were "fast becoming a reality on the ground, whether it [was] acknowledged by the surrounding countries and their respective allies or not". At the same time, she emphasises, Syrian Kurdistan was **"developing a progressive model for gender equality, religious and ethnic freedom, and participatory democracy unlike anything seen in the region"**.

Unlike "the simplistic reforms suggested by some in the opposition" movement in Syria, Owen says, the Rojava Revolution had "the potential to secure far greater social justice". And this fact, she suggests, was probably the reason "why, perversely, it [had] so few international allies in spite of **massive popular support on the ground**". In short, she asserts, despite colonialist and nationalist attempts to "write the Kurds out of history and out of territory", the progressive process in Rojava was something that appeared to be here to stay.⁷⁹⁶

The Political System in the Cizîrê Canton

In November 2014, Alexander Kolokotronis spoke at New Politics about the political system in Hesîçe and elsewhere in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava. The city, he affirms, had a council "comprised of 101 people, as well as five representatives each from five other organizations including the PYD". There was also "a coordinating council", he stresses, "made up of 21 people". Hesîçe, meanwhile, had "16 district councils" consisting of 15-30 people, which would "meet every two months". At the same time, between 10-30 communes would

⁷⁹⁶ <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/gender-justice-emerging-nation-impressions-rojava-syrian-kurdistan/>

“comprise a given district”. In short, Kolokotronis notes, there was “often 1 delegate for every 100 people in a district, which [was] far more direct than many other institutional structures across the world”. The “most frequent” form of political activity, however, was “the convening of peoples’ assemblies”, according to Kolokotronis. This phenomenon, he says, which “also spans across Kurdistan” in areas influenced by the progressive Kurdish movement, served “as the base for Democratic Autonomy”, and many areas had “weekly peoples’ assemblies”.

The aforementioned structures, Kolokotronis reports, also send “delegates to the general council of Rojava”, where “resolutions and **decisions are preferred to be made by consensus instead of simple majoritarian vote**”. In Hesîçe, meanwhile, “communes have commissions that address all social questions”, from ecology and sanitation to “committees for women’s economy to help women develop economic independence”. According to the Alevi Academy for Belief and Culture’s Aysel Dogan, Kolokotronis says, “**the best way to create an ecological system is to build cooperatives**”. At the same time, “other eco-minded activities include the development of seed banks, protesting the simple notion of nuclear power plan development, and the **disallowing [of] the entrance of mining companies**” in the region. Furthermore, in an attempt to “foster an ecologically geared social consciousness”, education in ecological matters “is part of the explosion of academies and other learning institutions that inhabit the region”.

According to Kolokotronis, “a number of academies [had] opened across Kurdistan”, including “the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy in late August in Qamişlo”, which sought to operate according to “an alternative education model”. In the Cizîrê Canton alone, he asserts, “670 schools with 3,000 teachers” had begun “offering Kurdish language courses to 49,000 students” – something which had long been denied to Syrian Kurds. Meanwhile, “youth councils, both under-18 and over-18, [had] emerged”, having a “say and power in the carrying out of initiatives and projects, e.g., in the building and modifying of recreational sites and spaces”. In fact, Kolokotronis says, “some of the most radical perspectives have, with clear articulation and vision, come from the Kurdish youth”, with one youngster stressing: “we don’t consider ourselves nationalists. We’re socialist internationalists”. And indeed, while “Democratic Autonomy and Democratic Confederalism constitute an ideological and institutional push away from the State and capitalism”, it is also a system based on solidarity, unity, and on a move “away from representative political structures to those of autonomous and performative practices”.⁷⁹⁷

Efrîn’s Minister of Economy on the Gradual Changes in Society

In December 2014, the Rojava Report republished an interview with Dr Amaad Yousef, the Minister of Economy for the Efrîn Canton of Rojava (who was “not a member of the PYD”). Describing the economy in the past in the region, Yousef explains that the Ba’athist regime had “passed a law in 2008 in order to force Kurds to migrate”, making it “very difficult for Kurds to own property” and “much easier for Arabs to buy this property”. Meanwhile, he explains that, in Efrîn, “there was an Arab tribe called the Boben”, whose “main job... was usury and loansharking”, and who “rendered [a large number of] Kurds homeless and propertyless”. Furthermore, “there were no elections within the municipal system in Syria”, and the Ba’ath party “would [simply] be nominated and chosen as a formality”. In short, then, Kurds had very few opportunities prior to the Rojava Revolution, according to Yousef.

At the start of the revolution in Efrîn, meanwhile, Yousef describes how, if Kurds “had taken the same side as the opposition in Syria, not much would have changed, because the approach of the opposition to the Kurds was no different than that of the regime”. If

⁷⁹⁷ <http://newpol.org/content/no-state-solution-institutionalizing-libertarian-socialism-kurdistan> and <https://armsforrojava.wordpress.com/2015/02/10/the-no-state-solution-institutionalizing-libertarian-socialism-in-kurdistan/>

Kurdish communities had risen up against the regime like some Arab citizens had asked them to, he says, “the regime would have said ‘these ones want to break up Syria’ and they would have organized all of the Arabs against us”. Consequently, progressive Kurds said: “we are 15% of Syria and you are 85% of Syria. Let 50% of you rise up and [then] 100% of us will rise up”. As this did not happen, though, Kurds in Rojava played things very carefully, attempting to avoid an anti-Kurdish ethnic cleansing campaign. Rather than waging war directly against the regime in Damascus, therefore, they simply stated that they were “going to implement [their own] model on a democratic foundation and without bloodshed and that [their] door was open to those who wanted to join [them]”.

In the first year of autonomy in Rojava, Yousef asserts, progressive activists “founded a newspaper”, a “TV channel”, and “a people’s assembly”. At the same time, he says, they “threw out the regime elements among [them]”, whilst doing no “harm to any place”. As a result, “secure and peaceful development of commerce picked up pace” in Efrîn, with “buildings [being] constructed and workshops [being] opened”. In fact, although only “450 thousand people [had been] living in Efrîn... before the revolution”, the population soon “exceeded 1 million”, with “close to 200 thousand Arabs” deciding to settle in the region.

Now, Yousef stresses, Efrîn had “50 soap factories, 20 olive oil factories, 250 olive processing plants, 70 factories making construction material, 400 textile workshops, 8 shoe factories, 5 factories producing nylon, 15 factories processing marble, 2 mills and 2 hotels”. It was now actually “the first and only place producing soap in Syria”, he notes. The region was also “working on developing commerce around dairy products, fruit and other foodstuffs” in local villages, in the hope that refugees would return to their homes. At the same time, however, Yousef asserts that the administration had “[forbidden] the founding of any more olive factories from an environmental perspective”, whilst also prohibiting “workshops melting lead [in order] to protect human health”.

“Engineers, agriculturalists and farmers”, meanwhile, had “formed their own unions”, and, for the first time in Efrîn, six trade unions “in the areas of health, commerce, agriculture, sports and theater and music [had] been founded”. Although “there was no other work outside of a couple of craft jobs” before the revolution, Yousef stresses, there was now “no unemployment [in Efrîn] with a population of over 1 million”. In short, “everyone who wants can have a job”, he says. In fact, he adds, Kurds who had previously gone to Damascus and Aleppo to find work (including “tailors, waiters, construction workers, doctors, [and] teachers”) had now returned to Efrîn, even though “certain people [had] migrated to Europe”.

For the moment, Yousef says, Efrîn was “continuing with Syrian money”, although “interest [was now] forbidden and no-one [could] charge it”. Those who sought to do so, he asserts, would be “put on trial”. Although “there are banks in every canton”, he stresses, the autonomous administration was also seeking to open up “village banks” because, at the moment, “people [were] saving by putting money under their pillows”. According to Yousef, the local government was “looking into the tax system from the Autonomous Basque Region”, in which taxes would be “distributed to the ministries depending on the need”. At the same time, there would be “transparency”, so that citizens could “know where the taxes they pay are being spent”. This system, though, was not “entirely in place yet”.

Currently, Yousef says, “all of our electricity is coming from the Free Syrian Army and therefore we cannot control it very much”, though there were also “generators all over the canton and in every village”, providing “at least 12 hours of electricity [per day]”. He also asserts that the local administration had “started a project to harness wind energy”, and that, “thanks to a popular cooperative that was founded together with the municipality, a

dam [had been] built” to meet the water needs of the population (water had previously been “brought in with tankers”).

When Efrîn had “experienced a ‘siege’ [the previous] winter”, Yousef notes, the price of a “sack of flour [had gone] from 3 thousand to 6 thousand 500 hundred (Syrian pounds)”. As a result, he says, “the canton management took a decision and announced that any sack of flour sold for more than 4 thousand 100 (Syrian pounds) would be confiscated”. Subsequently, a committee was formed to ensure that “the wheat produced in Efrîn would be sufficient for [its inhabitants]”. At the same time, the administration “immediately began working two mills and stopped the export of flour”. Consequently, Yousef asserts, “the price of flour was brought back down to 3 thousand 500 hundred (Syrian pounds)”.

Meanwhile, “a hospital belonging to the canton [had been] built”, and “no fee [would be] taken from the poor in exchange for medical services”, with “the fees taken from those who [had] the means completely [covering] the costs of the hospital”. At the same time, “schools [had] been opened in all villages” and the autonomous administration also had “preparations to open a university”. Even though there were differences in pricing for those able to pay and those not able to pay, Yousef asserts, “everything produced in Efrîn is cheap”. And, while “private capital [was] not forbidden”, he says, it was “made to suit our ideas and system”, which was being developed “around cooperatives and communes”. They would “complete each other”, he asserts. After the full development of the cooperative system, he stresses, “moral private capital [could then] be added in certain parts of the economy”. [Although some more radical supporters of the Rojava Revolution would disagree with such a system, the fact was that the progressive government was seeking to progress slowly and pragmatically towards a fairer society, in an attempt to avoid more social upheaval.]

According to Yousef, the gradual progress towards a more progressive society would help to ensure that more citizens would get on board with the project, and would eventually see Rojava “taken away from the liberal system”. Such a system, he asserts, is one in which “the big fish swallows the small fish and there is no morality”. For that reason, he stresses, “there is only one thing that is forbidden” in the Efrîn Canton, and that was “finance capital”. One significant problem brought about by the relative safety of Efrîn, however, was that rent had become expensive, because of the increased demand for housing in the region. Nonetheless, Yousef says, the autonomous administration had “begun preparations for construction cooperatives” and would seek to “ensure the right to housing for all”. Overall, he insists, it was important for Rojava’s progressive activists to “build the system of a democratic nation”, even though “a little time [would be] needed” for this process to occur. Therefore, he stresses, “**we will protect the rights of the poor and powerless and cooperatives and communities against the rich**”, but “**we cannot do everything in a day**”.⁷⁹⁸

A Society of Social and Political Revolution

In early December 2014, Murray Bookchin’s former partner and collaborator Janet Biehl visited Rojava “as part of a delegation of academics from Austria, Germany, Norway, Turkey, the U.K., and the U.S.”. Assembling in Erbil, Iraq, they quickly learned about “the petrostate known as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), with its oil politics, patronage politics, feuding parties (KDP and PUK), and apparent aspirations to emulate Dubai”. Just across the border in Syria, however, she says that she and her comrades would soon find a “**society of social and political revolution**” that “could not have been more different from the KRG”.

⁷⁹⁸ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/12/22/efrin-economy-minister-rojava-challenging-norms-of-class-gender-and-power/>

The delegates were initially met by the Asayish, which was the “civilian security forces of revolution” (that rejected “the label police, since police [forces tend to] serve the state, whereas they [claimed to] serve the society”). The organisers of the delegation, Dilar Dirik and Devriş Çimen (head of Civaka Azad, the Kurdish Center for Public Information in Germany), then gave the visitors “an intensive tour of the various revolutionary institutions” in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava.

When “regime authority collapsed in Rojava”, Biehl narrates, the region “had little trouble persuading its officials to depart non-violently”. She then explains how, avoiding participation in the largely Islamist rebellion against Assad elsewhere in Syria, Rojavans declared Democratic Autonomy and “established it in a “social agreement” (the nonstatist term it uses instead of “constitution”)”. This new system of “popular self-government”, she says, was based largely on “neighborhood commune assemblies (comprising several hundred households each), which anyone may attend, and with power rising from the bottom up through elected deputies to the city and cantonal levels”.

In Qamişlo, the visitors “attended a meeting of a local people’s council, where the electricity [situation] and matters relating to women, conflict resolution, and families of martyrs were discussed”. The men and women in attendance, Biehl notes, “sat and participated together”, with no gender division. The delegation also “witnessed an assembly of women addressing problems particular to their gender”, realising quickly “that the Rojava Revolution [was] **fundamentally a women’s revolution**”. Rojavan women, Biehl asserts, had “shaken off... extreme patriarchal oppression” in the form of “violent abuse, childhood marriage, honor killings, polygamy”, and other crimes which had previously been common in the region.

Now, Biehl says, women were participating “fully in public life”, with “institutional leadership” consisting of “one male and one female official – **for the sake of gender equality and also to keep power from concentrating into one person’s hands**”. Yekitiya Star, meanwhile, she explains, was “the umbrella organization for women’s groups” in Rojava, and representatives for the organisation told the visiting delegation that the “antagonist of women’s freedom” was not patriarchy, but “the nation-state and capitalist modernity”. In Rojava, though, Biehl asserts, “the women’s revolution [aimed] to free everyone”, transforming “not only women’s status but every aspect of society”.

Later on, at a meeting of the YPJ, the visitors learned that “the fighters’ education consists not only of training in practical matters like weapons but also in Democratic Autonomy”. Essentially, the concept was that the militants were not only fighting against jihadists to save their fellow citizens, but also to save their ideas. “Democratic Autonomy in practice”, meanwhile, Biehl insists, was a practical ideology that seemed “to bend over backwards to include minorities, without imposing [itself] on others against their will, leaving the door open to all”. Although she concedes that the system in Rojava was not “above criticism”, she asserts that, “as far as [she] could see, **Rojava at the very least [aspired] to model tolerance and pluralism** in a part of the world that [had] seen far too much fanaticism and repression”. In short, she argues, “to whatever extent it succeeds, it deserves commendation”.

According to Biehl, the economic model of Rojava was seeking to create a “**community economy**”, **building cooperatives in all sectors and educating the people in the idea**”. At the moment, one adviser told the delegation, around “70 percent of Rojava’s resources [had to] go to the war effort”, but “the economy still [managed to] meet everyone’s basic needs”. One main reason for this achievement was the fact that, out of necessity (because of the regional embargoes on Rojava), the cantons had been striving “for self-sufficiency”. There were neither exports nor imports between Rojava and Turkey, Biehl explains, and “even the KRG, fellow Kurds but economically beholden to Turkey, [was observing] the embargo,

although more cross-border KRG-Rojava trade [was beginning to occur when Biehl spoke], in the wake of political developments”.

The visitors then went to see: “a sewing cooperative in Derik, making uniforms for the defense forces; a cooperative greenhouse, growing cucumbers and tomatoes; [and] a dairy cooperative in Rimelan”. Partly because of the region’s fertility, Biehl points out, the Ba’ath regime had “deliberately kept the area pre-industrial”, so it could be exploited primarily for its raw materials and “abundant wheat supply”. While the latter “was cultivated” before the Rojava Revolution, however, it “could not be milled into flour” there. After the departure of regime forces in 2012, though, Rojavan progressives set about building a mill, which was “improvised from local materials”. It “now provides flour for the bread consumed [in] Cizîrê, whose residents get three loaves a day”, Biehl explains.

At the same time, the Cizîrê canton had also been “Syria’s major source of petroleum” before the Rojava Revolution, “with several thousand oil rigs, mostly in the Rimelan area”. In yet another attempt to stifle local development in the region, however, “the Baath regime [had] ensured that Rojava had no refineries, [thus] forcing the oil to be transported to refineries elsewhere in Syria”. In the last two years, though, Biehl says, “Rojavans [had] improvised two new oil refineries, which [were] used mainly to provide diesel for the generators that [were used to] power the canton”.

With these advances in mind, Biehl marvels at “the **do-it-yourself nature of the revolution**”, speaking about the “level of improvisation... throughout the [Cizîrê] canton” and about how it had been relying “on local ingenuity and the scarce materials at hand”. And education was a key part of this process, she asserts. Having visited “the women’s academy in Rimelan and the Mesopotamian Academy in Qamişlo”, she and her colleagues had seen how schools were rejecting “ideas of hierarchy, power, and hegemony”, with students teaching each other and learning “from each other’s experience” (in a much more collaborative form of learning). Regarding “practical matters”, though, Biehl says, “students learn what is useful” from their teachers while, with “intellectual matters”, they are encouraged to “search for meaning”. In short, **rather than memorising information, “they learn to think for themselves and make decisions, to become the subjects of their own lives”**. In other words, Democratic Autonomy had sought to empower youngsters and turn them into protagonists in their own lives and communities.

One of the most uncomfortable points of her visit to Rojava, Biehl says, was seeing images of Abdullah Öcalan everywhere. However, she also insists that “to interpret those images” as indoctrination would be “to miss the situation entirely”. Öcalan, for example, one person had told her, insisted himself that “no one will give you your rights”, and that Rojavans therefore knew “they must educate both themselves and society”. While Öcalan had “taught them Democratic Confederalism, as a set of principles”, then, they now had to “figure out how to implement it, in Democratic Autonomy, and thereby empower themselves”.

Excluded in the region by colonialist and nationalist powers, Biehl says, Kurds had long been subjected to “torture, exile, and war”, with Turkey being allowed by NATO “to call the shots on Kurdish matters”. Öcalan, she stresses, simply “taught them how to reset the terms of their existence in a way that [would give] them dignity and self-respect”. And for that, citizens throughout Kurdistan held him in high regard. That did not mean they were not independently minded, however, and Biehl herself insists that the Rojavans she and her delegation had met were more than “accustomed to grappling with hard questions”. In fact, in her opinion they consistently responded “thoughtfully” and even welcomed critique, showing a great amount of open-mindedness and intellectual independence.

In spite of all of the difficulties the Rojava Revolution was facing, including embargoes and jihadist onslaughts, it was “nonetheless an endeavor that [was pushing] the human prospect forward”, asserts Biehl. And with “many people” in the world having come “to the worst conclusions about human nature” throughout the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, she argues, Rojavans were now “setting a new standard for what human beings [were] capable of” achieving. In short, she says, they “shine as a beacon... in a world fast losing hope”.⁷⁹⁹

C) How Did the World Respond to Rojavan Autonomy?

The general mood in the Middle East concerning the Rojava Revolution was one of hostility, whether for quasi-religious or nationalist reasons. The interim Prime Minister of the Western-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC), for example, asserted in February 2014 that the autonomous administration in Rojava was “useless” and would “come to an end” after the ousting of the Ba’athist central government. Ahmed Touma, a so-called ‘moderate Islamist’, also insisted to Rudaw that his aspiring government did not recognise Rojavan autonomy, and that the PYD-led political process in the region did “not represent Kurds” (in spite of Rudaw’s claim that the party and its progressive measures enjoyed “considerable local support” inside Syrian Kurdistan).

Touma’s words, though, did not come solely from an ‘official’ Syrian rebel perspective, but also reflected that of the Western governments, the AKP regime in Turkey, and the KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan that had been sponsoring and supporting the SNC. And, for this reason, he claimed that the “Kurdish National Council [backed by the KDP’s Masoud Barzani] was the true representative of the majority of Syria’s Kurds” – an assertion not supported by any evidence. At the same time, he stressed that “the interim government of the [‘mainstream’] Syrian opposition [would] try to extend to [Rojava]” (basically suggesting that the FSA was prepared to attack YPG/YPJ-held territory).⁸⁰⁰ Nonetheless, as time progressed, it was very clear that the political administration of Syrian Kurdistan had made many more concrete achievements than the SNC could ever have aspired to, whilst defending itself against Wahhabi jihadists in a much more competent manner. Therefore, the threats of the SNC about the destruction of democratic confederalism in Rojava seemed a lot emptier and less realistic. The threatening actions of the ruling Islamist regime in Turkey and the ruling nationalist regime in the KRG, however, would be much more worrying for Rojavans.

D) Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan Watching Very Carefully

Turkey “Wary of Any Kind of Autonomy for the Kurds in Syria”

With tensions rising in the Middle East between the Invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring, the peace process in Turkey between the ruling AKP and the PKK rebels was slow (as discussed in Chapter Nine). In 2009, the government’s so-called “Kurdish Opening” hoped to “deemphasize the security focus” and expand the political and cultural rights of the Kurdish population, but the Erdoğan regime never seemed truly committed to negotiations. As a result, the PKK ended its unilateral ceasefire in February 2011, and Prime Minister Erdoğan subsequently cracked down on the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), arresting six of its elected MPs.

The above BDP politicians, Erdoğan claimed, were linked to the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), which was seen as “the urban arm of the PKK” and therefore as a ‘terrorist’ organisation.⁸⁰¹ Subsequently, the BDP boycotted elections, and a variety of different

⁷⁹⁹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/my-impressions-of-rojava.html>

⁸⁰⁰ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/08022014>

⁸⁰¹ <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2011/09/15/turkey-and-the-syrian-kurds/>

protests occurred throughout the country between 2011 and 2012. And, although it was still a legal party, the Pro-Kurdish BDP suffered a number of “arbitrary arrests of its MPs and supporters” in continuous government attempts to delegitimise it.⁸⁰² As a consequence, it felt itself forced to participate in protests against Erdoğan’s government.

In the summer of 2011, “rising violence between the PKK and Turkish security forces led to the deaths of “40 Turkish soldiers” and “nearly 160 PKK guerrillas”. Essentially, Erdoğan’s hopes of passing a “new civilian constitution” were fading away, and his government began to worry about the PKK’s links with Syria, where the movement had an “extensive network and a lot of clout amongst the Kurdish population”, mostly through the PYD. And with the Ba’athist regime increasingly losing control of Syrian territory, Erdoğan sought to bolster anti-Assad rebels in an attempt to overthrow the government sooner rather than later. According to Christian Sinclair, one big worry for Turkey was that, as the PKK had “regularly recruited in Syria”, new members might be “smuggled across the borders” into both Iraq and Turkey. Therefore, it was wary from the very beginning of the role that Syrian Kurds might play in the Syrian Civil War.

When Kurdish communities did get involved in the conflict in Syria, but in an unconventional way, Turkey soon faced a significant “security and ideological challenge in the Kurdish hinterland across its border”. Like Turkish Kurds, those in Syria demanded “language rights, constitutional recognition of the Kurds as an ethnic group” and, sometimes, autonomy. Increased instability or decreased government (or pro-Turkish) presence in Rojava, therefore, could lead to space being opened up there “for the PKK to operate”. As a result of such fears, Erdogan’s government was immediately concerned about “any power the Kurds may gain in a new Syria”, and “wary of any kind of autonomy for the Kurds in Syria and how this would influence Turkey’s Kurds”.⁸⁰³

When the Wahhabi jihadists of ISIS intensified their attack on Rojava in 2014, Turkish Parliamentarian Aysel Tugulk made a very telling comment about the situation, claiming that Ankara had not tagged along “as a player in the anti-ISIL front” led by the USA precisely “because **ISIL [was] a proxy force led by Ankara itself**”.⁸⁰⁴ Whether true or not, this statement clearly reflected the views of many activists in Kurdish and left-wing circles in Syria, Turkey, and elsewhere in the world at the time. And these beliefs were simultaneously strengthened by the AKP’s political stance towards Syria, which had left it very exposed to such suggestions. [More will be seen on the links between Turkey and ISIS in the following chapters.]

Turkey’s Counterrevolutionary Methods

In a video posted by VICE in late 2013, one Rojavan citizen said: “everyone here believes that Turkey is helping the Jihadis”.⁸⁰⁵ And there were many reasons for these suspicions. The Turkish State had been committing horrific crimes against its own Kurdish population for many decades, and civilian deaths and suffering were nothing out of the ordinary there. Then, with the implementation of Democratic Autonomy in Rojava, Turkey was clearly worried about the progressive and positive example of the revolution spreading into its own territory. Nonetheless, it went about stopping the example from gaining in popularity in completely the wrong way. In early September 2014, for example, a 14-year-old child was “wounded after being shot by Turkish soldiers while attempting to cross the border” with Syria. Following the death of his father three years before, the boy had simply “been crossing back and forth to North Kurdistan [in Turkey]... out of [the] need to support his

⁸⁰² <http://kurdishrights.org/2011/12/03/more-kurdish-politicians-arrested-in-turkey/>

⁸⁰³ <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2011/09/15/turkey-and-the-syrian-kurds/>

⁸⁰⁴ <http://www.press.tv.ir/detail/2014/09/18/379180/kg-angry-over-turkeys-stance-on-takfiri-insurgency/>

⁸⁰⁵ <http://politicalfilm.wordpress.com/2013/12/27/rojava-kurdistan-syrias-unknown-war/>, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6QLOnF7_fA, and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PK_XEz-uZYY

family”.⁸⁰⁶ Roughly a week later, meanwhile, the Turkish military shot civilian Mustafa Husin dead as he tried to cross the border.⁸⁰⁷ And the reality was that, far from discouraging solidarity and interaction between Turkish and Syrian Kurds, the violent actions of the Turkish State were actually encouraging it.

However, Ankara did not seek to reduce tensions on the border with Syria, and allowed its ‘security forces’ to continue acting with total murderous freedom. The Rojava Report, for example, insisted in early September that “the Turkish military [had been executing] tens of people along the border every year with complete impunity”, and that “not one of these cases [had] been subject to any form of legal investigation”. In fact, just a day before the shooting of the teenager mentioned above, “soldiers [had] opened fire on two ANHA reporters who were attempting to document the construction of new ditches along the border”. Fortunately, though, “no one was wounded or taken prisoner” in this event. Other cases, meanwhile, included the wounding of a 17-year-old boy named Hüseyin Batar from Cizîrê, who was shot on July 30 by Turkish soldiers “while fishing along the Tigris”. At the same time, the previous month had seen a man from the Efrîn Canton in Rojava “wounded in both legs... as he attempted to cross the border”, and 18-year-old Ehmed Mihemed killed while crossing back into Efrîn when “soldiers opened fire indiscriminately”.⁸⁰⁸

Meanwhile, Turkey was also accused of denying Yezîdî refugees entry into the country in late August 2014. Having “fled the Sinjar (Şengal) region of Southern Kurdistan” (in Iraq) after ISIS attacks, they had been stopped “by the Turkish military”, and remained “in a desperate situation”. They had escaped Iraq through “civilian corridors established by the YPG”, but were simply “left waiting on the Turkish border”, with soldiers meeting “any attempts to cross the border with force”. The Rojava Report insists on how the conditions facing the “many thousands of refugees” were similar to those they had faced on Mount Sinjar, in which they had been “struggling to protect their children and sick from the sun under the shade of rocks and what few trees they [could] find”, while eating “whatever food they [could] find”. And at the same time as they spoke of how “if it had not been for [the YPG and PKK] we would not be alive today”, they also criticised Turkish soldiers for their use of “tear gas and stun grenades” against people trying to cross into Turkey.

Refugee Gulê İlyas, for example, asserted that the YPG and PKK had taken “responsibility for [Yezîdîs] from the day [they] left Sinjar until now”, taking refugees “as far as here by their own means”. The Rojava Report, meanwhile, insisted that the Hizmet-linked Zaman newspaper had been blaming “locals for exploiting the refugees while attempting to label them as ‘smugglers’ and ‘terrorists’”. In reality, villagers had “worked hard to support the refugees” in spite of their limitations, and they soon “condemned the paper”, denouncing the article as “the work of a private war” waged by Turkish Islamists (including those in government) against them.⁸⁰⁹

Those Yezîdîs and other refugees who did manage to cross into Turkey, meanwhile, faced “assimilation”, according to “social service specialist” Mehmet Alan Akyüz. Such “cultural and linguistic assimilation”, Akyüz said, would also face “children from Rojava”, with them being forced to speak Turkish. In short, he says, the refugees were “not supported by the state”, and many children had to “work in the streets... embracing Turkish in order to provide money for their families”. In a system that did not “give work to people who [could not] speak Turkish”, he asserts, the Kurdish language was being pushed “to a narrow area of life” in a form of “cultural genocide”.⁸¹⁰

⁸⁰⁶ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/09/04/turkish-soldiers-kill-another-child-from-rojava-on-border/>

⁸⁰⁷ http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/turkish-soldiers-shot-dead-man-from-rojava-at-border.htm?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=anf-english

⁸⁰⁸ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/09/04/turkish-soldiers-kill-another-child-from-rojava-on-border/>

⁸⁰⁹ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/08/25/thousands-of-yazidi-refugees-denied-entry-into-turkey-in-desperate-condition/>

⁸¹⁰ <http://en.firatjans.com/news/news/turkish-state-assimilating-yezidi-and-rojava-children.htm#.VA7KSJLkzFo.twitter>

Oil, and the Turkish-KRG Alliance

In May 2014, the KRG “started exporting crude oil via the Turkish port of Ceyhan” after crude flow along a “new KRG-built pipeline” had started at the end of 2013. One source spoke of how “around 2.5 million barrels of Kurdish crude [had] been stored” at the port.⁸¹¹ The revenues from the sale of the oil, meanwhile, according to the KRG, would “be deposited in a KRG-controlled bank account” and “treated as part of the KRG’s budgetary entitlement... under the 2005 Constitution of Iraq”.

The aforementioned development showed that Turkey was definitively “siding with the KRG in its ongoing revenue dispute with Baghdad”, and positioning itself against the central Iraqi government. According to the KRG, meanwhile, the region would “continue to exert its rights of export and sell oil independently”, but would also remain “committed to negotiate in good faith with its counterparts in Baghdad to reach a comprehensive settlement on oil issues within the framework of Iraq’s Constitution”.⁸¹² Deutsche Bank analyst Tom Robinson, however, suggested that the KRG’s unilateral move showed it was “poised to become a major exporter of oil” in its own right.⁸¹³

At the same time, the KRG was seeking “damages for the... thousands of villages that [had been] destroyed from 1963 to 1991 by the past Iraqi regimes”, placing the bill “at \$380 billion”. According to Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzanî, the KRG was “committed to working with Baghdad, but not on Baghdad’s terms”. For him, they had to “sit down as equal partners”. Nonetheless, amidst growing distrust, Barzanî felt it necessary to insist that “Kurdistan [was] not a threat to anyone” any more, and that the KRG could simply “not compromise” on the issue of Kurds being “treated as an equal partner”. History, he said, would “prove that it [was] also in the best interest of Iraq” to work together as equals with its counterparts in the north.⁸¹⁴

In the statement above, however, it is difficult to believe that Barzanî was not just talking about political elites being treated as equals, rather than the citizens of the KRG and the rest of Iraq, especially given that the KRG regime had been accused on numerous occasions of nurturing a “culture of corruption, nepotism, and abuse-of-power”).⁸¹⁵ In fact, according to “multiple reliable sources” speaking in early 2014 (but wishing to remain anonymous for fear of their lives), there had been “a plethora of irregularities in the Ministry of Natural Resources [in the KRG]... creating corrupt officials and paving the way for many corrupt practices to take place in the oil industry”.⁸¹⁶ And, with “the lines dividing government and business [being] unhealthily blurred”, according to The Financial Times, real democracy and justice had not really been high on the agenda of the KRG’s ruling elites.⁸¹⁷

The aspiring KRG petro-state would no doubt love to get its hands on oil from Syrian Kurdistan, too, which would perhaps be possible if it could empower the minor political groups there subservient to the KDP and PUK. Nonetheless, it would be the forces of the Rojava Revolution, with their progressive ideology, that would begin “controlling and administering the oil in areas under its control in north-eastern Syria” after Ba’athist troops left the territory in 2012. In particular, the ‘Auto-Administration’ of Rojava had possession of “Rimelan, one of the major centres of oil production in Syria”. And, while there had initially been “attempts at “tactical peace agreements” with Islamist factions” fighting against the Kurdish-led secular militias, these groups then went “too far in their plans and started

⁸¹¹ <http://www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/402810?page=4&from=3253861565>

⁸¹² <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/ceyhan-kurd-oil-sale-revenues-go-krqcontrolled-account-says-ministry/>

⁸¹³ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/turkey-ready-sell-kurd-oil-global-markets/>

⁸¹⁴ <http://rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?PageID=27989>

⁸¹⁵ <http://www.meforum.org/1703/iraqi-kurdistans-downward-spiral>

⁸¹⁶ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/special-report-kurdistans-natural-resources-reputation-damaged-by-corruption/>

⁸¹⁷ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ea716668-f759-11e1-8c9d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3MHY0da6r>

targeting [Syrian Kurds] within [their regions”, asserts leading TEV-DEM figure Aldar Khalil.

Khalil emphasises that, after it was clear that Islamist groups would not respect truces with the YPG/YPJ, Rojavans knew they would have to exercise their “legitimate right in defending [their] people and towns”, and the YPG soon took the oil fields in the area as a result. YPG spokesman Redor Khali, meanwhile, insists that the liberation of the territory from self-interested reactionaries represented “the real spirit of the Syrian revolution”, in that it sought to ensure that resources would truly remain in the hands of the People. Khalil, however, worried about the “fate of oil in the region”, aware that both regional state powers and militant organisations would seek to take control of the precious resource. Nonetheless, he stresses: “we will certainly not move back, and we will not allow any party to act and monopolize the people’s money and the country’s wealth from now on”.⁸¹⁸

Considering the comments made above, it is worth looking at the claim made by Rudaw in August 2014 that ISIS appeared “determined to control more Kurdish areas [in the] northeast of Syria, which [remained] a weak link in their Caliphate”. Oil in particular, the news outlet asserted, was a force that ISIS, the KRG, and the Rojavan Auto-Administration all knew to be a key resource to control. In opposition to pro-ISIS and KRG groups, however, the YPG/YPJ had long proven itself to be “the most organized and disciplined fighting force in Syria”, halting the advance of ISIS and other Syrian rebel groups “for more than three years”.⁸¹⁹ In this environment, then, it was very unlikely that Rojava’s militias would lose territory without fierce resistance.

Nonetheless, when Turkey’s Erdoğan and the KRG’s Barzanî met in late 2013, Kurd Net says, they almost certainly spoke about the PYD’s “declaration of an autonomous administration in Syria’s Rojava region”. Both were “watching [the PYD] with misgivings”, with Barzanî in particular worried that parties sympathetic to his own were being side-lined in Rojava (along with his clique’s own interests there).⁸²⁰ Turkey, meanwhile, was worried because of the PYD’s links to the PKK, along with its refusal to join the SNC (controlled in part by the Turkish State). Overall, both Ankara and Erbil were interested in ensuring that oil and other resources in Rojava remained in ‘friendly’ hands, and that they did not fall into the hands of progressive forces that could challenge, respectively, their neoliberal Islamist and nationalist regimes.

Capitalist Opposition to Rojavan Control of Oil

In November 2014, Mika Minio-Paluello went into more detail about the suggestion made above about the importance of oil in the ‘Kurdish Question’. In particular, he says at Open Democracy, “**decades of energy colonialism in the Middle East” were now coming “face to face with a democratic challenge in Rojava”**. Quoting Dilar Dirik, he insists that YPG/YPJ fighters in Kobanî had managed to hold firm in Rojava because “their will to fight... for a fundamentally different future... [had] kept them going”. He also argues that “the heavy violence in Syria [had been] heavily influenced by [the] oil-driven geopolitics” of international and regional capitalist powers. Such “energy colonialism”, he asserts, had “enabled the repression of democratic movements” in the Middle East for decades.

The USA, Britain, and France, Minio asserts, had all “aimed to control oil reserves in the region and preserve corporate profits” in the past, and these policies had concered Kurdistan in particular because of its large oil fields. One example of such imperialist interventions was “when oil workers in Iraq [fatefully] occupied a pipeline pumping station

⁸¹⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/syria-kurds-oil-struggle-armed-islamist-factions.html#>

⁸¹⁹ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/03082014>

⁸²⁰ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2013/11/turkey4837.htm>

in 1948". These labourers were subsequently surrounded by the "machine guns and armoured cars" of mercenaries employed by the company involved. When "the Syrian parliament refused to ratify construction of the Trans-Arabian pipeline" the following year, meanwhile, the CIA helped the oil companies "organise a coup" in which a new, compliant military government would be installed in the country.

Later, Minio says, the construction of the "enormous twin Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipelines from Iraq to the Mediterranean" would bring "thousands of Turkish troops along its route and into nearby villages". And, **in Turkey, 99% of crude oil could be found in the Kurdish south-east, while in Syria around 60% came from Kurdish areas.** In more recent years, Minio asserts, Shell has also begun "fracking for shale gas" around the largely-Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in Turkey. In Iraq, meanwhile, the "conservative-nationalist Kurdish Regional Government", led by the KDP, became an ally of "western energy interests and neoliberal power" in a successful attempt to ensure imperialist support for its bourgeois national project. Kurdish movements in Turkey and Syria, meanwhile, had not sought to use oil to attract imperialist support, and had instead largely stayed true to their principles of fighting for "greater social liberation". As a result, Minio argues, any Kurdish autonomy in these two countries "could threaten western oil interests", especially when we consider the "ecological sensitivity" of the PKK and the PYD.

According to Minio, the fact that the political economy in Rojava was "characterised by community-based production and large-scale cooperatives" meant that it was therefore "less open to exploitation for foreign interests, like Gulsands, the London sanctions-dodging oil company that [previously] drilled for crude in Rojava". In fact, Minio goes as far as to say that the PKK and PYD were "the most organised and democratic political forces in the region, and [had] the best chance to begin democratising and decolonising energy". And such "energy democracy", he insists, could be "transformative globally". Western elites, for example, who use fear-mongering tactics at home (talking about "energy security") to undermine the power of energy workers, could well see their employees taking democratic control of the national energy resources of their respective countries. And for precisely this reason, "no elite power", whether the "US or Russia, Turkey or Iran, the Israelis or Saudi Arabia", wanted to support "a progressive and democratic revolution that could begin to transform our energy future". Therefore, Minio says, Turkey's blockade against Kobanî and the rest of Rojava (with US complicity) could be seen as a means of ensuring "that the PYD became [at least temporarily] dependent on western support" for survival.

Minio affirms that the USA usually "excels at using "aid" to alter [a movement's] politics and enforce subservience", but also suggests that the "**deep ideological roots" of the PYD and PKK may ensure that they won't just "roll over"** when tempted with US aid. And that ethical commitment, he says, is something to be hopeful about. In summary, therefore, social activists around the world must see **Rojava "as an ally in dismantling [the] energy colonialism that keeps us all weak"**.⁸²¹

Historical Context, Turkish Hostility, and US Opposition

In the past, Syria had strategically supported the PKK in its fight against the Turkish regime (as seen in Chapter Nine) in an attempt to weaken its nationalist and Western-backed neighbour. However, says Alastair Stephens at Counterfire, "nearly all regimes in the region" had, "at one time or another, backed armed Kurdish groups in neighbouring and rival states, whilst oppressing their own Kurdish populations at home". So effectively, there was nothing particularly strange about the Ba'ath regime in Syria doing the same. When Turkey threatened to invade Syria in 1998, however, Hafez al-Assad duly abandoned his

⁸²¹ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/mika-miniopaluello/oil-politics-and-battle-for-kobane> and @mikaminio

self-interested alliance with the PKK (no longer needing to support it to keep the USSR on side).

As seen previously in this book, there were several occasions in the twentieth century when Kurdish communities took advantage of weaknesses in the central governments of their respective states (such as in 1947, the 1960s, 1975, and 1991 in Iraq). On each occasion, however, resistance had been crushed (though in the 1990s “Western protection meant a Kurdish statelet was able to emerge” in Iraqi Kurdistan, with the pro-Western KDP and PUK parties fighting between themselves to take control). After Iraqi Kurdistan gained autonomy after 2003 thanks to the US-led Invasion of Iraq, the new Kurdish nationalist regime found itself “surrounded by hostile powers in Iran and Turkey, and with a difficult relationship with the government in Baghdad”, though diplomacy and oil would soon help nationalist elites to improve conditions (and “come to a certain accommodation with the Turks” in exchange for agreeing “to prevent the PKK from restarting the war in Turkey” from Iraqi Kurdistan).

In 2012, meanwhile, Turkish and KRG ministers signed a “joint statement... saying that they would tackle any threat from a violent group or organization that [tried] to exploit the power vacuum in Syria – [in] an apparent reference to the PYD/PKK”. At the same time, the Turkish military “launched exercises on the border” with Syria. Consequently, and because of Turkey’s alliance with the West, Syria’s Kurds were very wary of a possible “large scale western intervention” to prevent their progressive system from consolidating itself in Rojava. In short, any overt Western decision to oppose Rojavan autonomy would make Turkey the most likely “major component of any on the ground force” (as it had “the second largest, and one of the most battle hardened, armies in NATO”). Therefore, as the Turkish State also had vested interests in defeating the PKK-affiliated Kurds in Rojava (feeling their community threatened its “vital national interests”), communities in Syrian Kurdistan were committed to ensuring that they did not ‘ruffle any feathers’ outside of their own territories. At the same time, however, they knew that it would be incredibly unwise for Turkey to occupy the north of Syria, as such an act would likely increase PKK resistance in Turkey and condemnation from the international community.

The USA, meanwhile, which basically helped to install Kurdish self-rule in Iraq because of its opposition to the Iraqi Ba’ath government, was also in no hurry to back Kurds in Syria (principally because they did not appear subservient to Western interests, and because such an unlikely alliance would “further strain relations with Turkey”). In other words, the Rojava Revolution had many more powerful enemies than it did friends, with no nations in the region (or in the West) having “**any real interest in the rights of [Kurdish workers] in Syria, or anywhere else**”.⁸²²

Nonetheless, the Kurds’ role in defeating ISIS began to look ever more important in the summer of 2014. And when President Obama was finally forced to comment on the ISIS phenomenon, the US and the PKK finally found themselves in the position of “battling a common enemy”. One big problem, however, was that US allies, namely Turkey, had been criticised by the PKK for their “overt and covert support for ISIS”. At the same time, the PKK still suffered “sporadic military ambushes by Turkish forces” in spite of the ceasefire agreement of 2013, in which it began to move its fighters from Turkey into Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸²³

II) Kurdish Nationalism against Direct Democracy in Rojava

⁸²² <http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/international/16052-the-kurdish-question-in-syria-a-lithmus-test>

⁸²³ http://open.salon.com/blog/stuartbramhall/2014/07/17/kurds_mobilize_against_isis_in_syria

In late August 2013, actions of solidarity with Rojava were being organised in Iraqi Kurdistan by citizens opposed to the KRG's blockade of Syrian Kurdistan. With the Sêmalka border gate having been closed since May, activists had decided to organise "some activities to protest [against] the authorities" responsible for the action. The PKK's allies in the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (PÇDK), along with "many civil organizations and political parties", joined the protests in the hope of encouraging the reinitiation of "trade between South and West of Kurdistan". PÇDK member Mam Hejar, for example, called on all "democrats" and "patriots" to oppose the embargo and support the progressive democratic experience in Rojava.⁸²⁴

In April 2014, the KDP had allegedly "removed the flag of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) from the Sêmalka [Peşabir] border crossing with Rojava", to which it had already been "limiting access" for around a year. It subsequently "raised its [own] party's flag in its place", and also "dismantled the bridge across the Tigris River which had connected Rojava with the KRG", according to The Rojava Report. Meanwhile, "at least one Kurdish youth from Rojava was injured... when Peşmerga units attached to the KDP opened fire on protesters", who were "angry about the construction of a new border ditch" and wished to "denounce the mistreatment of Rojava refugees in the KRG". The demonstrations had been organised by the Ciwanên Şoresger (or the 'revolutionary youth'), "and had attracted hundreds who came from as far away as Derik and Qamişlo". KDP Peshmerga had allegedly "pointed heavy machine-guns at the protesters before opening fire, while the protesters responded with rocks".

Previously, Rojavan refugees in the KRG had complained of "harsh, prison-like conditions in which basic necessities [were] lacking and violence - including sexual violence directed against women - from local KDP officials and their allies against camp residents [was] commonplace". There were even claims that "women from the camps were being sold to local elites as well as wealthy Arabs from Iraq and the Gulf". And, at the same time, there was also political opposition to the KDP's policies towards Rojava inside Iraqi Kurdistan, with "a coalition of the largest opposition political parties in the KRG - including the YNK, the Goran movement, and Yekgirtu İslami - [joining] with the Kurdish National Congress (KNK) in... demanding the border-crossing at Sêmalka be opened and that the KRG recognize the Autonomous Canton Governments of Rojava".⁸²⁵

In May 2014, meanwhile, the ruling KDP was accused by "representatives of 116 civil society organisations" of attacking "progressive forces and free and democratic media". The party was, they said, attempting to "**disrupt attempts at broad Kurdish unity and perhaps stall efforts to aid the revolution in Rojava**". Zübeyde Zümrüt of Turkey's BDP, for example, accused Barzanî of having "**dug ditches and blockaded Rojava**" when he should have been uniting with Syrian Kurds in an attempt to "defeat attacks on [their] historic gains".⁸²⁶ Subsequently, when the "KRG parliament decided to officially recognize the three cantons... of Rojava" in mid-October 2014, President Barzanî still refused to recognise them.⁸²⁷ Growing unrest and a "unity agreement" between Kurdish parties soon afterwards, however, would threaten to force Barzanî's hand and "help mitigate financial problems" in Rojava (at least temporarily).⁸²⁸

Control of Oil in the Midst of Political Conflict

⁸²⁴ http://www.hawarnews.com/english/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=142:kurds-in-south-of-kurdistan-protesting-embargo-on-rojava&catid=1:news&Itemid=2

⁸²⁵ <http://rojavarreport.wordpress.com/2014/04/09/kdp-strengthens-embargo-on-rojava-opens-fire-on-protesters/>

⁸²⁶ <http://turkeyharvest.blogspot.mx/2014/05/yesterday-we-spoke-here-about.html> and

⁸²⁷ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iraqi-kurdish-government-recognizes-rojava-cantons.aspx?pageID=238&nID=73096&NewsCatID=352>

⁸²⁸ <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/10/31/remembering-the-forgotten-kurds-in-syria/>

In July 2014, Kurdish journalist Maksut Kosker spoke at The Jamestown Foundation about how Iraq had become “the center of conflict in the Middle East because of decisions taken... by Western powers such as Great Britain, France and Italy” upon the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. With Kurds fighting for a century to combat the negative consequences of the creation of new states which absorbed their communities, their “most recent challenge”, he says, now came in the form of ISIS jihadism. Nonetheless, because many Arab and Kurdish communities in Iraq are tribal, Kosker insists, and “none of the tribes want to be ruled by other tribal leaders”, ethnicity is effectively “more important than religion in the region”. The Kurds and southern Iraqi Shiites, therefore, could never be a “part of [ISIS’s] project”, he stresses.

If sectarianism was already rife in Iraq under an abusive Shia government, Kosker asserts, the military campaign of ISIS (attracting a large number of marginalised Sunnis) had made it even more so. In fact, he argues, “Iraq has never been an actual unified state”, and it now looked “like it [would] never have the chance to last long enough to become one”. Apart from racial tension and hatred in the country, he stresses, “control of northern Iraq’s oil industry also provides a significant economic reason for the conflict”. And that was why the battles between Kurds and ISIS had focussed primarily “on two major oil-rich cities – Mosul and Kirkuk”. After the latter’s victory in Mosul (Iraq’s second largest city), Kosker insists, it “declared it would not fight against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as the Kurdish forces were experienced and well-organized”. However, with the abandonment of land by Iraqi government forces, the KRG was left in control of “disputed Kurdish lands in early June”, and Kurdish nationalists thus received even more responsibility within Iraq than they had previously had.

The subsequent hunger for greater control in the KRG, Kosker suggests, may have made the capture of Kirkuk too “problematic” for ISIS, leading it to “divert its energies” to its “struggle with the central government”. Having fought against the YPG/YPJ in Rojava “without success for almost a year”, meanwhile, as the PKK declared its guerrillas “were ready to protect all parts of Kurdistan against ISIS”, the Wahhabi jihadists perhaps thought that, for the time being at least, it was sensible not to wage an all-out war against Kurdish populations. And at precisely this point, the KRG decided “to hold [a] referendum in Kirkuk in the absence of a powerful central Iraqi government”, with President Barzanî promising that “oil revenues from Kirkuk [would] benefit all the local communities” and not only the Kurds.⁸²⁹

“Long hailed by Iraqi Kurdish nationalists as “our Jerusalem””, Kirkuk had been a place of squabbling between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen for years. And, when Saddam Hussein “used forced population transfers to undermine Kurdish influence there” in the 1980s as part of a campaign of ‘Arabisation’, the city gained an even more symbolic importance.⁸³⁰ Additionally, oil from Kirkuk had long been considered by Kurdish nationalists as a “valuable economic contributor for a possible independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq”, being “high quality” and “relatively easy to extract”. In fact, it had made up “approximately half of all Iraqi total oil revenues” before the ISIS onslaught.

If Kurdish nationalists were to give the city up, they would effectively “lose their strong hand for an independent state”, and that was something they were not about to do in an attempt at saving their political counterparts in Baghdad. With ISIS holding “a 1,050 kilometer border with the KRG in Iraq and at least half of that with Rojava”, though, the Kurds nonetheless represented a powerful enemy for the jihadist group. And, as both forces

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[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=42601&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=6c99e60d1b314fc26785dc848aae4464#.VBCLDWOGcSE](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=42601&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=6c99e60d1b314fc26785dc848aae4464#.VBCLDWOGcSE)

⁸³⁰ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/21/the-worlds-next-country-kurdistan-kurds-iraq/>

needed oil “to preserve their legitimacy and recognition” (through the economic resources it provides and the diplomatic allies it attracts), it was “probable”, Kosker insists, “that a conflict between them [would] last for decades if the “Islamic State” [survived]”.⁸³¹

As will be seen in the following chapter, the KRG’s focus on expanding its territories to further benefit its corrupt and exploitative political and economic elites saw it take its eye off other issues – like the protection of citizens within its territory. Both in Makhmour and Şengal, for example, the regime was significantly embarrassed by the fact that the PKK and YPG/YPJ came to rescue civilians in the absence of its own forces. In short, the values and priorities of the progressive Kurdish movement and the bourgeois nationalist movement were revealed more clearly than ever during this period. While the latter focussed on political power and selfish economic aims, the former focussed on humanitarian rescue missions. And that key difference was something that the KRG would not wish to see highlighted again any time soon.

Turkey and the ‘Two Rival Pan-Kurdish Movements’

According to Middle East Analyst Jonathan Spyer, the “two autonomous Kurdish entities” of the KRG and Rojava had “arisen, in a contiguous land area, as a result of the collapse, or retreat, under very different circumstances, of two neighboring Arab nationalist dictatorships – in Iraq and in Syria”. In Iran, meanwhile, Kurdish autonomy was difficult because of “severe repression”, “mass arrests”, and “executions of activists”. And in Turkey, which hosted the “largest single population” of Kurds, the strength of the state meant that the PKK’s armed struggle against it never had a possibility of success. Furthermore, the group’s subsequent peace process, Spyer asserts, had failed to generate agreement on “core issues”, including the “release of thousands of Kurds jailed under not yet amended counter terror provisions of the penal code”.

The “widely differing relations” of the KRG and Rojava “with neighboring powers”, Spyer argues, greatly complicates their own relationship. With the former nurturing a strong relationship with Turkey, giving it “oil in return for electricity”, it had shared its neighbour’s “skepticism or hostility to the emergence of... [the] PYD-dominated [revolution of] ‘Rojava’”. Due to the PYD’s association with the PKK, an autonomous Rojava appeared to both the KRG and Turkey as a “strategic gain for the PKK”, presenting a “potential for disruption in the event of renewed conflict” between the Turkish State and the Kurdish insurgents. This concept, Spyer suggests, provided both an “impetus for the peace process, but also as a threat” to it. And the Turkish regime, meanwhile, in a sign that it was not truly committed to negotiations, decided to respond to the Rojava Revolution by “tightening up... border controls”, “cutting off... communication with the PYD”, and “beginning... the construction of a wall along the border”. Rather than preparing for peace, then, it seemed very much like the Turkish State was preparing for war.

KRG president Masoud Barzanî, meanwhile, who saw Abdullah Öcalan’s philosophy as a pan-Kurdish movement opposed to his own, followed the Turkish line as much as he could (without endangering his own reputation among Kurds). Both figures, Spyer says, viewed each other with “a deep suspicion”, which was perhaps represented in “the failure of the 2012 Hewlêr agreement to ensure the joint governance of Rojava by the [bloc led by the] PYD and the KNC ([an] association of Barzanî-supporting Syrian Kurdish parties)”. As a result, he asserts, the KRG viewed Rojava simply “as the fiefdom of its rivals” from 2012 onwards.

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[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=42601&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=6c99e60d1b314fc26785dc848aae4464#.VBCLDWOGcSE](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=42601&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=6c99e60d1b314fc26785dc848aae4464#.VBCLDWOGcSE)

The KRG, Spyer says, could have a great influence over cooperation between the two autonomous Kurdish regions, especially considering its significant financial sway. However, due to the importance of its economic relations with Turkey, the petty rivalry between Barzanî and Öcalan, and the “absence of any international guarantees for Rojava”, **the continued existence of the Rojava experience looked set to depend very much on the Turkish-KRG alliance against it.** For Spyer, in fact, Turkey even had “a kind of veto over any prospects of Kurdish unity”, possessing the mechanism within that partnership with the KRG “for preserving the division of the Kurds”.

Essentially, the leadership of the KRG was much more interested in ensuring its own power than in truly uniting Kurds, bringing social justice, or implementing meaningful democracy in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to Spyer, it was already clearly and permanently established as a body autonomous of the Iraqi central government, which was particularly visible in its “showdowns with the government in Baghdad in the course of 2012”. These events, Spyer says, showed that the KRG “could defend itself [from Baghdad] if it needed to”. At the same time, the nationalist government was “slowly developing the machinery of statehood, shrewdly avoiding adventures into the disputed areas, or any premature declaration of sovereignty”. It had also gradually increased the number of foreign diplomatic offices in its capital, showing an attempt to woo the international community. In short, Spyer stresses, it is difficult “to see how this foothold of Kurdish quasi-sovereignty [in Iraq] could disappear”.

Rojava, meanwhile, because of the ongoing Syrian Civil War, was “a far more provisional, tentative and vulnerable achievement”, says Spyer. The Assad regime, he asserts, has not yet fallen, and it “fully intends to win back control of Syria”. And with the advances of ISIS and the international campaigns against it, he stresses, the “tide of the war on the ground” was increasingly in the regime’s favour. At the same time, he emphasises, it was almost “a certainty” that a victorious Assad would seek to “re-impose control on the north east of the country” (mainly because of the oil resources the territory possessed). The majority of anti-Assad rebel forces, meanwhile, were also “committed to the maintenance of a unitary Syrian state” (or to an oppressive Wahhabi-inspired caliphate). Essentially, Spyer argues, “Rojava [was] without local allies” (apart from the PKK), and also without any significant “regional or international relations or sponsorship”. Therefore, while the territory was managing “to defend itself on the ground” (thus accomplishing “the most basic requirement for rule”), its progressive and autonomous “future [remained] uncertain”.

The ideological pan-Kurdish battle between nationalism and Democratic Confederalism, Spyer claims, pitted “two very different... movements against one another”. Consequently, he says, “the continued fact of Kurdish disunity [looked] inevitable”, especially when we consider how this “absence of unity” had the potential to allow “unfriendly or hostile outside forces” (like Turkey) “to wield influence for their own benefit among the Kurds”. For Spyer, therefore, only a “rapprochement between the KDP and the PKK and a resultant KRG guarantee of commitment to Rojava’s survival would vastly increase its chances in the longer term”.

While “the US and other western states [remained] committed to the continuation of Iraq and of Syria as single, sovereign states”, Spyer says, it was incumbent on Kurds in both Iraq and Syria to seek to convince the world that “the splitting of these states into their component parts [represented] a better chance for stability in the longer term”. Simultaneously, he argues, they should emphasise the futility of efforts “to artificially contain the aspirations of their component peoples within state borders that have often more closely resembled prison walls than accepted boundaries between legitimate countries”. In other words, they should seek to convince the international community that a more peaceful Middle East required “the survival both of the KRG and of Rojava”. Overall, however,

“preventing Rojava’s isolation” was crucial, insists Spyer, if only for the fight against Wahhabi jihadists.⁸³²

Israel on the ‘Kurdish Question’

Spyer’s article above brings up the question of what the Israeli position is towards Kurdish autonomy. On his website, Spyer quotes Peshmerga General Maghdid Haraki as saying that, “eighty years ago, they [i.e. colonial powers] joined three nations together and formed Iraq. This mistake must not be repeated. ...The solution is a breakup”.⁸³³ And, while I would argue that the arbitrary division or unification of different ethnic and religious communities did indeed play a significant part in creating the conflicts in the Middle East today, I would also insist that the true focus should be placed on the division between those who own land (and resources) and those who have been dispossessed of land (and resources).

In short, while ethnic and religious divisions are very real, they simply distract people from recognising that it is never ethnicity or religion that are responsible for their lack of democratic control over land, resources, and justice. Both are simply characteristics (whether physical, circumstantial, or mental) which, in the end belong to individual humans who make individual choices. Essentially, then, what really determines the unequal partition of the items listed above is robbery, deception, and violence – which are crimes committed by human beings, and not by religious or ethnic groups as a whole. And, fundamentally, these are offences that transcend ethnic or religious backgrounds, going to the very root of the internal human struggle between ethically-centred civilisation and ego-driven savagery.

In other words, the comment made by the Peshmerga official above is indeed correct in his assertion that the states of Iraq and Syria ought to be broken up. They are arbitrary and exploitative entities and they serve no purpose but to control the lives of the people under their oppressive yoke. However, while Spyer seems to use this sentiment as a justification for the creation of new, ethnic-based or religious-based states, I would emphasise that no new state needs to be created. Instead, what is necessary for peace, freedom, and justice to arrive in the Middle East (and elsewhere in the world) is localised democratic control over land and resources.

Nation states (and their self-interested, power-hungry rulers) effectively centralise the wealth created by a number of communities in a large area of land, before then deciding whether to redistribute this wealth partially (to keep their citizens from rebelling), or to keep the majority for themselves (and deal with rebellions as best they can when they finally arrive). What the human race should aspire to, therefore, is cooperation not within arbitrarily designated borders, but with all communities prepared to base trade on a fair exchange of goods between producers rather than ‘owners’. As has been proposed for Rojava, the only purpose of a political body larger than a community or neighbourhood should be to coordinate the relationship between different communities. It should never take away the right of a community’s members to make decisions about their own land and resources, or attempt to impose measures not in the interests of those citizens upon them from above.

Essentially, though, direct, localised democracy is not the type of system that Western imperialists, Middle Eastern dictatorships, or Zionist Israel want to see in the region. One of the main things that the latter wants is (at least officially) to reduce anti-Zionist hostility, which comes in large part from Arab nationalists and Islamists. Therefore, anything that weakens these forces is desirable to Israel. And in the case of Iraq, Syria, Iran, and even Turkey, Israel thus has an interest in ensuring or promoting Kurdish independence (or at

⁸³² <http://www.juergen-klute.eu/en/article/748.spyer.html>

⁸³³ <http://jonathanspyer.com/2014/09/05/the-is-kurdish-war/>

least a form of government not directly hostile to its own regional aims and activities). Effectively, then the Israelis have a friend in Barzaní's KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan, which follows a capitalist line of thought and is prepared to treat Israel as if it has not been responsible for division and devastation throughout the Middle East.

Elsewhere, with more progressive Kurdish forces, Israel would have less to gain, though the PKK-affiliated movement has not directly attacked the Zionist State like Arab nationalists and Islamists have (even if it sees it in a negative light). Rojavan Kurds, for example, may well oppose Israel's crimes in Palestine on a humanitarian level, but they are not likely to expend their limited resources in opposing them in the same way that dogmatic Islamists (driven by a sense of religious duty to protect fellow Muslims) and Arab nationalists (driven by a sense of ethnic duty to protect fellow Arabs) have.

As a result, Israel may well support the role of Rojava in weakening both Ba'athism in Syria and reactionary Wahhabi-inspired Islamism, even if it is at odds with Rojavan autonomy for secondary ideological reasons. Any overt Israeli funding, however, would likely discredit the autonomy of both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds in the eyes of their neighbours, who are generally opposed to the Zionist State. In Iraq, in fact, the integrity of Barzaní's KDP has already been significantly undermined by the support it has received from the West (and open Israeli support would almost certainly worsen the party's image even further). At the same time, although the interests of the West (and Israel) appear to be parallel to those of the Rojavans at the current time (in as far as their fight for an alternative to Ba'athism and Wahhabi extremism is concerned), these imperialist and colonialist forces are much more wary about supporting Rojavan forces than they are about supporting the KRG, as the progressive Kurdish movement could inevitably threaten their economic interests in the region.

One of the final words on this matter should go to PYD co-chair Salih Muslim who, as a representative of the revolutionary process in Syrian Kurdistan, has asserted that there have not been "very clear positions [from Israel] regarding Rojava". If the Zionist State does indeed support democracy (as it claims it does), he says, "they should [first] implement it... in their land... [by] respecting Palestinian rights". And, if they support the "independence of the Kurdish nation", he insists, "they should accept a similar right for the Palestinians". In fact, with an apparent reference to Israel's genocidal assaults on Gaza, Muslim finally asserts that "the old mentality of solving problems through the use of force is a past one, [and] it is not acceptable".⁸³⁴

While the above stance is essentially critical of the Zionist State (though politely so), the Kurdish nationalists in Iraq have long maintained "a fairly strong, positive approach to Israel, because they identify with Israel's historical and political themes", according to University of Kentucky professor Robert Olson.⁸³⁵ The Times of Israel, meanwhile, even speaks of how "a Mossad officer named Sagi Chori was sent to help his close friend... Mulla Mustafa Barzanî... in the 1960s", with nationalist Kurds seeing "Israel as a role model for an independent Kurdistan, a small nation surrounded by enemies and bolstered by a strategic partnership with the United States".⁸³⁶ In summary, therefore, progressive Rojava and the nationalist KRG have very different outlooks regarding Israel, and only the latter would be a guaranteed long-term collaborator with the Zionist State. The former, meanwhile, would essentially have the effect of weakening everything that the current state of Israel represents (in fencing off an ethno-religious 'other', supporting the colonialisation and gentrification of land, employing political fear-mongering to justify centralised and anti-democratic

⁸³⁴ <http://www.nationalia.info/en/news/1944>

⁸³⁵ <http://forward.com/articles/154888/iraqi-kurds-cool-ties-to-israel/?p=all>

⁸³⁶ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/is-a-free-kurdistan-and-a-new-israeli-ally-upon-us/>

government measures, and asserting the top-down dominance of economic and political elites through the use of disproportionate and dictatorial military might).

III) The USA not Keen on Rojava's Direct Democracy

In September 2014, Counterpunch's Kevin Carson questioned whether the USA was really prepared to support Rojava in order to defeat ISIS. He speaks of how the "main US ally" in the campaign against ISIS was the Barzanî government of the KRG, and that the USA therefore did not want to back any forces opposed to it. And with "Barzanî's main competitor for the loyalty of the Kurdish people" being the PKK's Abdullah Öcalan (who had been inspired by a "wave of interest in libertarian socialist thought among Kurdish nationalists after the fall of the USSR"), the USA's interest in bolstering Barzanî (and undermining the Rojava Revolution) would seem more than desirable.

Öcalan's theory of democratic confederalism, "also influenced by horizontalist struggles like Mexico's EZLN", was seen "as an alternative to both Western corporate capitalism and the Soviet command economy", Carson explains, and was thus adopted as the "basis for the Group of Communities in Kurdistan" (of which both the PKK and PYD are members). Seeking to create "federated direct democracies on the model of the Paris Commune, the soviets that emerged in Russia after the February Revolution, and local anarchist bodies in the Spanish Revolution", he says, this political system would be "governed by a mixture of worker self-management and participatory planning", with women figuring prominently. With this in mind, it would seem illogical for the USA, after having contributed to the 'defeat' of the Soviet Bloc, to suddenly tolerate (or even support) a new attempt at building a more progressive global society.

In Turkey, however, Carson speaks about how the PKK had already inspired Kurds to gain "significant regional autonomy for Kurdish areas" in the east, and had withdrawn "the bulk of its [experienced] fighting forces into Iraqi Kurdistan" in order to facilitate this peaceful process. At the same time, though, he asserts, the PKK and its allies in Rojava had been much "more successful militarily against ISIS forces than the Western-backed Free Syrian army". Therefore, it would "arguably be far more effective" at defeating ISIS if Obama and the USA were truly interested in doing so (even if an alliance were purely a temporary affair).

In the "Yazidi areas of Iraqi Kurdistan", Carson stresses, "Barzanî's Peshmerga forces melted away", and it was the YPG and PKK that stepped in to save Yezîdî civilians. These forces also stood strong (and seemingly unbeatable) against ISIS in Rojava until the jihadist group launched everything it had at Kobanî in its intensified assault of September 2014. Apart from being capable of resisting ISIS, Carson asserts, the militias of the progressive Kurdish movement also had "popular support throughout Kurdistan – not just the Iraqi part... unlike Barzanî". If Obama really wanted a popular and effective force to take control of the fight against ISIS, therefore, the PKK and its allies would clearly be the best bet.

Carson insists that such an alliance (or at least a permanent one) between the USA and pro-PKK forces would be unlikely, however. "The one thing worse than an ISIS victory, from the American state's perspective", he says, "would be the demonstration effect of an alternative to both corporate capitalism and state socialism, based on decentralism, direct democracy and self-management". In fact, he suggests that such a system had already been defeated after the Second World War in Korea. Quoting writer William Gillis, he speaks about how, when Japanese force left the Korean Peninsula, the power vacuum created had seen "something amazing" happen. Korean anarchists, he says, "came out of the woodwork and formed a nationwide federation of village and workers councils to oversee a massive project of land reform".

Only when “Soviet occupation authorities in the north quickly put a stop to this”, Carson asserts, was the aforementioned project finally liquidated and the Kim regime installed. And, when the USA eventually arrived in the south, “military commanders “had no protocol for dealing with regional federations and anarchist communes”, and thus “restored land to the dispossessed aristocracy and helped the landlords set up a military government”. When the Korean War started, meanwhile, Carson says, the US-backed military regime murdered numerous “anarchists and other leftists”, with “at least 100,000 suspected anarchists, socialists and communists or sympathizers [being] buried in mass graves”.

For Carson, US elites have one thing in common with ISIS today, just like they did with Soviet and anti-Soviet elites in the past. Like “with the farmers in Orwell’s *Animal Farm*”, he argues, “the men have one interest in common with the pigs that trumps all others: [that] they don’t want the “animals” – ordinary people – to rule themselves”.⁸³⁷ And in Rojava, there is a risk of that happening, Carson asserts. Therefore, the ruling economic class of the USA would have to be foolish to support Rojavans in the long term (even if they and their PKK allies are the most effective and popular force in the fight against ISIS). And if an alliance with Rojavans did materialise, Carson suggests, in order to defeat ISIS, it was unlikely to be a long-term coalition (unless of course political leaders of the Rojava Revolution betrayed its stated ideals). In short, if the Revolution followed its progressive course, of empowering all civilians and giving them control over their own lives, the USA would almost certainly do its very best to undermine the process.

IV) Sympathisers Respond to Rojava’s Call for Solidarity

In late August 2014, the president of Kobanî Canton Enver Muslim spoke about how revolutionary processes were developing in the territory in spite of Kobanî being surrounded by hostile forces. Citizens of Kobanî, he says, had resisted the intensified “attacks and embargo... by relying on their defenses and resources through a model of **common production and equal division of goods**”. In fact, he insists, working to “build a new economy” was “integral to the self-defense of the canton”. Nonetheless, with ISIS stepping up its attacks on the area, the “various organizations under the umbrella of TEV-DEM temporarily halted their other work [out of pure necessity] in order to support the YPG/YPJ”. And, in spite of the “great quantity of aid which [had] flown to Kobanî from North Kurdistan, Europe and other places where Kurds [had] organized campaigns”, Muslim asserts, there were still “serious needs, in particular in the area of municipal and health services”.

With Kobanî increasingly under siege, Muslim affirms, water from the Euphrates and “the electricity provided by the Tishrin dam” had all been “cut by ISIS”. Nonetheless, residents had sought their “own solution to the problem”, he says, by digging “18 wells around the village of Qeynter Oxan in west Kobanî” and laying “3200 meters of pipe to bring the water [to the city]”. These actions, he said, had helped to provide “40% of Kobanî’s water needs”. Electricity, meanwhile, was “provided by generators” that the autonomous administration had “installed on every street”.

Turkey, meanwhile, had played a key role in “cutting electricity” to Kobanî, Muslim stresses, because “the Turkish state [provided] electricity to places like Jarabulus where ISIS [was] located” but not to Kobanî. Other areas that had suffered because of the anti-Rojavan Turkish embargo had been food stores, basic services, and “all forms of trade”. At the same time, although “an old building had been converted into a 210 bed hospital”, Muslim

⁸³⁷ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/01/obama-wants-to-defeat-isis-but-not-that-badly/#.VAWioRdxnKw.twitter>

asserts, there were “serious medicine shortages” and “almost none of the necessary equipment”. And Turkey would “not accept any [Rojavan] patients except those injured by fighting”. The country’s blockade had also led to a “lack of construction materials..., vehicles, [and] garbage trucks”, Muslim says. In spite of all of these difficulties, though, Kobanî was still accommodating “thousands of refugees from Aleppo, Damascus and other parts of Syria” (which had seen “the population of the Canton” grow “several times larger... over the past two years”).

Committed to not giving in to Turkish demands of subservience or to ISIS encirclement, Muslim explains, the Kobanî Canton was “**building a new economic model**” to become **more self-sufficient**. Citizens there, he notes, had been “engaging in production based on [their] own resources and village communes”, and a “communal, common and equal model of [agricultural] production” was the key principle behind their actions. In this way, he asserts, residents were adding to the solidarity “received from [their] brothers and sisters in North Kurdistan” with their own inventiveness and ingenuity, all with the aim of ‘breaking the embargo’. Furthermore, he insists that he was sure that the “model of democratic autonomy” being built in Rojava would stand “the test of time”.⁸³⁸

The Solidarity of Turkish Kurds

The support from outside Rojava that Muslim was speaking about above came primarily from a large number of Turkish Kurds, who set about “gathering humanitarian assistance... for their relatives across the southern border”. The campaign, Turkish Weekly reported in late August 2014, had been “launched in 2013 following the first wave of ISIL assaults on towns” in Rojava, but was “widened recently when ISIL laid siege to Kobanî city”. The DTK (“founded in 2007 by 140 civil society organisations”) was coordinating support from Diyarbakır, but a “wide range of organisations in Kurdish provinces [had also] joined the campaign”. There were also “**hundreds of volunteers**... working on the campaign”, and adverts had been placed on billboards, TV channels, and newspapers by the DTK to encourage citizens to contribute financially to the efforts.

The DTK, however, had encountered a number of problems when trying to deliver the aid collected, with “roads between Rojava’s three non-contiguous Kurdish cantons [being] held by ISIL and other extremist groups”. In order for aid to pass between the cantons, therefore, it would have to pass through Turkey. Then, after ISIS had cut off the water and electricity to Kobanî, the city became the main recipient of assistance, especially considering that, as a result of the refugee influx from elsewhere in Syria, “Kobanî’s population [had] spiked from 500,000 to 800,000”. Furthermore, people had not been “able to harvest the crops in their fields” due to the ISIS onslaught, so starvation was a real threat for the city’s inhabitants. Consequently, between February and August 2014, the DTK “sent 190 trucks worth of aid to Kobanî alone”, while having “collection centres set up in Kurdish cities” throughout Turkey.

Although some aid from the UN to Rojava “helped provide vaccinations for children”, conditions were “not suitable for treating chronic illnesses”. And, to make matters worse, Kurds in Rojava who had previously been accustomed to crossing “into Turkey to receive treatment for serious illnesses” now found that the embargo and the humanitarian crisis had made that a lot harder to do. According to pharmacist and DTK campaign volunteer Abdullah Ayyildiz, the war in Syria (“created by imperial powers”) had been “causing suffering among children, women, the elderly, and the disabled”. The “only goal” of ISIS, meanwhile, he argued, was “carnage”, and he insisted that, “if they’re Muslims, then I’m not a Muslim”.

⁸³⁸ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/08/26/kobane-canton-defeating-embargo-and-attacks-through-communal-production/>

With water only being “provided to the city [of Kobanî] once every 48 hours”, the sick being in “urgent need of medical assistance”, malnutrition “becoming a serious problem”, and the “number of doctors and health personnel [being] extremely limited”, Turkish Weekly reported, the “organisers of the humanitarian campaign” had now “called on the UN and major international actors to provide support to Rojava and to use their influence to secure free passage of aid from Turkey”. In spite of Turkish hostility, however, the DTK and its volunteers were doing all that they could to support Rojava and help it to keep on resisting. At the same time, though, they insisted: “our assistance is not enough”.⁸³⁹

Rojava Democracy as “A Part of the Whole World”

In mid-November 2014, Metin Yeğin at Özgür Gündem recommended the “system that people [were] attempting to build in Rojava” as “a concept that knows no borders” and that could be applied “everywhere”. He insists it is a form of “‘oppositional democracy’ that opposes the capitalist/neo-liberal system and the prison regime which in every part of the globe is day by day creating ever worse conditions for a humanity that is worked and subjected to extreme conditions of control”. For him, the Rojava Revolution was a representation of the “‘freedom and equality’ that [could] be realized in a society with ecological democracy, collectives, cooperatives, communes, [and] radical participatory democracy”. What he calls ‘Rojava Democracy’ is, he claims, an attempt to “bring to life radical participatory democracy as a form of governance” which does “not only include minorities from every ethnic-religious community” for the sake of it but out of the belief “that it is absolutely necessary to include them”.

The example of Rojava, he argues, is the “opposite of borders”, and women there had “become a foundational subject of this radical democracy in a Middle East which [was] one of the sharpest and clearest examples of [gender] exclusion”. For women “who are excluded..., confined to their work with children, both exhibited and covered”, while at the same time being “objectified”, the Rojava Revolution was simply “a liberation struggle”, he insists. Most of all, however, Rojava Democracy was “a part of the whole world” because it was a consequence of global conditions and thoughts. “Building itself from [the] dust and [the] fragments” of the aforementioned environment, he asserts, it was fast proving itself to be a genuinely revolutionary socio-political model.⁸⁴⁰

Tamil Solidarity

In September 2013, writer Karthick RM talked at Counter Currents about the support the Tamil movement was extending to the Rojava Revolution. Speaking of the “horrible ethnic cleansing of Kurdish civilians in Rojava” at the hands of Wahhabi extremists, he reports on how civilians were “butchered inside their homes, women and children were raped, and that there were also beheadings”. Although “rebellious against a tyrannical regime is not just the right but also the duty of an oppressed people”, however, Karthick insists that a “rebellion that forgets virtue and replaces one sect of tyrants with another is not rebellion, but barbarism”. Therefore, the Islamist rebels in Syria were not true rebels but barbarians, he stresses. Nonetheless, he asserts, “the Americans [had] been harping only about an alleged chemical weapons attack by al-Assad’s forces” before late-2014, while giving just a “half-hearted condemnation of the massacres of Kurds” by Wahhabi jihadists, in an attempt to portray them as a lesser evil when compared to the Ba’athist regime.

“Grassroots activists in Tamil Nadu”, Karthick emphasises, had reacted to news of anti-Kurdish atrocities in Syria and Iraq “with righteous anger”. Furthermore, along with “urban mass political movements like the May 17 Movement, Balachandran Students’ Movement,

⁸³⁹ <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/170663/kurds-work-to-break-isil-39-s-embargo.html>

⁸⁴⁰ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/11/17/rojava-democracy/>

Islamic Youth Movement Against Genocide, and others from across the world”, these activists had promised to “stand in solidarity with the Kurds in this time of pain and resistance”. All too aware of how the USA had given Sri Lanka “military advice to cluster bomb the Eelam Tamil people”, whilst “silently [watching] as the genocidal Sri Lankan state used chemical weapons on the Eelam Tamils”, these campaigners emphasised that the USA’s talk of “supposed chemical weapons use by al-Assad” (and its relative silence about Islamist horrors) amounted to “tacit support” for anti-Assad jihadists.

The Öcalan-inspired progressive Kurdish movement, Karthick affirms, shares “a lot in common” with “the Eelam Tamils’ struggle which was led by Pirapaharan’s LTTE”. Being “militantly secular”, the search for “gender-justice” of both movements was “far advanced of the conditions in their respective regions”, he says, while “both [had been] opposed, oppressed and repeatedly betrayed by not one just country, but by the International Community”. Finally, he emphasises that, “more than any other struggle in the Middle-East, the Kurdish struggle for national liberation [represented] the quest for reason, modernity and egalitarianism, and a just, secular and inclusive society”. For Karthick, then, “one can legitimately argue that the Kurdish struggle represents the ONLY hope for the blossoming of such values in the region”.⁸⁴¹

Conclusion

The majority of the world’s citizens, often distracted and misinformed by the mainstream media, knew very little about the Rojava Revolution before ISIS made significant advances on territory held by US allies in Iraq in 2014. In fact, the minimal coverage that Rojava’s progressive process had received had come almost entirely from sources in libertarian socialist circles. For, while news outlets may have briefly covered the existence of Kurds in Syria, few actually delved into what the ideological experiment in their territory actually meant for the country, the Middle East, and the wider world. In other words, there was effectively a media blackout regarding Rojava. And only when ISIS beheaded a small handful of Westerners towards the end of 2014 did greater media coverage finally come (though it tended to brush over the progressive ideology of the popular mass movement in Syrian Kurdistan). Along with this extended exposure, however, came a new sense of Western military intervention being suddenly ‘justified’ once again (in the minds of Western elites, at least).

As seen in previous chapters (and in Chapter Seven in particular), further Western military intervention has never been what the Middle East needs. What it really needs is recognition and support for secular, progressive, and democratic experiments like that undertaken in Rojava. In this chapter, I have not sought to give a “blanket endorsement” of every position or action taken by the PYD and its allies in Rojava. In fact, I would even emphasise the absolute necessity of positive criticism of what is happening there as, while expressing solidarity with Rojavans is vital, we must never remain silent about the ‘points for improvement’ of any political system. Nonetheless, the simple reality is that the Rojava Revolution is by far the best example of humanitarian values being practised on a significant scale in the Middle East, and must therefore receive the support of all citizens in the world who advocate peace, social justice, direct democracy, and freedom.

Essentially, utopias are products of human imagination which give us goals to work towards and conceptions about how we can make improvements on our current situation. They are not concrete realities. And, with this in mind, we should never expect real-world political movements to resemble those of an imaginary utopian society. We can implore them to make improvements so that they come closer to what we consider ‘ideal’, but we

⁸⁴¹ <http://www.countercurrents.org/karthick030913.htm>, <https://wavesunceasing.wordpress.com/tag/solidarity/>, and @karthick_rm

cannot expect any human organisation to reach perfection (unless we have very low standards of perfection, of course). The fact is that, if we only engaged with real-world movements that reflected our utopian ideals exactly, we would probably never support any existing political group or process.

In short, by standing “with the oppressed against the oppressors” in all situations, lovers of justice and freedom at least come close to putting our principles into practice. There should, of course, be different stances and courses of action regarding reactionary and progressive ideologies and groups. If a movement of the oppressed shares a number of our own values, for example, we should give it our active (if not critical) support. If it shares almost nothing with our values, however, our role should be to work with the oppressed to free themselves doubly from both oppression and reactionism.

As the AEG insists, politics is always “a messy situation, based on debate, conflict and compromise” and, if we think for ourselves, we are always going to disagree with others on something, even if their views are essentially progressive.⁸⁴² However, if we wait for a perfect movement or moment to arrive, in which our utopian ideals are reflected completely, we are likely to wait our whole lives. Whilst maintaining our own independent principles, therefore, it is essential that we realise that realities on the ground are much more complicated than we would like them to be, and that we therefore support movements that come close to representing what we stand for.

In October 2014, *eagainst.com* summarised the value of the Rojava Revolution by saying that, while it reveals “a Kurdish proposal for peace”, it could also, “if applied more broadly”, be “a model for a peaceful and democratic Syria as a whole”.⁸⁴³ Thus, by expressing in this book my critical support for the directly democratic, egalitarian, pluralistic, ecological, and feminist characteristics of the process in Rojava, I am not aiming to spread naïve or one-sided propaganda but to encourage solidarity with what is the most progressive mass movement in the Middle East today.

In the following chapter, I will take a closer look at the concrete (rather than ideological) obstacles facing the revolution in Rojava, beginning with a description of the region’s vicious confrontations with ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. At the same time, I will analyse how the YPG/YPJ (and their PKK allies) became so important in the fight against the Wahhabi jihadists, and how the Turkish State effectively placed itself alongside the latter in this battle. And, finally, I will explore how, in the wake of increased media coverage of Rojavan resistance to ISIS (particularly in the city of Kobani), more and more left-wing activists around the world began to express their solidarity with the region’s revolutionary process.

⁸⁴² <http://anarkismo.net/article/27540>

⁸⁴³ <http://eagainst.com/articles/kurdistan-peoples-quest-freedom-democratic-autonomy/>

11) Rojava, ISIS, and the Battle for Humanity

As argued in the previous chapter, the Rojava Revolution provided a budding example of a progressive alternative model for Middle Eastern politics (in spite of all of the obstacles put in its way by external forces). In this chapter, I will examine in greater detail the military encounters of late 2014 that finally made it impossible for the mainstream media to completely ignore the role of the Rojava Revolution (and the PKK) in the fight against ISIS. I will show, for example, how the actions of the YPG/YPJ and the PKK were crucial for the protection of Yezîdî and other Kurdish communities in Iraq when Wahhabi jihadists began to expand their territory in mid-2014. In particular, however, I will look at: the battle for the city of Kobanî in northern Syria; what this struggle represented for Rojava, Turkey, and ISIS; and the international solidarity that the YPG/YPJ resistance in the community provoked.

A) Rojavan Forces Join the PKK in Defending Iraq

I) The Battle of Şengal

As seen in Chapter Seven, ISIS intensified its destructive rampage through Iraq and Syria in the middle of 2014. One of its attacks that got the most attention in the international media, however, was its assault on the Yezîdî people in Şengal (or Sinjar) in western Iraq. Part of the reason for this coverage was that, when the Wahhabi jihadists attacked the town, it was “was poorly defended” by the KRG forces ‘protecting’ it and “the Peshmerga withdrew without a fight”, leaving citizens there exposed to the genocidal rampage of ISIS. In fact, one Kurdish analyst would subsequently insist that “Yazidi Kurds [would] never forgive KDP leaders for this historical blunder” and would “take years to recover from their terrible wounds”.⁸⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the potential ethnic cleansing of Yezîdî communities was prevented to a large extent when YPG/YPJ and HPG/YJA-Star forces (the latter being the male and female armed sections of the PKK) stepped in to resist jihadist advances and create a humanitarian corridor for Şengal’s refugees.

Who are the Yezîdîs?

In early August, author Diana Darke described the Yezîdî community to the BBC, explaining how their “heartland” was in the Mount Sinjar region to the west of Mosul and how they had “traditionally held themselves apart in small communities mainly scattered across northwest Iraq, northwest Syria and southeast Turkey”. Their faith, she says, shares “many elements with Christianity and Islam”, but also with Zoroastrianism, with regards to its “light/dark duality and even sun worship”. However, she also stresses that the Yezîdîs have often been misunderstood by their neighbours.

According to “Sunni extremists”, for example, the Yezîdî community takes its name from “the deeply unpopular second caliph of the Umayyad dynasty”, Yazid ibn Muawiya (647-683). In reality, however, research has shown that the name “is nothing to do with the loose-living Yazid”, but is instead “taken from the modern Persian “ized”, which means angel or deity”. Therefore, the term ‘Izidis’ (or Yezîdîs) “simply means “worshippers of god”” (though Yezîdî people actually call themselves “Daasin (plural Dawaaseen)”, which comes from the name of an old Christian diocese in the Middle East).

The Yezîdî community, Darke says, reveres “both the Bible and the Koran, but much of their own tradition is oral”, so it is common for outsiders to misunderstand their beliefs. “Their

⁸⁴⁴ <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/17381-the-way-to-stop-the-islamic-state-is-a-united-free-kurdistan-just-what-the-us-does-not-want> and <http://internationalsocialist.org.uk/index.php/2014/08/the-way-to-stop-the-islamic-state-is-a-united-free-kurdistan-just-what-the-us-does-not-want/>

supreme being", she asserts, "is known as Yasdan", who "cannot be worshipped directly" and "is considered a passive force" (or "the Creator of the world, not the preserver"). At the same time, though, Darke adds, Yezîdîs believe there are "seven great spirits" which "emanate" from the aforementioned deity, and the "greatest is the Peacock Angel" (or Malak Taus), who is seen as the "active executor of the divine will". Nonetheless, as Malak Taus is perceived as "God's alter ego, inseparable from Him", Yezîdîsm should be considered a monotheistic religion.

One of the main reasons for the unfair marginalisation of Yezîdîs, meanwhile, is that they are considered by some as "devil worshippers". The cause of this misunderstanding is that another name for Malak Taus is "Shaytan, which is Arabic for devil". In reality, however, Yezîdîs actually "believe that souls pass into successive bodily forms (transmigration) and that gradual purification is possible through continual rebirth, [thus] making Hell redundant". Essentially, then, there is no need for a prominent 'devil' figure in the Yezîdîsm, as its followers maintain a belief which could be likened to the reincarnation ideas of Hinduism or Buddhism.

Like with the Druze and Alawi faiths, however, outsiders cannot convert to Yezîdîsm. And, as a seemingly 'exclusive' or 'secretive' religion, it has made some ignorant people in neighbouring settlements suspicious on numerous occasions. At the same time, as people can only be born into the faith, it is considered a backwards step for Yezîdîs to "convert to another religion" or "be expelled from [their] community", which clearly placed the belief system in ideological conflict with surrounding missionary groups. Nonetheless, if Yezîdîs were indeed given the option to convert, it is improbable that they would, as they believe that, upon leaving the community, "their soul can never progress".

Because it has been "feared, vilified and persecuted", however, the Yezîdî "population has dwindled" in the last century or so, according to Darke, and the group's current population is somewhere between 70,000 and 500,000. At the same time, though, she asserts, the Yezîdîs' "remarkable sense of identity and strength of character" have kept the faith going in spite of "centuries of persecution".⁸⁴⁵ And their community is just one of many examples of minority religious and ethnic groups in the Middle East which have suffered at the hands of the nationalist and religious movements of more populous groups in the region. In fact, it is often these minority communities that suffer the most from the undermining of pluralistic, secular principles by more discriminatory elites and organisations (usually with the complicity of self-interested international powers).

The Defence of the Yezîdîs

When ISIS attacked Yezîdî territory in early August 2014, the community was once again left fighting a struggle for survival. Having "already faced 72 massacres" in their history, "thousands of Yezîdî Kurds" would now be "victims of mass murder campaigns by IS in Şengal, a sacred site for this community". And, being "forced to evacuate their homes and flee into the nearby Şengal mountains", many people, "especially children and elderly people, died on the run".⁸⁴⁶ The ones who could not flee in time, meanwhile, were given the option (or effective death sentence for Yezîdîs) of converting or dying. Soon, hundreds of men would be killed, and hundreds of women would be taken away as slaves.

Later in the month, Tracey Shelton at Global Post reported that Yezîdîs who had escaped ISIS by "fleeing into the Sinjar Mountain range" were now camping "in schools and public parks..., construction sites or by the roadside". Furthermore, she stresses that "family after family [recounted] the same story of escape: While the Western media narrative [had]

⁸⁴⁵ http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-28686607?ocid=socialflow_gplus

⁸⁴⁶ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/islamic-state-sengal-how-pkk-vpg-taught-barzani-independence-really-means/>

emphasized the US role and that of the Iraqi Kurds' Peshmerga fighters..., **it was instead the [progressive] Kurds coming in from Syria and Turkey who saved the Yazidis' lives**".

The "mass exodus", Shelton reports, "took place on foot", and Yezîdîs could be heard saying: "**thank God for the PKK and YPG**" and "**the PKK saved us**". She also says that, "among the Yezîdîs", these progressive Kurdish forces were "being **hailed as heroes**". Moreover, as US planes began to arrive in the region, it was in fact "the PKK who entered the mountains with trucks and tractors to carry out the sick and elderly into Syria, while militants from the PKK and YPG held off IS advances". In short, she emphasises, "**there can be little doubt [that] the most essential rescue mission was carried out by Kurdish coalition forces led by the PKK**".

Refugee Mikey Hassan, meanwhile, also spoke about how "**the YPG had cleared a path through to Syria**" so refugees could escape to safety. Hassan, for example, had loaded his family into a borrowed vehicle and left for the border. As they were reaching the Syrian border, however, they "came under fire from two sides". Fortunately, though, "fighters from the YPG" crossed over the frontier and "held back the IS militants long enough for the family to cross the Syrian border into YPG-held territory". In fact, the general consensus from fleeing Yezîdî families was that they had been "**rescued from the mountaintop by YPG and PKK forces**, many by tractors that [had been driven] into areas of the mountain impossible to reach by car".

The reputation of the KRG's Peshmerga, meanwhile, suffered significantly after they "withdrew" from Şengal "in the night with no warning to the people". President Masoud Barzanî later "promised to investigate and punish Peshmerga officers who left the city of Sinjar", but it was already too late to save his reputation and that of his government forces. In short, the damage had already been done, and it was the PKK-led humanitarian forces which, according to Hassan, would be credited with **rescuing "at least 35,000 people"**.⁸⁴⁷

John Beck at VICE News, meanwhile, would assert that, according to Yezîdîs who had "fled the Islamic State offensive on the town of Sinjar" (and been "encircled on a nearby mountain" before eventually arriving at a refugee camp in Turkey), the KRG Peshmerga had "retreated with no warning" from the town. The "only security", they affirmed, "had come from the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the People's Protection Units (YPG)", which had fought back against ISIS to provide the Yezîdîs with "a passage to safety". One refugee said "**we want the PKK and YPG to stay and protect us... The Peshmerga just left. They sold us out**".⁸⁴⁸

Yezîdî Girls Kidnapped by ISIS

Soon after the event, KurdishQuestion.com published a Firat News Agency report on how a fifteen-year-old girl kidnapped by ISIS after the group's attack on Şengal had managed to escape with a friend to an "area controlled by HPG (PKK) guerrillas". The girl speaks of how the Wahhabi jihadists had "ripped us girls away from our families and [taken] us to Mosul", selling "half of our friends to Syria". The militants then allegedly forced them to pray, "beating and shooting the ones that refused to" do so. They also told them "to forget [their] families", saying: "we are your family now". In this situation, the girl says, she considered killing herself, and had already "witnessed the suicide of 4 girls". The friend with whom she would eventually escape, meanwhile, claims that "girls would cut off their hair" and scar themselves "to not look beautiful".

⁸⁴⁷ <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/140827/if-it-wasn-t-the-kurdish-fighters-we-would-have-died-there>

⁸⁴⁸ <https://news.vice.com/article/meet-the-pkk-terrorists-battling-the-islamic-state-on-the-frontlines-of-iraq>

With hostages “gathered in a large house in Mosul”, the victim explains, elderly people and men were thrown in prison, while children were taken “for religious education”. There were around “200-300 girls in Mosul”, she says, though militants “changed locations every day because of the fear of aerial attacks”. She also states that “they beat [the captives] severely”, and that ISIS militants “were buying girls from one another and giving them as gifts to other members”, all while her friends were “committing suicide” (with some cutting their wrists and others hanging themselves).

When the girl and her friend were taken to a village to be sold, however, they found “an opportunity [to escape] while [their guards] were eating”. Militants fired at them as they ran, searching for them in the dark, but they did not find them. “For two days”, though, the victim narrates, they “ran towards Sinjar”, where they would eventually find a house to hide in. The next morning, she says, “gang members went past shouting and screaming”, but later in the day she and her friend would be “found by PKK guerrillas”. After giving them first aid for their “wounded feet”, she explains, the guerrillas “took the two girls to the safe area controlled by HPG guerrillas and the Sinjar Protection Units”. Although traumatised by what they had seen and experienced, the girls would, like other Yezîdîs, emphasise that the PKK had saved them.⁸⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Kurdish journalist Mohammed A. Salih reported at the Washington Post on how a 14-year-old Yezîdî girl (referred to as ‘Narin’) had sought to “take refuge on Mount Sinjar” with her family when ISIS launched its attack on the area, but had soon found herself “surrounded by militants wearing Islamic State uniforms”. Narin explains how she and those alongside her were soon divided “by gender and age”, with: older men and women being robbed and then left alone in the desert to die; younger girls and women being driven away in trucks to be sold on as slaves; and able-bodied men (including Narin’s 19-year old brother) being shot in cold blood.

Narin talks about how she and other girls were taken to “an empty school in Baaj”, near Mosul, and were asked to convert to Islam. When they refused to do so, they were insulted and punished with harsh conditions. Being referred to as ‘pagans’, she says, they were confined in a building for 20 days, where they “slept on the floor and ate only once per day”. In this time, she insists, there would be constant abortive attempts to convert the women (who, as Yezîdîs, would not consciously abandon their faith). Later on, meanwhile, the married and unmarried women were separated.

According to Narin, she and a friend were “given as a gift to two Islamic State members”, who wanted to make them “their wives or concubines”. She speaks of how she was given to an “overweight, dark-bearded man [of] about 50 years old who seemed to have some high rank”. The man, nicknamed Abu Ahmed, “tried to rape [her] several times, but [she] did not allow him to touch [her] in any sexual way”. As a result, Narin says, he “beat me every day, punching and kicking me” and feeding her “only one meal per day”. Later on, meanwhile, she was told to call her family (who had arrived at Mount Sinjar and been rescued by YPG/YPJ or PKK fighters) and instruct them that, if they “travelled to Mosul and converted to Islam”, she “would be released”. As they did not trust ISIS, however, “they did not make the trip”.

When Narin and her friend were left alone by their captors, they “used kitchen knives and meat cleavers to break the locks of two doors to get out”. Having contacted a friend in the town before leaving, they were taken to his house and given a place to sleep. Then, the following morning, they began the two-hour-long journey to Baghdad by taxi, dressing in a way as to only leave their eyes visible, in the hope that they would not be stopped. At one

⁸⁴⁹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/south-kurdistan/yazidi-girl-kidnapped-by-isis-speaks/245-yazidi-girl-kidnapped-by-isis-speaks.html>

point, they had to bribe an official at a checkpoint, but they eventually reached some “Yazidi and Muslim Kurdish family friends” in the capital city. There, they were given “fake ID cards that enabled [them] to board a flight to Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan in the north”. After staying with a “Yazidi member of the Iraqi parliament” in Erbil, Narin says, she and her friend went to “the residence of Baba Sheikh, the spiritual leader of the world’s Yazidis”. Subsequently, they would finally be reunited with their parents, and their “month-long ordeal” would be officially over. Nonetheless, Narin was still left with haunting memories (as many other girls were), and she emphasises: “this country is no place for me anymore”.⁸⁵⁰

Dilar Dirik on Western Hypocrisy and Real ‘Independence’

According to Dilar Dirik, the Yezîdî crisis happened in large part because no international or regional state forces had heeded “the warnings of the Kurds in Rojava” about the increasing strength of Wahhabi jihadists in Iraq and Syria. With Western governments claiming that ISIS had simply “swept through the region”, catching us off guard”, however, and that, “in times of crisis, one should not play the blame game”, there was an official refusal to accept that an error had been committed. For Dirik, this rhetoric was simply “a very convenient way out [for those] that [had] actively or passively contributed to the rise, spread, and establishment of the Islamic State”. In short, she says, Western attempts to “blur an unjust war in Iraq, the international hijacking and instrumentalization of the so-called “Arab Spring”, [the] global arms trade, sectarianism, Islamophobia, and “the war on terror” into one dark, obscure mess, and [throw] responsibility far, far away” simply showed their **blatant disregard for any sense of truth and context**.

For Dirik, “respecting the victims of [the] modern-day genocide” attempts against the Yezîdîs meant speaking “openly and critically, so that those responsible [could] be held accountable”. In other words, she asserts, we must denounce that **the current crisis in the Middle East is “the result of the policies of the dominant international order, which frames governance in terms of states, power, and hegemony”**. In light of such an understanding, she says, we can see very clearly the “**hypocrisy of the American savior-complex** and the wickedness of “European moral duty” to arm their allies against IS, after having enthusiastically been selling arms to countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which [have] openly [supported] the jihadists, while NATO-ally Turkey provided the Islamists with opportunities to freely cross the border and get medical treatment in private Turkish hospitals”.

Meanwhile, Dirik insists, the US-backed KDP “has been propagating independence from Iraq in an arrogant and chauvinist manner at the expense of Kurds in other regions for a long time”, so its abandonment of Yezîdîs in Şengal was not at all surprising. For her, the crisis in the town had brought into view very clearly the options that the region had for the future. With KRG forces, backed by the financial and military power of the USA for a long time, having withdrawn from Şengal, she stresses the extraordinary nature of the fact that it was instead the PKK and its allies (“without any foreign support” and having “been internationally marginalized”) who had “rescued ten thousands of Yezîdîs”, whilst at the same time “being labeled as terrorists” by Western governments.

“The humanitarian catastrophe in Şengal”, Dirik says, illustrates “the real face of the status quo [i.e. the nation-state paradigm with its capitalist, chauvinist, [and] patriarchal foundations]”. The KDP, for example, committed as it is to being ‘independent’, Dirik emphasises, has actually ended up being heavily dependent on others. Meanwhile, “those Kurdish parties that no longer fight for a state because they reject statehood as inherently

⁸⁵⁰ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/09/10/i-am-a-14-year-old-yazidi-girl-given-as-a-gift-to-an-isis-commander-heres-how-i-escaped/>

oppressive”, she asserts, are the ones that in fact “rescued an entire community by displaying an **alternative, more meaningful form of independence through operating outside of the preset parameters of the state**”. In short, she stresses, the PKK and its allies demonstrated a true, revolutionary form of ‘independence’ in Şengal, while that of the KDP and its allies turned out to be simply reactionary rhetoric.

Although “there were several massacres in Rojava over the last two years, committed by the exact same jihadist group”, Dirik asserts, there was no “sign of outrage within the international community”, which seemed committed to denouncing Assad and remaining largely silent about his Wahhabi enemies. At the same time, there had been “tireless attempts by activists to engage the public and political actors” about the matter, but Rojava’s plight was ignored nonetheless. For Dirik, this silence was essentially “indicative of the fact that **not much of this current concern [about ISIS] is based on genuine ethical commitments to human rights**”.

The USA’s allies in the KRG Peshmerga, Dirik emphasises, “immediately withdrew without fight and without warning” from Şengal, with witnesses in the town even saying that the government forces had also “refused to supply the people with weapons to defend themselves”. The YPG/YPJ, meanwhile, “crossed the fading Iraqi-Syrian border... in order to defend the Yezîdî people, who were supposed to be protected by the much better equipped KDP”. For example, the Rojavan militias set up a “humanitarian corridor” and “the Newroz Refugee Camp in Derik” and, soon afterwards, were reinforced by PKK troops coming down to the area from the Qandil Mountains. In spite of these actions, though, Dirik insists, the PKK still remained on Western ‘terror lists’ and the “progressive Rojava cantons” (by extension) were still criminalised and marginalised by the international community. This hostility to Rojava in particular was exemplified, she says, by its “exclusion... from the Geneva II peace conference to resolve the Syrian crisis, despite the fact that Rojava [was] the only region in Syria that [had] managed to create secular, democratic, inclusive self-governance structures in the midst of a civil war and in spite of attacks by the Assad regime and jihadist groups”.

The Media’s Failure to Distinguish between Progressive Kurds and Nationalist Kurds

According to Dirik, Yezîdî refugees now cursed the KDP, said that “God and the PKK saved us”, and emphasised that, “if the PKK [hadn’t saved] the Yezîdîs”, the world “wouldn’t see a single one alive”. And for precisely this reason, Dirik adds, many Yezîdîs even “joined the ranks of the YPG/YPJ to retake and liberate their sacred homelands”. Nonetheless, and in spite of the **clear protagonism of the YPG/YPJ and PKK in rescuing the Yezîdîs**, the mainstream media simply applauded unspecific “Kurdish fighters” for the mission, thus “lumping “the Kurds” into one monolithic category”. And such coverage came “much to the benefit of the KDP”, Dirik stresses, with “some news articles and TV programs” even “miraculously [managing] to release entire reports on the situation of Şengal, without mentioning once the key role of the YPG/YPJ and the PKK guerrillas”. For her, such reports were made all the more ridiculous by the fact that it was precisely the latter who had, “by all accounts, displayed an impressive rescue mission”, and who had been “unilaterally praised by the refugees”.

According to Dirik, some articles in the mainstream media “marginally [mentioned] “Syrian Kurds” in one or two sentences, before moving ahead to discussing why the “US-allied, pro-Western Iraqi Kurds [deserved] to be armed”” against ISIS, suggesting erroneously that the performance of the former logically justified the arming of the latter (who were an entirely unconnected force). “In one report”, she emphasises, “one witness’s account of the YPG/YPJ and PKK fighters was [even] translated as “Peshmerga”” - the term used today almost

exclusively for the nationalist Kurdish militias which are the official armed forces of the KRG.

Dirik stresses that the KDP had long fought opportunistically to “consolidate its own power” in Iraqi Kurdistan, and had actively contributed to the marginalisation of Kurds outside of Iraq. It had, for example, developed a close alliance with Turkey, a country in which “10.000 Kurds are held as hostages in prisons and where Kurds still struggle to be recognized as equal citizens”. Iran, meanwhile, also “dominates the KRG’s policies”, she stresses, even though its reactionary Islamist regime regularly executes Kurdish activists at home.

At the same time, Kurdish nationalists in Iraq had “adopted a very hostile attitude” towards the Rojava Revolution, using “aggressive propaganda language”, closing the border “to refugees from Rojava fleeing from IS-massacres”, and holding “humanitarian goods back”. In April 2014, for example, it was even “digging a border trench between West and South Kurdistan and had peshmerga fighters point weapons at the people protesting [at] the border” (as explained in Chapter Ten). Kurdish critics, Dirik says, logically called these actions a “major manifestation of treason”, referring to them as a “Second Lausanne”, in allusion to the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne in which Kurdish territories were split between four countries.

The KDP’s focus, Dirik highlights, is on “economic, capitalist growth, idealized through “independent” oil sales, luxury hotels, and shopping malls, while actively reinforcing the borders drawn in Lausanne by contributing to the oppression of other Kurds” in the Middle East. Peshmerga fighters, meanwhile, “have been instrumentalized for the independence propaganda [of the KDP]”, Dirik argues, with the aim of symbolising “the masculinity of the “undefeatable” de-facto state”. The state’s “mystification” of these militias, she says, even though they now have “a regular job tied to a salary” and “largely operate [according to] partisan loyalties”, is aimed primarily at giving Iraqi Kurds a sense of ‘national pride’. Nonetheless, she insists, the fact was that, in the fight against ISIS, “the younger generation” of Peshmerga fighters (which had “no combat experience”) simply had “fewer motivations” to fight (especially considering that “many of them [had] not been paid regularly, due to the central Iraqi government’s budget cuts to the KRG”). In fact, Dirik states, it was actually “elderly retired peshmergas [who had] listed themselves to fight IS”, still driven by ideology rather than money or the orders of superiors.

“The tribal-feudal, conservative KDP”, Dirik asserts, “stands in stark contrast with the leftist-feminist ideology of the Kurdish political movement affiliated with the PKK”. The transformed PKK, she says, “promotes radical local grass-roots self-governance, gender equality, and ecology”, discarding state hegemony and regarding “nationalism as a primitive, backward concept”. And, while nationalist groups like the KDP have accused “the PKK-affiliated movement of having given up on the “Kurdish dream””, she stresses, “the events in Şengal” are simply a real-world illustration of “the **failure of the nation-state paradigm** and the implementation of democratic confederalism in action”.

Liberation, Dirik argues, is not defined “in terms of capitalist growth”, such as “oil sales that really only benefit a few multi-millionaire tribes”. In fact, she says, by asserting a form of independence “only within the restrictive parameters of the nation-state”, the KDP has actually “enslaved itself completely”, being “absolutely dependent on others” (Turkey and the USA in particular). The reality is, she stresses, that, whilst pushing for ‘independence’, the KDP’s failure “to protect its citizens” and its “subscription to the dominant order” represented, in truth, “the opposite of independence”.

The leaders of the KDP, Dirik asserts, have long divided Kurdish communities with “their opportunistic policies” and, more recently, with their “hostilities against Rojava”. In fact, she claims, their divisive actions actually “contributed to the rise of IS”. The “border-trench-digging, oil-selling, wealthy, established, and internationally favoured” nationalists of the KDP, she says, were so focussed on their own narrow goals in 2014 that they failed to rescue tens of thousands of lives in their own “sphere of control”, and as such allowed ISIS to advance much more than they ought to have been able to.

Rojavans, meanwhile, “because their understanding of self-determination, freedom, autonomy, and independence [recognised] the restrictive, oppressive framework within which the institution of the state [operated]”, displayed a “more meaningful concept of independence”. Focussing on “self-reliance and self-sustainability”, whilst “illustrating real unity”, Dirik says, progressive Kurds decided to act even though they had no official political responsibility to do so. What they felt instead, she insists, was a **humanitarian responsibility to act**. In fact, they could have easily allowed a massacre to occur on the watch of the KRG in a cynical attempt to weaken the KDP and other Kurdish nationalists in the region. However, they were driven by their own ideological convictions to act rather than petty political games, and thus put into practice an ideal of “unity of all peoples, not just nationalist unity among Kurds”.

In short, Dirik insists that there is a “massive difference” between the PKK and the KDP’s “understandings of “independence” and “unity””. The latter, she says, exploits “the understandable emotional attachment of people” to each other (after having “lived through a genocide under Saddam Hussein”) by distorting “the consciousness of the people” (just like Zionists did in Israel). Essentially, the nationalist party takes advantage of this painful collective memory by painting “every challenge to its corrupt rule... as “trying to destroy what we [earned after years of hard work]””. For the KDP, Dirik insists, freedom means possessing “what everyone else does: power, establishment, and hegemony”. The reality, however, is that “absolutely no state in the Middle East is autonomous and independent in a meaningful way”, so aspiring to be like them is counterproductive (if the aim is really true emancipation). For Dirik, the KDP should simply “stop abusing the word independence”, and Kurds should see its “clever backstabbing propaganda of statehood” as “an insult for people” who fought so hard for freedom against the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein.

Escaping Illusions and Developing Contextual Consciousness

According to Dirik, the mental “**illusion of independence as statehood**” puts the people into such a **deep state of false consciousness** that they almost scream “Thank you for your bombs, America!”, as if U.S. foreign policy was out there handing out bombs out of [some] random, unconditional love for the Kurdish people”. The reality, she says, is that **the “global arms trade and US policies” helped to nurture a system of violence and exploitation in the Middle East in the first place**. It is therefore “hard to conceive”, she stresses, how the superpower and the inherently aggressive system it advocates could ever “be the solution”.

ISIS, Dirik claims, will not “be eradicated with a few air strikes or the arming of puppet regimes on the ground”. Nonetheless, the “dominant powers” simply see this strategy as “the cleverest way of reproducing their interests in the region”. Having: launched “an unjust war in Iraq”; played “the second Cold War in Syria”; ignored “the Kurdish cantons in Syria”; and closed their eyes “to obvious support for jihadists by its allies”, Dirik insists, “the US now bombs the area again to destroy a jihadist group which holds American weapons and which would have never come so far without foreign support (esp. from US allies like Turkey, Saudi and Qatar)”.

With the USA “yet again engaging in military action”, Dirik affirms, whilst continuing to label “the ones who rescued the Yezîdîs as terrorists”, American elites simply hope to be “praised as the saviors of the Middle East” and to have their system seen as the ‘only way forward’. In reality, though, “their aid arrived on mount Sinjar... long after those that they designate as terrorists had already rescued the people”. Far from being humanitarian heroes, then, they were simply latching on to the successes of the progressive Kurdish forces which had performed the truly valiant feats.

A continuation of the US strategy of ‘bomb now, think later’, Dirik says, merely defers “the decline of the region to a later date”, ignoring “the fact that the IS enjoys a decent support base especially among Sunnis, who have been alienated and marginalized from Maliki’s Shiite regime, as well as Assad’s Alawite regime”. Even setting aside contextual information about how “U.S. and European policies [had] actively exploited... existing sectarian divides” in the Middle East, she asserts, the world needed to recognise that ISIS did “not consist of a bunch of crazy, irrational bandits”, but was actually “a well-organized group that [used] rhetoric and technology in a very sophisticated manner”.

The release of more bombs over the Middle East, Dirik argues, simply ignored “the fact that the so-called “collateral damage” in unjust wars in Muslim-majority countries” had always translated in reality to the death of hundreds of thousands of living human beings, whose communities would logically “want to take revenge”. The US strategy, she claims, also overlooked “the fact that many of the jihadists” fighting for ISIS and other Wahhabi groups in the region had actually joined “from European countries, after [ignorant citizens spouting] Islamophobia and xenophobia [had] discriminated against them in societies that [were meant to] teach equal opportunity”.

Understanding the context, Dirik says, does not mean justifying “the barbaric mass murders of IS”, but it does help us to see “that **a mere bombing of the symptom will not get rid of the disease**”. The fact is, she insists, that the disease spread as a result of “U.S. and European foreign policy, [the] global arms trade..., support for jihadists by NATO-allies”, and the self-interested exploitation of existing sectarian tensions.⁸⁵¹ To explain the importance of contextual understanding even more, I would argue that the disease metaphor can be taken even further. When the Bubonic Plague hit Europe in the fourteenth century, for example, “crude and unsophisticated techniques such as bloodletting and boil-lancing” were used because Europeans did not understand the causes of the illness. In fact, only when scientists discovered the bacteria responsible for the plague in the late nineteenth century could measures truly be taken to reduce its devastating effects, such as adopting “modern sanitation and public-health practices”.⁸⁵² And, as suggested in Chapter Seven, the same is true for ISIS or any reactionary political group. In other words, the remedy is not to attack the manifestations of reactionism themselves, but to attack the root causes behind their existence, which are socio-economic marginalisation and exploitation, ethnic and religious based politics, and Western-sponsored authoritarian oppression. In short, then, the true solution to the disease of reactionism is to support revolutionaries in their fight for social justice, secular and pluralistic politics, and direct democracy.

Dirik also insists that the solution is to support revolutionary processes, stressing that “**the solution must be radical and political and must include the recognition of actors such as the cantons in Rojava, as well as the PKK**”. This progressive Kurdish movement, she asserts, had “the people’s legitimacy through popular support from millions of people, who [regarded] them as their representatives”. The continued designation of the PKK as a ‘terrorist’ organisation, therefore, was simply a dangerous “foreign policy of appeasement

⁸⁵¹ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/islamic-state-sengal-how-pkk-ypg-taught-barzani-independence-really-means/>

⁸⁵² <http://www.history.com/topics/black-death>

and control”, which essentially represented “an inter-NATO present for Turkey”. Furthermore, as seen previously in this book, Dirik emphasises that “terror listings make no distinction between cruel, barbaric, inhumane thugs” and “political actors, who challenge the interests of the status quo”. If there were a distinction, she says, the PKK and their allies in Rojava would fall into the latter category but, as long as there is no such distinction, such designations continue to be the counterproductive and counterintuitive creations of self-interested political elites.

Rojava and the Fight against ‘the State’

Putting the West’s illogical anti-ISIS military strategies to one side, Dirik says, “the same corrupt, sectarian system of dependency in the region” is destined to continue for as long as the West and its allies engage “in the same political strategies”. Therefore, only fighting against the existing political system, she asserts, can truly “liberate the peoples of the Middle East from the Stockholm syndrome-like straight jacket, which looks Westward whenever a crisis emerges”. Kurds (and marginalised ethnic or social communities around the world), she stresses, need to realise that the real problem facing them “is not statelessness, but the state”.

To reject the state, however, “does not mean [surrendering]... autonomy, freedom, or independence”, Dirik insists. Quoting PKK commander Duran Kalkan, for example, she affirms that “the state is a force for organised suppression and exploitation”, and “to be a state means... dependence and collaboration”. Kalkan explains this statement further by asserting that “small states are dependent on larger states, and they are all dependent [on] the state system”, which “cannot be free and independent”. From his point of view, “the statist paradigm has no room for independence and freedom”, and “a free and independent consciousness” can therefore “only be achieved through the organised individual and society, which will lead to a democratic individual and society”. In other words, **the education of the people** (and their subsequent recognition of the importance of their direct role in the progress of their community) **is the most revolutionary of tasks – and the only one that can result in the formation of a just and directly democratic political system.**

According to Dirik, “the state has indoctrinated our thought patterns so much that we are unable to conceive of an alternative system”. While there are “some shortcomings” in the process of the Rojava Revolution, she affirms, largely “due to inexperience and the lack of resources due to economic and political embargoes”, the cantons in northern Syria have shown that “democratic, secular, and gender-egalitarian structures of self-determination can evolve”, even if it takes time. For example, she asserts, “people’s councils” have been built “in cities, villages, and neighborhoods, as well as farming and living cooperatives, women’s councils, and women’s academies”. At the same time, she adds, Rojava “does not aim to secede from Syria, because it no longer considers the borders of Sykes-Picot as valid”. Instead, its people focus on self-sufficiency, “regardless of the arbitrary statist structures imposed from the outside”. Furthermore, amidst these difficulties, she stresses, Rojavans hold their humanitarian ideals to be almost sacred. Thus, “in spite of international marginalization” and being forced to fight against both ISIS and the Assad regime “under bad conditions”, the YPG/YPJ still “came to the rescue of the Yezîdîs in South Kurdistan”. And this type of autonomy, Dirik argues, guided by a strong sense of humanitarianism, should always be “a much more desirable aim than being able to say “I have a state, [and] I am part of the system””.

For Dirik, “challenging the state as the institutional extension of patriarchy has [also] contributed immensely to the liberation of women in Kurdistan”. Speaking of ISIS in particular as an “ultra-patriarchal hell”, for example, she explains how the Wahhabi militants “specifically dehumanize women as [a] means to an end, enslaving them for one or

two hour-long lasting so-called “jihad marriages” to rape them with so-called “religious approval””. With the “rape [of] women on the side of their enemies” being declared permissible, meanwhile, sexual violence had effectively been used “as a systematic tool of war” by the group. Dirik refers in particular to estimates that “thousands of women [had] been kidnapped, raped or sold in slave markets by IS” by late 2014, while hundreds more had committed suicide to avoid such fates. At the same time, she stresses, ISIS had justified “its feminicide” by exploiting “the conservative notion of “honor” as the control over women’s sexualities and bodies, which was already prevalent in the region”.

Emphasising that the PKK and its allies represent an achievable alternative to this “ultra-patriarchal hell”, Dirik says that the progressive Kurdish movement’s “women’s liberation ideology” has been “a strong and radical counter-force to the disgusting mentality of IS”. By “transforming society’s gender awareness and founding its freedom on fundamental principles like gender equality”, she stresses, it has encouraged Kurdish women to “make up more than 60% of all women mayors in all of Turkey” (in “stark contrast to the KDP’s feudal-patriarchal tribal characteristics”). Therefore, she argues, supporting the progressive Kurdish movement is a much “more sustainable form of struggle against the mentality of IS” than dropping bombs on them.

While the YPG/YPJ had “been internationally marginalized and ostracized for two years”, and the PKK was still “labelled as a terrorist organization”, Dirik says, the two forces had “taught the international community a lesson in humanitarian intervention”. At the same time, though, they had also “taught the KDP... what real independence and autonomy [meant]”. In short, if it had not been clear enough already, they had illustrated once more through their progressive actions that “being a puppet of the global capitalist, nation-state-oriented order” could only ever lead “to complete dependency and unfreedom”. On the other hand, they had shown that, from “outside of the dominant system”, they were able to “efficiently and impressively [save] thousands of lives”.⁸⁵³

The Continuation of the Şengal Resistance

In fact, the progressive Kurdish movement did not just stop at saving Yezîdî lives in western Iraq, and instead chose to stick around to encourage and strengthen Şengal’s own independent capacity to defend itself. In early September 2014, Mohammed A. Salih at Al Monitor spoke about how, after the “unexpected and quick defeat” of the Peshmerga in Şengal, the YPG/YPJ had had to “jump into the scene” to fill the “security vacuum”, and would soon be backed up by their PKK allies. Having been “successfully battling IS and other radical jihadist forces in northern Syria for about two years” when they entered the Yezîdî stronghold in Iraq, the progressive Kurdish forces knew that the only way of sustainably protecting Şengal’s inhabitants in the long-run was to encourage them to defend themselves.

After rescuing the majority of the town’s civilians (by creating “a corridor through IS-held territory stretching all the way from the Syrian border to [Mount Sinjar]”), therefore, the YPG/YPJ and PKK soon set about forming “a special force, the Sinjar Defense Units, to defend Sinjar”.⁸⁵⁴ In fact, PKK forces announced in December 2014 that, along with the Şengal Resistance Units (YBŞ), they had “launched an operation to liberate Sinjar”. Local sources, meanwhile, reported that YPG/J fighters were “moving from the West Kurdistan side and HPG guerrillas and YBŞ fighters from the South Kurdistan side” against the village of Rebil Abîd, which was being “used by ISIS gangs as their headquarters” and was “located between Rojava and Sinjar”.⁸⁵⁵

⁸⁵³ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/islamic-state-sengal-how-pkk-ypg-taught-barzani-independence-really-means/>

⁸⁵⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/pkk-kurdish-fight-islamic-state.html#>

⁸⁵⁵ <http://www.ajansakurdi.net/?p=38398>

Subsequently, on January 14, 2015, a number of progressive Kurdish and Yezîdî groups held a conference “at the foot of Mount Şengal”. The ‘Şengal Êzîdî Founding Assembly’ claimed that, in this meeting, these organisations had agreed that one key reason for the ISIS massacre in Şengal had been a “lack of organization”, and that “the political social mobilisation and will of the Êzîdî people” needed to be emphasised, along with “the need for self-defence forces”. The ‘Founding Council’, the body said, had been created because Yezîdîs needed “a common platform” which could lead to “a common organization and mechanisms”. In the conference, the Founding Assembly stressed, the organisations present had created an administration that would allow people to govern themselves, “handle [their] own affairs, and express [their] interests and decisions as Êzîdîs”.

Considering that the “lack of a united self-organisation system and [a Yezîdî] defence organisation” had left Şengal’s inhabitants “dependent on others’ protection” and exposed to the horrors perpetrated by ISIS, the Founding Assembly asserted that: “our Êzîdî population decided at the conference that our self-organization requires our own defence organisation and system”. In a clear assertion of Yezîdî autonomy, the assembly affirmed that it wanted “everyone to recognise the will of our community and to accept that we will manage our own affairs”.⁸⁵⁶ A key point to make here, however, is that it is difficult to believe that this collective political decision was not prompted by the directly democratic beliefs of the progressive Kurdish movement that had come to the defence of the Yezîdîs months before.

Precisely for the reason stated above, the KDP voiced “strident opposition to the formation of an autonomous Yezidi parliament” several days after the aforementioned Founding Assembly. The nationalist party also announced that it would “not recognize the political will of the Yezidis” and called “attempts to establish local autonomy” in Şengal “divisive”. At the same time, it asserted that it “would not remain silent in the face of such policies”, claiming that the PKK was “attempting to bring these illegitimate demands to the table, discounting all the laws and organizations in the Kurdistan region”. As explained previously in this sub-section, however, the legitimacy of the KRG in the eyes of many Yezîdîs had simply disappeared when “KDP Peshmerga forces fled with their weapons and left the local Yezidi population without any form of protection or weapons with which to defend themselves”.⁸⁵⁷ In other words, then, the damage to the KDP’s dream of a capitalist nation under its anti-democratic control had already been done, and the increase in popularity of the PKK’s ideology had already begun. Now, it seemed that the Yezîdîs were committed to ensuring that a massacre like that perpetrated in August would never happen again, and that they saw the creation of a new political order as the only way to guarantee it would not.

II) PKK Support for the Forces of the KRG

The PKK to the Rescue of the Peshmerga

In addition to progressive Kurdish intervention in Şengal, the PKK had also been influential elsewhere in Iraq in ensuring that ISIS did not expand into Kurdish territories. John Beck at VICE News, for example, speaks of how the KRG Peshmerga in northern Iraq had managed to regain control of “large chunks of territory” by the end of August 2014 (including “the strategically important Mosul Dam”) which had been “lost to a shock offensive” by ISIS at the start of the month, but in large part thanks to the support of the PKK. The KRG also benefitted, of course, from American airstrikes, along with “deliveries of guns and ammunition from the US, Iraq’s central government, and others”, though a key element of

⁸⁵⁶ <http://rojhelat.info/en/?p=8128>

⁸⁵⁷ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/01/20/kdp-rejects-autonomy-for-sinjar-accuses-pkk-of-betraving-vezidis/>

this counter-offensive (which was largely neglected by the western media) was the involvement of “hundreds of fighters from the paramilitary wing” of the PKK, which had provided “a much-needed boost in morale and fighting abilities”.

Whilst the PKK was still considered a terrorist group by the USA and its allies, Beck asserts, the group made a “decisive difference in a number of battles, often fighting under cover of US air support”. In fact, he suggests that, if the US-led campaign in the Middle East was genuinely to do with combatting Wahhabist extremism, the USA and the PKK would logically find themselves fighting on the same side (in spite of their ideological differences). [As argued in Chapter Seven, however, the Western mission was not truly about combatting extremism, but about the West ensuring its continued political dominance in the region.]

VICE News met around 75 PKK male and female fighters who had travelled to the “oil-rich and ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk” in the middle of August. They had come to defend the city from ISIS, and could be easily distinguished from the uniformed Peshmerga as they were dressed in an “olive uniform of traditional loose-fitting Kurdish clothes”. They also looked a lot more “wiry, sun-beaten, and keen” than their Peshmerga colleagues, Beck says. Along with the Peshmerga, he asserts, and “a few remaining Iraqi soldiers”, these PKK forces were participating in “covert night raids behind Islamic State lines”. In fact, he stresses, “**PKK presence** [actually] provided peace of mind to the civilian population”, because its “guerrillas [had] played a **vital role in guarding and regaining territory from the Islamic State**”.

The group’s fighters had also “made a decisive difference in larger engagements elsewhere”, however, fighting in Makhmour, “near the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Erbil”, when “the Peshmerga forces retreated” after being “caught by surprise”. According to Beck, they had stepped in to defend the “nearby Makhmour refugee camp”, whose civilians felt they had been abandoned by the KRG Peshmerga. In fact, the **PKK** says that its fighters “**led the advance and forced the Islamic State to retreat, then pulled back and allowed Peshmerga** – who only supported from a distance during the offensive – **to hold the position...** with heavy weapons”.

In short, only thanks to the unique “tactics, fighting style, and ethos” of the PKK were the Iraqi Peshmerga able to push ISIS back. Beck, for example, emphasises that the progressive militants were “skilled, fiercely ideological, and battle-hardened guerrilla fighters”, which meant that they were a lot more prepared for the fight against ISIS than the Peshmerga. Furthermore, Beck asserts that, while the PKK had “been fighting the Islamic State in Syria for more than two years and honed their skills in Turkey”, the KRG Peshmerga had “not been tested in battle since before the US-led invasion of Iraq”. The former, he says, have “education and they are professional troops... [with] discipline and a system”. On the other hand, he quotes one fighter from Kirkuk who reportedly said that “the Peshmerga [were] weak and couldn’t defend against ISIS in Sinjar and other regions”.

KRG officials in Erbil did not want such opinions to spread too far, though, and the Peshmerga Ministry Spokesman, for example, “downplayed the role of non-peshmerga troops in recent assaults on the Islamic State”. At the same time, however, KRG president Masoud Barzani was “obviously aware of the contribution the PKK [had] made”, and thus “visited a PKK camp in the aftermath of the Makhmour battle, which [was] a surprising turn of events given previous rivalries between his government and the group”. In short, the embarrassing turn of events for the Peshmerga after the lightning ISIS advance was clearly something that Barzani needed to underplay, especially given that the nationalist militants had previously earned a fearsome reputation for “fighting Saddam Hussein's troops”. With these soldiers now being seen as “a less formidable fighting force than many had believed”,

Beck says, Barzanî had to find a way to show that he was on top of the difficult political situation.

The PKK, being “at least partly integrated with the Peshmerga” in the fight against ISIS, was inevitably receiving indirect support from the USA, Beck asserts, even though the superpower and “its allies [were] barred by international law from providing weapons or training to [so-called] “terrorist” organizations”. Furthermore, its fighters had also received US-made weapons and vehicles third hand, after seizing them from ISIS (which had “plundered US-supplied weapons when they routed the Iraqi army in June”). In other words, in spite of continued attempts to marginalise and delegitimise the PKK, the group was nonetheless benefitting from its fight against the jihadists.

Although the West (influenced heavily by its alliance with Turkey) considered the PKK a terrorist group, Beck says, the PKK was simultaneously “at pains to stress that it [was] a force for democracy, not terror”. One combatant even asserted that “the reality [was] clear like... water, and no one [could] hide it”. In short, he insisted, the PKK had been proving through its actions that it was “not a terrorist group but... a force that [sought to protect] Kurdistan”. Regarding alleged abuses from the past, meanwhile, the fighter argued that they had been “perpetrated by rotten offshoots” that “committed crimes under the name of PKK” but “did not belong” to the group. “All our effort is... so our nation will have the right of self-determination”, he stressed. A female fighter, meanwhile, emphasised that the PKK was fighting for “a democratic Kurdistan, under a confederate system that defends [the] equality and freedoms” of all ethnicities and religions. Precisely for the socialist ideals at the heart of the group, however, Beck asserts that there was “little prospect of rescinding the [PKK’s] status as a terrorist organization” anytime soon, even if the US could “turn a blind eye to” the group’s efforts within the Iraqi Peshmerga coalition.⁸⁵⁸

The Battle of Makhmour

Makhmour is a small farming town which lies “50 miles southwest of Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan” and, in early August 2014, “around 40,000 civilians had to flee” the community “due to the rapid Blitzkrieg-like advance of [ISIS]”. According to Franz-Stefan Gady at The National Interest, however, the PKK soon came down from the Qandil Mountains “to protect 12,000 Kurdish refugees from southeastern Anatolia, who [had] been living in a camp on the outskirts of Makhmour since 1994”. Three days later, meanwhile, on August 10, ISIS was thrown out of the town by PKK troops, “along with special counterterrorism peshmerga units” and “air cover” from US fighter planes.

Gady speaks of how, “in the vicious conflict against IS, the **PKK [had] proven indispensable**”. Upon the “initial thrust of IS into Kurdistan and the hasty retreat of the peshmerga”, he says, the PKK and YPG/YPJ immediately came into action. For Gady, “one of the principal problems with the peshmerga forces [had been] unity of command”, as the “lightly armed fighters” were “not a homogenous force” and were “split up between the... KDP and PUK” (which, as seen earlier in this book, had “engaged in a bloody civil war... between 1994 and 1997... that cost, according to some estimates, up to 5,000 lives”).

Amidst the rising prominence of progressive Kurdish fighters and the deteriorating reputation of the Peshmerga, Gady says, the PKK didn’t even “bother to conceal their perceived military superiority”. In Makhmour, for example, one 45-year-old PKK fighter called Nujeen claimed that “the peshmerga [were] not very disciplined”. Having “commanded a squad in combat”, she asserted that “the peshmerga [had withdrawn] from the town without notifying [the PKK], and without firing a single shot”. According to

⁸⁵⁸ <https://news.vice.com/article/meet-the-pkk-terrorists-battling-the-islamic-state-on-the-frontlines-of-iraq>

General Najat Ali, who had been the “commanding general of all peshmerga forces on the Makhmour frontline”, would respond to this allegation by claiming that the KRG troops had “had to withdraw [for] strategic reasons”.

Unlike the Peshmerga, Nujeen insisted, ISIS had proven itself to be “expertly aggressive”, fighting “like guerrillas”. Nonetheless, the 40-year-old PKK commander in Makhmour, known as Tekoshar Zagros, would stress that it had “not [been] a heavy fight”, emphasising that PKK militants knew very well “how to defeat [ISIS]”, having “been fighting them in Syria for the past two years”. He did assert, however, that, due to the “heavy weapons” of ISIS’s “regular army” (which were used in addition to guerrilla forces), the PKK lacked the “modern weapons” necessary to fight back against the jihadist group in a more efficient way. At the same time, though, Zagros added that increased coordination between the PKK and the Peshmerga had made the battle a lot easier (especially given that the latter were receiving significant US support).⁸⁵⁹

After the “re-conquest” of Makhmour, meanwhile, “the news of the stamina and military finesse of the PKK fighters” travelled to Erbil, where, “in an unprecedented public appearance, Massoud Barzani... openly praised the PKK fighters” for their role in a televised broadcast. With Barzani, “a seasoned fighter and veteran” himself, aware that “unity [was] indispensable for the defense of the Kurdish areas in Northern Iraq”, a “fragile cold peace” was now in place, and looked set to remain at least for as long as ISIS threatened Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸⁶⁰ [This détente would later be seen in Syria, where Barzani would use the jihadist offensive and Turkish embargo on Kobani to improve the Peshmerga’s reputation by sending a team to support YPG/YPJ fighters in the besieged city. More on this will be seen in Chapter Twelve.] In fact, as already mentioned, Barzani even “paid a visit to the [refugee] camp on Aug. 13 and met with senior [PKK] commanders there”.

ISIS’s Attacks in Iraq Brought Kurds Together across National Borders

According to Al Monitor’s Mohammed A. Salih, one reason for the PKK’s defence of Makhmour could have been because the nearby camp had long been used “as a base for recruitment” by the group. It could not have been considered a solely self-interested move, however, as PKK spokesman Demhat Agid pointed out, because there had also been militants fighting in Şengal and Kirkuk. Salih also speaks about how “Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in Iraqi Kurdistan” had also helped out in the fight against ISIS, rushing “to the front lines and [playing] a significant role in wresting control of the Gwer area” (around 40 kilometres from Erbil). The KRG, however, reportedly called Iranian Kurdish fighters linked to them away from the frontline in an attempt not to upset its “powerful neighbour, Iran”.

Meanwhile, Salih says, “the PKK presence on Iraqi Kurdistan’s soil could have long-term repercussions” on the long struggle between the KDP and PKK for “the domination of the Kurdish political scene in the Middle East”. Demhat Agid, for example, has insisted that, “when there are no more [IS] attacks left, then the issue [of our presence] needs to be discussed and a decision will be made in that regard”. Amid all of the PKK and YPG/YPJ’s actions in Iraq, meanwhile, Salih stresses, “Turkey [had] been unexpectedly silent”, suggesting that relations between the KRG and its Turkish allies could sour “if the PKK and YPG [were to maintain] their presence in Iraqi Kurdistan... when the conflict was over”. Nonetheless, YPG spokesman Redur Khalil insists that it was ISIS that “changed the borders set by colonialists and changed the region’s geographical map”, not the PKK and its allies.

⁸⁵⁹ <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-pkk-rumbles-northern-iraq-11169>

⁸⁶⁰ <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-pkk-rumbles-northern-iraq-11169?page=2> and @HoansSolo

“Therefore”, he stresses, their presence in response to that situation “should not be seen as an encroachment on any country”.⁸⁶¹

Thomas Seibert at The Daily Beast, meanwhile, also insists that the “deadly battle against jihadists” had been “**pulling together Kurdish factions**” in northern Iraq, “helping defend the many Americans” in Erbil (which was “home to a U.S. consulate and thousands of U.S. citizens working in the oil industry”). As a result, he says, PKK militants had been “improving their image” in American eyes. In fact, according to Osman Bahadır Dincer at the Turkish think tank USAK, “the main winners” of the battle against ISIS were the Kurds. Nonetheless, Seibert points out, there was still mutual distrust between the KDP and the PKK, with Syrian Kurdish forces apparently arresting “several officials close to Barzani”, and Barzani’s forces in the KRG having “raided the offices of groups close to the PKK” only a few months before ISIS’s assault on Iraqi Kurdistan.

For now, though, asserts Seibert, “intra-Kurdish squabbles have been put aside” in the fight against “common enemies”, especially as “Barzani’s peshmerga [could] use all the help they can get”. Having previously been “considered the most able military force in Iraq”, he affirms, the KRG’s militias had “struggled to hold their ground”, and the PKK had needed to reinforce them “with several hundred fighters”. While “PKK and Syrian Kurd forces were facing ISIS militants near Rabia and Sinjar, to the west of Mosul”, he says, the KRG Peshmerga had been “deployed north and east of Mosul”. And this joint effort to push back ISIS, he reports, had even seen the PKK call for “the formation of a joint Kurdish command to coordinate action” against the Wahhabi group.

The Turkish State and the Increasing PKK Presence on Iraq’s Battlefields

As a result of the KRG’s economic boom, Seibert says, which was “triggered by the exploitation of northern Iraqi oil resources”, Iraqi Kurdistan had become “one of Turkey’s biggest export markets”, and this had led Ankara to signal “it would accept an independent Kurdish state if Iraq was to break apart” (a stance that signalled “a reversal of a long-standing position”). However, he asserts, “a possible improvement of the PKK’s image in the West could anger Turkey”, especially considering that, with the group “on the front lines to defend Kurdistan”, it could reasonably expect “to be taken off the terror lists” of the West. According to the head of Turkish think tank IMPR, Veysel Ayhan, “without the PKK, thousands of people would have been killed in recent weeks”, and that was not something that could simply be ignored, however much political and media elites sought to do so.

The reality is, Seibert emphasises, that the PKK had “won hearts and minds of Kurds everywhere by standing up to ISIS”, and had even “impressed critics in the U.S. and the E.U.”. Furthermore, Dincer suggests, the group’s new position would make it “less likely to make concessions” in its peace negotiations with the obstinate elites of the Turkish State. In short, he argues, “it’s not good for Turkey if the PKK’s image is enhanced”, because the country’s regime would no longer be able to justify inaction in the ‘solution process’ by demonising the PKK if the group’s forces continued to act like heroes in full view of the world’s media.⁸⁶² In other words, with the militants gaining a reputation as progressive anti-terrorists, Ankara’s attempts to delegitimise and marginalise them would no longer wash as easily.

III) The Difference between the PKK and the KRG

The KRG is not like the PKK

⁸⁶¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/pkk-kurdish-fight-islamic-state.html#>

⁸⁶² <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/16/pkk-kurdish-terrorists-are-fighting-isis-terrorists-with-u-s-help.html>

Alia Malek at Al Jazeera spoke in mid-October 2014 of how, while “both Kurds and Arabs [had] fled Makhmour the day ISIL arrived, only Kurds [had been] let through checkpoints to the relative safety of Erbil”. As a result of this policy, she says, the Arabs of the town were simply left “to sleep in the open or risk going back to ISIL territory”. In fact, even after Makhmour’s liberation, a similar stance was taken by the KRG regime, which only allowed Kurdish citizens to return home. And two months afterwards, Malek describes, this was still the case, with only Kurds remaining in the town. Arabs, she says, were “now gone”, and it was the Kurdish nationalist regime of northern Iraq, which was “sometimes touted for its ethnic tolerance”, which had been “preventing their return”.

Arabs, Malek asserts, had “begged their Kurdish friends” to ask Makhmour’s Peshmerga chief Najat Ali Saleh “why they [could not] go back to their homes”, but Saleh simply asserted that “Arabs [had] betrayed the Kurds with their support for ISIL”, and then “ran away with ISIL as it retreated”. As a result of this “betrayal”, he insisted, “Arabs [would] no longer be safe in Makhmour”. For him, therefore, his regime was doing them a favour by stopping them from coming back. Former Arab resident Salman, Malek explains, had been “ecstatic” when he heard of the liberation of Makhmour, and had begun “to prepare to go home”. Soon, however, he received a call telling him that “armed mobs had set fire to his house”. In his opinion, though, it had not been his neighbours who had launched the attack, but ““peshmerga bastards” and people in Asayish [the KRG intelligence agency] vehicles”.⁸⁶³

A Feminist Struggle in Rojava and Gender Realities in Iraqi Kurdistan

The University of Bristol’s Nazand Begikhani, meanwhile, quotes Arab feminist Nawal El Saadawi on the current situation in Kurdistan and the wider Middle East, insisting that the women of the YPJ and the PKK had been leading “a war for freedom and democracy against oppression and subservience”, while telling the world “that women are equal to men”. In fact, Begikhani says, many women in the region had been “looking to the women in Kobani [and elsewhere in Rojava] as evidence of “a new hope” and an “aspiration for a real transformation of gender roles””. For her, the PYD had “sought to ensure the real involvement of women in polity and revolution” by containing “a large number of women members” and passing an “equality decree” that was “an indicator of its social and political progress”.⁸⁶⁴ Backing up these comments, Arab women from the village of Aliya Xwarê, which was liberated by the YPG/YPJ in August, asserted that, “thanks to [the] YPG and YPJ, we [now] live here in peace”. The groups had “removed all the gangs” from the area, they said, and one woman even insisted that “ISIS has nothing with Islam” and that the “YPG and YPJ’s achievements are our achievements”.⁸⁶⁵

While the steps made by the Rojava Revolution were enlightened, Begikhani asserts, “nurturing the progressive spirit expressed by the [equality] decree and turning it into a reality beyond the current situation [would] require continued vigilance and effort by women themselves”. Due to the continued opposition of “some faith leaders” to “any move to liberate women from traditional roles and the subservient status at the core of their Islamist ideology”, she stresses, it would ultimately “be up to women and their political allies” to “win the battle for gender equality, personal liberty and human rights in Kurdistan [and the wider region]”.⁸⁶⁶

While Rojavan women were making progress, however, many women in Iraqi Kurdistan remained “caught between their traditional roles and the modern world”, with “marriage

⁸⁶³ <http://projects.aljazeera.com/2014/green-mosque-road/>

⁸⁶⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-nazand-begikhani/kurdish-women-rights-fight_b_6205076.html

⁸⁶⁵ <http://www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/436352?from=1723857257>

⁸⁶⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-nazand-begikhani/kurdish-women-rights-fight_b_6205076.html

and motherhood... still [being] seen as the cornerstones of [their] lives".⁸⁶⁷ Journalist Sara Qader, for example, insists that "there is still a long way to go" to achieve gender equality in the region, with "abuse by men [having pushed] 538 women to commit suicide" in 2006 alone. "Non-governmental agencies advocating women's rights", meanwhile, had "had no impact", she stresses, partly because some of them "are affiliated to political parties" in the KRG.⁸⁶⁸

Lawyer Falah Muradkan-Shaker spoke at Iraqi-German women's rights group WADI in 2011 about how: "physical and psychological abuse"; "fear of family revenge and... manifesting any sign of freedom"; "female genital mutilation" (FGM); "suicide by self-immolation"; and "polygamy" were all issues that women faced in Iraqi Kurdistan. Politicians, meanwhile, were caught "between acknowledging women's rights and freedoms, and the sentiments of conservatives, be them religious or tribal men". And in the end, she says, they "always take the side of the strongest".

Women, meanwhile, were "left unsupported" by the government. In fact, she asserts that there had recently been a "big uproar" in both parliament and "in the mosques" of Erbil because the words "gender equality" had appeared "in some proposed legislations". Claiming the assumption of "equality between men and women" was "an unwelcome advancement", these conservative voices soon found a place in the KRG too, Shaker affirms, with "the Minister of Religious Affairs" saying that the use of the aforementioned words had been "dishonourable". And, far from being chastised, this politician faced no rebuke from "any authority or individual" within the state apparatus of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸⁶⁹

Back in Rojava, meanwhile, a female fighter called 'Viyan', whose Armenian family from Diyarbakır in Turkey had migrated to Kobanî after the 1915 massacres, spoke in late September 2014 about her commitment to ensuring that no people ever suffered such horrors again. And she was just one of "scores of Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, Arab and Yazidi" people who, "together with guerrillas from many other faith and ethnic backgrounds", had entered into Şengal in August 2014 "with the same goal". While ISIS's attempts to massacre Yezîdîs had left "indelible marks", it had also invoked "historical associations" with past instances of ethnic cleansing in the region.

Having "participated in countless battles within the Rojava Revolution", Viyan had been "wounded many times" whilst fighting with the YJA-Star. In fact, she joined the fight against ISIS in Şengal even though she was still recovering from a previous injury. Whilst fighting to save the town's Yezîdî inhabitants, she says, "the stories [her] grandmother had told" her about the Armenian genocide "passed through [her] mind". She even asserts that "there was a feeling that the massacre I was living through had become a part of the massacres about which my grandmother told me". At that point, she stresses: "I made a thousand promises to my conscience that I would do everything in my power so that the children I was carrying in my wounded arm would never again see such a massacre".⁸⁷⁰ And the presence of women in battle was certainly an important tool in the fight against ISIS. The Deputy Defence Minister of Kobanî, for example, Galiye Nimet, would claim that she had "personally met IS fighters face-to-face", and that "women fighters [infringed] on their psyche". Furthermore, she said, when ISIS militants hear a woman's voice on the radio, "they become hysterical".⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/picture_gallery/05/middle_east_women0s_lives_in_northern_iraq/html/1.stm

⁸⁶⁸ <http://www.irinnews.org/report/70603/iraq-kurdish-women-struggle-to-advance>

⁸⁶⁹ <http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/1/state4550.htm> and http://en.wadi-online.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=535:ekurd-iraqi-kurdistan-seen-from-a-womens-perspective&catid=11:analyse&Itemid=108

⁸⁷⁰ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/ypj-star-guerilla-i-have-made-a-promise-to-my-conscience/>

⁸⁷¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-kurds-isis-kobani-war.html#>

Rojava Key for Strengthening Progressive Kurds and Weakening Nationalists

The University of Sussex's Kamran Matin spoke in mid-October 2014 about how, "up to the 1970s, Kurdish movements for national rights" had been "more or less dominated by tribal chiefs, landed notables, religious authorities, or urban elites, or a combination of these strata", lacking "any radical socio-economic project" and over-relying on "external support". In Iraq, he says, the KDP's reliance on "US-Iran-Israeli hostility towards the pro-Soviet Ba'ath regime" had caused the movement to fall apart in 1975 when Iraq and Iran signed a peace treaty. After this event, he asserts, nationalist movements gradually lost their "dominance over Kurdish politics", and were soon replaced by more progressive groups, partly due to "the rapid processes of capitalist development" that had "transformed the social fabric of Kurdish society" and reduced the importance of "feudal-tribal social relations". Only in Iraq, he argues, thanks to the KRG's "rentier character" (or reliance on oil income), did the societal elites of bourgeois nationalist movements manage to retain their prominent role.

With urbanisation and literacy expanding considerably, Matin says, "new social and political forces arose" which would "radically [challenge] the old patterns of Kurdish nationalist politics". The PKK in particular, he insists, "decisively supplanted traditional conservative Kurdish nationalist forces", linking the fight for Kurdish rights "to wider political projects that [were] gender-egalitarian, eco-conscious, and socio-economically broadly socialist". Being "formed by a group of Kurdish university students disillusioned by the Turkish left's deprioritisation of the Kurdish question during the 1970s", Matin explains, the PKK and its allies soon gained a leading role in Kurdish politics.

With the aforementioned group adopting "much more flexible and imaginative political strategies" after Öcalan's capture in 1999, Matin says, in which its followers have combined "armed struggle with a vibrant civic political culture that [has sought to exploit] legal-constitutional opportunities" in Turkey and elsewhere, the movement has gained more and more importance in recent years. And, with the growing role of pro-minority rights political parties in Turkey, the Kurdish question was successfully re-posed as a "fundamentally democratic question". Therefore, together with the "PKK's own military resilience, organisational efficacy, and control over territory", this situation eventually "forced the state... into a peace or 'settlement process'".

At the same time, Matin adds, the PKK and its allies now claimed to advocate a "radical decentralisation of existing states through the establishment of a gender-egalitarian and eco-protective confederated system of self-management", seeking to set up "popular communes as the basic organs of the exercise of direct democracy" (as seen in Chapters Nine and Ten). In fact, with the 'social contract' of Rojava, he argues, "a truly remarkable document in the modern history of the Middle East" has been created. For him, the "very formulation of such a 'social contract' ..., let alone its successful implementation", was an extraordinary achievement.

Based on "mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society", Matin says, the aforementioned contract was unlike any other document created in the region, and protected "fundamental human rights and liberties" whilst also reaffirming "the peoples' right to self-determination". At the same time, he asserts, it saw the death penalty abolished and "internationally recognized human rights conventions" incorporated. For him, then, it "provides a radically different alternative to both Assad's brutal dictatorship and its Islamic opposition's equally repressive and anti-democratic project".

Matin emphasises how, "for many months after the outbreak of anti-Assad protests", there were "secular-progressive forces such as the Local Coordination Committees of Syria"

which were at “the forefront of the popular uprising” . However, when Assad cracked down on protests, leading to the militarisation and sectarianisation of the opposition (due to the “indirect intervention of regional reactionary pro-western, anti-Assad states”), this situation changed. And at this point, Matin argues, the Rojava Revolution was left behind as the only real hope of reinvigorating the “secular-progressive forces in the rest of Syria”, as it provided them “with space and resources for organisation and communication”.

With Turkey not having “taken any significant step to demonstrate its sincerity in the talks” with the PKK, however, the group and its allies in Rojava were destined to remain marginalised on the international stage, Matin affirms. In fact, in his opinion, the “AKP’s reaching out to the Kurds in 2011-2012” had been only “a tactical move to attract the support of the more conservative sections of the Kurdish voters in its electoral struggle against Kemalist and republican forces”. The Turkish State’s failure to implement “any major changes in [its] overall Kurdish policy”, meanwhile, or even undertake “symbolic gestures, such as the improving Ocalan’s prison conditions and releasing Kurdish political prisoners as was expected by the Kurdish side”, made the path towards a progressive secular solution to the Syrian Civil War ever the more difficult (as Turkey would continue to oppose the Rojava Revolution and support reactionary lackeys in Syria).⁸⁷² In short, though, Matin believes that the experience of Rojava was the brightest ray of hope for a more peaceful, just, and democratic Middle East, and that it therefore deserved the support of the world’s progressive activists.

Tamil Solidarity with the Progressive Kurdish Movement

In mid-August 2014, Tamil activist Athithan Jayapalan spoke of how the “oppression of the Kurds [had] parallels in other parts of the world”, and called for “solidarity among oppressed nations” and for “further cooperation and coordination”. In particular, he refers to the “takeover of the City of Sinjar in Southern Kurdistan by the fascistic Islamic State” and its “coordinated policies of eliminating the Yezîdî and the Kurdish population” there. He also emphasises how the “international community [had] failed to facilitate adequate humanitarian assistance or intervention” in response to the “mass exodus” from the city of 300,000 people “towards the inhospitable mountains” surrounding them. With “at least 40,000... Kurds and Yezîdîs” left “stranded” with “no access to shelter, water, medicine or food”, he says, another 130,000 or so had “fled to Rojava”. The point he seeks to stress the most, however, is the importance of the role that “Kurdish resistance forces” played in rescuing the Yezîdîs of Şengal.

While the world was distracted by the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, Jayapalan says, the militants of PKK-affiliated groups had been “quick in their response” to the ISIS advance on Kurdish territory. In fact, Murat Karayılan had insisted in mid-July that the PKK was: “ready to defend our people and their gains in the south [i.e. Iraqi Kurdistan]”. According to Karayılan, “no power can defeat us when we have proper relationships and cooperation”. He had also called on the KDP and PUK to “allow HPG forces to participate in the defense of [citizens] particularly around Kirkuk and Sinjar”.

Having “fought the fascist Turkish state consistently for 30 years”, Jayapalan insists, the PKK was now providing an “indispensable source of knowledge, experience and expertise in guerrilla warfare and in mobilizing national armed resistance”. They had also “proven... their strong commitment to Kurdish self-determination and sovereignty”, as seen in their involvement in the Rojava Revolution. Furthermore, Jayapalan stresses, their intervention in Şengal showed a “phenomenal transnational integration among the Kurds, rendering the oppressive borders separating them increasingly insignificant”.

⁸⁷² <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/10/15/kobani-whats-in-a-name/>

In an attempt to avoid or counter the “unfolding... destabilization of the U.S sphere of influence in the middle-east”, Jayapalan argues, the West had “consistently avoided assisting the Kurds in fighting the ISIS”. In particular, if the PKK and its allies led their own territories to become “masters of their own collective destiny”, he suggests, “it would foresee an unprecedented revolutionary transformation of the region and its geo-politics, which would prove devastating for the Imperialists”. Precisely for this reason, he says, the USA sought to “protect its own interests and diplomatic personnel in Southern Kurdistan’s capital Erbil” by providing “aerial military assistance” to the KRG (which had been denied to PKK allies in Rojava in spite of years of ISIS and Al-Nusra assaults on Syrian Kurdistan). US intervention near Erbil, he adds, was part of a “reluctant and limited intervention”, and sought simply to align with “the geo-politics of Turkey”. In essence, he notes, the superpower was “cunningly attempting to create friction and delink the KRG Peshmerga and the people of South Kurdistan from the Rojava revolution and the PKK by criminalizing the latter and providing limited support only for the former”.

Although “external powers” were trying to foster “a dissected Kurdish national movement which would be unable to materialize Kurdish self-determination”, Jayapalan claims, the PKK and its allies had already created a reality on the ground that could not justify a lack of coordination between different Kurdish factions for long. With “seasoned Kurdish fighters from Rojava... successfully [crossing] the borders and [assisting] their kin in South Kurdistan”, he says, they were now inevitably “fighting alongside the Peshmerga fighters in countering the ISIS alongside their shared border”. Furthermore, he asserts, the YPG/YPJ’s intervention had “impressed... the residents of Sinjar”, who “welcomed them as... liberators” whilst criticising the KRG. This gratitude, meanwhile, increasingly meant that the KRG could not express hostility towards the progressive Kurdish movement without creating discontent within its own jurisdiction.

In fact, YPG spokesman Polat Can expressed the above situation very clearly by saying that, while ISIS had sought to redefine links between Kurdish communities, the YPG/YPJ had “erased the borders between us... with great force in order to protect our brothers in the south”. Jayapalan, meanwhile, also focusses on the importance of the YPG/YPJ and PKK/HPG’s creation of the “local armed units for the defense of the Sinjar region” (or “the Sinjar Defense Units (SDU)”), which had attracted “hundreds of Yezîdî youths”. This reality, he says, reflected how the progressive Kurdish movement’s intervention in the city had “earned them the hearts of the people of South Kurdistan” and had effectively doomed the “treacherous US-Turkish effort to divide the Kurds” to failure. One thing that Jayapalan fails to mention, however, is the fact that Kurdish nationalists in the KRG had themselves been guilty of dividing Kurdish communities for many years, and specifically since the Rojava Revolution.

Linking the struggle of Kurdish communities against ISIS to his own ethnic community, Jayapalan insists that there were “strategic lessons” from which Tamils, as an “oppressed transnational people”, could learn. Conveying Tamil “solidarity to the revolutionary struggle of the Kurds”, he reports on how “Kurdish activists expressing their solidarity to the Tamil cause [had] also said that a stronger cooperation between the Kurdish and Tamil activists [was] needed”. And such collaboration, he asserts, could truly help to “build a transnational platform of alternate or representative international solidarity”, as “oppressed nations” were “often neglected by the established international left”.⁸⁷³

The West Remains Stubbornly Opposed to the PKK

⁸⁷³ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/08/19/the-kurds-and-sinjar-historic-national-unity-and-resistance/> and athi1@hotmail.com

German broadcaster DW's Klaus Jansen spoke in late August 2014 about the discussion regarding the reconsideration of the PKK's terrorist designation in Germany. Although in 1993 there were a number of attacks on "Turkish institutions in Germany" (reportedly by the PKK), he insists, "times have changed". With Öcalan having "called for non-violence" and focussed primarily on "increased autonomy and rights for Kurds", he says, PKK militants had now shown themselves "to be more competent than the KRG Peshmerga" at fighting against ISIS, and thus more worthy of Western support. Nonetheless, because the West was still at odds with the PKK's ideology, and was still an ally of the Turkish regime, its governments had decided to place their "hope in the [less effective] Peshmerga in the battle" against Wahhabi jihadism.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, "" made it clear she [wanted] German arms to be delivered to the Peshmerga only and not to the PKK", even though the two groups "[had] already fought side-by-side against IS terrorists"". At the same time, though, there were political figures, like the Social Democrat Party's Rolf Mützenich, who asserted that "a discussion needs to take place regarding the "classification of PKK as a terrorist group in Germany"". In spite of the fact that "others also support this view" and say that "the PKK has the potential to be political actor in Turkey and play a role in its bordering regions", claims Jansen, they nonetheless argue that "the discussion "should not be used as a lever to justify weapons delivery to the PKK"". ⁸⁷⁴ In other words, then, Jansen confirms here that Germany's official stance on the PKK would not change as long as its alliance with the Turkish State remained intact, as long as its desire for Iraqi oil continued, and as long as the PKK's belief system remained hostile to the idea of centralised states and capitalist domination.

B) The ISIS Assault on Kobanî

Intensified ISIS attacks on the northern Syrian town of Kobanî (or Ayn Al-Arab), "a major Kurdish city on the Turkish border... which [sheltered] a population of at least 200,000", ⁸⁷⁵ started on the September 15, 2014. The Wahhabi group's "initial plans" had been to take the surrounding villages and move into the town centre within five days. Turkey, meanwhile, had "made contingencies in accordance", expecting the city's inhabitants "to come to Urfa by the 20th" of September. The city, however, did not fall.

The assault had been "an expected development" for the YPG/YPJ "after ISIS [had] occupied Mosul and [overrun] military bases belonging to the Syrian army in Raqqah" in the previous weeks and months, leaving the Rojavan militias enough time to prepare "within [their] means" for an intensified jihadist assault. For example, they quickly "evacuated the surrounding villages", bringing some people to Kobanî whilst leaving others to cross the border into Suruç, where many had relatives. Essentially, "tens of thousands of people" had been evacuated successfully, and an expected massacre had been prevented. Meanwhile, the fact that the area around Kobanî was flat and ISIS had "superior weapons" meant that the YPG/YPJ had to narrow their line of defence. The groups therefore prepared primarily for "urban warfare" inside the city. The Wahhabi insurgents, meanwhile, "thought the progress [they had] made on deserted lands was a success", as did the Turkish government and its allies. ⁸⁷⁶ In this section of the chapter, I will take a much closer look at ISIS's attack on Kobanî and the impressive resistance put up by the YPG/YPJ and their allies in the city.

⁸⁷⁴ <http://www.dw.de/pkk-from-terrorist-threat-to-ally/a-17890523>

⁸⁷⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-air-strikes-us-attacks-are-failing-to-slow-isis-advance-say-desperate-kurds-in-kobane-9754110.html>

⁸⁷⁶ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/the-results-of-the-kobane-war-so-far/298-the-results-of-the-kobane-war-so-far.html>

I) Rojava's Stalingrad

In mid-September, Kurdish Info spoke about how there had been “intense activity going on in North Kurdistan” in response to the intensified ISIS attacks on Kobanî. After “calls for mobilisation by the KCK Executive Council, PKK Executive Committee member Murat Karayılan and the Kurdistan People’s Initiative”, the website explained, preparations [had] begun in many towns and districts in North Kurdistan to go to the Kobanî border”. The DBP co-chair of Suruç district İsmail Kaplan, meanwhile, claimed that the Turkish State was “providing arms and munitions to the [ISIS] gangs by train”, and called on citizens to “prevent support for the gangs at the border” and to “stop gang members crossing” into Syria. “The people of Rojava are not alone”, he said, while calling on “all those who consider themselves to be patriotic, revolutionary, democratic or just a human being, to immediately join our action”.⁸⁷⁷

The KCK Executive Council, meanwhile, had “called on the people of North Kurdistan to support the heroic resistance of Kobanî”, comparing “the broad alliance against ISIS to the broad front set up against fascism during WWII”. In fact, it asserted, “even those who had nurtured ISIS” (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and even Turkey) “were now opposing it”, and that their interests were therefore temporarily (and partially) coming into line with those of citizens in Rojava. The KCK also insisted that ISIS was receiving “encouragement from the Turkish state’s attitude” of hostility towards Rojavan territories, with the government completing “the encirclement of Kobanî from the north..., continuing to provide arms and logistic support to ISIS”, and essentially acting as “an accomplice in the massacres carried out by ISIS”.

In its statement, the KCK compared the “resistance of Kobanî to ISIS fascism today to that of Stalingrad against the Nazis during WWII”. In other words, it would be a key battle of heroic proportions that could well be a decisive event in the outcome of the fight against ISIS. For the progressive Kurdish group, the Wahhabi jihadists had grown “in the manure of capitalist modernity” and been “nurtured” by Turkey, and was therefore not the only culprit. Therefore, the alternative system being built in Rojava, the organisation insists, was the only way to “ensure no more ISIS-like organisations emerge” in the future. Furthermore, as Kobanî was considered to be “the symbol of the Rojava Revolution”, it could not be allowed to fall. In characteristically combative spirit, the KCK emphasised in its letter that “the peoples of the Middle East [would] destroy ISIS and establish a free and democratic life” in the region, and thus prevent reactionary groups from ever emerging again.⁸⁷⁸

A week later, Reuters’ Murad Sezer reported on how “140,000 Syrian Kurds” had fled into Turkey “since the frontier opened [the previous week], making the escape from Kobanî **“the fastest exodus” of the Syrian Civil War**. Refugees said that ISIS gangs had been “executing people of all ages in the areas they had seized to create a climate of fear and slavish obedience”. Meanwhile, arriving at the border “tired, miserable and desperate for water”, many civilians had to “wait days before [being] allowed to cross into Turkey”. Fully aware that its interference in Syria could cause such a devastating jihadist attack, the **Turkish State was** suspected by many locals, according to Sezer, to have been **consciously underprepared for the refugee crisis** that it would inevitably face as ISIS pushed into Kobanî.

With an “increasing accommodation problem in the small Turkish border towns”, border officials were only allowing a limited number of refugees into the country at a time. Other more fortunate refugees, meanwhile, had relatives in Turkey with whom they could stay. Sezer explains how many civilians from villages close to Kobanî had walked to the border, “some wearing simply a pair of slippers on their feet”, with other carrying “small children in

⁸⁷⁷ <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/thousands-preparing-secure-kobane-border>

⁸⁷⁸ <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/kck-youth-north-kurdistan-must-join-kobane-resistance>

their arms or on their shoulders". At the same time, those travelling by car, he says, had to "leave [their vehicles] on the Syrian side" of the border, with the same rule being applied for those bringing livestock with them. If they chose to cross in spite of these limitations, he asserts, they would be allowed to take "nothing but the clothes on their backs and a few bags or small suitcases".

Sezer affirms that "conditions at the border [were] very difficult", with the "summer heat [being] unbearable" and some "sand storms" covering the "hopeless, desperate, tired and angry" refugees. "Almost all of them", he stresses, "[wanted] to return to Syria immediately after reaching the border". Others, meanwhile, who had already crossed into Turkey, would later "venture back to the border to cross back to their home country".⁸⁷⁹ At the same time, though, the PYD's Salih Muslim claimed that a "massacre similar to that in Sinjar" was awaiting Kobanî if further action by the international community was not taken.⁸⁸⁰ In short, then, the situation was desperate.

Why Did ISIS Attack Kobanî?

Freelance journalist Carl Drott, who visited Kobanî between August and September 2014, wrote on October 9 about how ISIS's "decision to attack Kobanî in mid-September" had come about partly as a result of its "somewhat crippled capabilities in Iraq" (as a result of US airstrikes there) and "recent defeats against [the] YPG in the Cizîrê area". Essentially, he says, Kobanî was seen as "the low hanging fruit" of Rojava, which could be taken "before the coalition air campaign was extended into Syria". In the long-term, meanwhile, a "YPG-controlled enclave" in Kobanî "would tie up [the jihadists'] military resources and constitute a security problem" for the territories they controlled. Equally, if the YPG/YPJ were successful in their defence of Kobanî, they would almost certainly "look east towards Tel Abyad" (Girê Sipî in Kurdish), which stood in the way of the Kobanî and Cizîrê Cantons of Rojava.⁸⁸¹

In fact, one activist from Raqqa would say in February 2015 that ISIS was so worried about losing Tel Abyad that it had "dug tunnels in the area and built fortifications on the town's outskirts",⁸⁸² mainly because control of the town meant "opening and securing supply lines (ammunition, medication and armament) with Turkey". In short, if the YPG/YPJ took control of the area, it would be a significant loss for the jihadist group, "given its geographical location on the Turkish border" and the fact that it would effectively close the door "to those willing to join [the] organization from abroad".⁸⁸³

An ISIS victory in Kobanî, meanwhile, would mean "control of substantial resources in the form of houses, businesses and farm lands, which [could] be distributed as "war spoils" to fighters and local collaborators". In Tel Abyad, for example, there had been "a large Kurdish minority" before ISIS took over, but the jihadists initiated an "ethnic cleansing campaign" in mid-2013 which almost made it into an "entirely Arab-populated" town. According to one former Kurdish resident, "the main Baggara tribe as well as smaller tribes like [the] Assafah and [the] Naem all [supported] IS". Between Tel Abyad and Kobanî, meanwhile, and on "the eastern shore of the Euphrates", there were "a number of Arab villages, interspersed among Kurdish and mixed ones", where ISIS would seek to increase its influence. Although "there [were] no clear political divisions between the tribes" in this region, Drott asserts, some supported the YPG/YPJ whilst others support ISIS. Some local Arabs, meanwhile, appeared "to have turned to "fence-sitting" (supporting no one), "hedging" (supporting both sides) and "coat-turning" (supporting the group currently in power)".

⁸⁷⁹ <http://widerimage.reuters.com/story/fleeing-islamic-state>

⁸⁸⁰ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/26/kurds-rush-across-turkey-defend-kobani-isis-syria?CMP=tw_t_gu

⁸⁸¹ <http://carldrott.wordpress.com> and <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/whats-stake-kobani-islamic-state-kobani-calculations-carl-drott/>

⁸⁸² <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/23690>

⁸⁸³ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/03/syria-kurdish-tel-abvad-battle-federalism-turkey.html#>

The YPG, Drott says, has affirmed that it never captures Arab villages unless it is “requested by a local delegation”, and that it clearly has “no desire to rule over a wary or even hostile Arab population”. When the “**joint YPG-rebel command centre**” was established in early September, however, it looked like the “legitimacy of [the] YPG among local Arabs” would increase, and this unified front “**might even have urged IS to strike Kobanî before this alliance could become any stronger**”.⁸⁸⁴

Wassim NASR at France 24, meanwhile, reported on why Kobanî was “of **great symbolic importance to both sides**” involved in the conflict. He says that, “long before the Syrian civil war”, Kobanî had been “a bone of contention between ethnic Kurds on one side and Arabs and Turks on the other”. The town, he asserts, had been “the birthplace of many of the leaders and fighters of the secular [PKK]”, and thus “at the forefront” of the conflict between Turkey and the PKK. Nasr therefore insists that “it is no surprise that [the Kurds were] now doggedly defending one of the cities they [hoped would] one day be a bedrock of their independence”. ISIS, meanwhile, viewed the conflict in Kobanî as “a struggle against Kurdish “secular nationalism””, he affirms. One spokesman for the group, for example, even “stated that his fighters were not engaged in an “ethnic conflict” against Kurdish militias but a “religious and ideological” one”.⁸⁸⁵

Wahhabi Chauvinism or Socialist Secularism

According to Jonathan Spyer, writing in late September 2014, Kobanî was an “isolated, beleaguered space”, which had also been under attack from ISIS in May when Spyer visited, with the jihadis “trying to block the supply of electricity and water into the city”. Spyer also emphasises that there were “very strict border arrangements kept in place by the Turkish authorities to the north– in stark contrast to the much more lax regime maintained facing the areas of Arab population further west”. For him, the “Islamic State was the beneficiary of Turkish support” (at the very least “in its initial phase”), with evidence having emerged of “Turkish forces permitting Islamic State fighters to cross back and forth across the border during early clashes with the YPG”. Since then, he says, there has been greater ambiguity, with Turkey officially denying relations with ISIS but securing “the release of 49 Turkish hostages... under unclear circumstances”, suggesting a “complex connection between the two”.

The “arrival of Kurdish forces” in Kobanî “from across the Turkish border”, Spyer argues, would be “the key element in freezing the [ISIS] advance” on the city, as the roughly 1,500 PKK guerrillas who had crossed over into Syria to aid the YPG/YPJ appeared “to have played a vital role in halting the [jihadists’] advance”. PUK forces, meanwhile, were allegedly “on the Iraq-Syria border, waiting to deploy”, he says. The most recent ISIS onslaught, Spyer asserts, indicated that ISIS was “turning its attention back to Syria” after lightning progress through Iraq in mid-2014.

The Kobanî Canton in particular, Spyer stresses, had “long been a thorn in the side of the jihadis”, interrupting as it did “the jihadis’ territorial contiguity, separating Tel Abyad from Jarabulus and making a large detour necessary from [the] Islamic State’s capital in Raqqa city to the important border town of Jarabulus”. In fact, he asserts, Chechen commander Abu Omar al-Shishani had reportedly “made the conquest of Kobanî a personal mission”. In Spyer’s opinion, then, Kobanî was seeing a clash between “two successor entities” to the Assad regime in Syria, and was effectively the “point at which these two projects [would] collide”.⁸⁸⁶

⁸⁸⁴ <http://carldrott.wordpress.com> and <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/whats-stake-kobani-islamic-state-kobani-calculations-carl-drott/>

⁸⁸⁵ <http://www.france24.com/en/20141008-kobane-significance-why-important-kurds-islamic-state/>

⁸⁸⁶ <http://www.meforum.org/4832/the-defense-of-kobani#.VCgAdoAo8Pg.twitter>

Life under Siege

Between October 9 and October 12, journalist Heysam Mislim wrote a diary from Kobanî for Newsweek. In it, he insists that he had stayed in the city, in spite of the danger, to reveal the “reality on the ground” and oppose **“the propaganda and lies spread by Islamic State media and several other media outlets”**. Kobanî was “alive”, he says, and he speaks about how there were still “thousands of civilians” (including children) living in Kobanî, even though officials had tried to convince them to leave as soon as possible. Many of the civilians who had stayed in the city, he stresses, would simply “rather die [there] than go elsewhere as a refugee” (to be “arrested or killed by Turkish soldiers” or left “on the streets of Turkey as an abandoned refugee”). And this was the type of defiant spirit that Mislim sought to portray in his article.

He also describes how **numerous political figures in Kobanî were regularly seen among the people**, carrying guns with them as they prepared to go to the frontlines. Another point he makes, meanwhile, is that there was no Red Cross or Red Moon presence in Kobanî, and many citizens felt like humanitarian aid organisations had abandoned them. At the same time, he insists that all of the doctors and nurses were locals, and that medicine and food had to be smuggled into the city from Turkey, whose trigger-happy soldiers made the journey across the border a big risk. As a result of the lack of resources, he says, everything was rationed, and the people left in Kobanî could only have “one meal a day”.

Emphasising the difference between the YPG/YPJ and ISIS, Mislim asserts that, while the former would try to protect the bodies of their dead comrades, the latter would simply leave their deceased fighters behind. When prisoners were taken, meanwhile, ISIS would usually kill them, whereas the YPG/YPJ believed it was “wrong to kill war prisoners”. Even injured YPG/YPJ fighters, Mislim says, felt a duty to keep fighting even if they were not in an appropriate condition to do so, simply because of the humanitarian commitment they felt. At the same time, he asserts that, when citizens still in Kobanî listened to the news on regional Arabic and international radio stations, they were shocked to hear that Kobanî had “completely fallen into ISIS hands because this [was] clearly not true”.

Fighting with **“old Kalashnikovs, homemade explosives and RPGs”**, Mislim stresses, the YPG/YPJ had to make every bullet count, and simply could not do as much damage as ISIS’s wide array of heavy weaponry. They therefore had to focus on **taking ISIS fighters out with snipers, stopping suicide bombers in cars before they could arrive, and stationing themselves in demolished buildings in order to ambush their enemies**. The Wahhabi jihadists, meanwhile, cowardly “[targeted] residential areas” from afar, Mislim says, and shot just for fun sometimes because they had enough ammunition to do so. Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that it was such an **“uneven war”**, Mislim argues that “morale [was] still incredible”, mainly because the YPG/YPJ knew “why they [were] fighting”. In short, they felt they were **“sacrificing themselves for the entire world because [theirs was] a resistance to defend human values and human dignity”**.

Finally, Mislim speaks about how one girl, who had been arrested by border guards after the “Turkish government [had] closed the border crossings”, had been in contact with him – having secretly kept her phone. Turkish soldiers, the girl told him, had “threatened to deport [her and other detainees] back to ISIS-controlled areas of Kobanî” because, as they had not evacuated along with other refugees, they were “now considered illegal smugglers”.⁸⁸⁷ Essentially, this situation represented very well the hostile attitude of the Turkish State towards Kobanî (and Rojava in general), which simply added to the already

⁸⁸⁷ <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/10/24/kobane-diary-four-days-inside-city-keeping-incredible-and-unprecedented-resistance-277509.html>

difficult situation created by the country's economic blockade on Syrian Kurdistan, its alleged support for ISIS, and the jihadist onslaught itself.

A Civilian Day in Kobanî

In mid-December, Firat News reported on what life was like for civilians in Kobanî, with Sedat Sur spending "a day as the guest of the Cido family". Sixty-five-year-old Sediqê Xelil and her seventy-year-old husband Muslim Cido, Sur asserts, lived in a house with twenty family members. The family "used to live in the village of Situyê 15 kilometres to the west" of the city, where they planted "barley, wheat and cumin", but they had "had to flee... once the [ISIS] attacks [had] started". The jihadis, the family explained, had "plundered all their possessions", "damaged their house", and "installed many Turkish-speaking families in villages [they had] occupied" (according to some of their Arab friends still living in ISIS territory).

The autonomous government of Kobanî, Sur reports, had given the Cidos their house in Kobanî because Muslim had asserted that he and his family did not want to cross into Turkey as refugees. The constant jihadi shelling of the city, however, meant that the grandchildren could not "go out to play", and they "also [complained] about not being able to go to school". Nonetheless, while Sur spoke with Sediqê and Muslim, "a group of YPJ fighters" visited the house, bringing the children balloons to play with. The aim of their visit, though, had been to ask if the family needed anything.

With "no electricity in the house during the day", the Cidos also had "no stove or heater". A generator, meanwhile, was only turned on in the evenings, and was switched off again at night. In order to heat water to get washed and do their laundry, Sur explains, the family had to burn "twigs and pieces of cardboard they [had] found in the area". Then, to heat food, they would "use the small amount of paraffin" they had left. This meal, however, would only come in the evening because there was not enough food to eat during the day as well. Even with a thick jacket on, Sur says that he had felt cold in the house, and that "the children and other members of the family [had] no warm clothes". Instead, he adds, blankets were taken out and wrapped around the children.

The only other family in the street, Sur affirms, was invited to eat with the Cidos, who said that "everything [was] shared with the neighbours". After eating, meanwhile, everyone would get under their blankets. According to Sur, this was how "almost all civilians" lived in Kobanî at the time. In spite of support from the government and the YPG/YPJ, he affirms, "there [were] serious shortages of food and medication, and hardship caused by [the] lack of heating". Nonetheless, he says, the Cidos and the other civilians in the city were "determined not to leave their land", and it was "this perseverance that [allowed] them to surmount these difficulties".⁸⁸⁸

Serêkanîye - The First Kobanî

At the start of February 2015, Janet Biehl spoke about the Academic Delegation with which she had visited Serêkanîye two months before. With "50,000 people, mostly Kurds, but also Chechens, Armenians, Aramaeans, and Arabs", Biehl says, Serêkanîye lay "across from the [Turkish] city of Ceylanpınar", which had been separated after World War One when a line was drawn between them. And here, she asserts, near the border crossing, there had previously been fierce battles between the YPG/YPJ and Wahhabi jihadists. In November 2012, she explains, "several hundred invaders" from Jabhat al Nusra had "attacked and occupied the city", entering a residential neighbourhood accompanied by "the sounds of

⁸⁸⁸ <http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/a-civilian-day-in-kobane.htm>

helicopters and machine guns". On this occasion, Biehl adds, the groups fighters had "entered Serê Kaniyê not from the south but from the north, from Turkey". In fact, PYD co-president Asiya Abdullah would soon point out that "the attacks [were] coming from Turkey, and [were] in violation of international law". Nonetheless, "the invasion scarcely registered in international media reports".

Ba'athist planes "soon bombed the city, ostensibly to fight the jihadists", but their bombs ended up killing "at least ten civilians" and wounding "seventy others" in the process, while "fifty houses were demolished". After thousands of residents had fled, meanwhile, "the YPG mobilized to defend the city". In an attempt to force Al Nusra out of the city peacefully, Biehl explains, "a coalition of Kurdish parties called a march to protest the occupation... seven days after the initial attack". The jihadist group, however, had "set up barriers to block [the roads into the city]". Faced with this barricade, the "co-head of the local people's council, Abid Xelil, emerged, accompanied by Kurdish security forces (Asayiş), and demanded that the armed Islamists remove the roadblocks and allow the march". In response, though, "the jihadists opened fire and shot him to death, along with a young demonstrator".

According to Abdullah, Xelil had been "a symbolic figure for interethnic understanding" in the city, in which "Arabs, Aramaeans, Armenians, and Kurds [lived] together peacefully". In short, she argued, Turkey was "trying to undermine our harmonious coexistence and provoke a war between Arabs and Kurds". Days later, in fact, on November 20, "the Turkish army helped Al-Nusra's invasion by firing short-range missiles from across the border", while jihadists "gave the Turks the coordinates of YPG positions". When the YPG fought back, meanwhile, "observers noticed that injured jihadists were being taken in Turkish ambulances back across the border to hospitals in Ceylanpinar" (at the same time that "wounded Kurds were barred from receiving treatment in the same hospitals"). A day later, "**five Turkish tanks rolled over the border, again on behalf of Al Nusra**", **helping the jihadists to occupy "most of the city"**. For Biehl, therefore, "it was and is hard to avoid the conclusion that **the invasion of Serê Kaniyê was a Turkish operation, ordered from Ankara and coordinated from Ceylanpinar**".

The YPG continued to resist the occupation, however, and "on the morning of November 23, Al Nusra asked for a truce, which was negotiated". On January 16, 2013, though, "some 1,500 jihadists again crossed the Turkish border into Serê Kaniyê, this time with several tanks". Nonetheless, the YPG destroyed "three of the tanks and [killed] 100 to 120 jihadists, losing only a few of their own", and soon began to liberate occupied neighbourhoods. In fact, by January 30 "it had mostly driven Al Nusra from the city and retaken the all-important border crossing".

A month later, meanwhile, "the YPG and the Free Syrian Army agreed to a cease-fire, which Al Nusra said it would observe". Armed groups were supposed to leave Serêkanîye, and "a civil council, consisting of representatives of various Syrian peoples, was to control the border crossing". However, the jihadists attacked the city yet again on July 16. Quick to respond, though, the YPG "repelled the invaders and retook control of the entire city" within two days. Having expelled the occupiers once and for all, "YPG fighters [now] found Turkish passports" in areas they had abandoned.

In the rural areas surrounding the city, however, "Al Nusra, now amplified by ISIS, took to looting, abducting, and executing civilians, Kurdish and Arab alike". As a result, "the YPG launched an operation to drive the jihadists from the villages" in early November. A year later, when Biehl's Academic Delegation arrived in Cizîrê, "normal life had mostly returned to the city, although clashes with ISIS continued 25 kilometers the west". According to YPG spokesman Dr Huseyin Koçer, Biehl asserts, "**interethnic and interreligious cooperation**"

had been “**crucial to [the] popular self-defense**” of Rojavan society. For that reason, he said, “the social will of the self-government, expressed by the YPG, [was] to protect minorities’ cultural values and traditions”. For, “only in this way”, he asserted, could locals “defeat those who [were] attacking [them]” and trying to “displace [them] and pit communities against one another”.

Although Koçer affirmed that “many of the Arab villagers support Daesh”, he also stressed: “we don’t try to harm them”. In fact, he said, “we are sure [that] many of them don’t like Daesh but feel they have to support it out of fear”. Therefore, the YPG/YPJ sought “to strengthen the Arab villagers’ mobilization capabilities” rather than convert them to a specific political doctrine. “We try to create consciousness of freedom and liberation”, he asserted, while communicating “the need for self-organization, not only to sustain daily life” but also for political reasons. In short, “the people’s council of Serê Kaniyê” goes to liberated villages “and helps organize” similar councils where they live. “We discuss with them and propose to them our [democratic] project and our goals”, Koçer added. “We don’t go to places to make them be like us”, he explained. “We want to ensure that they can express their own political will” and, therefore, “through discussions, we try to raise liberationist consciousness”.⁸⁸⁹

II) Saving Kobanî

Heroism in Kobanî

On October 5, reports came in about a female commander of the YPJ who had “[broken] into [an] ISIS bastion” on the eastern outskirts of Kobanî, before “[clashing] with them, [firing] grenades, [and] then [detonating] herself with a grenade”.⁸⁹⁰ The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed that she had blown herself up, saying that “the operation [had] caused deaths”, but that there was “no confirmed number”. This “first reported instance of a female Kurdish fighter carrying out a suicide bombing against ISIL” came precisely as the jihadists continued to advance on Kobanî, having already caused “at least 186,000 people” to flee to Turkey.⁸⁹¹ The YPJ fighter, 20-year-old Dilar Gnexemis (aka Arin Mirkan/Arîn Mîrxan), reportedly left two children behind. This suicide attack occurred on the same day as the “reported suicide bombing of Ceylan Ozalp, 19, also near Kobanî”. Ozalp had also reportedly run out of ammunition and decided to “spend her last bullet on killing herself instead of falling into the hands of ISIS”.⁸⁹² [A subsequent message attributed to Ozalp claimed she was alive and that it had actually been a friend who had killed herself in early October.⁸⁹³]

According to Ruth Pollard at Australian newspaper The Age, who visited Rojava in early 2015, “in almost every home or office... – political or military – the photograph of 22-year-old Arin Mirkan” would be up on the wall. Essentially, she says, the YPJ “battalion commander”, who had “detonated explosives as she ran into a group of IS fighters” and killed “dozens of ISIS mercenaries”, was now a figure of inspiration for the Rojava Revolution.⁸⁹⁴ Although many others had died, the courage and determination of fighters like Mirkan, who had evidently been thinking about her comrades even at the moment when she knew her life was going to end, was clearly of particular motivational value.

A YPG fighter, meanwhile, would speak about a friend who had “stopped an Isis assault by dropping a bomb through a tank hatch, killing himself as well”. Only with his friend’s

⁸⁸⁹ <http://new-compass.net/articles/first-koban%C3%AA>

⁸⁹⁰ <http://syriahr.com/en/2014/10/female-commander-in-ypg-detonates-herself-in-a-grouping-of-is-fighters/>

⁸⁹¹ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/10/kurdish-suicide-bomber-attacks-isil-syria-201410518318542637.html>

⁸⁹² <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/10/07/Kurdish-female-suicide-bomber-revealed-to-be-mother-of-two.html>

⁸⁹³ http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=15a_1416075785

⁸⁹⁴ <http://www.theage.com.au/world/kurds-unite-to-build-kurdistan-in-defiance-of-islamic-state-20150314-141xwp.html>

action, he asserts, did ISIS temporarily retreat. The militant also claims that “Isis militants... appeared to be high on drugs”, and had come into the city “with 10 cars with heavy machine guns strapped on top and four tanks”.⁸⁹⁵ Whilst showing the unbalanced nature of both ISIS militants and their conflict with the YPG/YPJ, such stories also tell the tale of the immense human sacrifices of Rojavan soldiers.

These sacrifices, however, were made precisely with the intention of avoiding the horrors that the Wahhabi jihadists wanted to inflict upon them. In particular, female combatants were playing a key role in the defence of Kobanî against the chauvinist militants of ISIS, and YPG/YPJ forces in the city were even being “commanded by a woman, Heval (Comrade) Narin”. And one incentive for women to resist the ISIS advances was to protect the dignity of their gender. According to YPG officer Mehdi Aslan, for example, one female fighter who had been taken to Turkey to be buried “had not just been decapitated [by ISIS], but had also had her breasts cut off”. Such mutilations, according to The Guardian’s Emma Graham-Harrison, had simply “strengthened the resolve of fighters” in their struggle against ISIS.⁸⁹⁶

Women at the Forefront of the Fight against ISIS

In early November, co-president of the Kobanî Legislative Council Fayza Abdi spoke to Stephen Smellie at The Morning Star about how she was living among thousands of Kobanî refugees in Suruç, Turkey. She had crossed the border two weeks previously, insisting that “most of our people [were] here in Suruç and I [had] a job to do for them”. Before the ISIS attack, she says, “life was calm and quiet” in Kobanî, with refugees even coming to the canton “from across Syria for peace”. Having previously “had a hard time with [the Ba’athist regime of] Syria”, she asserts that Kurds in Rojava, “when [they] got autonomy”, were determined to make their “own life”, building “schools for [their] children” and setting up a system of self-government which would make sure they would never again have to submit to or depend on the will of others. She claims that “there was nothing before”, but that the system Rojavans had built up had attracted people from around Syria who were seeking to escape the horrific events of the civil war. In fact, she insists, “half the victims were Arabs living in Kobanî” when the ISIS onslaught on the city first began.

Before the Rojava Revolution, Abdi had been “a teacher of Kurdish and English”, but had also been, together with many other Kurdish women, “in the struggle for 30 years in the PKK and in all aspects of organisation”, such as unions and community groups. Now, she says, “**women are leading our revolution**” because they believe “**we must be our own solution**”. And, although “the vast majority of Kobanî’s 500,000 inhabitants had fled” after ISIS’s intensified assault, she explains, “there were still civilians in the city, including two of her daughters who [were] there helping the fighters”. She affirms that “half the city [had] been destroyed” since the start of the onslaught, and that the civilians still in Kobanî were “living in cellars”. Nonetheless, she insists, “Isis forgot that we are new Kurdish people”. Thus, with a defiant attitude, she asserts that Rojavans “are educated”, that they “know how to defend [themselves]”, and that they are committed to showing “that little weak people can defend [themselves]” and “can lead [their] country and the world” into a fairer, freer, and more democratic future.⁸⁹⁷

US Airstrikes Counterproductive

On September 23, a US-led military coalition began carrying out airstrikes against ISIS in Syria, after having stalled the jihadists’ advances in Iraq. Two days later, VICE’s John Beck reminded readers that Kobanî had been “surrounded by IS militants for well over a year”

⁸⁹⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-air-strikes-us-attacks-are-failing-to-slow-isis-advance-say-desperate-kurds-in-kobane-9754110.html>

⁸⁹⁶ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/11/kobani-time-running-out-besieged-civilians?CMP=tw_t_gu

⁸⁹⁷ <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-0774-Women-are-leading-our-revolution#.VInMmXu8480>

but that, with a “major offensive” now launched against the city, the situation was now “grave”. For example, there were claims that, if the Kurdish stronghold fell, “its remaining residents could be massacred”. Nonetheless, there was initially very little coverage in the mainstream media (which almost certainly believed Turkish and Western claims that the city would fall very quickly).

The YPG/YPJ were resisting the “modern weapons and armor” of ISIS (much of which had been “looted from the Iraqi army during [the jihadists’] shock advance in June”), with “elderly Soviet guns and RPGs”, and very few commentators expected them to hold back the Wahhabi onslaught for long. Furthermore, the Rojavan militias were “unable to access heavier ordnance” because of the Turkish blockade, and “could not access fresh ammunition” for the same reason. Relying primarily “on previously amassed stockpiles”, therefore, the YPG/YPJ had to be very careful with the few resources they had, and Beck insists that it would be very “hard [for them] to stop” the jihadists under these difficult circumstances.

The city “would be a major prize for IS”, Beck says, “as it would allow them to connect territories they hold and to control the border crossing, helping them bring fighters in and oil out into neighbouring Turkey”. The US-led airstrikes, meanwhile, were not preventing ISIS’s advance on Kobanî, and were focussing almost totally on areas far away from the city. In fact, according to writer and activist Mustafa Bahin, the strikes had “actually been counterproductive from the YPG’s perspective”, as they had been “doing little to weaken IS” and had even been “driving its fighters away from strongholds in Raqqa and elsewhere and towards the Kurdish city instead”. The jihadists’ supplies, meanwhile, had not been hit, so they were able to simply pick up their arms and head to the frontline to fight. At the same time, Kobanî defence minister Ismet Shêkh Hesen insisted that the airstrikes had simply increased ISIS’s “sense of urgency”, saying the group’s militants were now “trying to take Kobanî before the strikes [intensified]”.

On the Turkish border, Beck says, it was “hard to get close”, with guards “[levelling] their weapons at journalists who tried”. At a distance, though, “a mass of people, cars and livestock [could still] be seen on the Syrian side waiting to enter Turkey”. Those who had already entered the neighbouring country, meanwhile claimed they “had been at the gate for as long as five days”, and few mentioned less than three days of waiting. Having already undertaken “gruelling journeys from their home villages by foot”, they now faced yet more anguish at the border, with “Turkish police [having] even fired tear gas at those getting too close to the [border] fence”. In fact, Beck claims, because of the hostility of the Turkish State, many Kobanî residents who had previously fled as refugees had “begun to return”. At the same time, he says, “hundreds of Turkish Kurds” were also arriving in solidarity with the resistance fighters in Kobanî, “sneaking or bribing their way across the border to fight alongside the YPG” and YPJ.

“Less than a mile away”, meanwhile, “a customs crossing by the train tracks” saw hundreds of Kurds gather “each day” with the hope of getting back into Kobanî, having “left their families in Turkey” and returned to fight for their city. “In defiant mood”, Beck asserts, even those “with no military training... saw it as a duty to help where they felt that neither the West, nor anyone else, would”. At the same time, those not planning to fight “pledged to provide support in any way they could”. A teacher, for example, said he “would help with logistics and supplies, like bringing water to the fighters”. Others, however, had come back to the border simply because they “refused to live as refugees”. One middle-aged woman, for instance, stressed that, “after sleeping in a house with 10 other families..., she was returning whatever the risk”. Furthermore, back in Kobanî, officials like Ismet Shêkh Hesen

also emphasised that they would “not retreat” to Turkey, and would “die in Kobani” if necessary.⁸⁹⁸

The Important Distinction between Strategy and Tactics

According to Kamran Matin, “many western leftists [had] neglected the historical significance and transformative political potentials of the success of Kobani’s resistance” against ISIS amidst their campaigns against Western intervention. For him, “pressuring western powers to provide arms and logistical support to YPG/YPJ” was both “legitimate and justifiable”, despite the “discomfort of the left with the idea of western military support for YPG/YPJ”. He was not advocating for a full-scale coalition or extensive foreign interference, however, and insisted that the Rojavan city only needed “anti-tank weapons, ammunition and the opening of a corridor for fighters, food and medicine” in order to defeat the jihadist aggressors.

Encouraging “limited tactical western military support for YPG/YPJ”, Matin insists, “by no means loses sight of the fact that at its root **[ISIS] is the fascistic faeces of western imperial metabolism**” (being “a direct product of the American conquest of Iraq, the deliberate manipulation of sectarian differences, and the destruction of the social fabric of Iraqi society”). He asserts that “distinguishing between strategy and tactic [had] always been a basic element of concrete socialist politics”. In fact, he even says that securing support for Kobani’s fighters (which were opposed by “the virulently anti-left government of Turkey”) would actually “be an important tactical victory in the left’s wider anti-imperialist strategy”. Therefore, he argues, “the left should not... a priori rule out western military assistance for the defenders of Kobani”, and should instead “focus on the explicit terms and circumstances of such assistance”. For limited, unconditional support, he says, would even, in effect, “undermine the [long-term] objectives of the providers of the assistance” (by proposing an alternative political and economic system at odds with that propagated and protected by the West).

Furthermore, Matin asserts, the PKK and its allies were “unlikely to be manipulated into imperial intrigues” in the Middle East, and had “consistently called on Syrian opposition forces, other Kurdish parties, and [the] KRG to revise their uncritical alignment with US foreign policy in the region”. Their requesting military assistance from the West in order to protect the Rojava Revolution from ISIS, he claims, “simply [represented] a tactical exploitation of the contingent convergence of their specific interests” with those of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition.

In fact, Matin argues, a Rojavan victory in Kobani would actually strengthen the PKK’s hand in the peace process with Turkey, which would combine with the increasing popularity of the Turkish Left to “check [the] AKP’s authoritarian impulse and advance peace and reconciliation in Kurdistan”. It would also “have immediate and longer-term impacts on Iraqi Kurdistan too”, almost certainly threatening the “corrupt and nepotistic capitalism” of Kurdish nationalists there (which was “based on oil rents and lucrative backroom deals with Turkish and western companies”). For this reason, Matin says, the KRG “viewed the Rojava experience as a threat” and had set about building a “trench along its border” in an attempt to “pressurise [the] PYD into a political compromise that would extend [the] KDP’s dominance into Rojava”. The reality, however, was that the Rojava Revolution stood “in stark contrast to the conservative, elitist, crony-capitalist, and pro-western project of KRG ruling parties”, who sought to “transform Iraqi Kurdistan to another Dubai”.

⁸⁹⁸ https://news.vice.com/article/kobane-residents-remain-defiant-as-islamic-state-closes-in?utm_source=vicenewstwitter and @JM_Beck

Up to this point, Matin insists, “mass discontent with KRG ruling parties has so far been exploited by The Change Movement or Goran” (the latter of which is “not fundamentally different” from the KDP or PUK “in terms of social and economic” policy). However, considering the “serious economic, diplomatic, political and military mal-performance of [the] KRG”, Matin says, “a military victory for [the] PYD in Kobani [could] readily translate into a political victory for the more progressive and democratic forces” in Iraqi Kurdistan. He even asserts that the PKK’s ideology had increased in power in Iran, too, speaking of how PJAK had “recently promulgated its system of Democratic and Free Society of the East (KODAR), whose content [was] very similar to, and inspired by, the canton projects of [the] PYD in Syrian Kurdistan”.

The survival of the Rojava experience, consequently, would “undoubtedly boost [the] KODAR project”, and could also lead to “closer relations and cooperation between PJAK/KODAR and the main radical left” in Iranian Kurdistan, “which [had] recently displayed a relatively rare show of unity in solidarity with Kobani’s resistance”. Matin even suggests that victory in Rojava could give “further inspiration and energy to a new phase of political activism in Iranian Kurdistan and strengthen [the] wider democratic movement in Iran”.⁸⁹⁹ Although KODAR was still “simply a concept” in Iran in late 2014, he says, rather than a concrete reality like in Rojava, the similarity of its “radical bottom-up form of democracy” to that of Syrian Kurdistan could well see Rojavan successes rub off on the progressive Kurdish movement in Iran.⁹⁰⁰ In other words, Matin concludes, “the battle of Kobani” could well turn out to be “a unique moment for the international radical left movement to make a strategic intervention in support of an extremely dynamic and resourceful movement for gender equality, radical democracy and social justice in the Middle East”.⁹⁰¹

The Need for Conscription

On October 15, The Daily Mail spoke about how Kobani’s isolation and desperate situation had led the YPG to turn to “compulsory military service”, forcing up to 700 young men to join the fight against ISIS.⁹⁰² Rudaw, meanwhile, backed up these claims, suggesting that “many young people were staying at home to avoid being conscripted by the security units”.⁹⁰³ According to War Resisters’ International, Rojava had “adopted a law in July [2014] that [obliged] families living in the region to send one of their 18-30 year-old members to “defence duty”, which [would last] for six months”.⁹⁰⁴ The “disabled or sick”⁹⁰⁵ (and those who had previously joined the ‘Assayish’, KCK, YPG, or YPJ) would be exempted from serving, though those capable of defending Rojava who refused to comply with this duty would “face disciplinary measures”.⁹⁰⁶ A “financial contribution”, however, would be given to those conscripts who were a family’s ‘breadwinner’.⁹⁰⁷

The YPG had been “forced to draft civilians” mainly as “a response to the creeping threat of ISIS on their sovereign territory”,⁹⁰⁸ though “not all Syrian Kurds [were] happy with the decision”, as could be expected.⁹⁰⁹ The opposition KNC, for example, called the bill a “direct infringement of the voluntary nature of our people’s struggle for our just cause”.⁹¹⁰ Whilst

⁸⁹⁹ <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/10/15/kobani-whats-in-a-name/>

⁹⁰⁰ <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3703>

⁹⁰¹ <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/10/15/kobani-whats-in-a-name/>

⁹⁰² http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2793880/the-great-kobane-fightback-symbolic-recapture-hill-black-flag-isis-kurdish-fighters-swathes-city-step-airstrikes.html?ITO=1490&ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitterfeed

⁹⁰³ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/12102014>

⁹⁰⁴ <http://www.wri-irg.org/node/23519>

⁹⁰⁵ <http://aranews.net/2014/07/conscription-law-pyd-calls-syria-kurds-defend-dignity/>

⁹⁰⁶ <http://www.wri-irg.org/node/23519>

⁹⁰⁷ <http://www.diclehaber.com/en/news/content/view/410688?from=1923065108>

⁹⁰⁸ <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/08/6014/ypgs-mandatory-military-service-rattles-kurds/>

⁹⁰⁹ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrian-kurds-introduce-controversial-conscription-law-815152310#sthash.Xse6UEfk.dpuf%20%20%20%20%20%20%20Syrian%20Kurds%20introduce%20controversial%20conscription%20law%20-%20See%20more%20at:%20>

⁹¹⁰ <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/08/6014/ypgs-mandatory-military-service-rattles-kurds/>

insisting that “a unified attitude [was] the only means to overcome challenges” such as those facing them with the advances of ISIS, they emphasised that such an attitude could not be forced on people. Other KNC members, however, suggested that it was a “national and compulsory duty” to defend the land but, because they disagreed with the legitimacy of the autonomous government of Rojava (in which they had refused to participate), they believed the conscription law was also illegitimate.⁹¹¹ In short, the conscription measure threatened to undermine the libertarian claims of the Rojava Revolution, but at the same time represented a near necessity, given that: ISIS had superior weaponry and a large number of combatants; Rojava was suffering from the economic blockade imposed upon it by Turkey and the KRG; the territory had no support from external forces; and reinforcements from Turkish Kurdistan and elsewhere had not been allowed to cross the border legally.

C) The Role of Turkey in Kobanî

In this section of the chapter, I will take a closer look at the part that Turkey played in the jihadist assault on Rojava and, in particular, on the city of Kobanî. I will also discuss how the battle for Kobanî soon became “a daily topic of conversation among Kurds in Turkey”, how it worsened Turkey’s reputation in the eyes of both Kurdish communities and citizens around the world, and how the AKP government’s aggressive attitude towards Rojava and refusal to facilitate YPG/YPJ resistance in Kobanî significantly increased tensions between left-wingers and Islamists in Turkey.⁹¹²

I) Hostility towards Rojava as an Extension of the AKP’s Foreign Policies

Ankara More Determined to Defeat Progressive Kurds than Wahhabi Jihadists

Bill Park at Open Democracy said in early October that ISIS advances on Rojava had called into question “Turkey’s strategy and decisions”. In particular, he speaks of how the Turkish parliament’s approval of the permission to “send troops into Iraq or Syria... specifically mentioned” the PKK, but not ISIS. He also insists that **Turkey’s “signals [were] mixed..., puzzling, and shrouded in a troubling murkiness”**. In fact, he asserts, Turkey (“along with some Gulf states”) shared a significant amount of “responsibility for [jihadists’] emergence as the most formidable opponents to the Assad regime” in Syria. Furthermore, he explains how it was an “open secret... that **Turkish territory [had] been used by some of the more extreme opposition groups for recruitment, training, fundraising and medical care”**.

At the same time, Park emphasises, “supplies, recruits, oil from fields captured by IS fighters, and even arms [had] been smuggled across the [Turkish] border [into Syria] with little hindrance”. There were even accounts, he adds, of “Turkish intelligence units transporting arms to Syria” being “intercepted by the Turkish police” and the latter being punished as a result (with police chiefs allegedly being demoted, for example). In fact, Turkey even “protested when... the US designated the Al-Nusra Front... as a terrorist group” in 2012.

In its defence, Turkey pointed “to the porous nature of its long (over 800 kilometres) border with Syria”, but John Kerry nonetheless asserted that Turkey’s efforts to secure its borders had been, at the very least, a “sloppy process”. Likewise, Park asserts, “Kurds on both sides of the Turkey-Syria border [were] unimpressed by Ankara’s explanations”, as they witnessed with their own eyes the double standards of the Turkish State. Incredibly flexible at some points of its border, the country had built “a two-metre-high fence”, for instance, “to divide Turkey’s Kurds from their ethnic cousins in Qamishli”. And, while Ankara claimed

⁹¹¹ <http://aranews.net/2014/07/conscription-law-pyd-calls-syria-kurds-defend-dignity/>

⁹¹² <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/how-turkey-misread-kurds-201511910421859659.html#>

this construction was a “security measure aimed at preventing smuggling and illegal crossings”, the fact that it had “not taken similar steps in those border areas criss-crossed by jihadist groups” made its feeble excuses all the more implausible and preposterous.

One factor influencing the Turkish State’s hostility towards Kurdish autonomy in Rojava, however, was the fact that, while PYD co-chair Salih Muslim had “visited Ankara frequently in an attempt to persuade Turkey” that the YPG/YPJ were the most effective forces in the fight against ISIS, his refusal to “join the Ankara-sponsored Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army (FSA)” had been seen by Turkey (officially at least) as a sign that his “sympathies [lay] with the Assad regime”. The reality of the matter, however, considering that there was no evidence for the aforementioned claim, was that the PYD’s adherence to Abdullah Öcalan’s ideology of Democratic Confederalism (and its alliance with Turkey’s archenemies in the PKK) meant that Ankara simply did not want to do anything to encourage the party’s continued influence in Rojava’s political process. Kurdish autonomy in Syria, for example, would almost certainly facilitate or embolden attempts in Turkish Kurdistan to establish a similar system. And, because of Turkey’s apparently irreconcilable aggression towards the Rojava Revolution, the PYD soon “concluded that Ankara [was] more determined to undermine the Kurds than it [was] to defeat the jihadists”.

The “sudden flood” of refugees from Kobani, Park explains, “was initially obstructed by Turkish security forces, who [had] also since sought to prevent Kurds already in Turkey from re-crossing into Syria to reinforce Kobani’s defence”. Security forces in Turkey, meanwhile, had been “substantially augmented but [were] doing nothing” to stop the ISIS onslaught on the city. Instead, they hoped to create a buffer zone (or ‘humanitarian corridor’) in northern Syria, claiming it would serve to prevent the Syrian Civil War from crossing into Turkey and to allow a safe haven for refugees from the conflict. Nonetheless, this plan was unlikely to be legitimised by the UN, Park says, because Syria and its allies would see the entry of Turkish forces into the country as an illegal occupation.

At the same time, the autonomous cantons of Rojava would also see the aforementioned course of action as an occupying move, designed to undermine their own independent system of rule, especially considering that President Erdoğan had made it very clear that he made “no distinction between the PKK and IS” (and therefore viewed the PYD as a terrorist force also). In short, Park suggests, both the rhetoric and actions of the Turkish State showed very clearly that “Ankara [was putting] the fall of Assad and the defeat of Kurdish aspirations [in Syria] above... the destruction of the Islamic State” on its list of foreign policy priorities.

The Short-Sightedness of Turkey’s Hostility to Rojava

The KRG, meanwhile, was “bitterly disappointed” about Turkey’s inaction against ISIS in Iraq, which had “taught [it] a lesson about the limits of the [supposedly treasured] relationship”. And it appeared that there were sections of the US population that felt the same, with The Wall Street Journal, for example, referring to Turkey in September 2014 as a “non-ally”, and saying that the country had “done a lot to give credence to that assessment”. Essentially, Park insists, “this Turkish government’s capacity for self-damage should not be underestimated”. For, although it was “the country best placed to make a difference”, he says, **its stubborn hostility towards Kurdish autonomy had put it “in grave danger of emerging as everyone’s “non-ally”**”, whilst also having a negative impact on what little “domestic harmony” existed within Turkey itself.⁹¹³

⁹¹³<https://www.opendemocracy.net/bill-park/turkey-and-islamic-state-crisis-everyone%27s-nonally>

Human rights lawyer Hadayt Nazami, meanwhile, also asserted that **Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria had been "short-sighted" and "based on the Kurdish issue alone"**. At the same time, he stresses, its policy had essentially been "one of the key factors in turning [Syria] into a battleground for various jihadist organizations". And the reason for this reality, he insists, is the fact that, while the "secular progressive community" of the Kurds should have been "the most natural allies of the opposition" in Syria (thanks to their "experience in armed conflict and a strong sense of cohesion and discipline"), Ankara did its very best to co-opt Syrian Kurds into the process it sought to control itself, and subsequently called them regime collaborators when they refused to submit to its will (and that of its nationalist and Islamist allies in Syria).

Turkey, Nazami asserts, soon took "ownership of the forces fighting the Syrian regime", and imposed its own "political agenda on those forces", thus alienating the Kurds, who were committed to the establishment of a more meaningful form of direct democracy and to the official recognition of their cultural rights. **Thanks to the influence of Erdoğan's government, Nazami says, the FSA adopted the "same stance toward the Kurdish question as the oppressive Syrian regime had done for decades"**. Kurdish absence from the opposition, however, would soon backfire on the Turkish regime, as it allowed Syrian Kurds to "strengthen their military power and capabilities" thanks to their lack of participation in the civil war. The subsequent establishment of autonomy in Rojava, meanwhile, put the Syrian conflict right at the top of Erdoğan's foreign policy agenda, as he now knew that he had to do a lot more in the country in order to prevent a form of PKK-inspired democratic autonomy from spreading throughout the country (and the region). In short, then, although Rojava had rapidly become "the most stable and secure part of Syria", it had also become the part which posed the greatest risk to the preservation of Ankara's reactionary inaction with regards to the 'Kurdish Question'.

Although Turkey had not been threatened militarily by Rojava, Nazami says, it "still [preferred] the violent and unpredictable ISIS to a peaceful Kurdish region" on its doorstep. As a result of this stance, he asserts, Ankara consciously "blocked the only route for... [Turkish] Kurds going to help their brethren" in Kobani. And, with these facts in mind, he stresses, it was incumbent on the international community to deal decisively with Turkey's "hostile policy towards the Kurds" if it truly wanted to do something about the spread of ISIS.

The West, Nazami adds, had already seen how the YPG/YPJ and HPG/YJA-Star (along with the Western-backed, well-financed, and well-equipped Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga) had "been effectively fighting ISIS for weeks" and had "saved many Christians, Yezidis and other minority groups from ISIS atrocities". In short, then, PKK-linked groups had proven themselves to be the most effective forces in the fight against ISIS and, considering their heroic humanitarian efforts, Western governments would find it very difficult to keep supporting Ankara's hostile counterrevolutionary policies in Syria (officially, at least). Therefore, Nazami asserts, "Turkey's goals [differed] greatly from those of the global coalition". In fact, even a top US general apparently affirmed that the YPG/YPJ (and Peshmerga) should be used as the "boots on the ground" in the fight against ISIS (though the official American line was that support should only go to the Peshmerga forces).

"Humanitarian international law", Nazami insists, "obliges the EU and other powers not to interfere" in the conflict between Turkey and the PKK, and therefore not to "list the PKK as a terrorist organization". The law, he notes, states that "acts of war are not chargeable as either criminal acts or terrorist acts", so Western forces calling the PKK a terrorist group were in clear contravention of international law. The reason for this continued hostility, however, was the fact that President Erdoğan, following in the tradition of numerous Western-backed Turkish leaders before him, considered the progressive Kurdish

organisation to be a terrorist group. In fact, Erdoğan had even dangerously “claimed there [was] no difference between ISIS and the PKK” (a comment that could easily jeopardise the fragile peace process between Turkey and the PKK).

The concept of sovereignty, Nazami says, is a “key foundation of public international law”, and forbids the “interference of third parties” in an internal conflict. At the same time, however, the Turkish State made it very clear after the establishment of the autonomous cantons of Rojava that it “would not permit” any suggestion of a “fait accompli” in Syrian Kurdistan. In other words, it had no intention of allowing a progressive and democratic self-government to establish itself permanently on the other side of its border.

With the above hostility considered, Nazami argues, leaving “the task of protecting Rojava to Turkey” would essentially amount to “allowing foxes free reign of the hen house”. Ankara wanted to get its own way in both Syria and its Kurdish communities, and it was unprepared to settle for anything less. And, therefore, because Rojavans had refused to join the “anti-regime uprising” that the Turkish State was directing in Syria, they were now “being punished” for it, says Nazami. Although “**Turkey [stood] in the way” of international support for the population of Rojava**, he asserts, “the US and the EU [would] have a hard time taking the war to ISIS where the militants [were] strongest” without Syria’s Kurds, and would eventually have to accept the importance of at least temporary collaboration with the latter. For excluding Rojavans, Nazami insists, “may have serious consequences” for the Middle East, particularly considering that the “fragmented Syrian opposition groups, which also [included] several known and unknown jihadist groups”, simply would not be able to “achieve what [was] required [of them] without help from Syrian Kurds”.⁹¹⁴

Turkey in Trouble Because of Its Syria Policy

Turkey Analyst editor Halil Karaveli said on October 8 that Turkey had “been disappointed at every turn” in the Syrian Civil War and that, as a result of its own stance, it was now in trouble itself as well. The political balance in the country had shifted, Karaveli asserts, and the military establishment (so prominent in Turkey’s history) had now been “re-empowered”. The peace process with the PKK, meanwhile, had been brought to the “brink of collapse” by President Erdoğan’s aggressive and offensive comments about the group, which had “raised serious doubts about his government’s intentions of taking the necessary steps to accommodate the Kurds and the PKK as part of ongoing negotiations”.

When Rojava first declared its autonomy in 2012, Karaveli affirms, the Turkish government made it clear that it would not allow such a political situation to become an established fact on the ground, and subsequently “sent support to Jabhat al-Nusra, an al Qaeda affiliate that attacked the Kurds”. And, eventually, he suggests, this strategy would lead to the ISIS offensive on Kobanî in late 2014, which would see KCK Vice Chairman Cemil Bayık (one of the five founders of the PKK) assert that, “**if Ankara were to look the other way as Kobanî fell, the war would restart in Turkey**”. In short, Bayık had insisted, the progressive movement could not “pursue [peace] with a power that [sought to crush] what [had] been achieved in Rojava”.

According to Karaveli, the relative peace brought about by the PKK’s attempts at a negotiated solution with the Turkish State had actually represented indirect Kurdish support for Erdoğan, and had been crucial for the AKP’s electoral success. The ceasefire, for example, “benefited his regime” during the 2013 Gezi protests, throughout which the Kurdish movement remained neutral. Öcalan’s hope had been that “accommodating

⁹¹⁴ <http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/05102014>

Erdogan [would] pay off”, and that “some form of autonomy” would be given to Kurdish areas in Turkey (and that the PKK leader himself might even be released from jail). Karaveli, however, insists that this “logic was always flawed”, as an expectation that Erdoğan would increase Kurdish autonomy whilst “otherwise concentrating all power into his own hands” was essentially absurd. Nonetheless, we could also consider that the PKK’s talks were primarily aimed at avoiding a prolongation of the vicious and destructive war which it had fought with the Turkish State in previous decades, while giving civil society groups inspired by Abdullah Öcalan a chance to build autonomous democratic structures from the bottom up.

The Syrian Civil War, Karaveli asserts, was “forcing both sides’ hands”, though, with younger Kurds becoming increasingly angry with what they saw as “Turkish complicity in the assault on Syrian Kurds”, while “growing insecurity on Turkey’s southern borders [was] pushing Erdogan to be more attentive to the views and recommendations of the military”. On August 30, for example, the “Turkish military high command went public with its displeasure with the peace process”, essentially compelling the AKP regime to either crack down on the army or to abandon talks with the PKK. In short, the military’s “red lines” were still “the unity and the territorial integrity” of Turkey, and the lack of AKP consultation with the military over the peace negotiations had meant that the military establishment was becoming more and more restless with Erdoğan and his government. Furthermore, if the aforementioned red lines were crossed, said Chief of the General Staff Necdet Özel, the army would step in. In other words, then, the military would not tolerate any form of Kurdish self-rule, whether it was allowed by politicians in Ankara or not.

As previously mentioned, Turkish generals “requested that the [AKP] government move quickly to establish buffer zones at four points in Syria... in order to preserve Turkey’s security interests”, with or without US approval. And, “as security threats [mounted]”, Karaveli insists, the military was “now set to wield power once more” in the Turkish State. In fact, however, Erdoğan had actually “come to see military support as crucial to help him root out supporters of his erstwhile ally turned enemy, the U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gülen, within the state bureaucracy”, even though he had initially attempted to reduce the power of the military in Turkey. Additionally, Karaveli says, the “anti-Kurdish [read anti-progressive] alliance of Erdoğan and the generals [was] but the latest affirmation of the nationalist-conservative identity at the core of the Turkish republic”.

At the same time, however, the progressive Kurdish movement knew that it “simply [could not] defeat Turkey” in an armed conflict, a fact which Karaveli suggests could potentially propel an “alliance with the social democratic Republican People’s Party (CHP)”. In fact, he says, there was a “de facto alliance... during the vote to authorize the military incursion into Syria and Iraq”, with an “anti-war coalition composed of the CHP and the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP)” opposing the right-wing’s approval of military action. The CHP, however, still had “a vocal, Turkish nationalist wing that would not be comfortable with [having such] a broad Turkish-Kurdish social democratic coalition” on a more permanent basis. Nonetheless, Karaveli asserts, the two parties were “exploring the possibility of some form of cooperation in the upcoming parliamentary elections” of 2015. Though there were many obstacles to an alliance, he stresses, “a united front” would definitely give Turkey “what it [had] lacked since the 1970s, a strong social democratic alternative to the dominant, authoritarian right”. Karaveli affirms, however, that he believed it was “more likely that growing insecurity and heightened conflict [would] further entrench authoritarianism” in Turkey.⁹¹⁵

⁹¹⁵<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142170/halil-karaveli/kobani-and-the-future-of-turkish-democracy>

Turkey's Syria Policy Key in the Battle for Kobani

Luke Harding and Ian Black at The Guardian wrote on October 10 about how "Turkey's policy towards Syria [was] key" in the Battle for Kobani. Erdoğan, they say, had long "backed the Muslim Brotherhood and like-minded groups across the Middle East" and "called for international intervention... which no one else was prepared to enforce". At the same time, they report, "analysts [were saying that] Erdoğan... [had] underestimated the impact on Turkey of the humanitarian crisis caused by the war". Furthermore, as NATO's "only Muslim member", they assert, Turkey had also remained suspiciously "lukewarm about the strategy of the anti-jihadi coalition assembled by Barack Obama after the Isis advances in Iraq", claiming to fear that it would "end up strengthening Assad" in Syria.

Meanwhile, Harding and Black note, critics were accusing Turkey "of exploiting the Kobani crisis for its own domestic purposes", preventing "Turkish and Syrian Kurds from joining the fight" there in the hope that the city (as a key part of the Rojava Revolution) would fall. There had also been "signs of [Turkish] collaboration" with Rojava's "rival political bloc", the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which was backed by the Iraqi KDP and was seen "as less of a threat [to Turkey] than the PYD".⁹¹⁶

Turkey's Negative Role in the Middle East

Naila Bozo, who edits the 'Alliance for Kurdish Rights' website, spoke at the New Internationalist in November 2014 about how Turkey's reputation was "in tatters" thanks to its hostile attitude towards the Rojava Revolution. Speaking of the latter as "a model for a functioning democracy in a war-torn region", she says that its "bottom-up approach" and "inclusive system" had been "considered a threat" by Turkey. As a result, she insists, "the Turkish government [had] been far more vocal about the potential danger of a Kurdish autonomous state than [about] an IS-controlled territory" (an attitude which was "reflected in many aspects of Turkish society and media"). Furthermore, with "numerous reports of the Turkish army killing refugees from Syria crossing the border into Turkey", she stresses, suspicions had risen "about Turkey's role [in the jihadist assault on Rojava], especially considering its motive in keeping Rojava and [progressive] Kurds out of power for the sake of its own political and economic interests".

Bozo then quotes a Newsweek article by Barney Guiton in which a former member of ISIS was reported as having said: "**ISIS commanders told us to fear nothing at all** [on the Turkish border] **because there was full co-operation with the Turks...** and they reassured us that nothing [would] happen [by saying that]... they regularly [travelled] from Raqqa and Aleppo [to north-eastern Syria via Turkey]". According to Bozo, "Turkey's shameful link to IS [was] not hidden from the attention of allies and the international community", but "a clear, public condemnation [had] not yet been voiced and Turkey [had] shown no sign of feeling pressured to change its course". Consequently, she stresses, "Kurds' perception of the Turkish government" had worsened significantly, causing them to show increasing resistance. Nonetheless, in spite of determined Kurdish campaigning, Turkey "managed successfully to avoid international condemnation for its [aggressive] treatment of the Kurdish people".

The Roboski massacre, Bozo insists, in which "34 innocent civilian Kurds, the majority of whom were children", were killed on 28 December 2011 by the Turkish military, was simply "one massacre of many committed by the Turkish government which targeted Kurdish civilians" and for which there was still rampant impunity. At the same time, she emphasises, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan was taking "advantage of the turbulent situation across the

⁹¹⁶http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/10/-sp-kurds-kurdistan-briefing-isis?CMP=tw_t_gu

Arab world to promote his leadership in Turkey as a role model for the region". Kurdish rights, meanwhile, were "routinely ignored", as the West sought to use Turkey as a neoliberal Islamist pathway into the Arab World. At the same time, "ongoing violations" like the events of Roboski, she asserts, "were barely present in international media outlets covering Turkey's role in the Arab Spring". In fact, only when the Gezi Park protests erupted in 2013 did Turkey finally "fall from its pedestal as a regional 'hero' and 'beacon of hope'", she highlights. In short, she argues, it was "evidence of corruption and police brutality, widespread censorship and mass arrests" which finally "served to prove that Turkey [was] itself far from stable".

In addition to Turkey's reticence to join the fight against ISIS, Bozo asserts, the state also found itself in the position of not having fulfilled "any of the goals that [had] been a barrier between them and their accession into EU, most significantly freedom of expression and press; the country's... illegal and ongoing invasion of northern Cyprus; and... [the] police's extensive brutality against civilian protesters and opposition activists [in 2013]". And, with an enormous amount of journalists in prison ("the majority of whom [had been] charged with 'offending a government official'" or of simply being "Kurdish writers, academics, teachers and students who [had taken] the risk of defending their dignity and rights"), the country was far from moving closer to its goal of entry into the EU.

Although these issues were left out of European demands on Turkey, Bozo says, "Kurdish people's demands of the right to education in their mother tongue and right to free assembly, freedom of expression, information and press" should also have played a significant part in determining how 'democratic' the Turkish regime was considered to be in the West. Nonetheless, the fact that that its "position as a regional power" and ally to the West remained intact showed very clearly that its strategic importance outweighed the many stains of its "laissez-faire attitude towards IS and its massacres of Kurdish civilians".⁹¹⁷

II) Turkish Attempts to Weaken Rojava Begin to Backfire

Turkish Blockade against Journalists

According to VICE News, north-east Syria had become "one of the most complex and under-reported fronts in the entire Syrian war" because Turkey had "closed the border crossings [with Rojava] to international trade as well as to journalists". VICE journalists, therefore, had been left with "no option but to cross the border illegally, dodging Turkish army patrols and risking arrest" in the process. Meanwhile, the Turkish State continued to offer "free access to rebel-held areas of Syria".

In a documentary film made by the agency, Kurdish activist Kovan Direj, "living as a refugee in north-east Syria", spoke about "how the local Kurdish forces [in Rojava] were capable of filling the security vacuum" left by the Syrian Civil War. He insists, for example, that "Christian parties and their militias [were] working with the dominant Kurdish PYD party to keep the Jihadists out" of the region (which, containing as it did "around 60% of Syria's oil reserves", was seen as "a potential treasure trove" by Wahhabi militants). Having previously been quiet farming communities, VICE reports, "Kurdish and Arab villages [in Rojava]... were now the front line [of defence] in the war between the YPG" (whose forces were mostly composed of "local farmers") and jihadist invaders. When these local militias could not hold off Islamist advances, however, a "mobile reserve of elite troops" could be called upon.⁹¹⁸

⁹¹⁷ <http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2014/11/19/turkey-reputation/>, @nailabo and @KurdishRights

⁹¹⁸ <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/rojava-syrias-unknown-war/>

An Attempt to Prevent YPG-Rebel Unity

As mentioned previously in this chapter, ISIS launched its September offensive on Kobanî just “days after the People’s Protection Units [had] formed an alliance with local Syrian rebel brigades [in order] to confront the terrorist group”. Journalist Mohammed al-Khatieb, for example, reported that “rebel factions there “[were] doing their best” to support the YPG” in its resistance, but that it seemed like ISIS fighters had caught the new alliance by surprise in a “pre-emptive assault” before a strengthened attack on them could take place. Thanks to this tactic, ISIS had managed to overrun dozens of villages in the space of a few days by late September, forcing many displaced inhabitants to flee to Turkey, where “there [were] no camps set up to receive such a large number”. In fact, says al-Khatieb, “many of the displaced [were] now out in the open”.

Around Kobanî, al-Khatieb explains, the YPG/YPJ was fighting alongside “rebels from the Dawn of Freedom Brigades, Jabhat al-Akrad (the Kurdish Front Brigade) and Liwa Thuwar al-Raqqa (Raqqqa Revolutionaries Brigades), among other groups”, with each brigade protecting different military posts. However, the “individual roles of rebel brigades [appeared] minimal”, he insists, thus reducing “the importance and effectiveness of this alliance” (which was “the first of its kind”), especially considering that “the most prominent factions in the ranks of the opposition... [such as] the Islamic Front, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, Haraket Hazem and the Syrian Revolutionary Front... [had] not [formed] part of the [alliance] and [did] not have a presence in the Kobanî canton”. Furthermore, ISIS had the advantage of having a “large number of heavy weapons and tanks..., compared to the light weapons carried by the YPG [and] the small number of rebels in Kobanî”. According to an activist quoted by al-Khatieb, though, the “US-led coalition launching airstrikes on IS positions in Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor on Sept. 23” meant that, while ISIS continued to attack Kobanî, the “intensity of the battles significantly eased”.

In the view of a spokesman from the opposition Kurdish Front, Ahmed Hissou, the “cooperation between the rebels and the YPG “[had] annoyed both the regime and Turkey” and [had] pushed them to mobilize IS via “private communication channels” to attack Kobanî and end the alliance”. In particular, Hissou alleged that the “attack on Kobanî [was] the result of... the regime’s relinquishment of its barracks in Raqqqa to IS” and the consequent “strengthening [of] the organization”.⁹¹⁹

Turkey Prevents Syrian and Turkish Kurds from Crossing into Kobanî

In late September 2014, the BBC’s Mark Lowen, reporting from Mürşitpınar on the Turkish-Syria border across from Kobanî, reported on how the **Turkish government had been “preventing Turkish Kurds from leaving the country to fight against [ISIS] in Syria”**.⁹²⁰ According to the KCK, Turkey was following a “**policy of emptying Rojava**”, something it insisted was “as dangerous as [a] massacre” there. Creating empty territory on the Syrian side of the border, the KCK claimed, was a Turkish attempt to establish a buffer zone in order to “support and complement ISIS attacks” against the Assad regime. In a statement, the group argued that “the reality in Kobanî [was] not as reported by the pro-AKP media and some Arab press [outlets] that [supported] ISIS”. There was “stiff resistance” in the city, it asserted, and the battle would even play a “key role in determining the outcome of the conflict” with ISIS.

Consequently, the KCK called on Kobanî’s citizens to “return to Rojava as soon as possible and defend the land together with the YPG and YPJ forces”, so that Turkey could not succeed in creating its buffer zone in Rojavan territory. For the purpose of the latter was, the

⁹¹⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/is-progress-kobani-kurds-syrians-alliance.html>

⁹²⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29415142>

group claimed, to weaken what was essentially the only progressive and secular alternative to Assad currently in existence in Syrian territory. It also insisted that “people should organise their lives according to war conditions and launch resistance everywhere, not just in Rojava and Kobanî”. And, with Kurds being “more organised than they [had] ever been”, the group argued, “developments in the region [were presenting] the Kurdish people with historic opportunities to achieve freedom and democracy”, which it was incumbent on them to take.⁹²¹

A report from Firat, meanwhile, insisted at the same time that “25 thousand people who [had] crossed the border from Kobanî and [gone] to Suruç following attacks by ISIS [were] not being allowed to cross the border and return to Kobanî”. Kurdish communities were allegedly “angry at the AKP government’s propaganda” (which insisted that “Kobanî [had] been evacuated”) and also at “being halted at the Mürşitpınar border by Turkish troops”. Echoing the KCK’s sentiments that the “Turkish state [wanted] to empty Kobanî”, Firat reports on how around “three thousand people” had been stopped at the border, though others had “crossed despite attempts to prevent them” from doing so. A further two thousand, meanwhile, were in Suruç town and in nearby villages, simply waiting for the opportunity to cross.

According to 62 year-old Teyyar Ahmed, Turkey’s actions were revealing the state’s hypocritical policies regarding Kobanî. “We abandoned our homeland because an atmosphere of panic was created”, he said, and “Turkish government ministers received us with open arms”. Now that citizens were “attempting to return”, he insisted, Turkish forces had started to “attack [them] with truncheons”. Another Kobanî citizen, meanwhile, known as Huseyin Muhamed, asserted that he “would return to defend Kobanî”, having safely left his family in Turkey. “I want to go to Kobanî to protect it”, he argued, but “the **Turkish state is holding us hostage here**”. Having “brought our elderly, the sick and children here”, he stressed, “now we want to protect our homeland... [but] the Turkish state doesn’t want us to go”.⁹²²

The Peace Process Rocked by ISIS

Taking into account the comments of both the citizens and analysts mentioned in this book, it seemed clear in 2014 that a part of Turkey’s strategy of weakening the democratically autonomous administration Rojava was to dangle the peace process with the PKK in front of the organisation every time Turkish or international citizens criticised Ankara’s stance on autonomy in Syrian Kurdistan. It is even possible that Erdoğan’s AKP regime believed that its position would force the hand of the PKK, leaving it with no option but to resist state hostility towards its allies in Rojava through force. And thus, by reinitiating hostilities against the Turkish State, the PKK would essentially justify an attack (in the eyes of Turkish elites) on the Rojava Revolution.

In short, Turkey’s failure to make steps forward with the ‘solution process’ with the PKK, along with the advance of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, had become a test of the progressive guerrillas’ commitment to peace with Ankara. And, as journalist Aslı Aydıntaşbaş asserts, both Turkey and the PKK had been suffering from a lot of paranoia since the intensification of the Syrian Civil War (and, in particular, since the growth of ISIS), so tensions were very high. Turkey, for example, thought (perhaps understandably) that the image of the PKK would be significantly bolstered by its fight against ISIS, while the PKK felt that Turkey was secretly supporting ISIS. Until 2014, Aydıntaşbaş says, the peace process had looked “solid enough to withstand” these strains on bilateral relations, but the intensified ISIS offensives

⁹²¹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/north-kurdistan/emptying-rojava-and-creating-buffer-zone-is-turkey-s-aim-to-help-isis-1/238-emptying-rojava-and-creating-buffer-zone-is-turkey-s-aim-to-help-isis-1.html>

⁹²² <http://www.kurdishinfo.com/permission-return-Kobani>

against Rojava in that year had pushed them to breaking point. For Rojava, she insists, as “an important political and geographic success story” for the PKK, could not be left to suffer the consequences of “Ankara’s silence” about the ISIS advance and its aggressive and isolating blockade on Syrian Kurdistan. Furthermore, both Turkey’s actions and inaction were seen by many in the progressive Kurdish movement in the Middle East as “indirect support for IS”.

Another factor that was contributing to the derailing of negotiations in Turkey, meanwhile, was the role played by the Barzanis in the KRG who, for some time, had been “some of the most vital and discreet actors of the solution process”. The nationalist government, however, also had its own doubts about Turkey, which had failed to step in to help its Iraqi Kurdish allies when ISIS had pushed further into northern Iraq in the summer of 2014. As a result, Aydıntaşbaş asserts, there was a distinct possibility that the KRG might stop playing such an “active role in resolving the crisis” in Turkey. And with decades of Turkish anti-PKK propaganda also gradually wearing off in the Western media thanks to the PKK’s heroic acts in the battle against ISIS, the party’s position had been strengthened significantly, while Turkey’s had been weakened.

As a result of Turkey’s poor position in the peace process, the PKK accused it of “discreetly supporting IS” and wanting “to make a deal with the United States to get rid of the Kurdish presence [in] Kobanî”. Turkish distrust of the PKK, meanwhile, along with a desire to discredit the increasingly popular Kurdish movement, led the AKP government to claim that the organisation had been “making secret deals with Russia and Iran” to reduce its power in the region. And, though such claims were fairly absurd, the progressive Kurdish community was indeed growing increasingly restless with the government’s slow progress towards a solution to the ‘Kurdish Question’. As a result, says Aydıntaşbaş, the peaceful position adopted by Abdullah Öcalan may not be able to convince PKK followers for too much longer. For her, the PKK leader’s “hand [was] now weakening”, and he had been forced to ‘toughen his own messages’ in response. According to Aydıntaşbaş, Ankara needed to take advantage of Öcalan’s peaceful stance before it was too late but, in 2014 at least, it had refused to do so. As a result, she asserts, the Turkish State could be at risk of forcing its Kurdish population back into armed conflict (a suggestion backed up by the fact that the KCK had “declared the cease-fire with Turkey over” for all intents and purposes, as a result of Ankara’s clear hostility to the progressive Kurdish movement).⁹²³

Shame on Turkey Means Shame on NATO

In early October, French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy argued in a number of international newspapers that “Turkey [could not be allowed to] remain in NATO if Kobanî was to fall”. Ankara, he says, was under a moral obligation to “allow the thousands of Kurdish fighters willing to defend the city to cross the border”, but was instead “hiding behind legal technicalities” and “waiting for the town to fall”. Although the principal concern of the state was to weaken the PKK (which, for Lévy, needed to be taken off Western terror lists), the NATO member had to be “held directly responsible” if Kobanî fell. In short, he calls on “Turkey’s NATO allies to remind Erdogan of his responsibilities” as a national and regional leader, and insists that Kobanî ought to be seen as “a test for Turkey, in terms of its future in Europe and the Atlantic Treaty”.⁹²⁴

Furthermore, Turkey was not only obstructing YPG/YPJ efforts to defend Kobanî, but was also directly and indirectly supporting jihadists (as will be discussed in the following subsection). In March 2015, for example, even after months of tension and criticism, the Turkish State was still defending ISIS members, with RT reporting that “authorities in Turkey [had]

⁹²³ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-iraq-kurds-isis-solution-process-1.html#>

⁹²⁴ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/if-kobane-falls-turkey-cannot-remain-in-nato.html>

confirmed social media reports that an injured Islamic State commander [was] being treated in a Denizli hospital". The government even stated that the militant, known as Emrah Cakan, had "every right to receive medical care as he [was] a Turkish citizen".⁹²⁵ [More on Turkish collaboration with ISIS will be seen both below and in Chapter Twelve.]

III) Turkish Collusion with Jihadists

Turkey Fanning the Flames of ISIS

In June 2014, Amberin Zaman reported from al-Tleiliye in northern Syria, a "tiny village close to the Turkish border" that had been attacked at the end of May by ISIS. Fifteen Sunni Arab civilians, she says, including a year old child, had been killed by the jihadist group in "what [appeared] to have been a retaliatory attack against the YPG", which had been embarrassing the militants by successfully resisting their invasions. The aforementioned civilians, Zaman asserts, had "apparently [been] mistaken for the village's original occupants, Kurdish-speaking Yezidis", who were being targeted both because of their faith and their ethnicity.

The YPG/YPJ, Zaman explains, had been fighting Islamist extremists for over a year along the Turkish border, gaining at points from jihadist infighting between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. "Control over strategic border crossings with Turkey", she says, was essential, as it could help the YPG/YPJ to cut off the flow of support to Wahhabi groups whilst giving themselves control over the "illegal fuel trade, which in turn [would help to] finance the purchase of weapons". Such a development, she stresses, would be especially important for Rojava given its economic isolation and its control the "Rumeilan oil fields to the east of Serekaniye".

According to the YPG, however, Zaman affirms, **Turkey had been "fanning the flames of the conflict, providing arms and sanctuary to ISIS and sealing its borders in an effort to quash the Kurds' march toward self-rule"**. Officially, she asserts, Turkey actually described ISIS as "a terrorist group and a threat" but, because of the YPG/YPJ's "tight links to the PKK", they were considered "an even greater threat" than the Wahhabi jihadists "in Ankara's eyes". In fact, Zaman speaks about how, until recently, **Turkey had been "allowing jihadist fighters to move unhindered across its borders"**.

YPG commander Abdo Sino, for example, told Zaman that, after the YPG had attacked ISIS in the village of al-Rawiya, he had seen **"two Turkish ambulances [pick] up their wounded and [carry] them back to Turkey"**. Sino, Zaman says, had taken pictures of the dead Wahhabi combatants, and had shown her their "pale white skin, long curly hair and unkempt beards", thus adding to claims that "many of the ISIS fighters [were] Chechens and Azeris". He then took out a jihadist "pocket manual... exalting martyrdom... [and] printed in Azerbaijan", which he had found "in the pocket of one of the slain ISIS men".

Sino and others, meanwhile, believed that ISIS militants "[continued] to be allowed safe passage through Turkey", but also that **the Assad regime, gaining more and more victories on the battlefield, was "using ISIS to keep [the Kurds] in check" in the meantime**. While the state's withdrawal of troops from Rojava in the middle of 2012 had aimed to focus government troops on the fight against opposition forces elsewhere in the country, Zaman states that it was also partly a move seeking to "get back at Turkey for its unabashed campaign to topple Assad". In other words, it was not really a sign of Assad's desire for the Kurds to succeed in installing an alternative system of government in Rojava, but an indication of his temporary strategic goals in the civil war. Nonetheless, with the Rojava

⁹²⁵ <http://rt.com/news/238713-isis-commander-turkey-hospital/>

Revolution allowing “Syriac Orthodox Christians to form their own battalion to defend themselves” and “empowering women (about a third of the YPG’s fighting force [was] female)”, there was now a real risk, Zaman says, that Rojava’s inhabitants would not accept a return to Ba’athist rule of their territory. And that possibility had Assad’s regime worried, she suggests, and would provide a significant incentive for it to allow jihadists to attack Rojava.

In relation to the aforementioned comments, PYD co-chair Salih Muslim asked: “why else is the Syrian army turning a blind eye to ISIS activities around areas under its control?” In fact, as a result of these worries about Assad retaking Rojava, Muslim asserted that “Rojava officials had initiated new talks with the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition to secure recognition of their fledgling administration”. At the same time, Rojava was beginning to see “limited aid... delivered twice a week” from Turkish territory to the YPG-controlled town of Kobanî. Secret talks, meanwhile, were reportedly also “underway between the PYD and Turkey’s national intelligence agency, [the] MIT”, partly as a result of the ongoing Turkish peace negotiations with the PKK.

According to some ‘Western diplomats’, however, it was very “likely that Turkey [had] helped ISIS and other jihadists in the past”, making Ankara’s true intentions towards Rojava a little clearer. “Claims of collusion between ISIS and the Syrian government”, meanwhile, were dismissed by these same sources.⁹²⁶ Nonetheless, whether assertions of regime collaboration with jihadists were true or not, one thing that was almost certain was that, if the Syrian regime were to emerge from the Civil War intact, it would attempt a re-conquest of the territories lost in Rojava.

Turkish Complicity with the Transit of Jihadists into Syria

In apparent reference to Turkish complicity with ISIS, the “UN Security Council adopted a resolution” on the September 24, 2014 calling for “all member states to curtail the travel of those going abroad to train for or participate in terror operations”, and for them to end “recruitment efforts”. It also said they had the responsibility of “preventing foreign fighters from entering or transiting through their territory”. Furthermore, if the political will existed, the UN insisted that “sanctions [could] be applied to countries that [did] not comply”. For reporter Ahmet Insel, this resolution concerned Turkey in particular because of “the high number of fighters [especially from “Islamic jihad organizations” like ISIS] who [continued] to go to Iraq and Syria through Turkey”.

The day before the Security Council’s decision, Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had insisted that “Turkey had deported more than a thousand fighters from 75 countries since 2011”, and had banned several thousand potential fighters from entering the country. Some of the fighters, however, says Insel, had in fact been deported after they had “turned themselves in to Turkish or their own national authorities” after disillusionment in Syria. In reality, he asserts, “Turkey’s measures against foreign fighters [were] extremely meagre”. And there was an ideological reason for this, he affirms, in that, until 2013, “the government [had] actually perceived transit through its territory as a sign of support for the “just war” in Syria”.

Another “critical issue”, says Insel, was that “**recruitment [had taken] place with the knowledge of some bodies that [were] close to the government, such as nongovernmental organizations that [operated] under the guise of humanitarian assistance**”. Some of these organisations, he asserts, had been accused of “transferring humanitarian assistance that was actually combat materiel”. Meanwhile, “the **Turkish state itself [had been] caught**

⁹²⁶ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/zaman-syria-kurds-rojava-ypg-muslim-pyd-pkk-turkey-isis.html#>

secretly transporting to Syria three truckloads of ammunition – swept under the carpet as humanitarian assistance”. For *Insel*, though, a number of the accusations made against the country simply represented “some Western countries trying to cover their own shortcomings and make Turkey the only guilty party”.⁹²⁷

At the same time, *KurdishQuestion.com* reported in mid-September on how the Turkish State, amidst ISIS’s assault on northern Syria, was preparing for “a new massacre against [the] people of Kobanî by transporting many tanks and ammunition to ISIS gangs by train”. Quoting PKK-affiliated *Özgür Politika*, the website asserted that “the Turkish state [had been] carrying military aid by trains to Tel Abyad” (or *Girê Sipî*). In fact, local sources in the border town claimed that there had been “many train dispatches just across from *Silib Qeran* village”, which had been “serving as a base for ISIS gangs”. Even though there was “no train station there”, the locals insisted, “trains [had been] stopping at this spot exactly and emptying their loads”. Then, after the departure of the trains, “gang members” (i.e. jihadists) would collect the crates.⁹²⁸

October Footage of ISIS and Turkish Soldiers

In October, footage was released in which ISIS members and Turkish soldiers were seen exchanging words on the border with Syria. Critics claimed the video was “clear evidence of Ankara sharing close ties with ISIS militants”. In the video, two ISIS militants near Kobanî could be seen checking through, and even burning, the belongings of refugees left behind in Syria, and were “then seen casually walking up to the Turkish border”. Then, after briefly speaking to Turkish soldiers, they “[waved] goodbye to each other” and “quietly [walked] back”.⁹²⁹

The Turkish army claimed that “the footage and related media headlines” had been “aimed at blemishing the reputation of the Turkish army as part of a larger smear campaign”. At the same time, an “internal inquiry” tried to portray the event as an insignificant and inconsequential encounter, claiming that the soldiers had been “patrolling the border... near the *Karaca* border station (*Suruç/Sanlıurfa*)” and had warned “two individuals” (i.e. the ISIS members) that the area was a minefield and that “they should move back”. The report then asserted that the militants had declared they had “made a mistake”, and that they would return to where they had come from.⁹³⁰

Turkish Soldiers “There Just to Watch”

At the start of October 2014, *Al Jazeera* reported on how locals on the Turkish border with Syria had said, in response to Turkey’s deployment of troops on the border, that Turkish soldiers were “there just to watch”. Since the renewed ISIS offensive on Kobanî, meanwhile, **the military had also set up “new checkpoints along roads entering villages bordering Syria” in order to stop Turkish Kurds or other sympathisers from reinforcing the YPG in the besieged city**. In *Mürşitpınar*, on the border with Kobanî, “**about 50 tanks [were] deployed**, while police [stocked] up on weapons and artillery”.

At the same time, former Kobanî resident *Aslan Mehmoud* (“now living in *Mürşitpınar*”) asserted that Turkish politicians had “just deployed their military to protect their own land”, but were “in no way helping the Kurds” in Kobanî (in spite of the fact that “stray shells and

⁹²⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/turkey-un-security-warning-radical-syrian-groups.html>

⁹²⁸ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/turkey-is-supplying-munitions-by-train-for-isis-military-attacks-on-Kobani/218-turkey-is-supplying-munitions-by-train-for-isis-military-attacks-on-Kobani.html>

⁹²⁹ <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/isis-fighters-seen-fraternising-turkish-soldiers-near-kobani-border-video-612629>

⁹³⁰ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/breaking-turkish-army-statement-on-video-of-isis-meeting/377-breaking-turkish-army-statement-on-video-of-isis-meeting.html> and <http://www.memrijtm.org/video-posted-by-kurdish-news-agency-posts-by-isis-fighters-suggest-turkish-military-cooperating-with-isis.html>

bullets” from the jihadist onslaught on the city had landed on the Turkish side of the border). As previously mentioned in this chapter, meanwhile, refugees arriving into Mürşitpınar and Yumurtalik by car from Syria “were not [being] allowed to bring their vehicles inside”. Elsewhere, according to a former resident of Kobanî, ISIS itself had taken “about 700 of [the abandoned] cars”, and the Turkish military had not tried to stop them.

Diyarbakır, meanwhile, which is “the capital of Turkish Kurdistan”, saw “hundreds of Kurds [take] to the streets” to protest against the Turkish government’s inaction regarding the ISIS assault on Kobanî. “All shops in the town” were also closed “as a sign of protest”. At the same time, Turkish Kurds from Ankara, Istanbul, and all around Turkey showed their solidarity by “arriving at the border to help the refugees and [to] install independent security in Kurdish towns and villages”. In the border village of Alizar, for example, which had been “effectively borderless” before the recent ISIS advance, families on the Syrian side spoke of how they had had to flee to the Turkish side. One local said: “we are one land and now because of Daesh, our families on the Syrian side had to leave their homes”. Fortunately, though, Turkish Kurds had “given them shelter”.

Another local, meanwhile, affirmed that, if ISIS crossed to the Turkish side, “we would have to protect ourselves” because Turkish security forces had previously shown their reluctance to act.⁹³¹ Furthermore, The Observer’s Emma Graham-Harrison wrote on October 11 about how ISIS was “trying to cut off [Kobanî’s] border crossing into Turkey, its last link to the outside world”, and how Turkish soldiers were doing nothing to stop it. And this prospect would come on top of an already dire situation in the city, as disabled engineer Berkal Karan, for instance, spoke of how “he was eating only one meal a day to stretch out supplies”. Considering the possibility of an ISIS victory in Kobanî, journalist Mustafa Abdi from kobanikurd.com even insisted that, “if [the jihadists were to] cut off the border, then everyone inside [would] die”.⁹³²

Turkish Army and ISIS Torturing Civilians Together

In December 2014, AjansaKurdi published the names of Turkish soldiers killed in Mosul and Kobanî, as proof of “collaboration between Turkey and ISIS”. The agency spoke of how AhlulBayt News (ABNA) had “issued the names of 12 [former] Turkish intelligence (MIT) and special forces operatives who were assumed to be ISIS members and were killed in Mosul and Kobanî”. According to ABNA, “the Iraqi army [had] targeted a MIT ‘safe house’ in Mosul because “Turkish operatives [had been] dressed like ISIS militants”. At the same time, ABNA said, “5 special forces operatives [who “were dressed like ISIS militants and had long beards”] were killed as they tried to cross the railway line and infiltrate Kobanî”. Although “it was understood” that these people were “special forces personnel, not ISIS militants”, they had been “carrying ID cards given by ISIS to their own fighters”. Back in Iraq, meanwhile, another “3 people [were] killed... [and] were found to have had links to the MIT and military intelligence”.⁹³³

Whether the aforementioned discoveries prove Turkish infiltration within ISIS or not, the fact was that, in many ways, Turkey was doing almost as much to contribute to the suffering of civilians and resistance fighters than the Wahhabi jihadists themselves. In early October, for example, local residents of the village of Boydê on the Turkish-Syrian border claimed that “ISIS fighters and Turkish soldiers attached to the Karaca military base [had] met... in the border region near Kobanî”, with the jihadists being “provided with certain supplies by the Turkish soldiers before crossing back into Syria”. Fuat Tilgen, for instance, speaks of how ISIS militants had arrived in a “white minibus with darkened windows and seemed

⁹³¹<https://uk.news.yahoo.com/turkey-just-watch-kobane-091551895.html#nmm5f7s>

⁹³²http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/11/kobani-time-running-out-besieged-civilians?CMP=tw_t_gu

⁹³³ <http://www.ajansakurdi.net/?p=31980>

entirely familiar around the Turkish soldiers". After "hearing a number of pistol shots", meanwhile, he saw how "two residents of Kobanê who were attempting to cross the border with their animals were captured by Turkish soldiers from the Karaca base and beaten for hours".

Later on, Tilgen "noticed more movement along the border", with "a white civilian minivan" crossing "through the border fence" and passing by "the Turkish armored vehicles through the crowds waiting to cross the border in the mined border-zone". According to Tilgen, "these kinds of vehicles [had] been seen all over the border for the past week". Fifteen militants, he says, then "got out of the vehicle" and "began to attack people". Families, he asserts, were then driven eastwards. Meanwhile, "a new minibus arrived", coming "up alongside the soldiers at the place where the residents of Kobanê had first been". The soldiers subsequently "went over to the civilian vehicle" and, after the arrival of "another vehicle", they "began to give them things". Two street lamps were even turned off during the process to obscure the view, he says, though "it was obvious that whatever they put in the vehicle [was] very heavy".

Afterwards, Tilgen explains, "Turkish soldiers continued their attack on the residents of Kobanî", apparently torturing "one child for hours" (with the sound of the beating reaching "all the way across the border"). He was hung up "by his feet", and only when Tilgen "shone a flashlight across the border" did the soldiers release the child and pull away from the area. Accounts of torture, meanwhile, came from elsewhere as well, with Kobanî resident Mahmud İbrahim being "apprehended by Turkish soldiers and tortured". Having "tried to cross over to Turkey", he asserts, "soldiers attacked us with clubs and rifle-butts". Along with other people, he says, he was thrown "into the barbed wire" on the border and had his mouth held shut by the officers. Having "acted like I was dead", he stresses, they then left him where he was.

Fellow Rojavan Şergo Şexo, meanwhile, asserts that, "as he went across the border to buy bread during the night", Turkish soldiers "noticed a family a little ahead of him and they apprehended a man and woman", beating them "for hours" and destroying their car. He claims "the soldiers tied the man and woman to the back of an armored vehicle", dragging them "for meters and meters around the minefield". Later, he says, "a vehicle belonging to ISIS arrived from Til Şêar and crossed the railroad", with ISIS militants pulling families from their cars and telling them to leave the area. When they met resistance, he stresses, the jihadists "pulled out weapons and threatened to kill them". After the refugees had left, he insists, the militants "came up to the Turkish border", and then another vehicle "came from the Turkish base and spoke with them". A while later, he adds, "a vehicle from Turkey showed up and unloaded what I thought was a box from the car and put it in the ISIS car".⁹³⁴ And, with a number of stories like those mentioned above coming to light, it was difficult to believe that there was not, at the very least, informal contact between Turkish soldiers and ISIS militants.

IV) Why the PYD Wanted to Keep its Distance from Turkey

If the PKK Really Were Terrorists, Maybe Turkey Would Support Them

Professor David Romano quotes David Graeber at Rudaw, saying that, "amid the Syrian war zone", there was "a democratic experiment... being stamped into the ground by ISIS" in Kobanî and elsewhere in Rojava. Like the YPJ in Syrian Kurdistan, Graeber had asserted, "Spanish revolutionaries [had also] empowered women and fielded female combatants" during the Spanish Civil War. And, while "the PYD [were] of course not angels", he had

⁹³⁴ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/03/turkish-army-and-isis-working-together-torturing-civilians-around-kobane/>

insisted, “the Syrian Kurds [had] not attacked anyone but the Islamists trying to take over their lands”. Nonetheless, Romano affirms, while the KRG could easily obtain Western support, the “secular Syrian Kurds” were effectively “told by Washington and Ankara that they must drop their demands for autonomy, local government and Kurdish and other minority rights” if they wanted to receive arms.

Romano also emphasises that, “when the **United States began its bombing campaign in Syria**, it appeared to be **targeting ISIS everywhere except where they were besieging the Syrian Kurds**”. The jihadists, therefore, he explains, drove their “captured Iraqi and Syrian tanks around Kobani with impunity” for weeks, “even though [their] armor [could] be easily targeted by Western aircraft”. And, at the same time, he says, “news reporters just across the border in Turkey filmed the whole thing”, or “at least until Turkish soldiers tear gassed them out of the area”.

After the USA finally “targeted ISIS around Kobani” (as will be seen in the Chapter Twelve), “the public was told that Turkey had asked the Americans to do something to help the besieged city” while, in reality, it is almost certain that “**Americans finally decided to do something contrary to Turkey’s wishes**”. For, if Ankara had felt any need or desire to target ISIS, “they could have done so themselves” from very early on, instead of sitting and watching as jihadis attacked territory just over the border. Equally, they could have allowed troops and arms to cross into Kobani from allies in Turkey, but they chose not to do so. In short, Romano stresses, “there [were] much better options to help Kobani than an embargo or Turkish ground troops setting up a buffer zone” in northern Syria.

“Every year”, Romano emphasises, “hundreds of Kurds get imprisoned in Turkey for smuggling cigarettes across the mountains on the Iranian and Iraqi borders, yet we do not hear of any ISIS smugglers getting caught on the flat terrain of the Syrian-Turkish border”. And, with Turkey preventing “food and water from being sent to Kobani’s defenders, at the same time that it [pretended] it [did] not wish to see Kobani fall”, it was becoming harder and harder not to accuse Ankara of aggressive hypocrisy. In short, there was one standard for reactionary Wahhabi jihadists, and another for progressive, secular Kurds – even though both groups were considered by the Turkish State to be terrorists. Therefore, Romano concludes, if only Erdoğan’s comments about ISIS and the PKK being “the same” were actually true, maybe Kurdish fighters in Syria would “be better supplied and not prevented from crossing into Syria to defend Kobani”.⁹³⁵

The PYD against Subjugation to FSA

According to journalist Sevil Erkuş, the “**Turkish intelligence authorities**” had urged PYD co-chair Salih Muslim “to bring his forces under the ranks of the Free Syrian Army”, and thus to abandon all of the democratic and independent principles held dear to the Rojava Revolution (as described above). On October 4, Muslim apparently “had a lengthy meeting with Turkish intelligence officials” about the “ongoing jihadist siege” on Kobani, in which the Turks had told him to: “take an open stance against the Syrian regime”; join a newly restructured Syrian opposition; and “distance itself” from the PKK if it wanted Western and Turkish support. In what was clearly an attempt to coerce the PYD into adopting a more ‘Turkish approach’ towards the Syrian Civil War (and towards politics in general), Turkey and its allies were simply adding even more pressure after previous refusals to allow weapon deliveries to the YPG/YPJ in Rojava.

Kobani, meanwhile, was being used as a big bargaining chip, as the Turkish border was currently the only path through which assistance could possibly arrive. Nonetheless, an

⁹³⁵ <http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/091020141>

'ideological shift' in the PYD was unlikely to happen, as Muslim had clearly "asked Ankara not to obstruct other Kurds in the region coming to help Syrian Kurds' fight against ISIL, and to allow the PKK to send help to Kobanî through Turkey". In short, the party was demonstrating that it was not prepared to isolate its PKK allies by embracing Turkish factions just because Turkey wanted such a guarantee.

Muslim's first talks with the Turkish government for a year, however, were perhaps an important step forward towards a slightly less hostile stance from Ankara in the coming months. And this development came "after Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş [had] requested help from the Turkish government in the Syrian Kurds' fight" against ISIS.⁹³⁶ Having perhaps hoped for some compassion from Turkey in the light of recent events in Kobanî, however, both Muslim and Demirtaş's efforts were instead greeted with the same self-interested political games that had hindered previous talks. In short, it seemed very clear that what **Turkey wanted to do was to back the PYD into a corner in Kobanî**, in the hope that it would submit to Ankara's will of forming a unified resistance to Assad (alongside the FSA). In the case of victory in the civil war, however, such a broad alliance would surely lead to the dilution of any form of democratic autonomy that Syrian Kurds currently enjoyed.

Schemes Aimed at Weakening Rojava

In late September, Muslim had claimed that ISIS was "too free to use its heavy weapons" and, whilst welcoming US-led airstrikes against ISIS, he "questioned why IS forces besieging Kobani [had] not been bombed". In spite of the PYD's offers "to be a backup force" against ISIS, he said, the coalition had given the party "no response". He had insisted, for example, that: "we certainly want to cooperate with the [coalition] to avoid being slaughtered, but... I think **some parties do not want us to be seen on the forefront**, which will happen in case of collaboration with the coalition". In short, he said, the "current blockade" by Turkey was a clear attempt to keep the YPG/YPJ under-armed and under-supplied in their battle against ISIS.

The "deterioration" of the situation in Kobanî, Muslim asserted, was "not due to the lack of fighters or shortages of defenders", but because ISIS was "besieging the city from three sides" with "sophisticated" weapons, while the YPG/YPJ had only light weapons which were "not effective against US armored vehicles". The jihadists' weapons, he said, were "partially derived from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades that joined the group, and partially from the recent fall of the military airport of Tabaqa", though some of ISIS's "powerful weapons [had come] via a "suspicious" way", being "obtained by IS from the FSA warehouses near the Turkish border crossings". According to Muslim, these weapons had been "given to [the group], and were not the result of [surprise] attacks", as Turkish authorities had claimed. Other heavier weapons, meanwhile, had come from Mosul where, for Muslim, there was no logic that could explain "how six brigades of the Iraqi army [had] left all of their weapons to IS and made no effort to defend themselves" (just as Michel Chossudovsky argued in Chapter Seven).

Muslim also criticised the ease with which ISIS had been "allowed to move its heavy weapons – which [had] been monitored by US radars at all times – for dozens of kilometers to encircle Kobanî". **The US-led air raids**, he insisted, **had suspiciously come "a week late"**. Nonetheless, he argued that Rojavans had their "own forces" and did not need a military intervention, though they did need anti-tank weapons. With those, he stressed, Kobanî's resistance fighters would be "able to defend" themselves. In fact, he emphasises, if weapons were allowed to "pass via Turkey" either into Kobanî or to Rojavan forces

⁹³⁶<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ankara-urges-pyd-leader-to-join-ranks-of-free-syrian-army-against-assad.aspx?pageID=238&nID=72545&NewsCatID=510>

elsewhere in Syria, the YPG/YPJ would be perfectly capable of pushing ISIS back all by themselves. For “Kurds of the entire region”, he asserted, “including Iran, [were] flocking to repel the invasion of IS”.

PYD Insists on Its Opposition to Turkish Interference

According to one European official, PKK forces had been “fighting more than the peshmerga in both Syria and Iraq” in the battle against ISIS but, because “Turkey [wanted the party] to stay on the blacklist”, Turkish allies did not want to take any steps towards delisting the PKK from their ‘terror lists’. In fact, Ankara had apparently asked Europeans to “keep the party on the list so that it [did] not have a substitute for peace”. And, as a result of this clear hostility to progressive Kurds, Muslim stressed that a buffer zone “under the management of Turkey” in northern Syria would be considered “an occupation of our territory” which Rojavans would resist. Regarding “international selectivity” of support for groups fighting ISIS, meanwhile, he asserted that the desired goal of this tactic was “to eliminate the Kurdish administration “model” in the north of Syria”, claiming that “no one [wanted] Syria or the Middle East to follow this model” because “the example we are giving changes the whole equation”.

As an example of why the process in Rojava was revolutionising Middle Eastern politics, Muslim emphasised the Kurds’ political inclusion of Assyrians, who were excluded in Turkey, Iran, and the rest of Syria, where “they [had] nothing”. According to him, “the Assyrians, Kurds, Turkmens and Arabs” in Rojava “all [wanted] to live together and [believed] in democracy”, and this was simply a model for the Middle East that some forces in the region did not want to survive. “Some”, Muslim asserted, had “other interests to follow” and, “when they have desires, they make poor people fight”.⁹³⁷

In mid-October, meanwhile, Muslim reiterated that the **PYD would “not fight in Syria on Turkey’s behalf against Bashar al-Assad”**, insisting that the party had “been in a fight against this... regime since 2004” in a perfectly independent manner. In fact, he stressed, when “we were being tortured in intelligence basements” by Assad’s forces, Turkish officials “were [dining with them] in Aleppo, Damascus and Ankara”. Consequently, he added, **Syrian Kurds could not allow Turkey to dictate what they had to do**. “We have a policy”, he said, and “have repelled and fired them from our areas”. In short, he argued, **Rojavans had “stopped being soldiers for others”**, no matter how much Turkey wanted them to fight elsewhere in Syria on its behalf against the Assad regime.

Finally, Muslim emphasised once again that “a ground offensive was not necessary for Kobani”, and that “anti-tank weapons... would suffice for the Kurds to save the region”. In reality, he insisted, a Turkish “ground offensive would make things worse, not better”, because “ISIL [was] in Istanbul”. The Turkish State, meanwhile, simply wanted “to fix these regions according to its own will and... demographically change the area”. Only “a safe haven... formed under the guidance of international forces”, he conceded, would be an acceptable development.⁹³⁸

V) (The Lack of) Humanitarianism

The Refugee Crisis in Turkey

At ROAR Magazine in mid-November, Aysan Sönmez, an “artist and activist from İstanbul”, spoke of how the one million or so Syrians who had fled into Turkey since the start of the civil war were “being housed in tent camps close to the border in the south of

⁹³⁷ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/09/syria-kurds-massacre-salih-muslim.html#>

⁹³⁸ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=238&nID=72880&NewsCatID=352>

Turkey". Tens of thousands more, however, had "made their way to cities like Istanbul and Izmir", she says, "where in many cases they [had] received a **cold and heartless welcome**". The media in Turkey, meanwhile, was seriously underreporting "the plight of the refugees", she insists, which was "perhaps due to a lack of political will from the government to take a clear stance on the issue", but was perhaps also to do with "the fact that many of the refugees [stemmed] from ethnic groups that [had] a problematic history in Turkey already" (like the Kurds, for example).

Having visited "the district of Suruç in the province of Urfa in southern Turkey" in early October, she had seen the "large influxes of refugees" which had come to the border "as a result of the siege of Kobani by the Islamic State (ISIS)". Instead of "just sending aid", she asserts, her comrades "[preferred] to actually visit people so [they could] listen to them and better understand their real needs". At night, though, she says that "the inhabitants of Suruç and people that [had come] from all over Turkey to show their solidarity patrolled the area to prevent ISIS militants from crossing over" into Syria. In fact, she claims that a French boxer had apparently "been caught a few days before" trying to go to Kobani to fight for ISIS, and five youths had "received quite a beating until they finally got him to give in". Two women in the area, meanwhile, spoke of how ISIS had "abused the bodies" of four YPJ fighters and had even "cut off the head of one of the women".

Sönmez also speaks about how she had "visited the municipal office [in Suruç] to gather information about the camps in the area", and had found out that some refugees had "been able to take shelter with their relatives in surrounding provinces". Nonetheless, she states that fifty thousand more were staying in camps near the border and "outlying areas of Suruç that [had] been opened up to them". Unfortunately, however, many of the refugees were "women who [had] recently [given] birth or [had] many children". In fact, she insists that "the streets of Suruç [were] filled with children".

The capacity of one municipal tent camp, Sönmez explains, was one thousand, while another ("capable of housing 600-700 people") was about to be opened. Another "tent city", meanwhile, had been "set up by the state relief program", and housed 4,500 people. Nonetheless, "no one [seemed] to be homeless", she asserts. "They [had] all been settled in defunct wedding halls, empty shops, newly constructed buildings and mosques, or they [had] moved in with relatives", she says. At the same time, though, there were still between 5,000 and 6,000 "Kobani residents who [were] camped out in a field on the border that [was] surrounded by mines", hoping that, "when the situation [calmed] down, they [would] be able to return to their homes".

Aid, meanwhile, was generally arriving from "socially engaged individuals and organizations". The AKP government, on the other hand, had "[said] it [would] help out but [did not] do anything", according to refugees. The KRG, however, had sent "230 tents and 600 blankets from Iraq". At the same time, Sönmez says, doctors were treating patients in the state-run hospital in Suruç, while "providing outpatient care at the places where the refugees [were] staying". Although there was "no shortage of medicine", they insisted, there was "a pressing need for preventative medicine and... the most crucial issue in that regard [was] food". In fact, they claimed that "death through starvation" was one of the biggest concerns they had. And regarding this matter, Sönmez herself asserts that there were not enough soup kitchens, and that there was a clear need for "establishing a proper system" so that the tens of thousands of refugees could receive "the nourishment they [needed]". For, in food warehouses, she argues, there was clearly "a problem with the distribution of aid", with it generally "being sent randomly".

While "Suruç's infrastructure for water, electricity and sewage [had been] designed to handle the town's original population of 50,000", Sönmez claims, the system was now "on

the brink of collapse”, because “the population [would] occasionally [soar up] to 180.000 due to refugees that [came] and [went]”. As a result, she says, children were “bringing water in buckets”. In short, then, the municipality simply did “not have enough resources”, and had “largely been left to its own devices” by the central government.

Furthermore, Sönmez argues, with winter approaching, “thousands of... women, children and elderly” people were set to be left “hungry and literally out in the cold”. And as Suruç was “situated on a flat plain”, meanwhile, “even the lightest of rains [could] cause the tents to flood”. In essence, therefore, the refugees were “completely dependent on aid and charity” for survival. Nonetheless, the situation was much worse in western Turkey, where many refugees were “left to fend for themselves, often working irregular and underpaid jobs while faced with the hostile dispositions of the local people”.⁹³⁹ Essentially, then, although it was committed to fuelling the Syrian Civil War and destabilising the revolutionary process in Rojava, the Turkish State had clearly not put a lot of attention into what it would do with the migrants which its aggressive policies had inevitably sent fleeing across its borders.

The No-Man’s Land between Kobanî and Turkey

On October 12, Vanessa Altin spoke of how “terrified civilians [were] stuck in [Kobanî] and in a no-man’s land between the outskirts and the border, which [was] closed to them”. One civilian, 40-year-old Ekram Ahmet, said that “many of the old people” in the town simply “[refused] to leave their sons to fight”. He also claimed that “many IS supporters [were] drug-crazed as they [fought] and [killed]”, describing how “they [had] lots of pills with them that they all [kept] taking”. At the same time, he spoke of how his “11-year-old son [had been] dragged off a bus by IS” and how, “realising he was Kurdish, they pushed him into a line to be taken away and beheaded”. Fortunately, though, his son had managed to run away, while Ekram himself had also managed to escape such encounters because he could speak Arabic.

As Ekram crossed the border to Turkey with his family, meanwhile, he speaks of how “the Turkish soldiers [there] jeered and insulted” them, calling them “‘stupid people’ and ‘donkeys’”. And, unfortunately, others arriving in Turkey did not find themselves in much better conditions. “More than 150 children”, for example, were left to shelter “in the garden of council offices in the Turkish border town of Suruç”, and one six-year-old (called Rojdan) spoke of how it was “too cold to sleep and the floor [was] hard”. At the same time, five-year-old Alene described how her father had to “fight the bad people so we can go home” (the fathers of all of the children interviewed were fighting in Kobanî at the time). Altin then says that, when the press was about to leave, the refugee children “all stood and raised their hands in the traditional symbol of peace”.

Kurdish reporter Murat Ciftçi, meanwhile, spoke of how the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî had once again “begged Turkey to open a safe corridor to allow the wounded and civilians to escape and to reinforce fighters in Kobanî”, and had been refused help. He also said that “Arab planes [had seemed] less inclined to engage the enemy, instead just dumping bombs on fields and flying back to their bases”. And, although some US air strikes had a certain effect on ISIS forces attacking the city, the involvement of Arab nations was “seen as mere tokenism”. At this point, however, the USA (which had “conducted multiple airdrops to resupply Iraqi security forces”) was still obeying Turkey’s restrictions on sending military and humanitarian aid to the YPG/YPJ fighters in Kobanî, so even American efforts to stop the ISIS onslaught on the city were minimal.⁹⁴⁰

⁹³⁹ <http://roarmag.org/2014/11/suruc-refugee-camps-turkey/>

⁹⁴⁰ <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/inside-kobane-drug-crazed-isis-savages-4423943>

Turkey Arrests Refugees

John Beck at VICE News spoke on October 11 about how “Turkish security forces [had] arrested and detained more than 200 Syrians refugees - including young children” fleeing from Kobani. “Two hundred and seventy-four”, he says, “including a large number of woman – one pregnant – and minors [had] been held inside a single large room at a police station on the outskirts of Suruç”. The information, he notes, had come from HDP executive Committee member Meral Danis Bestas, who had insisted that “150 of the detainees [were] now on hunger strike”. President of the Sanliurfa Bar Association, Ali Fuat Bucak, meanwhile, added that “some of the detainees were injured and all were being held in unsanitary conditions”, without “soap or water to wash”. Furthermore, Bestas asserted, “no reason had been given for the arrest of the refugees”, and all of them were civilians. One of them, Rashad Mahmoud, whose son “had been arrested while attempting to retrieve his car from Kobani”, said he had told his brother in Kobani “not to come [to Turkey] as he [would] end up straight in jail”.⁹⁴¹

Human Rights Watch (HRW), meanwhile, claimed that, according to “satellite imagery” and sources on the ground, “over 2,000 civilians remained as of November 18 in a section of the mine belt referred to as the Tel Shair corridor northwest of Kobani where they [were] at risk from landmines”. They were there, HRW said, because “Turkey was refusing entry for cars or livestock and [the civilians] did not want to leave behind their belongings”. Although Turkey, a member of the Mine Ban Treaty since 2003, had “the legal obligation to perimeter-mark, monitor, and fence all mined areas... to ensure the effective exclusion of civilians”, it seemed perfectly happy to allow refugees to stay in the area. In fact, HRW even insisted that there had been “at least 70 mine explosions between September 15 and November 15”, and that “at least three civilians” had died or been injured “in at least six of these explosions”. One 10-year-old boy, for example, had been killed, while “seven other children” had been wounded. In other cases, the mines had been “detonated by livestock”.⁹⁴² As a general rule, however, the Turkish State was far from fulfilling its duty of protecting civilians, and was displaying no sympathy (and even direct hostility) towards refugees.

D) International Solidarity with Rojava and Kobani

The Battle for Kobani had significantly boosted the media profile of the Rojava Revolution by late October, and was attracting the attention and solidarity of a large number of citizens around the world. In fact, Petar Stanchev at KurdishQuestion.com even spoke in February 2015 of how “the bravery and heroism of the People’s Defence Units and the Women’s Defence Units (YPG and YPJ) [had been] praised by a large spectrum of groups and individuals – anarchists, leftist, liberals and even right-wingers”, who admired “their historical battle against what was often seen as IS “fascism””.⁹⁴³ In this section of the chapter, I will analyse the response of international groups and civilians to the conflict, and how the YPG/YPJ’s resistance was rapidly turning into a key battle in the fight (both physical and ideological) against ISIS.

I) Strategic Alliances

Short-Term State Support?

Rojava, as a general rule, went through the whole of 2014 without a state ally (even though some strategic convergences of interest would occur in the last couple of months of the

⁹⁴¹<https://news.vice.com/article/turkey-arrests-274-kobane-refugees-fleeing-islamic-state-attack> and @JM_Beck

⁹⁴² <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/02/syriaturkey-landmines-kill-civilians-fleeing-kobani>

⁹⁴³ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/exclusive-on-kq-from-chiapas-to-rojava-more-than-just-coincidences.html#edn3> and <http://roarmag.org/2015/02/chiapas-rojava-zapatista-kurds/>

year). According to Today's Zaman, which was generally biased against the PKK and its allies, Iran was allegedly "determined to support" the YPG/YPJ in Rojava "for its short term interests in Syria" (though there was little proof of actual assistance). The autonomous Kurdish region, the paper asserts, was "something that Iran [definitely did] not want to see in the long term", but in the short term its interests lay in the fight against ISIS and, by extension, the bolstering of its Ba'athist allies in Syria.

Freelance journalist Abdulla Hawez, who was based in Iraqi Kurdistan, claims that the PYD was "aware that Iran [was] not an actor "to be trusted" for any Syrian opposition group in the long term", but that it was willing to take almost any temporary support it could get in order to defeat ISIS. At the same time, Hawez asserts that, when Salih Muslim went to Iran in August (along with KNC chairman Abdulhakim Bashar), the country allegedly asked how it could support the YPG/YPJ in its fight against Wahhabi jihadists.

BİLGESAM think tank's Ali Semin, meanwhile, claims that "Iran looks at the bigger picture", and had therefore decided "it could ignore the beginnings of a future Kurdish state" in its efforts "to save its interests in Syria". Even though, in the long term, Rojava could "pose a threat to Iranian territorial integrity" by inspiring Kurds in Iran, he says, Iran was still open to giving strategic support to Rojava in order to save Assad. According to KCK leader Cemil Bayık, Iran was "trying every method to achieve the best possible result from the Syrian crisis". He also insists that "Iran would like to sabotage [the settlement] process" in Turkey between the PKK and the government, so it was therefore recommendable for Turkey to take "quick steps to advance the... process" and reduce government hostility towards Rojava, to avoid such a development to become possible.⁹⁴⁴ At the same time, support from the US-led anti-ISIS coalition and from the KRG (which will be discussed in the following chapter) would also be mere short term strategic alliances rather than long-term ideological ones. Nonetheless, it was incumbent on Rojavan revolutionaries to remain aware of the political goals and interests of their temporary benefactors.

II) Support from Anarchists and Other Left-Wingers

Rojava as Freedom from Fundamentalism and Imperialism

At the end of September, author Derek Wall emphasised that "a victory for the Kurds and their allies in Syria [would be] a victory for all who want a future that is dictated neither by fundamentalists nor imperialists". In his opposition to further Western military action in the Middle East, he reminds us that "Iraq was transformed from secular totalitarianism to chaos [and,] in turn, [this] chaos and [the] opposition to occupation seeded a jihadist movement". Western support for anti-Assad groups in Syria, meanwhile, had facilitated the growth of ISIS, and more intervention would likely help the group to grow even more (as argued in Chapter Seven).

A key point for Wall, however, is that the West had totally ignored the resistance of Syrian Kurds to ISIS when it suddenly began to talk about the terrorist threat in mid-2014. In short, he insists that "the most successful opponents of ISIS [were] not only unsupported by the west but [were] effectively at war with a NATO ally" (i.e. Turkey). For him, then, if "the 'war on terror' was real, the words Kobani, Rojava, and YPG would be on our TV screens more often than a marriage date with George Clooney". But "these [were] the Kurds the west [did] not support", he says, and "mentioning their very existence [was] virtually an existential threat".

⁹⁴⁴ http://www.todayszaman.com/diplomacy_iran-supports-pyd-for-immediate-interests_323776.html

Wall emphasises that, in Rojava, largely Kurdish forces had “been fighting and beating ISIS and other jihadists like the Al Nusra front” since 2012, and that, only a month before the renewed attack on Kobanî in September, they had rescued “thousands of Yazidi [civilians] in Iraq” from an ISIS advance (as seen in Section A of this chapter). “Political and religious pluralism” in Rojava, he stresses, was being “strongly promoted”, and the dominant PYD, which existed alongside “other Kurdish and non-Kurdish political parties”, was an advocate of “political diversity, feminism and self-governance”. According to Wall, a North London anarchist who had previously visited Rojava had “noted that [its citizens were] carrying out **an almost unique democratic experiment**”, with the civilians he met asserting that “nobody, including... the political parties, [intervened] in their decision making”, and that they [made] “all the decisions collectively”.

However, “Rojava [offered] the threat of a good example”, Wall argues. And, while it “may or may not be the utopia it sounds like”, he concedes, the fact is that **“the west [simply] has little time for alternatives to capitalism that might just work”**. In this respect, he says, the current “allies of the US and UK tell us all we need to know”. Saudi Arabia, for example, “beheads citizens on a regular basis, outlaws LGBT people, doesn't allow women to drive and, like ISIS, does not tolerate churches, Shia mosques, or the advocacy of religions other than the most constrained form of Islam”. Qatar and Bahrain, meanwhile, are not much better, he insists, and **the “roll call of allies is a list of shame, which includes some of the most repressive states on our planet”**. Thus, if this “oil-soaked catalogue of monsters”, he asserts, is the set of allies chosen by the West, there should be no reason to expect that its governments would support genuinely revolutionary movements in the region.

The West, Wall says, had screamed and shouted about the ISIS threat, but the YPG and YPJ, who had up to that point “been the most effective opponents of jihadism”, were being “largely ignored”. NATO ally Turkey, meanwhile, had “been accused of supporting ISIS, as part of its longstanding conflict with the [PKK-affiliated] Kurds” in the region. In fact, around “\$800 million of oil” was thought to have been “sold by ISIS in Turkey”, and there was even “evidence that Turkish troops [had] been training ISIS”. And, although the Turkish government was not exactly the same as ISIS, the fact was that Turkey’s opposition to revolutionary Kurdish autonomy on its doorstep was (as discussed in Section C of this chapter) considered to be much more important than the fight against radical Islamism. Worse still, however, was that Turkey’s allies in the West, at least in part, seemed to share this view.

In summary, Wall affirms, Western intervention “has brought nothing but misery to the Middle East”, and the “silence from Obama and Cameron regarding Turkey's repression of the Kurds” was a sign that **“the ‘war on terror’ [was] more about the rhetoric than reality”**. Therefore, he asserts, if we “want to see societies based on pluralism, self-governance, respect for minorities and empowerment of women”, **we “need to confront our elected leaders over their failure to challenge Turkish opposition to Rojava”**. In short, **we need to call out their hypocrisy and leave our comfort zone of apathy if we have even the slightest desire of building “a future that is dictated neither by fundamentalists nor imperialists”**.⁹⁴⁵

Intellectuals, Socialists, and Unions Show Solidarity with Kobanî

At the same time, in early October, solidarity campaigns for Kobanî were spreading around the world. “More than 250 international Kurdish studies scholars”, for example, “issued a call for action to support... Kobanî”. The Kurdish Studies Network, with over a thousand members worldwide, “urged coalition forces and the international community “to take

⁹⁴⁵ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/derek-wall/western-blind-spot-kurds%27-forgotten-war-in-syria>

immediate action to prevent an impending disaster by supporting the Kurds in their fight for self-defence". They emphasised, however, that they were not calling "for any military aggression or occupation, including that of the Turkish military", but for Turkey to "negotiate with the Kurdish representatives in good faith to ensure the ongoing peace process". What they did want, meanwhile, was for the democratically autonomous Rojava to be "recognized as a legitimate authority and provided with the needed weaponry and other support". If this support came, they insisted, the YPG would easily be "capable of driving away the threat of [ISIS]"⁹⁴⁶

At the start of November, UNITE (the biggest trade union in Great Britain) released a statement of support for Kobanî after meeting with the Centre for Kurdish Progress, saying that "the bravery shown by the Kurds in Kobanî in defence of the entire community [was] to be commended". It also stated that it was "appalled that the Turkish government [had] put its own nationalist politics ahead of the plight of Kurdish people"⁹⁴⁷

Australia's Socialist Alliance, meanwhile, adopted a resolution in late September in support of "the struggle of the Kurdish and other communities in Rojava", emphasising the Revolution's "enormous importance for the future of the Middle East". For the group's members, the Rojavan "attempt to establish a society where all ethnicities and religions [could] live amicably and cooperatively side by side [was] **profoundly progressive**", as were the Revolution's "efforts to empower women". As a result, they insisted that "socialists must actively solidarise with these struggles", and especially with "the struggle in Rojava which [was] at such a critical point" with the fierce ISIS assault on Kobanî.⁹⁴⁸

The DAF in Kobanî

At the end of September, the DAF (or 'Revolutionary Anarchist Action') released a statement, just as images on the internet began to show anarchists arriving in Kobanî to support the YPG/YPJ resistance forces. The group symbolically called ISIS "Dehak" (after the evil king from the Kurdish Nowruz stories) and the people of Rojava "Kawa" (after the blacksmith who trained rebels who would eventually overthrow Dehak), saying that **capitalism had given birth to the "the procreated violence" suffered in the region**. ISIS, the organisation asserted, was simply a "subcontractor of the states that [pursued] income strategies in the region". Civilians, meanwhile, were "fighting... not for income, but for their freedom". In the statement, the DAF argued that **the USA, the EU, and Turkey all had "expectations of income from the region"** and were, in reality, not particularly disturbed by the advances of ISIS (which would explain why they had left it to its own devices for so long, and even facilitated its growth). Proclaiming their support for the "freedom fighters" of Kobanî and all of Rojava, the DAF concluded: "**we are all Kawa against Dehak**".⁹⁴⁹

On October 9, Channel 4's Brian Whelan reported on how "a group of Turkish activists [had] crossed the border to support the Kurds". The members of the DAF, which had also been present at Taksim Square and Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013, apparently insisted that "each position that the Kurdish people's movement [lost] against Isis [was] interpreted by the [Turkish] state as a loss of the power across the table" (in its peace negotiations with the PKK), and that such developments were thus perceived to strengthen Turkey's hand. The group, meanwhile, asserted that its members had managed to bypass Turkish border guards to help "Kurdish refugees to escape into Turkey". They had also helped by "setting up tents" and "organising the distribution of materials sent in solidarity". According to Whelan,

⁹⁴⁶<http://kurdishstudiesnetwork.net/2014/10/07/kurdish-studies-scholars-statement-of-solidarity-and-call-for-action-to-support-kobani/> and <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/091020141>

⁹⁴⁷<http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/unite-statement-in-support-of-the-kurds-in-kobane/393-unite-statement-in-support-of-the-kurds-in-kobane.html> and <https://tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com/2014/11/01/unite-britains-biggest-trade-union-backs-the-struggle-of-kobane/>

⁹⁴⁸<http://www.socialist-alliance.org/news/solidarity-rojava>

⁹⁴⁹<https://tahrircn.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/kurdistan-syria-anarchists-join-struggle-against-isis-in-kobane/>

the links between Kurdish libertarian socialists and other anarchists had stemmed primarily from “Abdullah Öcalan’s prison conversion to the writings of Murray Bookchin, a New York anarchist academic” (as discussed in Chapters Nine and Ten). And now, Whelan insists, the Turkish anarchists hoped to learn from the Öcalan-inspired experiences of the Rojava Revolution.⁹⁵⁰

Subsequently, in late October, the DAF emphasised that, considering the two-year-old social revolution of Rojava, **ISIS’s attacks on Kobanî had clearly been in the political interests of both the “Turkish State and global capitalism”**. Thus, the group felt that it was necessary to show solidarity with the revolutionaries of Rojava in their fight against the Wahhabi jihadists. Abdülmelik Yalcin and Merve Dilber were just two DAF members who went to Suruç at the very start of Kobanî’s resistance, participating in “the human chain border watch”, organising “a lot of protests”, and making “leaflets and posters”. Turkey, they say, had been so worried when autonomy was proclaimed in Rojava that it “even tried to build a wall to destroy... the revolution”. Then, when ISIS (a “violent mob produced by global capitalism”) attacked the city in mid-September, the anarchists believed that the Rojava Revolution was in mortal danger. Therefore, they soon “departed from Istanbul to the Kobanî border”, with the aim of stopping reinforcements, arms, and logistical support from reaching ISIS militants from Turkey. They also “cut the [border] wires and crossed [over] to Kobanî together with people coming from Istanbul” in order to give what support they could to the city’s defenders.

Yalcin says that the DAF members were “greeted with huge enthusiasm” by Rojavans, and “had conversations with [the] people of Kobanî and the YPG/YPJ guerrillas”. At the same time, though, Turkey’s policy was “to attack everyone who [was] involved in the border watch and who [lived] in the border villages, and everyone from Kobanî who [tried] to cross the border”. During each assault, he insists, Turkish “trucks [transported] some stuff to the other side of the border”, either to “let people cross the border to join ISIS”, to “send arms”, or to “provide ISIS with its daily needs”. The vehicles, he asserts, would sometimes even have “official plate numbers”. Dilber, meanwhile, claims that “a lot of these shipments were large enough to be easily observed”, and stresses that she had seen “tens of “service vehicles” with black windows [cross] the border” during her time there.

For Yalcin, “Kurdish people [had] been fighting a struggle of existence against the destruction and denial politics of [the] Republic of Turkey for years, and against other political powers in these lands for hundreds of years”. He insists that “**neither the revolution in Rojava nor the struggle of Zapatistas in Chiapas fit into [a] description of classical national freedom struggles**”. The reason for this belief, he explains, was that the existence of a nation implied the existence of a state and the institutions that come with such an entity. Instead, he insists, **these experiences represented a people’s “struggle for stateless self-organization”, which required a distancing from the concept of a “nation”**.

According to Dilber, meanwhile, **Turkish security forces and their Hizbulkontra** (a mixture of Hezbollah and Contra) paramilitary partners had “terrorized Kurdistan” when protests broke out in solidarity with the Kobanî resistance in late 2014. For her, these events showed “how much the Turkish State [feared] the Rojava Revolution and the possibility that such a revolution could also generalize in its territory”. And, rather impressively, she asserts, “social revolution [had] still managed to emerge” in the region, in spite of imperialist “plans, depredation and manufactured violence” (and those of their regional associates). Essentially, she says, **Rojava had “strengthened the confidence in revolution** specifically for the people of this region but also on the global scale”. In conclusion, therefore, she praises the process,

⁹⁵⁰<http://www.channel4.com/news/turkey-kurdish-islamic-state-kobani-taksim-anarchists-kurds>

saying that “borders [were being] abolished, states [were] being rendered powerless, [and the] plans of global capitalism [were being] disturbed”.⁹⁵¹

Australian Anarchists Support Rojava

At the end of October, the Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group (MACG) attended “a demonstration in support of the defence of Kobanî”, at which they distributed a leaflet criticising the “vicious and reactionary” actions of ISIS. Meanwhile, the group’s statement read, the “increasingly authoritarian regime of Recep Erdoğan in Turkey”, was showing precisely “which side he [was] on by keeping the border sealed” and only allowing the “Peshmerga of the reactionary Kurdish Regional Government, quislings of Erdoğan” to cross into Kobanî (“with the obvious purpose of crushing the Rojava Revolution”). [More on the KRG’s ‘support’ for Kobanî will be seen in Chapter Twelve.]

At the same time, the MACG’s flyer also insisted that ISIS was “not an anti-imperialist force”, but a “Frankenstein’s monster”, with US imperialism having fostered “reactionary Islamist organisations to undermine working class, progressive and anti-imperialist movements... from the 1940s onwards”. The “financing, arming and training [of] the most fanatical jihadis... in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989”, the MACG emphasised, had been the crowning glory of this tactic. On top of this fact, the group stressed, “Western imperialist powers (especially the US, Britain and France)... have backed the most reactionary and violent regimes [in the Middle East], have repeatedly invaded the region, and have sponsored Israel”. Whilst describing the historical connection between imperialism and radical Islamism, however, the MACG also insisted that “any force [striking] blows against the imperialists will [logically] gain support from many local people” who are opposed to Western interference in the region, no matter how reactionary it may be.

The MACG also praised the Rojava Revolution in its leaflet, calling it “**a progressive beacon to all humanity, emerging from amongst the imperialist domination, bloodthirsty tyrants and religious reaction**”. The Revolution’s “democratic confederalism”, it read, “offers a solution to the national problem” by opposing nation states, which “can only ever oppress those within their borders and enslave national minorities”. And with the process relying on “autonomy for all, down to the smallest local level”, the MACG believes it to be “**the secret to reconstructing West Asia and the world along progressive and humane lines**”.

Meanwhile, the MACG affirmed, ISIS could only be defeated “by the region’s workers and oppressed masses themselves”, and not by foreign military forces, as “imperialist intervention [would] only strengthen the monster”. The group also declared that the People must “confront the US and other Western imperialists, Russia, the butcher Assad, the Turkish chauvinist Erdoğan and his AKP, Erdoğan’s quislings in the KDP and PUK, the Gulf monarchies, the mullahs of Iran, the Shi’ite sectarians of Iraq and, last but not least, the Zionist war machine in Israel”.

The Rojava Revolution, however, the MACG asserted, had “been made possible by a set of circumstances that [could not] be replicated elsewhere”, as no other government would give a revolution the space that Assad had been forced to give to it. In other countries, meanwhile, the group said, class consciousness would be key in order to “unite workers across national and sectarian divides and draw in the oppressed masses behind them”. At the same time, the process in Syrian Kurdistan, the MACG warned, had not yet been solidified, and the PYD could either “become a pawn of imperialism” or “be [the] spark for a revolution which [would end] oppression altogether and [establish] democratic confederalism”. Referring to temporary alliances and deals, the group affirmed, the PYD

⁹⁵¹<http://meydangazetesi.org/gundem/2014/10/devrimci-anarsist-faaliyet-ile-kobane-uzerine-roportaj-dehaklara-karsi-kawayiz/> and <http://anarsistfaaliyet.org/english/an-interview-with-revolutionary-anarchist-action-on-kobane-we-are-kawa-against-dehaks/>

had “the right to obtain arms from wherever necessary” in its fight against ISIS, but it also had to ensure that “no concessions... on points of principle” be made.⁹⁵² In short, then, as long as the PYD and its allies always stood on the side of the workers and the oppressed, it did not matter where they got their arms from or what strategic alliances they made.

Anonymous Attacks ISIS

President Erdoğan’s continued blockade of Kobani, meanwhile, saw Anonymous “calling for [a] Cyber Attack on Turkey” on October 12.⁹⁵³ Then, three days later, Alek Hidell at Anonymous HQ announced that the group was also targeting ISIS, posting about how “**the greatest way to battle an idea is with a better idea**”. Criticising how the USA always set its sights on “fighting wars against ideology”, he insists that “Obama can drop as many bombs on ISIS as he wants but nothing he does will end the IDEA of ISIS”. And, with the USA itself having played a significant role in the creation of ISIS, the idea of American bombs solving the crisis seemed even more problematic.

With US troops having been withdrawn from Iraq because “the American people were sick of war and wanted out”, Hidell asserts, a “new terrorist threat, ISIS” appeared “all of a sudden”, leading “70% of the American public [to] support going back to war”. **This situation**, he says, “reeks of the intelligence community’s touch”. At the same time, he stresses, the previous war in the region had “achieved nothing tangible for the American people and [had] only thrown the country into further economic turmoil”. In spite of this fact, though, “the military industrial complex [ground] on at the expense of the soldiers who [had given] their lives for an ideal which [did not] appear to be shared by their superiors”.

For the aforementioned reasons, Hidell emphasises, OPISIS (a “cyber-war against ISIS”) was a necessity. In fact, though, having been attacked themselves on Twitter back in June by ISIS hackers, he insists that “Anonymous [had] already committed cyber attacks against Turkish government websites and [had] put a scare into countries like Syria and Qatar [which had] recently invested heavily in upgrading their cyber security” as a result. Whilst insisting that “**the CIA have a long history of manipulation**, especially in the middle east” and that the agency probably “helped create what we know today as ISIS”, he also stresses that **solidarity with the fight against the jihadists was necessary**. Unlike US foreign policy, however, this war would be waged online, and not with bombs.⁹⁵⁴ And, although Hidell did not mention Rojava in particular, his concept of fighting the idea of Wahhabism effectively translated to indirect support for Rojavan revolutionaries, who were themselves seeking to destroy the reactionary ideology of ISIS with their own ‘better idea’.

Trotskyist Support

In late September 2014, the Trotskyist LIT-CI called the YPJ an example of “women’s struggle, organisation, and resistance against violent discrimination”. It refers to how, at the start of 2013, three Kurdish guerrillas were assassinated in Paris in what seemed to be a demonstration of “collaboration between the secret services of the Turkish and French governments”. Now, it insists, “the male chauvinism of organisations like ISIS and Al Qaeda [were] evident” in Syria and Iraq, and women were being “kidnapped and raped to satisfy the sexual whims of the “lords of war””. With strict interpretations of Sharia law being applied under their rule, the group says, in which women were obliged to “cover themselves totally”, it was clear that the Wahhabi extremists saw women as “weak and decorative beings” whose primary purpose was as sexual objects. And in this hostile

⁹⁵²<http://melbacg.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/victory-to-the-rojava-revolution/>

⁹⁵³<http://youtu.be/IOVO3XTBZkE> and <http://ireport.cm.com/docs/DOC-1178845>

⁹⁵⁴ <http://www.ijreview.com/2014/09/177896-anonymous-gets-fight-isis-supporters/> and <http://anonhq.com/anonymous-hacker-group-goes-isis/>

environment, the LIT-CI stresses, the emancipatory battle of the YPJ and their YPG counterparts was more important than ever.

A “revolution in the consciousness of women”, it explains, had occurred in Syrian Kurdistan, with many Rojavan civilians seeking to join the YPJ and the police forces which had “the autonomous power to deal with cases directly involving women”. Although the YPJ mostly consisted of young women (some “no older than twenty years of age”), it asserts, ISIS members allegedly begged YPG negotiators to “remove women from the frontline because it [was] a dishonour for them to die at their hands”. The LIT-CI adds that the jihadis actually “[feared] women more” than men, because of their belief that “falling in battle at the hands of a woman [would] prevent them from entering into heaven”.

Meanwhile, the LIT-CI insists, the Centre for the Training and Emancipation of Women in Qamişlo had been organising “literacy workshops in Kurdish”, and “even IT and sewing classes”, though one of the most popular classes was that entitled “women and their rights”. One member of the centre, Brahim, argued that “**the emancipation of a woman begins when she understands that she has the right to be an individual capable of managing her own life**”. In other words, the LIT-CI suggests, there was a “double “revolution”” in Rojava, occurring “not only on the battlefields but also in the minds of a people oppressed and divided for decades” and in those of women who had “always been the most victimised, subjugated, and abused people in society”. For these reasons, the Rojava Revolution was to be considered “a first step” in the fight to destroy an unjust socio-economic system in the region, and one that had to be supported.⁹⁵⁵

Sarah Parker from British Trotskyist group Socialist Resistance, meanwhile, spoke about how “local people” and the YPG/YPJ had “heroically defended” Kobanî, emphasising that “a high proportion of the fighters”, which were “mostly Kurdish” but also included “Arabs and Assyrians”, were “women, mainly young but also middle-aged”. At the same time, she says, “some Free Syrian Army forces who [had] moved to Kobanî [were] also fighting there”, but the YPG/YPJ nonetheless had “no heavy artillery and only a few home-made armoured vehicles”. She also claims that “ISIS [was] receiving ever more blatant assistance from Turkey, which the US and its allies [seemed] to be doing nothing effective to hinder”.

Meanwhile, Parker reports on how “mass protests by Kurds on the border at Kobanî [had] been taking place”, partly because some villagers who had been evacuated through Kobanî had claimed “they had seen about 3000 men escorted over the border into Syria in the middle of the night by Turkish soldiers, presumably to reinforce ISIS”. At the same time, an “old Berlin-Baghdad railway line” was reportedly “being used by the Turkish army to resupply ISIS”. And for these reasons, protesters from around Turkey had set about “patrolling the border” and “watching out for Turkish soldiers helping ISIS recruits to cross the border”.

YPG/YPJ forces in the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava, meanwhile, were “also fighting ISIS around Serekani to try to get through to the west to relieve the siege of Kobanî”, Parker says. At the same time, “far left leaders from Turkey”, including those from the “ODP (Freedom and Solidarity Party), EMEP (Labour Party) and HDP (People’s Democratic Party)”, visited Kobanî in solidarity. Additionally, Kurds outside Syria were “stepping up their demonstrations throughout Turkey and all over Europe, including occupying Schipol and Frankfurt airports, and [there were] increasing numbers of hunger strikes, including outside the European Parliament”. Parker argues that, “predictably”, there had been “a deafening

⁹⁵⁵ <http://www.litci.org/index.php/temas/mujeres/item/2684-la-lucha-de-las-mujeres-kurdas#.VCKbLRaTsn4>, http://www.litci.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2559:the-struggle-of-the-kurdish-women&catid=736:syria-&Itemid=103, and <http://pos.org.mx/?p=8997>

silence... coming from governments and most politicians around the coalition, as Turkey [was] a key ally, and imperialism [did] not like the radicalism of [the] YPG in Syria”.

In the UK, hunger strikes and marches were organised by the UK Kurdish Assembly, the Free Youth Movement, and the Roj Woman’s Association. Apart from raising awareness about the resistance in Kobani and hoping to encourage the arming of the YPG/YPJ, these groups sought to get official recognition from the UK, the EU, and the USA for “the three cantons declared autonomous regions in Rojava Kurdistan”, along with their denunciation of Turkish support (whether direct or indirect) for ISIS.⁹⁵⁶

III) Support for Kobani and Rojava from within Turkey

Turkish Kurds Rush to Kobani’s Defence

In late September 2014, Kurdish-Turkish activist I. Zekeriya Ayman insisted that the People’s Democracy Party (HDP) was “leading a huge campaign in solidarity with defence of the Rojava city of Kobani”, while “thousands of Turkish-Kurdish youths trying to enter Syria to join the war against IS... clashed with Turkish police at the border”. MPs from the party, meanwhile, had “visited the Syrian border to show their solidarity with Kobani’s resistance”.⁹⁵⁷ Constanze Letsch at the Guardian reported that, according to Turkish Kurds, the fight to defend Kobani was also their fight.

In the Turkish village of Yumurtalik, meanwhile, which was just two miles away from Kobani, civilians said “this border has no meaning for us”, emphasising that they had come to “protect Kobani and to watch over this border”. They stressed, in simple terms: “we don’t trust Turkey to do this right... [because] they would be happy if Isis wiped Kurdistan from the map”. For them “continuous attacks by Turkish security forces on Kurdish activists gathering in border villages [was] proof enough... that Turkey [did] not want the Kurds to prevail in Kobani”. One citizen, a twenty-four-year-old actor from Istanbul called Ismail, said he had come to provide support to refugees and “make a film about the suffering of the Syrian Kurdish people”.

Elsewhere on the 20-mile-long Turkish border with the Kobani Canton, Kurds arrived from all around Turkey, mostly by bus, to offer support to the Syrian refugees. “Often”, Letsch says, “they [were] stopped at a police checkpoint, and according to activists in Suruç, many [were] prevented from reaching the border town altogether”. There were “**constant ID checks on all the roads to Suruç**”, she insists, “and a **high presence of Turkish security forces**”, leaving the town resembling one in “a state of emergency”. With “dozens of armoured police vehicles and heavily armed anti-terrorism units” lining the streets, she affirms, “water cannon [stood] at the ready”. Meanwhile, “the smell of teargas [hung] in the air”, and “gendarmierie forces [blocked] every village road in the district, **trying to keep activists from reaching the border regions**”. In short, the Turkish State was treating the activists (who had come to support both refugees and the progressive defenders of Kobani) like terrorists, just as the real terrorists of ISIS were coming closer and closer towards the Turkish border.

Students Azad and Okan, however, told Letsch that “the police violence they [had] faced over the past four days [had] hardened their resolve to stay and demonstrate”. And, only a day before, “12 of their friends [had been] taken into custody during a protest”. Okan asked “Why do they treat us as terrorists when the real terrorists are in Kobani, killing and looting?” In spite of their lack of fighting experience, they were considering “joining the armed resistance in Kobani”. Others, meanwhile, had also wished to go to Kobani in the

⁹⁵⁶http://socialistresistance.org/6773/solidarity-with-kobane-an-urgent-task?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter

⁹⁵⁷<https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/57438>

same week, but **police had arrested eight of them, simply for announcing “that they wanted to go to Kobani to support the resistance there”**. One 16-year-old boy from Suruç said that, sometimes, he and others would “create a fight with the police to cause a diversion” so fighters could cross into Kobani.

In spite of frequent appeals from the PYD, Turkey had “rejected all requests to allow Kurdish fighters and PKK aid to cross into Kobani legally”. Nonetheless, one seasoned combatant, who had “been with the PKK in Turkey since 1991”, insisted that YPG/YPJ fighters would “come to the border fence to help us cross”. ISIS militants, he said, “should be afraid of us”, stressing “we fight much better than they do, [even though] we are in need of better weapons”.⁹⁵⁸

The HDP Calls for Support for Kobani

Also in late September, the HDP spoke about how “the situation around Kobani [had] dramatically deteriorated”. There had been “intensive attacks, by tanks, heavy artillery and thousands of fighters” on the city and, even though the YPG/YPJ had been putting up fierce resistance, ISIS was advancing thanks to the aggressive Turkish embargo on Rojava. For the progressive Turkish party, “the struggle against ISIS’s hateful and extremist ideology [was] at a critical stage”, but the “targeted international attacks against ISIS in Syria” had so far “had no effect on the dire situation in Kobani”. The jihadists, meanwhile, said that “those who [had] been a part of the communal mobilization” against them would “be judged as infidels and face “divine justice””. In such an environment, the HDP asserted, mass executions in the city would be likely if ISIS was allowed to advance much further. “More than one hundred villages”, the party stressed, had already “been ethnically cleansed of their Kurdish population”, and there would need to be “immediate action on the part of the international community to prevent a genocide” in the city itself.⁹⁵⁹

Solidarity from the Women’s Initiative for Peace

At the same time, the Women’s Initiative for Peace (WINPEACE) in Turkey insisted that “the Kurdish female guerrilla force [had] been the forefront in the struggle against patriarchy and against the Islamic State’s targeting, slaughtering and enslaving of women”. Rojavan women, the organisation claimed, stood “for a hope for a different form of governance in the region”. And, having called for “women to take action for peace” since 2009, the group now called on “all women from all around the world to... support... the women of Rojava” in their revolutionary struggle. Referring to ISIS, it asserted that “this most recent war machine [had] been unleashed upon us by international actors, as part of a design to reshape the entire region in line with their interests”. The jihadists, WINPEACE argued, were also being “aided and abetted by the state of Turkey”, and were becoming “the main fire power in the attempt to destroy” the Rojava Revolution and, “along with it, hopes for a different form of governance in the region”.

WINPEACE also claimed that Ankara’s stance on ISIS was “threatening to end the peace process between the government of Turkey and the Kurdish guerrilla forces”, leading the state to lobby “internationally for the establishment of a buffer zone where the Kurdish autonomous region currently [existed]”. The group insisted, in answer to such requests, that Rojava was “NOT empty land”, a claim they argued to be “grossly exaggerated by the state of Turkey, in efforts to make the world believe this land [was] deserted, and [could] be made into a buffer zone, controlled by international soldiers rather than the people of Rojava”. In essence, it stressed, it was a shameless propaganda “attempt to shape the region according

⁹⁵⁸ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/26/kurds-rush-across-turkey-defend-kobani-isis-syria?CMP=tw_t_gu

⁹⁵⁹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/hdp-press-statement-on-situation-in-Kobani/247-hdp-press-statement-on-situation-in-Kobani.html>

to powerful interests". Women, meanwhile, were "once again in the middle", and "their bodies [had] been made into battlefields".

ISIS, and "the mentality of the international powers that [supported] and [had] created it", WINPEACE emphasised, posed "a direct threat to all of us, to all of our bodies as women anywhere in this world". At the same time, the group insisted that it realised "that this attack [targeted] the peace process in Turkey", but that "moving the war to the south of the border [was] no way to peace!" Attacking Erdoğan's inaction regarding ISIS, therefore, it asserted that "a mentality that [collaborated] with the IS... [was] no way to peace", and thus called on activists to address "the UN, the Turkish government, or [their] own governments" about the situation in Rojava.⁹⁶⁰

Feminist and LGBT Solidarity

In early October, Turkish feminists and LGBTs insisted that the Rojava Revolution was "one of the unique experiences of women's history", and was "under threat of being shattered" by ISIS. They asserted that women in Rojava had "made a revolution for an alternative life possible by sinking their teeth into it", creating "an alternative life not only for women but also for all minorities, all ethnicities" and, most importantly, an "alternative to capitalism and to patriarchy". ISIS knew this, they said, and thus hoped "to end... this alternative life that these women [had] made possible" in Rojava.

When the Nazis had power in Europe in the twentieth century, the feminists and LGBT activists insisted, too many citizens "chose to remain silent because of some bloody political tactics". Furthermore, they stressed, "international powers have [today] condoned the war crimes Israel [has] committed... because of their bloody political interests". In Kobanî, they asserted, "these international powers along with our country Turkey [were] trying to sacrifice [Kobanî inhabitants] for some political tactics", with the **Turkish State trying to "make Rojava a buffer zone by evacuating [people] just like Israel did [with] Palestinian land"**. For "women's rights activists, for feminists, for LGBT people, for socialist women and Muslim women", and for all of those "struggling for a better life for women", the group said, it was "a historical responsibility" to stand up for those who had "created an alternative life" in Rojava.⁹⁶¹

KurdishQuestion.com, meanwhile, reported on "a speech made at the "International Political Women's Council" meeting in Germany", where the "co-chair of the Rojava People's Assembly Sinem Muhammed [had] said that "the YPJ... [was] struggling on behalf of all the women of the Middle East and the World"". The YPJ ranks, she asserted, were "made up of women from different faiths and ethnicities including Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Yezidis and Christians". She also emphasised that "the Rojava Revolution, with its Women's Assemblies, academies and women's homes", was essentially "**a women's revolution**". This fact, she said, was "one of the main reasons as to why ISIS [was] attacking Rojava".⁹⁶²

Football Solidarity

Deniz Naki, a professional footballer from Turkish team Gençlerbirliği who publically condemned ISIS and showed support for YPG/YPJ fighters in Kobanî, "was physically attacked by three people and verbally abused... for being Kurdish and Alevi".⁹⁶³ The aggressors allegedly asked him, "are you that dirty Kurd?", before then saying "damn your

⁹⁶⁰ <http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/09/call-for-international-solidarity-against-war-in-rojava/#.VCrT8RaGcSE> and bariskadingirisimi@gmail.com

⁹⁶¹ <http://www.anarkismo.net/article/27455>

⁹⁶² <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/the-ypj-is-struggling-for-the-women-of-the-world.html>

⁹⁶³ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/north-kurdistan/kurdish-footballer-attacked-in-turkey-for-condemning-isis.html>

Kobanî, damn your Sinjar”, and punching him in the eye.⁹⁶⁴ A “lack of support” from his club in the aftermath of the assault, meanwhile, pushed him to leave almost immediately for Germany, saying he “could not have faith in the judicial process” of a country that had allowed so many state crimes to go unpunished.⁹⁶⁵

IV) International Protests and Solidarity

On October 1, The Guardian reported on how “members of the Kurdish diaspora [had] been staging protests and hunger strikes around the world in support of calls by Kurdish leaders in [Kobanî] for weapons” from the West. In Britain, they “initiated a hunger strike close to the gates of Downing Street as part of a campaign calling for the UK [and other European governments] to provide Kurdish forces [in Rojava] with... heavy weapons and antitank missiles”. In spite of Kobanî having created the “fastest refugee exodus of the three-year civil war” in Syria, however, the UK and other allies of Turkey stayed loyal, at least for the time being, to the Turkish line of not arming progressive Syrian Kurds (due to their close relationship with the PKK). In fact, as seen previously in this chapter, Turkey was even “preventing some fighters from entering Syria” to back the struggle of the YPG/YPJ, while its Western allies said nothing.⁹⁶⁶

On October 3, meanwhile, Salih Muslim spoke in Copenhagen at an event organised by FEY-KURD, which was attended by “over a thousand people from Kurdistan”. There, he said that “**the model of democratic autonomy established in Rojava [had] discomfited dominant forces with interests in the region, which [was] the reason ISIS attacks” on the autonomous cantons had “been intensified”**. At the same time, he emphasised that the YPG/YPJ forces had been “countering attacks aiming to throttle the Rojava revolution for 18 months”, which had received no coverage in the mainstream international press or comments from Western politicians. In short, then, he believed that the “ISIS gangs were the hired killers of those states that could not stomach the democratic system established by the Kurds in Rojava”. [Here, he was almost certainly referring to Turkey, but probably also to the Ba’athist regime in Syria, the KRG, and even the imperialist forces of the West.]

“We have set up a system”, Muslim said, “which recognises different beliefs, the rights of women and the mother tongues of different peoples”. In particular, he stressed, “the oil [of Rojava was] in the hands of the people, not the oil companies”, and this fact did “not suit these [self-interested] states” mentioned above. Their big problem, however, was that they themselves “could not declare war on a democratic system”, primarily because of their own rhetorical commitment to ‘democracy’. Therefore, he insisted, these powers had “looked for hired killers” to weaken and undermine the Rojava Revolution, and “ISIS fitted the bill”.

Referring to Turkey’s newly passed resolution allowing military intervention in Syria and Iraq [which will be analysed in greater detail in Chapter Twelve], Muslim insisted that, “if harmful things [were] done to communities” by the Turkish army, there would “be a backlash”. Any action “taken without consulting this administration [in Rojava]”, he stressed, would be considered “an occupation” (as mentioned above).⁹⁶⁷ Meanwhile, “thousands took to the streets of London”, marching to Downing Street to demand “arms and humanitarian supplies” for Kobanî. The Stop the War Coalition was present, and echoed “protesters’ calls to allow... [the PKK] back into the region to fight against Isis”. [On this occasion, the numbers were bolstered by protesters who were “demonstrating against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)”, but there was still widespread support among protesters for Syria’s Kurds in light of the ISIS attack on Rojava.]⁹⁶⁸ At the

⁹⁶⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-eu-29924670>

⁹⁶⁵ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/north-kurdistan/kurdish-footballer-attacked-in-turkey-for-condemning-isis.html>

⁹⁶⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/01/kurds-hunger-strike-downing-street-isis-uk>

⁹⁶⁷ <http://diclenews.com/en/news/content/view/422670?from=3534286294>

⁹⁶⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/isis-in-kobani-thousands-march-in-london-urging-action-to-help-kurds-9789271.html>

same time, the Kurds on hunger strike near Downing Street had little success in pushing the British government to “provide [the YPG/YPJ] with heavy ammunition to fight against Islamic State (IS) militants”.⁹⁶⁹

There were also protests elsewhere in Europe in early October, as dozens of Kurdish protesters “broke into the European Parliament... in Brussels” and “hundreds more... demonstrated in Berlin and other German cities”. In fact, as tensions rose, there seemed to be some hope for the YPG/YPJ’s anti-ISIS resistance in the fact that the UN’s special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, asserted that “the Syrian Kurds had defended Kobani with great courage and **the international community should now take concrete action to support them**”.⁹⁷⁰

Meanwhile, others sympathetic to those suffering in Kobani showed their solidarity in a number of different ways. At the City University of New York in November, for example, the NYC Rojava Initiative spoke of how “the international community [had been] late to recognize and respond to Kobani’s call for solidarity”, emphasising that it had arisen (“independent of any political organization”) in order to “increase international solidarity and take urgent action when necessary and possible”. Inspired by the Kobani resistance, the group saw “Rojava democracy” as “an exemplary model for the whole world in its efforts to build co-operative and communal economies, democratic governance and the radical empowerment of women”.⁹⁷¹ Then, at “a lecture at the 4th New World Summit”, Dilar Dirik emphasised the latter point in particular, insisting that “the Kurdish Women’s Movement [had] liberated democracy from the state” and been key in creating the “Stateless Democracy” of Rojava.⁹⁷²

Support from Argentina

On the 2014 anniversary of Che Guevara’s death, on October 9, the Juventud Guevarista De Argentina (The Guevarist Youth of Argentina) showed their solidarity with the people of Kobani, which they called both “the birthplace of the Rojava Revolution” and today’s Stalingrad. The Battle for Kobani, they insisted, called on all revolutionaries to “stop the genocidal and murderous fascism of the Islamic State”. At the same time, the group claimed that US bombs in the region were simply a “smokescreen” which aimed to “justify [US claims] that [had] nothing to do with terrorists”, when in reality there were photos of US officials “coordinating actions with the most prominent terrorists”.

The struggle to fight back against fascism, NATO, and their terrorist monsters, the Guevarist Youth argued, would be the “best homage” to Guevara (who was, like the PKK, also considered by the West to be a terrorist). The UN, the group’s communique suggested, had been complicit in Turkey’s blockade of Kobani and also in the funding of extremists by Gulf States by not sanctioning or punishing them for their role in the growth of ISIS. It thus called for the “democratic nations of Latin America” to punish these countries, and for progressives throughout the continent to unite with the people of Rojava in their struggle against fascism, nationalism, and imperialism.⁹⁷³

A Global Day for Kobani

At the end of October, a “Global Day for Kobani” was called for, with the PYD emphasising that there had been a “strategic change in the international view of Kurdish ideals”. In a

⁹⁶⁹ <http://en.ria.ru/world/20141001/193504538/Kurds-on-Hunger-Strike-in-London-Asking-for-Weapons-Against-IS.html>

⁹⁷⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29526783>

⁹⁷¹ http://www.kurdslist.org/kobane_and_the_rojava_revolution_live and contact the group at nyc.rojava.initiative@gmail.com

⁹⁷² <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/stateless-democracy-how-the-kurdish-women-movement-liberated-democracy-from-the-state/303-stateless-democracy-how-the-kurdish-women-movement-liberated-democracy-from-the-state.html>

⁹⁷³ <http://alfonsocano121.blogspot.mx/2014/10/el-che-guevara-vive-y-resiste-en-kobane.html?spref=tw>

statement, the party asserted that “the public [had] seen the historic heroic resistance in Kobanî” with their own eyes, and had therefore understood that Rojavan forces had “represented legitimate defence and the joint values of humanity”. It also insisted once again that “the reality behind the attacks on Kobanî [was] that **this project [had] scared certain circles who [did] not recognise the will of the people**”.⁹⁷⁴

In response to the call for international solidarity, “hundreds of people... gathered in central London in a powerful display of support” for Kobanî on November 1, with Turkish citizen Husyin Guler saying that “the rally was... about drawing more attention to the plight of those living in Kobanî”. It had been “organised by the Kurdish People’s Assembly and Peace in Kurdistan Campaign, [following] a call for action signed by hundreds of well-known academics, writers, lawyers, politicians and activists, including Noam Chomsky and Archbishop Desmond Tutu”.⁹⁷⁵ And it was precisely this increasing awareness and solidarity that was gradually pushing the West to modify its aggressive stance towards Rojava (at least temporarily).

Socialism and Rojava Festival

Meanwhile, in late November, the Rojava Report spoke of how PYD co-president Asya Abdullah had addressed a “conference of international Marxist-Leninist parties and organizations” (known as CIPOML) which was hosted by the EMEP (or ‘Labour Party’) in Istanbul. In a video message, she insisted that there would be “no life without women”, and that all people, of different genders, ethnicities, and religious beliefs, would “all win together”. People in attendance subsequently began “shouting slogans in support of Rojava, Kobanî and socialism”.

At the same time, a miner would assert at the event that Kobanî had been “the signal flair” for the culmination of “years of struggle waged across the Middle East”. For him, the city represented a **battle “between ISIS, the representative of international imperialism, and the YPG, the representative of labor and the oppressed”**. Finally, he emphasised that “the ideology of freedom [would] prevail”, and that “the free woman [would] prevail”. Also speaking at the event, HDP co-president Selahattin Demirtaş would be “frequently interrupted” when speaking “by slogans of ‘long live brotherhood among the peoples’” – a scene that showed a growing convergence of the Left in Turkey, and a significant move away from both sectarianism and nationalism.⁹⁷⁶

Trade Unions Visit the Turkish Border with Kobanî

In December, “representatives of two of the biggest trade unions in Europe” (the RMT and ETF) would visit “the Suruç district of Urfa to show their solidarity with the Kobanî and Sinjar resistances and to assess the situation and the needs of the refugees from Kobanî and Sinjar”. These visitors would also be “accompanied by the representatives from the trade unions in Turkey”, and they all “held a joint press conference” in a village on the border with Syria. Chidi King of the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) spoke first, saying that the trade union representatives had visited the authorities of Suruç and then “the tent cities where the refugees from Kobanî [were] sheltered”. She then claimed that “the people of the region and the municipalities” had been “[working] hard for the people of Kobanî”, emphasising that she and her fellow visitors would “issue a call for humanitarian aid to all the governments of all countries upon [their] return” to their respective workplaces.

⁹⁷⁴ <http://en.firatajans.com/news/news/pyd-calls-for-active-participation-in-Kobanî-day-rallies.htm>

⁹⁷⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/11/01/global-day-for-kobane-islamic-state_n_6087190.html

⁹⁷⁶ <http://rojavarreport.wordpress.com/2014/11/24/socialism-and-rojava-festival/>

Subsequently, Eduardo Chagas of the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) stressed that ISIS's assault on Kobani had "not [been] a result of a random choice but [had] aimed to destroy the social system built in Kobani". As trade union members, he underlined, he and his comrades would "stand by the values created in Kobani", and would criticise the "negative discrimination" against Kurdish and Yezîdi refugees from the Turkish government that they had seen "during their visits to different cities in the region". KESK (Confederation of Public Workers' Trade Unions) co-chair Lami Özgen, meanwhile, then insisted that "**the democratic future in the Middle East**" would "**be created by the peoples themselves**", and that the workers of the region were "continuing to struggle [towards] that aim until it [was] realized". At the same time, Şaziye Köse (the other co-chair of KESK) would then draw particular attention "to the struggle of [the] fighters of [the] YPJ, saying that the resistance of women against the gangs [was] part of their struggle for liberation".

Meanwhile, Kani Beko of DİSK (the 'Revolutionary Workers' Trade Unions Confederation' or 'Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions' of Turkey) emphasised that "the ISIS gangs [had been] backed by US imperialism and the AKP government, adding that the workers of Europe and Turkey must also raise their voices in the coming period" in order to combat the attempts of both regional and international economic powers to undermine the Rojava Revolution. Before the end of the conference, Steve Hedley of the RMT (the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers of the UK) would even affirm that there were "**two visions in the Middle East, one being the totalitarian system, and the other being the democratic system created in Kobani**". Then, after the conference had finished, the international trade unionists "joined the human chain in the village formed in solidarity with the Kobani resistance".⁹⁷⁷

V) Physical Support

French Anarchist weekly paper *Alternative Revolutionnaire* reported on September 26 that "**Istanbul anarchists [and] other leftists and feminists**" had "**managed to cross over into Syria and the northern town of Kobani**" to support the YPG/YPJ defence units there. It emphasised that "**thousands** of young people, socialists, trade unionists, revolutionaries, feminists, [and] libertarians" had "poured in from all over Turkey", aiming to "support the refugees and defend the city". Turkish troops, it claimed, had tried their best "to disperse them", but "hundreds of activists and militants [had nonetheless] managed to cross the border" (including members of "the Revolutionary Anarchist Action Group" (DAF), as mentioned in Sub-Section II).⁹⁷⁸

One fighter from Turkey was Suphi Nejat Ağırnaslı, or Paramaz Kızılbaş, who was a member of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Turkey (MLKP) and was "killed fighting alongside the YPG" on October 5. In his last letter, he said he had been "born as an ordinary person" and would "[say] goodbye to you as an ordinary person as well". He had come into the world as a "fugitive in Söke" in Western Turkey, and said he hoped his comrades would continue to "lay the seeds for the emergence of ordinary heroes that [would] bring a spark to the lives of ordinary working people".⁹⁷⁹ And this was precisely the type of attitude that had driven the thousands of activists mentioned above to travel to Kobani in solidarity with its people and with the Rojava Revolution.

Support from Within Syria

Commander Ebu Leyla of the FSA's Shams Al Shamal Battalion, fighting "under the roof of Burkan Al Firat joint operations centre", said in mid-November that he had "**joined Burkan**

⁹⁷⁷ <http://en.firatajans.com/news/news/representatives-of-european-trade-unions-in-suruc.htm>

⁹⁷⁸ <https://libcom.org/news/anarchists-join-fight-against-isis-defend-kurdish-autonomous-areas-03102014>

⁹⁷⁹ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/18/last-letter-of-mlkp-fighter-martyred-in-Kobani/>

Al Firat for a democratic and free future and [for] the re-establishment of unity among all peoples in Syria". His group, he insisted, was now fighting against ISIS in many parts of Syria "in coordination with the YPG", and had "promised to the YPG, who have played a major role in the fight against terror and the defense of the peoples", that it would "never leave Kobani alone". He and his fellow fighters, he stressed, would "be fighting alongside the YPG till the victory".

Being created as a front "against ISIS in the Euphrates area" in mid-September, Burkan Al Firat saw the following groups unite with the YPG/YPJ in a "spirit of unity and determination": Liwa Al Tawhid (East branch); Liwa Al Siwar Al Raka; the Shams Al Shamal brigades (linked to the Fajr al-Hurriya brigades); Seraya Jarablus; Liwa Japhat Al-Akrad; Siwar Umunaa Al Raka; the Al Kasas Army; and Liwa Al Cihad Fi Sebilillah.⁹⁸⁰ As described previously in this chapter, the creation of this Syrian anti-ISIS coalition may well have prompted the Wahhabi group to launch its attack on Kobani (as a pre-emptive strike before Burkan Al Firat could begin an assault on ISIS militants).

"We Are Here to Defend a Peaceful City"

Amidst the onslaught on Kobani, KurdishQuestion.com published a letter written by YPJ fighter 'Narin', in which she spoke of how, the previous day, she had "celebrated [her] 19th birthday". In particular, she referred to how a male friend had sung "a beautiful song about mothers", and how they had both cried because they missed their mothers. Her friend, for example, had not seen his for about a year. On the same day, meanwhile, Narin said she had helped to treat a wounded comrade, saying: "I gave him my blood".

Fighting on the eastern side of Kobani with another eight comrades, she wrote that "only a few miles stand between us and them", referring to the fighters of ISIS. "We see their black flags and we listen to their radios", she stressed. Sometimes, she said, "we don't understand what they say when they speak foreign languages, but we can tell they are scared". Previously, she asserted, the city had previously "hosted many wounded [people] and refugees from [its] Syrian brothers". Now, however, "we are here to defend a peaceful city", she insisted, even though "we never took part in killing anyone" before. Addressing her mother, she promised she would visit her "once this dirty war that was forced on us is over". This conflict, she said, "does not know what missing means", and she wanted her mother to know that, if she didn't return, she had "dreamed of seeing [her] for so long".

If she died in battle, she wanted her mother to visit the house from which she was fighting against ISIS, so she could "see [her] name written there in red ink" on a window, where "sun light... penetrated [the] room from the bullet holes in that window". She signed off by saying simply, "MuM I MISS YOU".⁹⁸¹ If this letter shows anything, it demonstrates the humanity behind the brave YPG/YPJ soldiers, but also the way in which the battle had been imposed upon them, and that what they wanted most was peace. Furthermore, it shows the feelings of a warm, caring young person, forced by horrific circumstances into a violent conflict with intolerant, bloodthirsty extremists. And, in short, this situation was a very real consequence of Western interference in the Middle East throughout the twentieth century (as discussed previously in this book), along with the dominance of repressive authoritarian governments (which were either propped up by Western imperialists or born as a reaction to their interference).

Iraqi Kurds in Kobani

⁹⁸⁰ <http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/burkan-al-firat-commander-we-are-alongside-the-ypg-till-the-victory.htm>

⁹⁸¹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/letter-from-a-yjp-fighter-in-kobane/282-letter-from-a-yjp-fighter-in-kobane.html>

On October 17, Al Jazeera reporter Alia Malek reported on how Zanyar Kawa had died five hundred miles from his home town of Sulaymaniyah, fighting alongside the YPG/YPJ in Kobani. As an Iraqi Kurd, he was among a minority of his countrymen who sympathised with the PKK and their political principles. Although nationalist sentiment was dominant in Iraqi Kurdistan, the ISIS offensive on northern Iraq in the summer of 2014 had seen increasingly large numbers of Iraqi Kurds “[embrace] the PKK fighters as heroes, lauding them for recapturing the northern Iraqi town of Makhmour and its surrounding villages and for rescuing thousands of members of the Yazidi ethnic group who were trapped in nearby Sinjar”.

Meanwhile, fellow Iraqi Kurd Halkawt Sami, a carpenter, had also enlisted to fight ISIS when it approached Erbil in August 2014, though he had “signed up for the PKK, [and] not the Peshmerga”. The progressive Kurdish group, he said, had “[come] down from the mountains to protect us”, and in doing so had shown its humanitarian aims. At the same time, Sardar Star, a local leader of a political party linked to the PKK, affirmed that “a new generation” of Kurds in northern Iraq had been “introduced to the PKK”. He then added that, “without a doubt, our popularity has increased”.

The KDP, however, was aware of this fact, and insisted that it would “not allow the corpse of a dead PKK fighter [Kawa, in this case] to enter Erbil”, in what would be an aggressive and politically-motivated move. According to Abid Ilke, a politician from a PKK-affiliated party in Iraqi Kurdistan, responded to this decision by saying “the KDP [wouldn’t] allow the body to come through here because, if it [came], more people [would] participate, [and] more people [would] follow us”. For him, because he “[knew] their mentality”, this was clearly the main motive.

Apart from the KDP’s own political differences with the PKK, another factor determining its decisions was a fear that, by improving the KRG’s treatment of the PKK, ties with the group’s biggest enemy, Turkey, would deteriorate. The KDP-run KRG, Malek asserts, hosted “at least 1,200 Turkish companies”, and was “Turkey’s second-largest trading partner after Germany”. At the same time, University of Vienna lecturer Thomas Schmidinger stresses that Turkey had also “profited a lot from the KRG”, and that **the KRG was effectively “a semi-colony of Turkey’s post-Ottoman sphere of influence”**.

Meanwhile, the KRG also had to please Germany, which had “said it [would] provide weapons to the Peshmerga only if the group [could] guarantee that none [would] fall into PKK hands”. It thus had to assert firmly that it was “not coordinating with the PKK in the fight against ISIL” (even though it almost certainly was, at least on a local level). As Kurdish nationalists, however, the KDP had been forced to applaud the PKK for their bravery in protecting Kurdish populations (as seen earlier in this chapter), saying that, “at the end of the day, they are Kurds”.

In 1994, the PKK set up a refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan which “has [since] sheltered thousands of Kurds who’ve fled Turkey”. When ISIS began to advance on Makhmour in August, Malek says, the PKK “evacuated [its] people to the mountains, secured the camp and then helped liberate the town and its surrounding villages” (as described in Section A of this chapter). And these actions led some of the group’s fighters (along with KRG citizens) to believe that “the Peshmerga [did not] know how to fight” and that they were “not organized”.

In short, then, the PKK’s decision to take matters into its own hands in Makhmour had paid off. Locals had now “changed how they [treated] PKK fighters”, greeting them and even hugging them when they arrived. “Dozens, perhaps hundreds”, the PKK insisted, had “signed up in the last two months [between August and October 2014] to train with the PKK

in the Qandil mountains". Even Kamal Karim, a local "plaster factory owner", had donated his home for PKK fighters to sleep in, while others in Makhmour had begun "sending... food and coming to visit". After many years of KDP-inspired hostility towards the PKK, one guerrilla said: "when I see this support..., I want to cry".

According to one member of the BDP (now part of the HDP), **the policies of the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan had "exacerbated the gap between rich and poor"** and, precisely because of this fact, parties like the BDP could also gain from the rise in popularity of the progressive views and actions of the PKK. Nonetheless, they would have to contend with the state if they wanted to grow as, in May 2014, **"the KRG's intelligence agency [had] shut down the Erbil office of the BDP's sister organization"**, with KDP members saying it was an "illegal" group. And one key reason for this aggression was that, in the end, the KDP's alliance with Turkey and the West was so important that it was a much higher priority than freedom, democracy, or justice. One KDP member even said: "we don't want to allow demonstrations of support of illegal parties not permitted by government".⁹⁸² In other words, the KDP wanted to retain control over the KRG, to decide which views and parties were not compatible with its nationalist-capitalist model, and to ensure that support for such 'illegal' views or parties would remain low.

Arms from Iraqi Kurdistan

At the same time, however, KurdishQuestion.com reported at the start of October that KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzanî had "sent weapons and ammunitions to Kobanî", though "it was impossible for them to send in Peshmergas... due to geographic restrictions" (in other words that Ankara would still not allow them to cross through Turkish territory to reach the city). Barzanî asserted that he was "not unaware of ISIS's attacks on the Kobanî region of Rojava", but wanted to convince KRG citizens that he was working with a number of limitations.⁹⁸³

In fact, "leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan's two main political factions" (the KDP and PUK) both declared on October 12 that they had "dispatched weapons, equipment and humanitarian aid" to Kobanî (almost a month after the ISIS assault had begun).⁹⁸⁴ The New York Times spoke about how, according to "officials in Kobanî", the YPG/YPJ militias in the city had "never received weapons or ammunition from the Kurdistan authorities". Aid for refugees in Turkey and Syria, however, had allegedly crossed into Kobanî from Suruç in late September, with "a convoy of at least 15 trucks with posters indicating that they had come from [the KRG]".⁹⁸⁵ The coalition air strikes, meanwhile, which had started around two weeks previously (as will be seen in Chapter Twelve) were, according to Barzanî, being "jointly coordinated by the coalition and the Kurdistan administration" (by which we should read the KRG rather than the government of Rojava, though the latter would soon be involved to a certain extent).⁹⁸⁶

Western Civilians Join the Fight against ISIS

On October 13, Rudaw reported on how "hundreds of Kurds from the West" had "gone to fight alongside" the YPG/YPJ in Syria and the KRG Peshmerga in Iraq in their fight against ISIS.⁹⁸⁷ Western foreign fighters, meanwhile, like US citizen Jordan Matson and a Dutch

⁹⁸² <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/10/17/pkk-s-rise-in-iraqikurdistan.html> @aliamalek

⁹⁸³ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/south-kurdistan/nechirvan-barzani-we-have-sent-weapons-to-kobane/290-nechirvan-barzani-we-have-sent-weapons-to-kobane.html>

⁹⁸⁴ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/51e16cc0-521c-11e4-b55e-00144feab7de.html#axzz3TvRtVbq3>

⁹⁸⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/world/middleeast/kurdish-rebels-assail-turkish-inaction-on-isis-as-peril-to-peace-talks.html?smid=tw-share&r=1>

⁹⁸⁶ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/south-kurdistan/nechirvan-barzani-we-have-sent-weapons-to-kobane/290-nechirvan-barzani-we-have-sent-weapons-to-kobane.html>

⁹⁸⁷ <http://rudaw.net/english/world/13102014>

biker gang, had also joined the YPG/YPJ, with Matson even posting on his Facebook page a link to “an official YPG recruitment page” for foreigners to join the progressive Kurds’ fight against IS”.⁹⁸⁸ From the Netherlands, there were allegedly “three members of biker gang No Surrender” in the region, while around “20 native Dutch nationals” had allegedly tried to join the fight against ISIS. According to the Dutch Kurdish federation, for example, these civilians had been “looking for introductions to local militia leaders”, though the federation insisted that “the struggle [needed] heavy weapons rather than manpower”.⁹⁸⁹

In early November, meanwhile, Swedish national Rahel Qadir was reported to have joined the YPG “to help battle extremists of the Islamic State (IS/ISIS) in Kobani”. The 29-year-old of Kurdish origin had previously been “a soldier in the Swedish army before heading to the embattled city”.⁹⁹⁰ Then, a few weeks later, information came to light about how British citizens had also joined the ranks of the YPG in Kobani. James Hughes (from Reading), who had previously “fought in Afghanistan”, had left the British army earlier in the year after five years of service, and Jamie Read (from Worcestershire) had previously “trained with the French army”. According to Al Arabiya, these figures appeared “to have been recruited by Jordan Matson” via the “Lions of Rojava” Facebook page, on which Matson “[urged] people to join and help “send [the] terrorists to hell and save humanity” from ISIS”.

Soon, Matson would confirm to The Independent that Hughes and Read (both in their mid-twenties) “were with him”, while inviting the paper to travel to Rojava to meet them. According to Aman Banigrad, of London’s Kurdish Community Center, some British citizens were “travelling for humanitarian reasons” to the region, though others were “going to the frontline with the YPG”. In fact, he said: “one of our members lost a cousin fighting in Kobani two weeks ago”. At the same time, one 17-year-old girl was “believed to be making her way to Syria” through Europe, making her “potentially the first known case of a British female fighter joining the anti-ISIS battle”. Furthermore, days before, 31-year-old Canadian Gill Rosenberg was “identified as the first foreign female to join the Kurds”.⁹⁹¹

According to the BBC, there were around 15 Westerners fighting with the YPG/YPJ in Kobani in late November, though they insisted they were not mercenaries. At the same time, however, “more than 500 Britons [alone were] said to have fought for IS”. As one of a few Brits on the other side, Jamie Read stressed he was “not being paid”, and asserted that there was “no factual evidence to support that accusation”. Instead, he emphasised that he and James Hughes had become involved “to help the Kurdish people, the YPG - support them in their fight”. Meanwhile, a statement on Facebook argued that “**a mercenary is a person who takes part in an armed conflict who is not a national or a party to the conflict and is ‘motivated to take part in the hostilities by the desire for private gain’**”, underlining that this was therefore “clearly not the case for those... who know or have met James Hughes and Jamie Read”. The two Brits were “volunteers”, the page said, “whose conscience [had] motivated them to apply their skills to assist innocent people who [had] been left to their own devices in the face of terror from IS and to report their experiences so that western European audiences [could] understand the imperative of assisting” Kurds in Rojava and elsewhere.

The BBC was told the same story, meanwhile, by a “freelance journalist helping the YPG with their media relations”, who said “the YPG [provided] weapons, uniforms, food and accommodation but [did] not pay a salary”, and that “the fighters [had to] make their own way to Syria”. The impression this reporter had got, therefore, was that Hughes, Read, and others, had “served in the armies of their own countries and [had] strong feelings against terrorism”, seeing the struggle of Kobani “as a struggle between good and evil”. At the same

⁹⁸⁸ <http://insurgentsia.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/the-lions-of-rojava-are-recruiting-americans-to-fight-the-islamic-state-in-syria/>

⁹⁸⁹ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/syriakurd1633.htm>

⁹⁹⁰ <http://aranews.net/2014/11/swedish-man-joined-ypg-fight-isis-militants-Kobani/>

⁹⁹¹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2014/11/23/More-British-mercenaries-join-fight-against-ISIS-.html>

time, while the British Foreign Office said that “anyone fighting in Syria [was] likely to be arrested on their return to the UK”, it stated that, “for them to be charged with an offence [would depend] on whether they [were] deemed to have taken part in acts of terrorism” or not.⁹⁹²

Regarding the two men’s treatment at the hands of UK authorities, the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) would report in December on how Read and Hughes had been “held for six hours... by counter-terrorism police at London’s Heathrow Airport... after returning home for Christmas”. At the same time, Prime Minister David Cameron had previously asserted that “those fighting against the Islamic State would not be treated in the same way as those who had joined it”. Nonetheless, the police apparently asked Read and Hughes if they were “being paid” to fight against ISIS – a claim which they both (again) denied.⁹⁹³

In March 2015, meanwhile, the YPG spoke of how the death of “Australian fighter Johnston Ashly (Bagok Serhed)” at the hands of ISIS militants had shown, once more, that “the revolution being conducted in Rojava” was “**a revolution of humanity**”. The group also referred to how the murder of “British YPG fighter Erik Konstandino Scurfield (Kemal)” near Til Berek had been a devastating loss for Rojava, as Scurfield had “[become] a symbol of the revolution for us”, as “his participation in the fight in Rojava [had proven] the fact that **the fraternity of the peoples lies [in] resistance**”. In short, the YPG asserted, the battle of Kobanî had rapidly become “a symbol of resistance worldwide”, while causing “the whole world [to] turn their faces towards Rojava”.⁹⁹⁴ And, with people from around the globe participating in the defence of Kobanî and Rojava (although to a much lesser extent than those flocking to ISIS), the group’s words were certainly backed up with facts.

If Our Governments Won’t Support Rojava, We Will

In late October 2014, VICE News interviewed 43-year-old Brian Wilson (aka ‘Zagros’), an American citizen who was fighting with the YPG in Rojava. Having “served in the US Army and also worked for 16 years at the sheriff’s office back in Ohio”, he speaks about how “at least four other Americans [were] among [the YPG forces]” and that, surely, “many more [would] be joining [them] soon”. Already an experienced fighter, Wilson explains that he had not “even seen [the YPG] training camps”. Although he had “not yet been involved in direct combat”, he had helped to “manage private security for the YPG’s high-ranking officers”. Because ISIS was “well-funded and organized”, he asserts, “air strikes [were] helpful” but the YPG/YPJ “still [lacked] weapons, medicines, and advanced technology, such as explosive detectors or night vision goggles”. Partly for this reason, he says, he would “stay as long as they need me”. Nonetheless, he asserts, “these guys are not only fighting ISIS but, **unlike other armed groups in the region, they also talk about democracy and human rights**”. The project the YPG/YPJ were defending, he stresses, was “not just for the local Kurds but also for the Arabs and Christians living in the region”.⁹⁹⁵

In late February 2015, KurdishQuestion.com reported on how a twenty-two-year-old Englishman called Jac had travelled to Erbil hoping to fight alongside the YPG in Rojava. Revealing his mission to airport officials, however, had clearly been a mistake, as he was soon “deported back to the UK after the airport officials received an ‘instruction from above’”. Nonetheless, he saved up for a ticket once more, but this time he travelled to Sulaymaniyah, “where he successfully met up with some YPG contacts” and crossed into Rojava. Despite having had “no prior military training”, Jac had decided to leave “a

⁹⁹² <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-30172856>

⁹⁹³ <http://www.aina.org/news/20141211161718.htm>

⁹⁹⁴ <http://en.hawarnews.com/ypgs-british-fighter-erik-lost-his-life-in-til-berek/>

⁹⁹⁵ <https://news.vice.com/article/a-divorced-father-of-two-from-ohio-is-fighting-the-islamic-state-in-syria>

comfortable life behind in England” behind, putting “his life on the line for his morals and beliefs”.

Posted in Cizîrê Canton, he speaks about how he and other “ex-military guys” from the West had been largely ‘training themselves’, while having “brief training from the Kurds on their weaponry because it [was] obviously different to what the foreign guys [were] used to”. In short, he explains, he had studied a lot about the Syrian Civil War but, when ISIS “started targeting the Kurds”, he decided to “learn about their struggle”, doing extensive research “every day for maybe about six months”. He describes how, seeing the brutality of Wahhabi jihadists in the region, he got “sick of just looking at it on the internet”. While it was “a morale boost for the Kurds” to have international fighters in their ranks, he says, they had all essentially come on “a humanitarian basis, which [was] primarily to fight”. And this task, he asserts, was “a necessity” due to the West’s refusal to do more to support the Rojava Revolution. “Essentially”, he stresses, “if our governments were supporting the Kurds, in the ways that they could, and should”, the physical support of internationalist fighters “probably wouldn’t need to happen”. In other words, Jac was not in Rojava because he saw it as an “exciting” mission, but because he was compelled to do so by the lack of action from his self-interested government.⁹⁹⁶

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have aimed to show that the presence of the YPG/YPJ and the PKK in Syria and Iraq was crucial in the fight against what, at some points, had seemed like an unstoppable advance by the Wahhabi jihadists of ISIS in the Middle East. Whether in Şengal, Makhmour, or Kobanî, the progressive Kurdish movement proved itself to be the strongest military and ideological force in the fight against ISIS, even when it faced clear hostility from the Turkish State and its allies. In other words, the heroic and humanitarian credentials of the Rojava Revolution and its revolutionary supporters shone through even though it faced significant aggression from a number of powerful external enemies.

Furthermore, because the abilities and principles of Rojavan defence forces gained more and more coverage as a result of the ISIS assault on Kobanî, they and their progressive allies would receive support from around the world, whether from anarchists, Marxists, socialists, trade unionists, intellectuals, or simply unaffiliated citizens opposed to the barbarity of ISIS. At the same time, the Rojava Revolution, which was essentially a struggle for an alternative socio-economic and political system in the Middle East, also became in late 2014 a vital component in the battle against Wahhabi chauvinism in the region and against the regional and international powers which had previously supported it. The US-led anti-ISIS coalition, however, which had managed to bring these reactionary powers together, would soon try its best to get Rojavans and the progressive Kurdish movement ‘on side’ (at least for the time being), recognising as it did the strategic importance of allying itself with the most popular, fearless, and effective anti-ISIS fighters on the ground.

In the final chapter of this book, I will look more closely at the role of the USA and Turkey in Kobanî, and in the battle between the Rojava Revolution and Wahhabi extremism as a whole. In particular, I will reflect on the USA’s decision to wage an aerial war against ISIS around Kobanî (around two weeks after the onslaught had begun), and the effect that this would soon have on US-Turkish relations and on Ankara’s strategy concerning Rojava. At the same time, however, I will also emphasise how Turkey’s continued hostility to the progressive PKK-inspired revolution in Syrian Kurdistan during the assault on Kobanî led to a severe deterioration of bourgeois democratic rule in the Turkish State (which had

⁹⁹⁶ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/meet-jac-standing-up-for-his-beliefs-with-the-ypg/658-meet-jac-standing-up-for-his-beliefs-with-the-ypg.html> and <https://soundcloud.com/bbc-world-service/a-young-english-volunteer-with-the-kurdish-ypg-says-fighters-are-coming-from-all-over-the-globe>

already been occurring to a lesser extent in previous years under Erdoğan and the AKP). Finally, though, and perhaps most importantly, I will reflect on the Rojava Revolution's chances of survival and on the compromises it may have been forced to make in order to protect itself and secure its own continued existence.

12) The Five-Way Battle for Kobanî

Australian academic Michael Karadjis emphasised in early October 2014 that, in order to win the war against ISIS, it was necessary to **replace the group “on the ground among the Sunni base”** that it exploited and controlled. While “the Kurds [had] been valiant fighters against ISIS”, he says, this had primarily been in the defence of “their own Kurdish turf”. And, although Karadjis is indeed right that the Wahhabi group would need replacing with a ‘better idea’, he fails to mention that the majority of Kurds themselves are Sunnis. In other words, then, if the defeat of ISIS was purely a religious matter, then the progressive alternative to Wahhabism offered by Rojavan citizens would be precisely the solution from a ‘Sunni base’ referred to by Karadjis.

In short, repression of Sunnis by the Shiite sectarian government of Iraq (installed by the USA after the 2003 invasion) was a key factor in the growth of ISIS, as seen in Chapter Seven. And the reactionary Wahhabi group, reacting to the desperate circumstances, simply promised marginalised Sunnis an outlet (though extremely misdirected) for their justified anger, much in the same way that any fascist organisation would. In order for ISIS to be weakened, therefore, oppressed Sunni citizens would need to have another outlet for their anger. As suggested above, the progressive system of the Rojava Revolution is precisely the type of alternative that would draw these people away from ISIS. In other words, the ‘Sunni base’ of the jihadist organisation would need to take democratic control over their own territories, and base the survival of this autonomous system on cooperation, freedom, and the equitable distribution of fundamental resources and services. They would also need to adopt a permanent position of opposition to self-interested political elites seeking to pass edicts down upon them. In short, **the promise and prospect of grassroots democracy and justice**, in the absence of bloodshed, **ought to be enough to take the carpet away from under the feet of ISIS ideologues.**

Nonetheless, as seen in Chapter Seven, the USA and its international and Middle Eastern allies had another plan: bombing ISIS and remodelling the façade of the undemocratic status quo. For example, before air-strikes began in Syria, the US congress approved the provision of “training, equipment, supplies and sustainment” for some 5,000 “vetted” rebels in the country. Its official aim, though, no longer focussed on getting rid of the Assad regime, but on trying to “smash ISIS (and Jabhat al-Nusra) and negotiate with the regime”. And, amidst this context, Karadjis says, we “should not confuse the... terms “vetted” and “moderate” with “secular” and “non-Islamist””. If ‘vetting’ were to disregard any “elements, groups and individuals” with any “associations” with ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham, he insists, the American resolution would effectively wipe out “90 percent, if not more, of the FSA and of the Syrian opposition as a whole--since they [had almost] all actively [cooperated] with Jabhat al-Nusra on the ground against both the regime and ISIS, and even more so with Ahrar al-Sham”.⁹⁹⁷

In other words, then, **the only realistic alternative to nationalism and Islamism on the ground in Syria was the progressive system offered by the secular and non-Islamist Rojava Revolution.** Nevertheless, because the West and its regional allies were not fond of populations exercising autonomous, directly democratic, and secular socialist rule, their ruling political elites had effectively shunned Rojava’s Kurds, and sought to leave them totally out of the ‘Syrian equation’, ever since the start of the Syrian Civil War. Instead, Western elites focussed almost all of their energies on a small number of disorganised Western puppets who never had any real hopes of fighting off the well-armed, well-funded, and ideologically committed forces of ISIS (which, as seen in Chapter Seven, had grown in

⁹⁹⁷ <http://socialistworker.org/2014/10/06/why-syrian-rebels-oppose-us-air-strikes> and <http://mkaradjis.wordpress.com/2014/09/25/syrian-rebels-overwhelmingly-condemn-us-bombing-as-an-attack-on-revolution/>

strength as a direct result of the anti-democratic sectarian meddling of the West's Wahhabi allies in the Middle East).

With Rojavan resistance making the news as a result of the ISIS onslaught on Kobanî, however, it soon became increasingly harder for the West to ignore the progressive forces of Rojava when trying to make arguments about defeating Wahhabi jihadists. In short, Western condemnations of the latter were losing more and more credibility because of the self-interested political rejection of the groups who, in defence of secular democracy, were offering up the fiercest anti-ISIS resistance of all. And, with this situation in mind, I will look in this final chapter at how the USA, Turkey, and the KRG all sought to manipulate the war between ISIS and the Rojava Revolution in Kobanî for their own benefit when it became clear that the YPG/YPJ and their allies were committed to fighting until the last drop of blood in order to prevent the city from falling. In particular, I will examine: how the US-led bombing campaign against ISIS was finally directed towards the jihadist forces attacking Kobanî; how the Turkish State held onto its aggressive anti-Kurdish policy for as long as it could; and how the eventual concessions from Ankara involved the military involvement of the reactionary nationalist forces of the KRG.

A) The US-Led 'Coalition', Rojava, and the Fight against ISIS

Jane's Defence Weekly Correspondent Michael Stephens spoke on September 11, 2014 about how the YPG/YPJ had "done remarkably well" at holding ISIS at bay in Rojava. As they were fighting against Wahhabi jihadists "on five front lines across northern Syria", he says, the militias were "one of the only forces that [knew] how to take on the extremists at their own game". Using "speed, stealth, and surprise", he argues, they were an "archetypal guerrilla army, able to deploy quickly to front lines and concentrate [their] forces before quickly redirecting the axis of [their] attack to outflank and ambush [their] enemy". A crucial element of their success, however, was their "autonomy", he insists, which allowed their brigades "a high degree of freedom" and therefore an ability to "adapt to the changing battlefield".

In other words, then, while ISIS had fared well "against more static forces" in Syria and Iraq (which were "wholly incapable of countering its highly mobile forces"), it found it a lot more difficult to defeat the YPG/YPJ militias, which had "adapted their [own] fighting styles to the territory in which they [operated]". Relying "heavily on snipers", "mobile support weaponry", and "roadside bombs to limit enemy movement and prevent outflanking manoeuvres", Stephens asserts, the YPG/YPJ had intelligently not tried to confront ISIS's heavy weaponry head on. Nonetheless, he stresses, the Rojavans' effectiveness against the jihadists had not resulted in the "military assistance from countries including France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States" that the KRG Peshmerga had received.

In fact, all sorts of propaganda had tried to delegitimise the Rojava Revolution since 2012, with unjustified claims that it was opposed to Turkey, that it supported Assad, and that it received support from Iran. In reality, the inhabitants of Syrian Kurdistan had tried to stay out of the civil war in order to save lives rather than out of love for Assad or opposition to Turkey. Meanwhile, Rojavans had never attacked Turkey, and had received no clear support from Iran. The truth of the matter was simply that the Rojava Revolution threatened the interests of Western capitalists and those of socio-economic and political elites throughout the Middle East. For that reason, Islamists, nationalists, and imperialists all had an interest in keeping quiet about what was going on in northern Syria for as long as possible.

In fact, while Rojava was isolated by international capitalist politics, Wahhabi advances from the south, and Turkish hostility from the north, it also faced nationalist hostility from the

KRG in the east (as seen in Chapter Ten). And, as a result, the YPG/YPJ was “poorly equipped”, possessing no “body armour or helmets” and being forced to buy “weapons and ammunition... on the black market”. At the same time, however, the Rojavan militias had “managed to expand into Iraq, largely thanks to the retreat of the KRG’s peshmerga from around Mount Sinjar” in order to protect the Yezîdis (as seen in the previous chapter). Furthermore, with the latter now “eager to avenge IS atrocities”, the YPG/YPJ was “asked... for weapons and training”, which it gave to locals with little hesitation. Indeed, even in early September, Stephens reported on how the militias had already “trained more than 1,000 in one-week military courses and sent them back to Sinjar, where they [would] operate as local defence units under YPG and PKK supervision”. In short, then, the YPG/YPJ now had both influence and a presence in “areas in Iraq previously controlled by the Peshmerga”, both militarily and ideologically.

Although the YPG/YPJ denied “having permanent intentions on Iraqi territory”, the Yezîdî units left behind in Şengal appeared “loyal to the YPG, not the peshmerga”, according to Stephens, and, for precisely this reason, the nationalist KRG insisted that YPG/YPJ presence in Iraq was “a violation of sovereignty”. The reality was, however, as seen in Chapter Eleven, that the KRG had lost any claims of legitimate ‘sovereignty’ over the land of the Yezîdis when its Peshmerga forces had failed to protect them from the genocidal ISIS onslaught on Şengal. Nonetheless, both the Syrian and Iraq Kurdish administrations claimed they would “try to resolve the issue amicably”, though the KRG’s loss of popularity and the people’s growing admiration for the YPG/YPJ and PKK were phenomena that would not be counteracted easily.

Furthermore, in addition to the opposition of distressed Kurdish nationalists, Wahhabi jihadists were also bothered by the successes of the Rojava Revolution (and especially by its control of “strategic border crossings” and its blockage of “the road from [ISIS’s] capital in Syria’s Al-Raqqah across to the city of Aleppo”).⁹⁹⁸ Therefore, it was only a matter of time before ISIS would intensify its attacks on northern Syria (a move which finally came with September’s onslaught on Kobanî). As seen in Chapter Eleven, though, the YPG/YPJ resisted ISIS for much longer than any international actor thought they would, and this unexpected situation gave rise to a number of dilemmas for the USA, Turkey, and the KRG. In the first two sub-sections below, I will explore the reactions of these political entities to Kobanî’s continued resistance, and in particular the American decision to bomb ISIS around the city. Then, I will look at the impact that the superpower’s aerial campaign would have both on the Battle for Kobanî and on Wahhabi reactionaries living in the West.

I) The Reaction of the USA, Turkey, and the Media to Kobanî’s Resistance

In early October, as Rami Abdulrahman from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that “ISIS fighters were now in almost complete control of the “security quarter”” of Kobanî, deputy US National Security Adviser Tony Blinken spoke of how, “**in the absence of any ground force there, it [was] going to be difficult just through air power to prevent ISIL (IS) from potentially taking over the town**”.⁹⁹⁹ And, with these words, Blinken expressed his ignorance (or feigned ignorance) to the fact that the YPG/YPJ had been successfully defending the city (and the rest of Rojava) from ISIS attacks for months (and weeks in the case of the most recent assault) without any support from the USA or any other nation. Therefore, it was still clear at this point that American elites preferred to consider Rojavan resistance forces as a non-existent factor in the battle against Wahhabi jihadists rather than admit that the strongest anti-ISIS force in the region was a group of secular, democratic, and libertarian socialists. The reality was, however, that the longer the

⁹⁹⁸ <http://www.janes.com/article/43030/analysis-ypg-the-islamic-state-s-worst-enemy>

⁹⁹⁹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/10/10/ISIS-fighters-capture-Kurd-HQ-in-Syria-s-Kobane.html>

Rojavans held out against ISIS, the more the world's media was going to cover the event, and the harder it would be for the USA to deny their existence.

Increasing Press Coverage

In late September, the BBC's Paul Wood, "one of the first western journalists to gain access to Kobani", reported of how "clashes [were] visible from Turkey, where some protesters [had] stormed a border fence to go to defend the town". The argument in Europe at the time was that a bombing campaign in Syria against ISIS would go against international law, as Assad had "not asked for foreign assistance", and would therefore be illegitimate. The USA, however, had already begun to bomb ISIS in Syria (though not in Kobani), flouting worldwide norms as per usual.

The BBC's Mark Lowen, meanwhile, "joined villagers on the Turkey-Syria border cheering the fight against IS", claiming that **some refugees**, who had "tried to return to help stem the militants' advance" on Kobani, **had faced tear gas and water cannon from Turkish forces**, who were trying to stop them from bolstering the city's defence forces. At the same time, as NATO member Turkey was clearly demonstrating intense hostility towards Kobani and its inhabitants through its aggressive actions, refugees asked: "where is America, where is England, why are people not helping?". The reality was that, having heard so much about the West's stated commitment to 'democracy' and 'humanitarianism', some less conscious citizens did not understand that Western elites did not genuinely care about intervening in political crises to protect innocent civilians (especially if it would go against their own economic interests). Furthermore, they were not aware of the fact that, far from being 'heroes', these self-interested regimes had actually supported, propped up, and even contributed to creating repressive dictatorships and Wahhabi extremists in the Middle East for many decades (as has been shown throughout this book).

Some US spokesmen, however, were not completely concealing facts about the situation in Kobani. Armed forces chief General Martin Dempsey, for example, insisted that an "air campaign... would not be enough to defeat [ISIS]", and stressed that "a political solution and a ground campaign would both be needed in Iraq and Syria". Whilst being totally correct about each assertion above, though, his 'solution' was not to support the already existent secular autonomous cantons of Rojava but to create "a force of up to 15,000 fighters - to be drawn from Syria's moderate opposition" (read pro-Western Islamists and nationalists) - to fight on the ground in Syria. The effective, popular, and democratic Rojavan defence forces, meanwhile, were not to be part of that equation (or at least not explicitly). "The only truly effective force", Dempsey affirmed, would be "a force comprised of Iraqis and Kurds and [the] moderate Syrian opposition". And, while his mention of 'Kurds' could have meant the YPG/YPJ, it alluded primarily to the well-known nationalist Kurdish forces of Iraq (as the general population of the world still knew almost nothing about the progressive Kurdish movement opposed to reactionary nationalism). In short, Dempsey's ambiguity suggested that the USA was not prepared to knowingly increase the world's awareness about the secular, democratic, and socialist defence militias of Rojava.

The US-led airstrikes, meanwhile, destroyed ISIS tanks "in the oil-rich Deir al-Zour province", with the coalition "targeting oil facilities under IS control in both countries in order to reduce its income". The argument behind these attacks was that, to stop the jihadist group from earning "an estimated \$2m (£1.2m) a day from oil sales", its infrastructure needed to be targeted.¹⁰⁰⁰ Analysing the situation more closely, however, it seemed a lot more likely that **the USA and its allies were intent mainly on protecting regional oil resources rather than on shielding innocent civilians** (and, judging by the 2003 Invasion of

¹⁰⁰⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29382945>

Iraq, such a strategy would not come at all as a surprise). In fact, some fighters in Kobani actually insisted that the coalition strikes had “hit behind the Isis lines”, having seen the group’s tanks but failing to target them.¹⁰⁰¹ Increasing media coverage, though, would soon force coalition airstrikes to become a lot more effective.

Information about ISIS-Controlled Raqqa Spreads Around the World

Since ISIS captured Raqqa in eastern Syria in 2013, the BBC said, “about 3,000 Europeans had gone to join armed Islamist groups in the region”, and the UN Security Council had sought to control this movement with “a binding resolution compelling states to prevent their nationals from joining jihadists in Iraq and Syria”. The corporation also spoke about how ISIS had “captured broad swathes of Iraq in June”, but it only said that the group promoted an “extreme form of Sunni Islam”. In other words, it failed to specify that the ideology of the jihadists was the same (Wahhabism) as the state religion of Western allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar.¹⁰⁰²

Nonetheless, more information was now spreading throughout the world about ISIS and the horrors of its rule, even if the historical and political context around the group’s emergence was seldom explained. With the last Syrian soldiers being driven out of Raqqa in August 2014, for example, the city had seen a severe deterioration in human rights. In early October, CBS reported on how “many of the roughly 220,000 Raqqa residents” who remained in the city under Wahhabi control had been “poor to start with”, but had “become [even] poorer since this small city was taken over by ISIS extremists”. Most of them, CBS’s Elizabeth Palmer and Khaled Wassef said, would “eat their Eid meal in a soup kitchen, paid for by the few wealthy citizens who [could] still afford to bankroll charity”. Meanwhile, they quote activist ‘Abu Ibrahim al-Raqqawi’ of the group Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently (RSS) as saying that, when ISIS arrived, jihadists soon “became the elite of the community”, being “given comfortable homes and cars – and... a generous salary every month”.

According to Ibrahim, the aforementioned situation was “bound to fuel local resentment, especially as the favoritism [appeared] to extend to essential services, like medical care”. People requiring medical care, for instance, would need to “travel to Turkey”, he insists, while “ISIS fighters wounded in battle or airstrikes” would “get treatment at local clinics run exclusively for them and their families”. Meanwhile, there were “reports of boys as young as 14 and 15 being snatched from their families and sent to training camps to become ISIS warriors”.

With the city being controlled “with an iron fist”, Ibrahim asserts, the simmering resentment in Raqqa’s citizens was “too dangerous” to show, as patrols of Hesbah (ISIS’s police force) were “on every corner”. Most Hesbah officers, he stresses, were “foreign -- Americans, Dutch and British -- but anyone who [approached] them to talk [would be] immediately warned off by armed men”.¹⁰⁰³ Backing up these claims, Syria Deeply’s Ahmad al-Bahri spoke in November 2014 of how ISIS had created “a systematic bureaucracy of religious rule” in Raqqa.¹⁰⁰⁴

A month later, on December 20, Al Arabiya reported on how ISIS militants had “executed 100 members for trying to flee their base in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa”. It claimed that fighters had been sensing “a halt to ISIS’ military progress” with the YPG/YPJ’s resistance in Kobani, while “witnessing mounting casualties among their ranks”.¹⁰⁰⁵ Gareth

¹⁰⁰¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-against-isis-turkey-joins-western-coalition-in-fight-to-stop-militants-9771253.html>

¹⁰⁰² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29382945>

¹⁰⁰³ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-fighters-in-groups-syrian-capital-raqqa-losing-hearts-and-minds/>

¹⁰⁰⁴ <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/11/6388/isis-restructures-raqqa-ruling-system/>

¹⁰⁰⁵ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/20/ISIS-executes-100-deserters-in-Syria-s-Raqqa-report.html>

Platt and Zaid Al Fares at the International Business Times, meanwhile, spoke about how **ISIS had “completely shut down Raqqa’s education system as it [battled] to control the hearts and minds of young people in its Syrian city”**. At the same time, it had “passed an order banning girls from travelling outside Raqqa, and [had] introduced an ultra-conservative uniform for its female citizens”. Women failing to cover up from head to toe, for example, would face “a lengthy spell in prison”. For Platt and Fares, “the closure of Raqqa’s schools [marked] the culmination of a series of drastic education reforms introduced by IS”, which had “previously ordered the strict segregation of students by gender, with all mixing forbidden, and closed both public and private universities”. And, at the same time, a range of subjects, from science to philosophy, had been “banned as they apparently [contravened] the law of God” according to ISIS ideologues.

The Wahhabi extremists were also “frantically trying to improve [their] border security to prevent Raqqa’s citizens from leaving without permission”. In fact, having “perpetrated a string of vicious executions” against those resisting its authoritarian role, **ISIS had even killed “a 98-year-old man who was one of Raqqa’s most respected elders”**.¹⁰⁰⁶ Subsequently, on December 23, the group “released a list of rules dictating how Christians living in the Syrian city of Raqqa should behave, including the instruction to never pray in public or within earshot of a Muslim”. Having previously been “one of Syria’s most liberal areas”, then, Raqqa’s Christians would now have to follow seven rules in order to have their safety ensured. For example, there was to be “no treachery against ISIS”, and no “church construction or repairs”.¹⁰⁰⁷ In short, the jihadists wanted both total political control and total ideological control over the city.

A Difficult and Robotic Existence in Raqqa

Towards the end of February 2015, Abu Ibrahim al-Raqqawi of RBSS spoke about how “the pressures of publicity and the mundane and expensive business of ruling a city [had] pushed even Isis to make some compromises”. For example, while “crimes like smoking or failing to shutter a shop during prayer time would have earned transgressors several dozen lashes” a number of months before, “some religious police [had now] started to accept fines in place of punishment from those who [could] afford it”. At the same time, the jihadists also lacked “blood for fighters injured in air strikes or on the frontline”, forcing them to compel citizens to donate. Before having a case processed at the “Islamic court”, for example, civilians must first “go to a certain hospital, donate a pint of blood, [and] then return with the receipt”.

According to al-Raqqawi, “Isis [did not] want people to work”, instead hoping they would suffer so much that “the men [would] join the group, and the women [would] marry Isis fighters”. And, although the population of Raqqa had fallen from around 1 million people to 400,000 since ISIS took control, some of the poorer citizens did not want to leave because Isis would seize their house, and they would then be left with nothing. Meanwhile, “with no work”, many civilians “just stay at home watching television or using the internet”, al-Raqqawi asserts. Furthermore, although “no children [were] being forced to join up”, they were “bored”. With nothing fun to do in the city and parents “so worried that their children [would] be brainwashed” at school, most are simply kept at home. If they went outside, he says, they would just see men walking around with guns all the time, and would perhaps eventually “want to go to the recruitment camps”. In spite of the fact that some people have set up small home schools, meanwhile, ISIS had said it would “kill any teachers who it [caught] running private schools, particularly ones for girls”, so it was a very dangerous game to play.

¹⁰⁰⁶ <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/raqqa-isis-bans-education-desperate-jihadis-shut-down-all-schools-1480595>

¹⁰⁰⁷ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2885506/How-live-Christian-Raqqa-ISIS-release-seven-rules-followers-rival-faith-including-praying-earshot-Muslims-never-mocking-Islam.html>

Generally, al-Raqqawi stresses, “no one thinks that Isis will be forced out soon, because there are so many of them”. In fact, he says, “the number of foreign fighters in the city is shocking”, with “no neighbourhood [being left] without them and dozens of houses [having] been taken over”. At the same time, he adds, there was little interaction between locals and foreigners, as “the jihadis from other countries [tended] to stick in groups by nationality or language – the British together, the Dutch together – and they [did not] have much to do with ordinary people”. Although these foreign fighters had an important position in jihadi society, they would essentially be kept as prisoners, having their passports confiscated as soon as they arrived in Raqqqa. In other words, then, the city was built not on freedom, solidarity, and progress, but on war, oppression, and social decay.¹⁰⁰⁸

What the US Air Strikes Meant for Assad

In late September 2014, the USA finally spread its bombing campaign against ISIS from Iraq into Syria. The reason for this move was that, although the USA and its allies had fuelled the growth of Wahhabi extremism in Syria in its desperate attempts to overthrow the Assad regime there, scenes of rapid ISIS expansion could no longer be hidden from the media. Therefore, the political elites of these states finally realised that they would have to act in order to avoid appearing supportive of such extremists. In the end, they still wanted to get rid of Syria’s Ba’athist regime, but not if that meant allowing an even less subservient force (linked ideologically to terrorists who had already perpetrated violent crimes in the West) to gain political power. Assad, therefore, was no longer to be considered the most evil political force in Syria.

The Assad government, whose propaganda efforts had already benefitted significantly from the horrific behaviour of some of its Islamist opponents, could now also say that even the USA was on its side. Damascus newspapers, for instance, were beginning to claim that “Washington and its allies [were] in the trenches together with the Syrian army”. And these assertions were just a small sign that the Ba’athist state was preparing to use the weakening of ISIS to its advantage. According to analyst Emile Hokayem, the Assad regime was not “meant to be the beneficiary of these [US-led air] strikes, but that [was] what [seemed] to be happening”.

The so-called “moderate” forces in Syria, meanwhile, had “given little sign of being strengthened or moving on the offensive because of the air strikes”, and had apparently been ‘left out of the loop’ regarding the attacks. The Hazm movement, for example, which was “a main beneficiary of western support”, even claimed that the “coalition strikes [were actually] helping the regime”. Its spokesman, however, then showed signs of either dishonesty or ignorance, saying that Assad’s regime (rather than the West and its allies) had been the main “root of the terrorist problem”.

At this point, one point to leave incredibly clear is that the Ba’athist regime in Syria had always opposed Wahhabi movements like ISIS. It had indeed formed an alliance with the Shia Islamists of Hezbollah in Lebanon but, as seen in Chapter Seven, the Lebanese group was a very different type of organisation from those sponsored by Wahhabi benefactors. And, while Assad’s forces had almost certainly committed war crimes during the civil war, and had definitely violated the human rights of Syrian citizens, it would simply go against their interests (and those of its Shia allies) to bolster the anti-Shia forces of ISIS, especially considering that much of the anti-Assad opposition had “been fighting alongside... Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate”, for years.¹⁰⁰⁹ One thing that the Ba’athist regime almost certainly did not do, then, was to back Wahhabi extremists directly.

¹⁰⁰⁸ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/21/islamic-state-capital-raqqqa-syria-isis?CMP=share_btn_tw

¹⁰⁰⁹ <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b7587dd0-44c7-11e4-ab0c-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3EM01XNXH>

Between Chapters Five and Seven of this book, I showed how Wahhabi elites and jihadists have been promoted by both Western intelligence agencies and Western allies in the Muslim World on a number of occasions, and thus how there is no way we can possibly disconnect the West's policies in the region from the growth of Wahhabi extremist groups like ISIS. In fact, even mainstream media outlets like The New York Times (NYT), known for its general subservience to the 'interests' of the US establishment, have been forced to mention the connection between ISIS and Saudi Arabia. The "ruthless creed" of ISIS, the paper has said, comes from an "austere interpretation of Islam [which] became the foundation of the Saudi state". Although the jihadist group may represent "a kind of untamed Wahhabism" that opportunistic Saudi political elites are wary of, the NYT asserts, it is essentially "open and clear about [its] almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement", circulating "images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls" and plastering "Wahhabi texts... on the sides of an official missionary van".¹⁰¹⁰

The simple fact is that, as explored previously in this book, the repressive pro-Western dictatorships of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have the violent, discriminatory religious corruption of Islam that is Wahhabism at their very heart. They may have moved towards more 'stately' behaviour to please their Western allies, but without at least paying lip service to Wahhabism, their regimes would have long since lost their 'religious' legitimacy and collapsed. And the main reason that Arab nationalists like the Ba'ath Party in Syria are unpopular with both Wahhabis and imperialists is that they are (officially at least) opposed to both the religious discrimination at the centre of Wahhabism and the foreign domination of their political systems. Therefore, the main reason why Assad's regime is seen to be an enemy of both Saudi Arabia and the USA is not because it is oppressive, but because it is the wrong kind of oppressive (i.e. it does not allow religious ideologues to dominate social policies and does not allow the West to dominate economic policies). If these states now had to oppose Assad's main opponents in Syria (the Wahhabi jihadists of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra), therefore, it was only because they felt they could put their own political and economic dominance in the region even more at risk than Assad did (largely by giving them bad press but also by aiming to set up a system that would not be subservient to their own elites).

At the same time, however, the Rojavan Revolution was also seen by the aforementioned powers to be more dangerous than Assad. Opposing capitalism, imperialism, religious discrimination, and authoritarianism, Rojava's central political ideology was, in short, just as big a potential threat to the interests of the USA and its regional allies than Assad and ISIS were. The problem, though, was that the West could not justify an attack on the secular and democratic administration of Syrian Kurdistan, as it was by far the strongest opponent of ISIS in Syria. The fact that the progressive process in the north of the country also aimed to ensure human rights were upheld, meanwhile, simply added to the obstacles in the way of explicit Western destabilisation of the territory. For the time being, at least, the West would have to accept that weakening Rojava would mean strengthening both Ba'athism and Wahhabi jihadism in Syria, which would effectively be a public relations disaster, revealing to citizens in the West where the priorities of their political and economic elites truly lay. Therefore, Western leaders would have to tread very carefully where Rojava was concerned, especially considering that increasing media coverage was helping, slowly but surely, to give its defence forces a reputation as heroic anti-ISIS fighters.

US Bombs Do Little to Save Kobani

¹⁰¹⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/world/middleeast/isis-abu-bakr-baghdadi-caliph-wahhabi.html?_r=0

If the ideological analysis above does not convince readers about the worries of the USA and its allies regarding the Rojava Revolution, facts on the ground can help to clarify the situation. After the start of the US bombing campaign in Syria in September 2014, for example, Kurdish fighters and commanders stated that **“American air strikes [had] done little to dislodge Isis fighters trying to take” Kobanî**, even though the jihadist assault on the city had meant that it would have been incredibly easy for coalition planes to pick off large numbers of ISIS militants.

At the same time, the YPG/YPJ had been “bolstered by hundreds of Turkish Kurdish fighters and [progressive] Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions” in Kobanî, but the “US-led air strikes which began on Monday [22/09/14] [had simply] been ineffective”, according to the city’s chief of defence, Ismat Sheikh Hassan, who said the US had “struck empty buildings”. ISIS militants, meanwhile, were “fighting harder to push forward before there are more strikes”. Furthermore, as could have been expected, the libertarian socialist command structures of the YPG/YPJ were “not informed of [the US] air strikes” aimed at ISIS in Syria. In spite of having fought the group for over a year and proven themselves effective, therefore, the Rojavan defence militias were simply “left out of the loop”, showing that **US ideological interests were still more of a priority than genuinely destroying ISIS**.

In the first week of the renewed September offensive against Kobanî, ISIS had seen hundreds of villages emptied and over 130,000 people flee into Turkey. The city, meanwhile, was quickly surrounded, and the YPG/YPJ was significantly outgunned by the well-funded and well-armed militants of ISIS. Additionally, as a supposed result of the refugee crisis, **“Turkish armed forces lined the border, with tanks stationed in newly dug trenches, while armoured personnel carriers and special-forces vehicles were visibly on patrol”**. In short, then, even as Turkey joined the “international coalition led by the US against the jihadist threat”, its priority was still clearly to stop the free movement of progressive Kurds in the region rather than to stop the advance of ISIS on Kobanî (which it could easily have done if it had the desire to do so).

The treatment of refugees in Turkey, meanwhile, was almost as bad as life in the besieged Kobanî, according to some of the city’s inhabitants. One schoolteacher, for example, spoke of how she had “had to sleep on the street” and said that, in Kobanî, she and other refugees could at least “die in [their] own homes, in [their] own town”. At the same time, though, even as ISIS continued to advance on the city, Kurdish fighters said they were “determined to defend their land until the very end”, showing the same tenacity as the Soviet fighters who defeated the Nazis in the Battle of Stalingrad over seventy years before. “Don’t worry, guys”, said Hassan, addressing himself to the citizens of Kobanî, “we won’t leave Kobanî... I’m ready to be executed by Isis but I’m not ready to leave my town. Whether the world helps us or not, we will defend our city”.¹⁰¹¹

Airstrikes Don’t Stop ISIS

In early October, Tom Finn at Middle East Eye quoted Kobanî foreign affairs minister Idris Nassan as saying that ISIS was coming increasingly closer to seizing the city, amid “growing concerns amongst Syrian Kurds that the **US-led airstrikes... [were] doing little to hinder the militants**”. The official then emphasised: “we’ve been besieged and they’ve done nothing”. And, while the Pentagon claimed that the coalition had been “hitting the suburbs of Kobanî”, Nassan insisted that jets had been heard overhead but no airstrikes had been seen. Kobanî spokesman Omar Alish, meanwhile, asserted as many others had previously that ISIS recruits had “been entering from Turkey to Syria... for months”. For him, this phenomenon showed very clearly that the Turkish State was “worried that if [Rojavans were

¹⁰¹¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-air-strikes-us-attacks-are-failing-to-slow-isis-advance-say-desperate-kurds-in-kobane-9754110.html>

to] defeat IS, [they] may declare independence and that might embolden Kurds in Turkey to do the same". In an attempt to assuage such concerns, however, he insisted: "we are part of the Syrian Republic, [and] we just want to protect our villages and our towns here".¹⁰¹²

At the same time, The Guardian reported that Idris Nassan had said "**air strikes against ISIS targets in northern Syria [had] failed to stop the militants from advancing towards the centre of the city**". In particular, he stressed that "air strikes alone [were] really not enough to defeat Isis in Kobanî", because "ISIS had adapted their tactics to military strikes from the air". Nonetheless, he also focussed on how it was not necessary for foreign troops to enter Kobanî to reinforce the resistance, and on how "heavy weapons and ammunition" for the YPG/YPJ would suffice. US Senator Lindsey Graham, meanwhile, who was well-known for his fear and warmongering, emphasised correctly that "a ground component" was necessary, though this would not come in the form of "the inexperienced fighters" of the FSA. To use these forces, he affirmed, would be "militarily unsound". His solution, however, was almost certainly for US troops to enter Syria (something that would have no doubt made the situation in the region much worse). And, predictably, he did not mention empowering the fierce resistance of the YPG/YPJ militias in Rojava.

Meanwhile, The Guardian also reported on how "several MPs and representatives of Kurdish groups in Turkey [had] arrived at the border to show solidarity with Syrian Kurds and to form a "human chain" stretching along villages bordering Kobanî".¹⁰¹³ With this action, these figures had hoped to bring more international media attention to the struggle of the northern Kurdish city and, to a large extent, they had succeeded. In fact, all of the acts of solidarity around the world between September and October had played a part in increasing global awareness of the existence of Kobanî and the brave resistance of its progressive defence forces.

Iran Warns against Turkish Intervention in Syria

With Turkish tanks on the border with Kobanî and Ankara hoping the fall of the city would facilitate its desired creation of a buffer zone in northern Syria, the Assad regime's friends in Iran felt it necessary to warn the Turkish State about the potential repercussions of such interference. On October 9, for example, The Iran Project reported that "Iran [had] warned the government of Turkey against possible military intervention in Syria", and that the two regional powers were allegedly "in consultation over the situation" in Kobanî. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, for example, said the two countries were "trying to find a solution to the crisis". Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, however, had previously expressed "concern" to Turkey "about any measure that could further complicate the situation in the region", while Amir-Abdollahian had asserted that his country would "take any necessary action to help the Kurds in Kobanî in line with its support for the Syrian government in its fight against terrorism".¹⁰¹⁴

The aforementioned aid, however, would not materialise, even though Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham would later assert that "all groups which are resisting the Takfiri terrorism can learn" from the resistance of the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî. In fact, Erbil-based BasNews would report in late January 2015 that there were "suspicions among Kurds that Iran [was] funding anti-Kurdish tribal Arab militias in Syria". The PYD, meanwhile, would accuse "both the Iranian regime and the Syrian government" on January 20 of "trying to scupper the self-rule of the Kurds [in Rojava] by instigating the clashes with

¹⁰¹² <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/spite-airstrikes-close-syrian-town-1927469689>

¹⁰¹³ <http://www.aina.org/news/20141005132512.htm> and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/05/air-strikes-isis-not-working-syrian-kurds>

¹⁰¹⁴ <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2014/10/09/iran-warns-turkey-over-military-presence-in-syria/>

Arabs in the city of Hasakah that erupted on 16 January”.¹⁰¹⁵ In short, then, Syrian Kurds were wary of any attempts by Tehran to portray itself as a force for progress in the region.

At the same time, the supposedly centre-left KDPI (the KDP’s fraternal nationalist organisation in Iran) reported in November 2014 on how “230 Kurds [had] been arrested in various cities in Iranian Kurdistan for having taken part in demonstrations in support of the Kurdish people’s resistance in Kobanê”. At the start of the resistance, the party’s website claimed, “the Iranian regime [had actually] encouraged the Kurdish people in Iranian Kurdistan to demonstrate in support” of the besieged city, hoping as it did to: “divert attention from its own oppression” of the Kurds; “signal to the international community that... there [was] no Kurdish issue” in Iran; and “be perceived as a friend of Kurds in other parts of Kurdistan in order to prevent them from supporting the Kurdish people’s quest for liberty and national rights in Iranian Kurdistan”. Then, however, when Kurdish activists began to capitalise “on the regime’s encouragement of demonstrations in support of Kobanê” and turn the protests “into public outcries against the Iranian regime’s oppression of the Kurdish people” (by “chanting slogans against the Iranian regime”), the political elites of Tehran changed their tune.¹⁰¹⁶

II) The USA Finally Targets Kobanî

In the conservative US magazine National Review, Andrew McCarthy reported in early October on how “senior Obama administration officials [had] “downplayed the importance of” Kobanî”, apparently saying the city was “not a major U.S. concern”. The Wall Street Journal, meanwhile, had clarified why, emphasising that “**the U.S. goal in Syria [was] to cripple the Islamic State’s ability to support its operations in Iraq**”. In other words, enticing ISIS into Syria Kurdistan (where Kurds were not US allies) was **a way of both appeasing Turkey’s opposition to Rojava and distracting attention away from pro-US forces in Iraq**. Therefore, when Obama said he would “hunt down terrorists... wherever they [were]”, what he really meant was that he would prioritise the defence of subservient US allies in Iraq whilst allowing secular democrats in Rojava to fight against ISIS in almost complete isolation. And, although the National Review was coming from a right-wing standpoint, it was indeed right that Obama’s words were not enough to “justify letting Kobanî fall by rationalizing that the city [was] not essential” to the narrow mission of degrading ISIS primarily in Iraq.¹⁰¹⁷

Jim Michaels at USA Today, meanwhile, spoke of how **Kobanî**, in the first days of October, **was rapidly “becoming an important propaganda coup for extremists”, as it showed they could “stand up to American military power”** (which, in all fairness to the USA, was largely because they had put almost no effort into stopping the ISIS advance on Kobanî). At the same time, Gulf Research Center analyst Mustafa Alani said that, **because ISIS’s advance on Kobanî had become international news, it had become “a psychological victory”** for the group, as being seen to resist attacks by the USA helped to “attract [both] recruits and money”. Effectively, Alani asserted, “young people [would] not join a weak, defeated organization”, and ISIS shows of strength simply improved the group’s reputation as a jihadist vanguard organisation.¹⁰¹⁸

Nonetheless, Kobanî was not just any disheartened city that could be overrun by ISIS. It was the birthplace of the Rojava Revolution, and the Kurdish-led militias there were highly dedicated to resisting the ISIS advance and defending the progressive experiment they had

¹⁰¹⁵ <http://basnews.com/en/news/2015/01/29/kurdish-mistrust-persists-despite-iranian-praise-for-kobani-fighters/>

¹⁰¹⁶ <http://pdki.org/english/230-kurds-arrested-following-demonstrations-in-support-of-kobane/>

¹⁰¹⁷ <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/389888/why-kobani-not-major-us-concern-according-obamas-apparently-evolving-calculations>

¹⁰¹⁸ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/09/turkey-syria-islamic-state/16957557/>, and

<http://johnib.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/kobani-a-propaganda-win-for-islamic-state-with-no-ground-troops-u-s-is-handing-islamists-a-huge-psychological-victory/>

been fostering. And, the longer these forces resisted the jihadist advance, the weaker ISIS looked, especially after having taken over other towns and cities with relative ease. In short, then, the increased media coverage of the Battle for Kobani was giving greater exposure to both ISIS and the YPG/YPJ, and turning it into a symbol of the global conflict between reactionism and revolution in the developing world.

The KCK, meanwhile, would criticise the “inactivity of the coalition against ISIS in Kobani”, saying that, **“if a tragedy [were] allowed to occur in Kobani, the Kurds and the public [would] primarily hold Turkey, the USA, Europe and other coalition members responsible”**. And, if anything, the group insisted, coalition strikes elsewhere in Syria had actually been “encouraging ISIS to attack Kobani”. Furthermore, it stressed, **the application of “a double standard towards Kobani”** had been **“raising suspicions among the Kurds and the public towards the sincerity of the coalition”**.¹⁰¹⁹

If the propaganda value for both ISIS and the libertarian socialist forces fighting against it was not already enough to worry US politicians and their allies into acting, criticism from American citizens of their government’s relative inaction around Kobani (intensified by the **seemingly emotionless response of US political elites** to the prospect of a massacre in the city) almost certainly was. In other words, while US officials tried to emphasise that “the overall objective of degrading [ISIS] was more important than any individual town”, and John Kerry said it was “important to remember that you have to step back and understand the strategic objective”, they were just digging an even deeper political hole for themselves, while increasing public opposition to their apparently cold and robotic strategy. And, as a result of this situation, the American establishment was soon forced to modify its tactics.

According to retired General Jack Keane, **“Kobani did not fit into our initial plans”**. However, he insisted in early October, “we should have hit them hard a week ago” (in other words, before the media began to cover the story in relative depth). In reality, then, Keane’s comments show us that US elites had no real interest in saving Kobani and that, because media coverage had not yet intensified, the coalition airstrikes would only begin to hit the jihadists in the city when they had already arrived. The importance of the press coverage, meanwhile, is shown even more clearly in Keane’s assertion that **“American forces didn’t begin bombing around the town significantly until the fighting there garnered media attention and pressure mounted for the Americans to do something to help the Kurds defending the town”**.¹⁰²⁰

In fact, American officials would soon admit that they had committed a serious error by not acting in Kobani sooner. Former ambassador to Iraq James Jeffrey, for example, insisted that official US statements about the city “not [being] strategically important” were big mistakes which had seriously affected the country’s image in the region.¹⁰²¹ “Those Kurds” in Kobani, he argued, were “fighting for America” (by which he meant to say ‘against ISIS’), and if the superpower were to allow the city to fall, it would show either approval of (or complicity with) ISIS’s assault on the city. In order to avoid such impressions, then, the USA was increasingly “forced to act in an effort to save Kobani” and, **on October 9, US airstrikes in Syria “were all concentrated around Kobani”**.¹⁰²² Although the real reasons for its previous stance (i.e. that it did not want to see an autonomous, socialist democracy in the region and

¹⁰¹⁹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/kck-kurds-are-sceptical-of-coalition-sincerity/250-kck-kurds-are-sceptical-of-coalition-sincerity.html>

¹⁰²⁰ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/09/turkey-syria-islamic-state/16957557/> and <http://johnib.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/kobani-a-propaganda-win-for-islamic-state-with-no-ground-troops-u-s-is-handing-islamists-a-huge-psychological-victory/>

¹⁰²¹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-moves-to-curb-protests-over-government-refusal-to-intervene-in-syria-1412768164>

¹⁰²² <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/09/turkey-syria-islamic-state/16957557/> and <http://johnib.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/kobani-a-propaganda-win-for-islamic-state-with-no-ground-troops-u-s-is-handing-islamists-a-huge-psychological-victory/>

that it did not want to upset Turkey) were not revealed, the US government had essentially backtracked in order to appease critics and protesters.

Overall, the unemotional US tactics regarding the Battle for Kobanî had done more harm than good, both to the reputation of the American government and to the inhabitants of the Rojavan city, whose struggle against ISIS had rapidly become “a symbol of the ability to contain ISIS regardless of its strategic importance”, according to military and national security expert Anthony Cordesman. And, in short, this change had been made necessary primarily because “stories of the brave Kurdish fighters defending the small border city against ISIS [had] swept international headlines” and had seen the American public “[demand] that the US step in to prevent a humanitarian disaster” there.¹⁰²³ In other words, then, it was a move forced upon the US establishment, to a certain extent at least, by both citizen activists and the press.

ISIS Targets Hit Near Kobanî

On **September 27**, the Pentagon reported on how “US-led coalition air strikes [had] hit Islamic State (IS) targets near the besieged Syrian town of Kobanî”, though the city was still far from being the USA’s focus in its campaign against ISIS in Syria. Apparently, “an IS building and two “armed vehicles” were destroyed at the Kobanî border crossing” by the aerial attacks, which marked a watershed moment in the coalition campaign, which had previously had more of a negative impact than a positive one on the Rojavan city. At the same time, however, the BBC spoke only about how “Kurdish fighters” had previously been defending the city alone, failing to mention anything about the progressive revolution of Rojava or the difference between the YPG/YPJ and Kurdish Peshmerga soldiers in Iraqi Kurdistan. In other words, then, the mainstream media was doing very little to distinguish between PKK-affiliated forces in the region and the Kurdish nationalists of the KRG.

According to the BBC, “the coalition air strikes did not appear to prevent skirmishes during the night”, but the YPG/YPJ were nonetheless “grateful” for the relief provided from the air. “Turkish troops”, meanwhile, continued to “prevent Turkish and Syrian Kurds [from] crossing the border to help defend Kobanî”, and “several thousand Kurdish refugees” still remained “stuck at the railway line which marks the border with Turkey along with their sheep and cattle” (because they were not allowed to take their animals, which were “their livelihoods”, over the border with them). At the same time, the FSA called on the anti-ISIS coalition to “carry out strikes against the government in Damascus”, in a sign that the Western-backed force knew they were losing the battle against Assad, though UK MPs, for example, would “[vote] overwhelmingly in favour of air strikes in Iraq, but not in Syria” (in an attempt to stick to the international principle of only getting involved in a foreign conflict militarily if the established government of a country asked for support).¹⁰²⁴

On the same day, Rudaw reported that, according to a YPG source, ISIS had “withdrawn from several villages around Kobanî... following US-led air strikes”. The jihadists, the source said, had also been forced to “cease fighting on the outskirts of Kobanî”. Whilst helping the Rojavan defence forces to keep ISIS at bay, however, the West seemed to be simultaneously preparing a Kurdish nationalist alternative to the YPG/YPJ fighters, with Germany announcing “it had started training 32 Kurdish Peshmerga fighters at an army school in Bavaria” in preparation for expanded operations against ISIS. Europe’s economic powerhouse, meanwhile, had also begun “delivering arms to northern Iraq”, arming around 10,000 Peshmerga fighters “with some 70 million euros... worth of equipment” and “sending some 40 paratroopers to help train the fighters [to use] the weapons”.

¹⁰²³ <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/01/airstrikes-syria-kobani-statistics-operation-inherent-resolve>

¹⁰²⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29390781>

Refusing to arm the YPG/YPJ because of its close commercial alliance with Turkey and designation of the PKK as a terrorist group, Germany (and its allies in the West) were clearly doing their best to replace media attention on the Rojavan militias with attention on the 'moderate' (read 'capitalist') Peshmerga soldiers of the KRG in the fight against ISIS. Nechirvan Barzani's visit to Turkey at the same time, meanwhile, suggested that the KRG was also on a charm offensive, hoping to increase the Peshmerga's prominence in the battle against ISIS (and reduce that of the YPG/YPJ at the same time).¹⁰²⁵

In response to the US-led airstrikes around Kobanî, meanwhile, ISIS had allegedly "poured in reinforcements" to the area by October 12, committed as it was to taking the city, defeating the progressive secular system there, and showing it could stand up to Western attacks. Nonetheless, Yahoo News reported on how the new fighters the Wahhabi group was sending to the city did not have a lot of "combat experience", and were falling much more easily than the first wave of militants. At the same time, UN chief Ban Ki-moon continued to urge Turkey in particular to act "to prevent a "massacre"" in Kobanî.¹⁰²⁶

A Public Relations Campaign and a Strained US-Turkish Alliance

On October 16, Turkey's prime ministerial adviser Cemal Haşimi was reported as having said that the American-led attacks were essentially a ""public relations" campaign that [was] doing little to defeat [ISIS] or resolve the conflict in Syria". The city of Kobanî, meanwhile, was merely serving as "a distraction from the need for a wider settlement to end the war", he stressed. Furthermore, he insisted, "aerial bombardment [would] not [be] enough" if there was no "political perspective on the future" being taken into consideration. And Haşimi's comments about the USA's bombing campaign being pointless without a political solution were indeed spot on, though, for Turkey, the aforementioned 'perspective' would be one in which the Rojava Revolution would collapse and neoliberal Islamist militants (in the style of the AKP) would take power in Syria.

In short, Ankara's aim was to deal with "Syria's top terrorist" (which for the Turkish regime meant Bashar al-Assad), and Haşimi insisted that **attacks on ISIS would simply "be treating symptoms and not the cause"**. Again, whilst the latter was completely true, Haşimi neglected to mention that there were a number of 'causes' behind Wahhabi reactionism in Syria, including: socio-economic injustice; a lack of popular democratic rule; state persecution, exploitation, and corruption; and self-interested foreign interference in Syrian politics, all of which were issues that would not be solved by installing in power a neoliberal, pro-Turkish, or Islamist alternative to the country's Ba'athist regime. In fact, instead of seeking a truly meaningful alternative to Ba'athism in Syria, Turkey simply wanted a "no-fly zone" or "buffer zone" in northern Syria to "protect [it] from the immediate threat of having Isil on its border", to "provide territory on which Nato countries could train rebels", and to weaken the progressive political experiment in Rojava. In other words, Ankara wanted to replace an independent, democratic, and secular Kurdish system on its border with a highly dependent, Western-backed, and most likely sectarian regime. Proof of the veracity of this assertion can be seen in the fact that "Hasimi and another Turkish official regarded calls to allow weapons to flow across the borders to the YPG defence forces as preposterous".

According to Haşimi, "the gruesome images circulating on YouTube" regarding ISIS had "whipped up the international community into a state of hysterical hyperbole", and caused them to lose focus on reality. And he was indeed right, as the deaths of a handful of Westerners in ISIS territory had provoked what thousands of local civilian deaths had not been able to provoke – a supposed legitimization of overt involvement in the affairs of a

¹⁰²⁵ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/28092014>

¹⁰²⁶ <http://news.yahoo.com/turkey-says-us-air-bases-fight-014832580.html>

foreign nation. In other words, the destruction of Middle Eastern lives were not considered to have been important enough to seek a peaceful solution to the Syrian Civil War over the course of three years, but the destruction of a few western lives was so horrific that, within weeks, the USA was once again leading a military campaign in the region (which it unreasonably claimed would help to bring peace). Essentially, as shown previously in this book, the governing elites of the USA have never really been interested in peace, democracy, or justice in the Muslim World, and have only ever wanted to protect their own economic interests in the region, no matter what the cost. And the deaths of Western citizens simply help to justify such self-interested foreign adventures, as the events of 2014 showed.

Meanwhile, Haşimi insisted that the non-state actors of the YPG/YPJ were relying on the US-led airstrikes for survival, suggesting that they were incapable of surviving by themselves (though this fact was mainly because of Turkey's blockade on Rojava and its refusal to allow arms to pass through into Kobani). The consequences of a US-backed YPG/YPJ victory over ISIS, he said, would be "negative for Turkey, for the region, for the EU and for global stability". For him and the Turkish regime, the USA's support for the Rojavan militias simply represented "a normalisation of radicalism".¹⁰²⁷ If we think more carefully about what his words actually meant, however, we can see that he really meant to say that the defeat of ISIS in Kobani would be 'negative' for Turkey, for the repressive state actors of the Middle East, for the self-interested ruling elites of the EU, and for global capitalist stability (as it would bolster the independent, democratic, and progressive alternative flourishing in Syrian Kurdistan, while allowing its example to spread further afield in the region). In other words, then, letting the Rojava Revolution survive would set a precedent in the region which could place the exploitative and oppressive powers there at risk, as its focus on socio-economic justice, direct democracy, and equality would significantly weaken any sense of legitimacy that neighbouring anti-democratic and pro-Western regimes could claim to have.

Direct Contact between the YPG/YPJ and the Anti-ISIS Coalition

On **October 14**, journalist Mutlu Çiviroğlu reported on "an exclusive interview with... [YPG] Spokesperson Polat Can", in which the latter confirmed that the Rojavan defence forces were "**officially working with the International Coalition against ISIS**", and that "their representative [was] in the Joint Operation Command Center". Can also spoke of how "cities [in Iraq] ten times the size of Kobani [had] surrendered to ISIS in a few days" and of how "those cities [had] not even [been] besieged with considerable force". The Wahhabi group's onslaught on Kobani, however, had seen it suffer many losses, Can said, and many of its weapons had "passed into the hands of the YPG", facilitating a fight back by the militia.

At the same time, Can reaffirmed that Kobani had "been under an embargo for the last year and a half", that "none of the major forces from other cantons [in Rojava had] been able to reach [the city]", and that the YPG/YPJ had therefore been left completely isolated from outside support. In recent days, he insisted, **the coalition air strikes had been "numerous and effective" but, "had these attacks started a couple weeks ago, ISIS would not have been able to enter Kobani at all"**. Such action, he said, would have easily prevented the city from turning "into a war zone".

In the early period of the ISIS advance, Can stressed, "**Turkey was a serious obstacle**", **preventing "any help from reaching us and [preventing] the air strikes"**. For example, the country had stopped coalition jets from flying within 10km of the Turkish border, and "the coalition had not yet made a serious decision to help the YPG" (which would have put its

¹⁰²⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11168354/US-led-air-strikes-on-Kobani-are-PR-campaign-Turkey-claims.html>

alliance with Turkey at risk). Furthermore, **both Turkey and the USA had “thought that Kobani would fall in a week or two and be forgotten easily”**. Only when the YPG/YPJ’s strong resistance became clear (seeing a significant increase in media attention) did solidarity from around the world create “pressure for more effective and intensified air strikes [near Kobani] and [direct] assistance for the YPG”, Can asserted.

According to Can, the YPG/YPJ was now “acting in concert with international coalition forces” in the fight against ISIS, and was “in direct contact with them, in terms of intelligence, on a military level, and in terms of air strikes”. For example, “special units in Kobani” were relaying coordinates to the YPG/YPJ, which was then transmitting them to coalition forces. In fact, Can even spoke of how “many high ranking officials of the coalition” had “congratulated [the Rojavan militias] and expressed their admiration for [their] struggle”.¹⁰²⁸

On October 17, meanwhile, Rudaw revealed that the USA had held “direct talks” with the PYD the previous weekend,¹⁰²⁹ and KurdishQuestion.com reported on how the US Department of State had asserted that it tried to “get intelligence from a wide range of people” (underlining that “some intelligence sharing [was] going on” with the YPG/YPJ). At the same time, Central Command General Lloyd J. Austin gave a briefing in which he said there were “some very determined fighters” in Kobani, showing that the Rojavan defence militias were gaining respect even from the military establishment of the USA.¹⁰³⁰

When Does Accepting Aid Become Collaboration?

Ten days later, on October 27, the General Secretary of the Socialist Democratic Party (SDP) in Turkey, Rıdvan Turan, wrote at Özgür Gündem about “whether or not accepting weapons from the United States [was] the same as collaborating with imperialism”. Historically, he said, there had been a tendency on the left “to view the processes around Kurdish nation-building... as collaboration with imperialism”, which had emanated in part from the “denialism inspired by Kemalism” and other forms of regional nationalism. The Comintern, for example, chose “to support the Kemalist regime against the Kurdish rebellions” in Turkey, calling them “‘backwards’ and ‘feudal’”, Turan asserts. Such an “anti-imperialism rubric”, he says, “sacrificed the right of self-determination to national chauvinism”. For such supposedly left-wing schools, he argues, “it did not matter that [the] PKK [had] for years avoided coming to resemble the KDP”. Therefore, their claims of the PKK’s allies in Rojava being collaborators because of “their acceptance of the delivery of weapons from the United States under the shadow of massacre”, he stresses, were simply detached from reality.

While the Left should be looking at the resistance of Kobani as “a step forward for the revolutionary center forming in the Middle East”, Turan argues, there were many voices instead proclaiming that the YPG/YPJ militias were “collaborating with imperialism” by accepting US support. In the **previous two years** or so, however, these same voices said nothing about the “**cooperation, in both word and deed, between the United States, Turkey and the KDP around the Rojava question**”. Both “US imperialism and Turkish colonialism”, he stresses, had long been “pressuring the PYD to become a part of the Free Syrian Army and fight against Assad”, telling it to join with the Barzani-controlled National Council of Syrian Kurds (ENKS). And, as a result of the refusal of the PYD and its allies to submit to the will of these self-interested state powers, he insists, the people of Rojava were subjected to an “undeclared embargo”. The voices on the left, therefore, that ignored these

¹⁰²⁸ http://civiroglu.net/2014/10/14/ypg_usa/ and @mutludc

¹⁰²⁹ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/16102014>

¹⁰³⁰ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/u-s-we-are-coordinating-with-ypg/318-u-s-we-are-coordinating-with-ypg.html>

“colonialist/imperialist onslaughts” and “never brought attention to [Rojava’s] liberating and anti-imperialist stance”, were simply guilty of “an unredeemable social chauvinism”.

“Collaboration”, Turan argues, “is not accepting military aid while under the threat of massacre”, but “entering into imperialist dependency and colonial relations”. Therefore, he says, such relations cannot be defined “in the “moment””, and can only be seen “over the course of a “process””. As an example, he refers to “Lenin’s transportation from Switzerland to Saint Petersburg with the necessary material support of German imperialism”, and how it “produced one of the finest moments of the First World War”. In that case, he insists, a temporary convergence of interests did not mean “entering into imperialist dependency and colonial relations”. The character of the process that subsequently took place in Russia was not determined by Germany’s temporary support for Lenin, but by “the creative forces of the class struggle in Russia”.¹⁰³¹ And, while the story of the USSR and any political process is not ‘black and white’, the point remains – that it is the ideology of a movement which eventually determines how a process develops, not from whom the said movement receives temporary support along the way. Therefore, Turan maintains, this logic should also be applied to Rojava when we analyse the support it began to receive in late 2014 from the USA (and other counter-revolutionary forces).

UK Involvement around Kobanî

Also speaking at the end of October, The Daily Star’s Neil Chandler spoke about how “a team of British special forces [had been] dispatched to the Turkish-Syrian border to help brave Kurdish fighters battle against Islamic State (IS) gunmen”. This claim suggested once again that, bit by bit, the West had realised that it could not completely ignore the resistance of the YPG/YPJ and that, to preserve its own ‘anti-terrorist’ reputation, it would have to fight alongside these militias in order to defeat ISIS (even if that support were only temporary).

In “several air strikes”, the paper said, the SAS had “guided warplanes” from hidden positions “in the surrounding hills”. And, while the SAS members had “mainly been active in Iraq”, some members of the “elite unit” had apparently been “sent into Syria when Kobanî looked as though it might fall into IS hands”. At the same time, however, Chandler did not mention any direct links between the SAS and the YPG/YPJ (though he did speak about how the special units had openly admitted to helping to train Peshmerga and government forces in Iraq in “how to use heavy machine-guns and direct mortar and artillery fire on to enemy positions”).¹⁰³²

Media Focus on ‘Attractive’ Female Fighters

On October 6, even British right-wing newspaper The Daily Mail felt compelled to publish an article on YPG/YPJ bravery in Kobanî and Rojava, though it did so in an ignorant and sensationalist manner. It referred, for example, to Deilar Kanj Khamis (aka Arin Mirkan), who had “[blown] herself up at an IS position east of the border town, killing ten jihadists”. The paper claimed “she [had been] a mother with two children” and one of “more than 10,000 female fighters” within the YPG/YPJ who were currently fighting against ISIS in the north of Syria. The “valiant comrade”, according to a YPG press release, had been “able to perform a *fedai* action [i.e. self-immolation] and kill dozens of ISIS mercenaries and stop their advance”. Her “will and determination”, the communique read, would “be the spirit of resistance in the hearts of all our combatants of the People’s Defence Units and Women’s Defence Units”.

¹⁰³¹ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/27/is-the-pyd-collaborating-with-imperialism/>

¹⁰³² <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/406952/SAS-are-the-heroes-of-Kobanî-after-protecting-town-from-Islamic-State>

Meanwhile, 19-year-old Ceylan Ozalp (aka 'Diren'), who had previously "appeared in a report on female Kurdish fighters", was said by Turkish newspapers to have killed herself "when she ran out of ammunition" in order to avoid being captured by members of ISIS. She had reportedly "used her final bullet to take her own life - calling her colleagues over the radio to say goodbye before killing herself". When interviewed by the BBC a month before, she had said she would "rather blow [herself] up than be captured by ISIS". Nonetheless, her death would be placed into doubt by the fact that some "senior Kurds" apparently said she was "still alive and [continued] to fight against ISIS" in Rojava.¹⁰³³ [More on both of these cases was discussed in Chapter Eleven.]

Towards the end of October, the newspaper also spoke about how YPJ fighter 'Rehana' had become "a symbol of hope for the embattled Syrian border town after a journalist tweeted a picture of her making a 'V-sign', claiming that she'd personally killed 100 Isis militants". With the image being "retweeted over 5,000 times", her attractive features had clearly been the focus of attention, at least for some commentators. Whilst not caring to report about other YPG/YPJ fighters who had been killed in the ISIS assault on Kobani, therefore, The Mail spoke about how "gruesome pictures" posted on Twitter apparently showed an ISIS fighter "holding aloft her head".¹⁰³⁴ Although the paper would no doubt be almost totally opposed to the progressive values at the heart of the Rojava Revolution, its interest in pretty women and Islamophobia almost certainly helped it to overcome this ideological gulf (which did not matter much anyway as it had completely failed to give any information about Rojava or its revolutionary system).

For Dilar Dirik, the Mail's treatment of female fighters in Rojava was completely "typical of [the] western media's myopia", which would seek to "appropriate the struggle of Kurdish women for their own sensationalist purposes" whilst failing to consider "the implications of women taking up arms in what [was] essentially a patriarchal society". With "even fashion magazines" talking about YPJ militants, Dirik says, it was very clear that **reporters were simply picking "the most "attractive" fighters for interviews", whilst 'exoticising' them as "badass" Amazons**". With Rehana, for example, having "garnered a great deal of media attention", she insists, such an "overabundance" of coverage about her had raised "several important questions". The most important point for Dirik, however, was that, in all the "plethora of reports" on YPJ militants, there had been "**little attention [paid] to the politics of these brave women**".

The "mainstream caricaturisations", Dirik stresses, "erroneously [presented] Kurdish women fighters as a novel phenomenon" and "[cheaped] a legitimate struggle by projecting their bizarre orientalist fantasies on it", whilst seeking to "oversimplify the reasons motivating Kurdish women to join the fight". While there "may be an element of truth", she affirms, in suggestions that "the Kurdish leadership" in Rojava had exploited these women "for PR purposes - in an attempt to win over western public opinion", the very same critics who make such assertions "fail to appreciate the different political cultures that exist among the Kurdish people as a whole". At the same time, they ignore "the fact that Kurdish women have been engaging in armed resistance for decades without anyone's notice".

The Western Media's Failure to Recognise the Politics behind the Struggle

Dirik argues that her generation "grew up recognising women fighters as a natural element of [Kurdish] identity", and says that claims of female "tokenism" in Rojava were both ignorant and insulting. Although "there [was] still a long way to go", she insists, the

¹⁰³³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2782092/Mystery-surrounds-fate-Kurdish-female-fighter-poster-girl-reports-emerge-killed-bullet-avoid-taken-hostage-ISIS.html?ito=social-facebook>

¹⁰³⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2809260/Poster-girl-Kurdish-freedom-fighters-Kobani-captured-beheaded-ISIS.html>

presence of women in armed Kurdish militias (especially those linked to the PKK) had “in fact shaped the consciousness of millions of Kurds” in the Middle East and the diaspora. With stories of Kara Fatma leading “a battalion of almost 700 men in the Ottoman Empire” and inserting “43 women into the army ranks... in the late 19th century”, and of twenty-two-year-old Leyla Qasim becoming “the first woman to be executed by the Iraqi Baath party for her involvement in the Kurdish student movement... in 1974”, Dirik asserts, there was nothing new about female participation in the Kurdish rights movement. And, while Kurdish society is not “gender-equal”, she concedes (emphasising the “prevalence of male-dominated rule and violence”), an “estimated 35 percent” of the Rojavan defence militias (representing around 15,000 fighters) were women. Furthermore, she asserts, the YPJ, as an “autonomous women’s army”, conducted “independent operations” rather than being subject to YPG command.

Far from the ignorant, sensationalised articles of the Western media, Dirik argues, “women in the Syrian Kurdistan region, including Arabs, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Armenians, [had led] a social revolution against society’s patriarchal order through gender-egalitarian governance and a grassroots-feminist movement”. Meanwhile, she says, with “almost half of the PKK ranks [consisting] of women”, the movement explicitly committing to women’s liberation and enforcing quotas, and a ‘co-presidency’ system being applied at “all levels”, **the progressive Kurdish struggle was the closest thing to a mass feminist movement the Middle East had**. In fact, she emphasises, the “majority of women in the Turkish parliament and municipal administrations are Kurdish”, showing their prominent role as opponents of the chauvinist political status quo in Ankara.

The difference between the progressive PKK-affiliated Kurdish movement and that of the KDP-led Kurdish nationalist movement, Dirik says, was that only “several hundred [women] make up the all-female battalion of the [KRG] Peshmerga”, and many of those “complain that they are not deployed at the front”. Previously, she asserts, in the 1970s and 80s, “Kurdish women took up arms alongside their husbands... during the armed resistance against the regime of Saddam Hussein... and even assumed noms de guerre”, but things have now changed. Today, she insists, “almost none of the women currently enlisted have actual combat experience”, and they are often put “in charge of logistics instead”. In short, she stresses, **the feudal-patriarchal culture of the two dominant [nationalist] parties in northern Iraq is less permissibile of women's participation in war** so, with their control of the KRG, women’s roles in the Peshmerga have changed. Therefore, **articles in the Western press calling YPJ fighters simply ‘Kurdish female fighters’ (or in the most ill-informed cases ‘female Peshmerga fighters’) brush over the massive differences between the progressive Kurdish movement (seen in action in Rojava) and the nationalist Kurdish movement (seen in action in the KRG).**

Overall, Dirik asserts, “if there is a strong women’s movement among Kurds beyond the battlefield today”, it is “more to do with left-wing politics and the culture of resistance” than with the fact they are Kurds. Therefore, treating “the Kurdish women’s fight as PR” for the Rojava Revolution is akin to treating “all Kurdish parties as one homogeneous group or [ignoring] the social revolution that preceded the armed struggle, which gave Kurdish women a reputation as important political actors and equal decision-makers”. In reality, Dirik insists, “the mass-mobilisation of women in Kobanî is the legacy of [a] decades-long resistance of Kurdish women as fighters, prisoners, politicians, leaders of popular uprisings and tireless protesters, unwilling to compromise on their rights”.

In summary, Dirik argues, “it does not help Kurdish women to be glorified as enemies of ISIL if their entire political struggle is not supported”. The **“Western media’s white-washing of the Kurdish women’s resistance”**, she says, simply **“sanitises a radical struggle** in such a way as to suit the perceptions of a western audience”, instead of “challenging the

awkward fact that the [PKK]... is labelled as a terrorist organisation - by Turkey, the EU, and the US" (a fact that media outlets "conveniently leave it out" of their articles). "**Appreciation for these women**", therefore, Dirik insists, "**should not only praise their fight against ISIL, but it should also recognise their politics**". Finally, she suggests, maybe the fact that removing the PKK from Western 'terror lists' and officially recognising the Rojava administration would impact negatively on Western hegemony in the Middle East is precisely why the West's media machine tends to ignore the political context of the struggle of progressive Kurdish women.¹⁰³⁵

Ken Hanly, meanwhile, speaking at the Digital Journal, also referred to how "most mainstream news reports" had been ignoring the fact that "Kurds defending the Syrian border city of Kobani" from ISIS were libertarian socialists linked to the PKK. In particular, he says, they were ignoring the fact that Abdullah Öcalan had called in 2013 for a ceasefire (thus effectively ending the decades-long conflict with the Turkish State) and the fact that "a new door [was] being opened from the process of armed conflict to democratization and democratic politics". Moreover, Hanly talks about how the de facto leader of the PKK, Murat Karayılan, had even proclaimed that the group was now "as ready for peace as war".

The media, Hanly asserts, was also neglecting the fact that, according to a 2005 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights, "Turkey had violated articles 3, 5 and 6 of the European Convention of Human Rights by granting Öcalan no effective remedy to appeal his arrest and sentencing him to death without a fair trial". The general hostility of the Turkish State and the PKK's search for peace, therefore, were significant issues left out of media coverage on events in Kobani. For Hanly, therefore, it was important that the world heard the words of David Graeber, who had written in *The Guardian* that "the [progressive] Kurdish struggle could become a model for a worldwide movement towards genuine democracy, co-operative economy, and the gradual dissolution of the bureaucratic nation-state".¹⁰³⁶

Lessons for the West from Kobani

On October 16, the BBC's Mark Urban spoke about the lessons the West had learned from the YPG/YPJ's resistance in Kobani. Firstly, he reports, Kobani was indeed "not "strategically" important" for the Syrian Civil War or the US-led campaign against ISIS, but it had become important because of the "human misery" and the "displacement of 250,000 people" that ISIS's assault there had created. It was also important, he says, because of its "**knock-on effects on the Kurdish relationship with Turkey**", and that of Turkey with its own allies. By successfully aggravating these tensions, he insists, ISIS would achieve a significant victory.

Another lesson from the Battle of Kobani was, Urban argues, that "**both [ISIS] and the Pentagon [had chosen] to fight there for propaganda reasons**". With the possibility of the jihadists taking the border town, he suggests, they had a "chance for a big propaganda win", one that the US-led coalition wanted to deny them. At the same time, however, the alliance did not want to commit to holding the town, in an attempt to deny an ISIS propaganda advantage if they were indeed successful in their invasion.

As seen previously in this chapter, Kobani's location on the Turkish border "made it the **subject of worldwide TV coverage**", while the fact that Turkish authorities had largely "prevented re-supply" to the city meant that Ankara's hostility to the progressive Kurdish forces there was also seen around the world. Additionally, the fact that the Battle for Kobani was one of the first cases of accessible coverage of a jihadist siege encouraged international

¹⁰³⁵ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/beyond-the-battlefield-the-kurdish-women-s-radical-struggle/380-beyond-the-battlefield-the-kurdish-women-s-radical-struggle.html>, <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/57671>, and <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/10/western-fascination-with-badas-2014102112410527736.html>

¹⁰³⁶ <http://www.digitaljournal.com/news/politics/op-ed-kurdish-terrorists-defending-kobane-inspired-by-us-anarchist/article/407821>

campaigns to call for action to prevent a massacre in the city. Furthermore, with the Wahhabi militants concentrated in one area, giving their enemies an easy opportunity to kill them, the US-led coalition would almost certainly have been ridiculed if it had not taken the opportunity to target them there (especially as the majority of civilians had already been evacuated from Kobani). As it turned out, though, the fight actually was crucial for increasing the depletion of ISIS's supplies (in the short term at least).

Perhaps a key tactical issue regarding Kobani, however, was that, "by distracting IS from the battle in western Iraq", the coalition was giving itself time to strengthen its Iraqi and KRG allies. Thus, it was clearly "in the coalition's interest to keep [the conflict in] Kobani going for as long as possible". The opposite, meanwhile, was true for ISIS. With their stubborn campaign to take the city, they had ended up "drawing in heavy weapons such as tanks and artillery, that might have been better used elsewhere".¹⁰³⁷ The group's perseverance in Kobani, meanwhile, either suggested that ideology had clouded their judgement (leaving them to seriously underestimate the YPG/YPJ and believe they could still win the battle) or that it genuinely saw the battle as one that it had to win (whether for its own reputation, for its strategic interests in Syria, or for propaganda purposes). Whatever the reasons for ISIS's continued onslaught of Kobani, though, the fact was that the battle had become world renowned and appeared to represent **a watershed point in the campaign against the Wahhabi group**.

The Desperate Lies of the ISIS Propaganda Machine

In late October, in spite of the advances made by the YPG/YPJ thanks to limited US support from the air, ISIS had British hostage John Cantlie (a 43-year-old journalist seized in late 2012) appear in a video from eastern Kobani. In the "apparently scripted video", the BBC reported, the reporter spoke about how the battle was "nearly over", and how the militants were just "mopping up". He also said that urban warfare was "something of a speciality of the mujahideen" (something apparently contrary to YPG/YPJ claims of numerous ISIS losses since the urban battle had begun).¹⁰³⁸

III) The Impact of US Airstrikes in Kobani

As suspected (and discussed in Chapter Seven), the US-led airstrikes on Wahhabi positions in Syria fed the propaganda of jihadists in the country. **The al-Nusra Front**, for example, "denounced the air strikes as "a war against Islam"", calling online for "jihadists around the world to target [the] Western and Arab countries involved".¹⁰³⁹ Meanwhile, the YPG/YPJ confirmed that ISIS "had its own drones", showing that the Wahhabi group was still clearly not close to running out of resources.¹⁰⁴⁰ In fact, the organisation seemed more intent than ever on taking Kobani, in spite of spending many more weeks fighting there than had originally been planned.

ISIS Suffering Heavy Losses but Turkey Remains Hostile

On October 7, the Rojava Report spoke of how ISIS was "suffering heavy losses at the hands of the YPG/YPJ and the armed citizens of Kobani" as they sought to reach the city centre. The YPG Press Center, for example, had released a statement which said that, "in all areas, violent, hand-to-hand fighting [had] taken place".¹⁰⁴¹ The following day, the BBC's Paul Adams affirmed that the "US-led coalition [had] carried out its most sustained air attacks so far on Islamic State fighters attacking the Turkey-Syria border town of Kobani". With ISIS

¹⁰³⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29650588>

¹⁰³⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29796179>

¹⁰³⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29390781>

¹⁰⁴⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29796179>

¹⁰⁴¹ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/07/isis-suffering-heavy-losses-in-street-to-street-fighting-in-kobane/>

already inside the town, however, it was too little too late for many Syrian Kurdish fighters (monitors reported that “at least 400 people [had] died in three weeks of fighting for Kobani”). Top female commander in Kobani Meysa Abdo, meanwhile, said “**we’ve seen the most effective air strikes around Kobani ever, but they are a bit late**”. Nonetheless, Adams claimed that the **ISIS advance had been brought “to a juddering halt”** by the air strikes. He also stressed that “it [seemed like] the Kurdish defenders of Kobani [were] now communicating directly with US-led coalition forces” (as mentioned in Sub-Section II).

In Turkey, meanwhile, “at least 12 people [had been] killed in protests by Kurds... about the lack of Turkish military support” to Kobani. According to the BBC’s Mark Lowen in Istanbul, the “crisis in **Kobani [was] reawakening the ghosts of the civil war between Turkey and the Kurds**”, and Ankara was not planning to alleviate tensions by compromising on its aggressive anti-Rojavan policies. Lowen, for example, reported on how “tear gas and water cannon” had been used by the country’s police force “as unrest spread to at least six cities”. Most of the deaths, meanwhile, occurred in Diyarbakir – “Turkey’s largest Kurdish city”.¹⁰⁴² In short, then, the US airstrikes on Kobani had changed very little about Ankara’s own stance towards the city.

October Air Strikes Help the YPG/YPJ to Push ISIS Back

On October 16, Lebanon’s Daily Star also emphasised that YPG/YPJ fighters had begun to push ISIS back in Kobani. It reported on how the US believed it had “killed several hundred ISIS fighters in and around Kobani”. Three days earlier, meanwhile, Kobani had seen the “largest number” of airstrikes in one day in the area since the campaign had started back in September. Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister, however, mocked the YPG/YPJ, saying they were “not able to put up a serious fight there”, trying to discredit the groups that Turkey’s own aggressive and counterrevolutionary blockade on Kobani had helped to weaken.¹⁰⁴³ Just as the USA was beginning to see the YPG/YPJ as strategic allies against ISIS, then, **Turkey’s mockery and hostility was increasing.**

A day before, meanwhile, Kobani’s deputy foreign minister Ihsan Naasan said that the YPG/YPJ now controlled “80 percent of Kobani”, affirming that the defence forces were now “on the counteroffensive” (contrary to Turkey’s assertions about the abilities of the Rojavan militias). At the same time, The Washington Post underlined that the intensified US airstrikes on Kobani had “put the United States in the curious position of bombing to defend a Kurdish faction aligned in opposition to its usual regional allies” (in Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan). A “Pentagon planning team”, the paper affirmed, had allegedly “asked the Turks to put aside their antipathy toward the Kurds and allow the [YPG/YPJ] fighters free access to regroup and resupply themselves on the other side of the border” (a request that Ankara would duly reject).¹⁰⁴⁴ In other words, although the YPG/YPJ were defending an autonomous socialist experiment that went against US interests in the region, it seemed that Washington was, for the time being at least, more committed to ensuring that ISIS did not take Kobani, realising in the process that support for the YPG/YPJ was the only way of guaranteeing that the jihadists would fail in their conquest of the city.

After Kurdish advances, partly as a result of increased US airstrikes against ISIS around the city, the UK’s Channel 4 reported on October 18 that ISIS had “hit back” with “a fierce barrage of shells”, which had “landed in the town centre and over the nearby border with Turkey”. YPG commander Mehmûd Berxwedan, however, said that, “over the last three

¹⁰⁴² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29526783>

¹⁰⁴³ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Oct-16/274255-kurdish-fighters-start-to-push-back-isis-in-ain-al-arab.ashx#axzz3GEwPDFDz>

¹⁰⁴⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/kurds-claim-to-have-turned-tide-against-islamic-state-in-kobane/2014/10/15/af9b5726-547f-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html

days”, the YPG/YPJ had been “going forward step by step” rather than retreating.¹⁰⁴⁵ In fact, the previous day, Berxwedan had spoken in depth about the importance of Kobanî, insisting that the “19th of July Rojava Revolution” had begun in the city and had soon become “a symbol of resistance and freedom” for Rojavans. The latter, he said, had then spread the progressive revolution to other parts of Syrian Kurdistan, thus upsetting “the plans of both certain international powers and certain regional powers who did want the Kurds to express their own will”.

The YPG Maintains Perspective

In fact, Berxwedan spoke of how the international and regional powers opposed to the Rojava Revolution had “expended much effort in breaking and destroying” the will of the Rojavan people, with ISIS eventually bringing “70% of their forces to Kobanî”. For him, **“Turkey and many powers supporting ISIS [had] planned these attacks consciously”**, hoping to “make up for their defeats in Iraq and Cizîrê” in Kobanî. “Until now”, he insisted, “there are two forces that have successfully emerged in Syria. One is us and the other is ISIS”. In other words, he said, the Syrian opposition could either follow the “path of the gangs and of the occupiers or the path of democracy”.

With ISIS, Turkey, and other powers expecting Kobanî to fall within a week, Berxwedan stressed, the Wahhabi jihadists had attacked the city with the same forces that “had captured entire cities within hours and brought states to their knees”. And, although “no help came from anyone, including the government of the KRG”, he insisted, “we responded to this attack with our own small arms and with things we had prepared using our own resources”. Because of the unbalanced nature of the battle, however, the YPG/YPJ had been forced to wage “a conscious and tactical battle”, he asserted. Putting up resistance “in every village and hamlet”, he noted, they had “prolonged the days of the resistance” and allowed the Rojavan defence forces “to hit back at ISIS”, making it impossible for the group to enter into the city itself “for almost 3 weeks”. Meanwhile, he said, “many Northern youths [had] climbed over fences and crossed borders to come to Kobanî and join the resistance”, while “actions in East and South Kurdistan and in Europe were also a big boost [to] morale”.

According to Berxwedan, the YPG/YPJ militias “didn’t do what [ISIS] thought [they] would”, refusing as they did to gather all of their forces in the villages and “let [themselves] be destroyed there”. In fact, he emphasised, in the battle inside Kobanî itself, “70% of [ISIS’s] offensive and professional forces [had] died”, leaving the group to place weapons into the hands of “children” and its less experienced “Women’s units (Ketibe-i Unsa)”, which were told “to carry out bombings” (or the “bloody, dirty work” as he puts it). In short, the jihadists were trying “to increase morale and numbers” by employing “truck bombs as a form of psychological warfare”. The YPG/YPJ, however, had the advantage of being on their home turf, he said, insisting that the militias knew the city “street by street”.

At the same time, in an attempt to highlight Turkey’s hypocrisy regarding Rojava, Berxwedan affirmed that ISIS had “targeted a TMO Grain Silo belonging to Turkey with a rocket”, while hitting Turkish territory later on “with a lot of mortars”. Here, he underlined that, “if we had fired even a single bullet into Turkey, Turkey would have made hell” for Rojava but, with the attacks launched by ISIS, there was no response. And this absence of a clear reaction from the country, he said, suggested that Ankara was assuming ISIS had hit Turkish land by accident, apparently being aware that “ISIS would not consciously strike its partner” (or a sympathetic force which saw it, for the time being at least, as a relative ally).

¹⁰⁴⁵ <http://www.channel4.com/news/air-strikes-pound-is-as-kurds-make-gains-in-kobani-kobane>

Speaking of how **there had been “no help from the [anti-ISIS] coalition” for 15-20 days**, Berxwedan asserted that ISIS had been able to take the eastern third of the city thanks to its superior arms. Since the US airstrikes had begun, however, the YPG/YPJ had been able to prevent ISIS from gaining any more territory. At the same time, “not a single civilian [had] died from the planes bombs” and no YPG/YPJ fighters had been hit. Nonetheless, the commander emphasised that “the forces that [would] get the real results [were the Rojavan] land forces”. If the coalition really wanted to destroy ISIS, therefore, he argued, it needed “to provide weapons to those fighting on the ground”. Meanwhile, stressing the alliance’s selective support, he said that its forces had “not done for [Rojavans] what they [had] done for the Peshmerga in South Kurdistan”.¹⁰⁴⁶ [This comment would come just days before the KRG was allowed by Turkey to send Peshmerga troops into Kobanî, thus allowing the US-led coalition to bypass supporting the YPG/YPJ yet still support boots on the ground. More on this turn of events will be seen in Section C.]

While Berxwedan criticised the coalition’s double standards, Rudaw reported on how, according to TEV-DEM co-chair Omar Alush, it was important for the anti-ISIS coalition to “cut off the ISIS supply route from other parts of Syria” while there was relative quiet in Kobanî. He said, for example, that the YPG/YPJ had “information that the group [was] preparing for another assault on Kobanî” (a claim that turned out to be correct).¹⁰⁴⁷ Nonetheless, **the coalition** (in its apparent hope of distracting ISIS away from Iraq and enticing its forces into Kobanî) **would fail to cut off the group’s supply routes**, leaving it free to launch a second wave of attacks on the city.

On October 19, the General Command of the YPG claimed yet again that the Battle for Kobanî would “shape the future of Syria and the democratic struggle for freedom and peace”. In fact, it insisted, the common fight against Wahhabi terrorism and the search to build “a free and democratic Syria” had been “the basis of [an] **agreement... signed with certain factions of the FSA**” (i.e. those that were more progressive than others). Thus, these militias would continue to “work to consolidate the concept of true partnership for the administration of this country and commensurate with the aspirations of the Syrian people with all its ethnic, religious and social classes”.¹⁰⁴⁸

US Airdrops for the YPG/YPJ Courtesy of the PUK

On October 20, Paul Adams spoke of how the Battle for Kobanî, which had now “claimed around 700 lives” (mostly those of ISIS jihadists), was “more symbolic than strategic”. The “scorched earth tactics” used by ISIS, in an apparent attempt to “make sure there [would be] nothing [for Kobanî’s inhabitants] to return to”, had sought to destroy the will of the YPG/YPJ fighters, but had instead intensified their commitment to resistance. And, to support their determined struggle (for whatever short-term purposes), the USA made the decision to airdrop a limited amount of supplies to the Rojavan militias which had apparently been “provided “by Kurdish authorities in Iraq””.¹⁰⁴⁹

From the KRG’s perspective, the increasing support aimed at the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî was seen as an opportunity to improve an image which had been tarnished by the Peshmerga’s failures in Iraq earlier in the year. For that reason, the government’s website took pains to emphasise that “weapons and military aid [had been] delivered to Kobanî... from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by American cargo jets”.¹⁰⁵⁰ The KRG’s head of protection and information institution, Lahore Sheikh Genki, would also say, on the official PUK website, that it had sent “**24 tons of weapons and ammunition** in addition to **various medical**

¹⁰⁴⁶ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/17/interview-with-ypg-commander-isis-has-lost-in-kobani/>

¹⁰⁴⁷ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/17102014>

¹⁰⁴⁸ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/ypg-general-command-statement/322-ypg-general-command-statement.html>

¹⁰⁴⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29694594>

¹⁰⁵⁰ <http://www.krg.org/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=52382>

supplies... to the Kurdish People's Protection Units in Kobanî". On his Facebook page, meanwhile, Genki affirmed that the "weapons, ammunition and medical supplies" had been "sent by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan".¹⁰⁵¹

The Role of the KRG and Turkey's Response to US Infidelity

The day before the aforementioned airdrops, President Erdoğan had insisted that "he would not allow Kurdish fighters to receive any transfers of American arms", showing in the most stubborn of manners that Turkey's borders were to be considered off limits for any force wishing to bolster the YPG/YPJ's resistance efforts in Kobanî. US officials, however, growing increasingly impatient with their allies in Ankara, chose to bypass Turkish territory and undertake aerial deliveries to the Rojavan militias involving "three planes and **27 bundles of supplies**". The BBC's Guney Yildiz, meanwhile, spoke of how US officials had "previously said that they had to limit their relations with the Kurds in Syria due to objections from Turkey", and of how the **direct delivery of supplies to Kobanî by the USA was a sign that the superpower had finally grown tired of Ankara's irrational and counterproductive demands.**¹⁰⁵²

Then, soon after the airdrops, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that **Turkey was ""assisting" Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to cross into Kobanî to join the fight" in Kobanî**, supposedly as a response "to a request from the Kurdish president, Massoud Barzani". Nonetheless, it was very clear that Ankara's decision had come as a direct response to the USA's decision to ignore its ally's aggressive ultimatums. According to Adams, both the airdrop and the new Turkish commitment to allowing Peshmerga troops to cross into Kobanî suggested that the AKP regime in Turkey was coming "under enormous pressure from Washington to take a more active role" in the conflict.

Nonetheless, the previous verbal hostility leaving Ankara continued, with Çavuşoğlu insisting that the PYD was "a threat to Syria's future" (by which he meant it was a threat to Turkey's involvement in or domination of Syria's future). He even claimed that the party sought to exercise "control over a certain part of Syria... just like ISIS". At the same time, though, he did not emphasise that such PYD 'control', if existent, was over primarily Kurdish territory, much dissimilar to ISIS, which was seeking to control territory of opposing religious and ethnic groups. Neither did he justify the comparison between the two groups with any examples of PYD crimes (examples of ISIS's crimes would be unnecessary as the world was already all too aware of them). However, for Çavuşoğlu (and the entire AKP regime), as long as the PYD had "these ambitions" (by which we should understand 'the desire of Kurds and others to have direct democratic control over their own lives'), it would "not receive the [official] support of [either] the FSA or Turkey" (even though, as already seen, certain factions of the FSA had already signed agreements with the YPG/YPJ and significant numbers of Turkish citizens had come out into the streets to protest against Ankara's hostile stance towards Rojava).

In addition to Turkey's continued aggression against the Rojava Revolution, **Kobanî's Defence Minister Ismet Hesên asserted that the Turkish-KRG decision to send Peshmerga troops into the besieged city "had been made without his approval"**. At the same time, though, the YPG/YPJ were offered no better options, and thus ended up accepting the KRG's assistance in the end. Furthermore, both the airdrop and entry of Peshmerga troops would leave "the battle for Kobanî... no longer quite as one-sided as it was" previously, according to Adams.¹⁰⁵³ Once again, the BBC here was failing to use the correct words to describe the situation in Kobanî. Far from being 'one-sided', for example,

¹⁰⁵¹ http://www.pukmedia.com/EN/EN_Direje.aspx?jmare=22293

¹⁰⁵² http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29684761?ocid=socialflow_twitter

¹⁰⁵³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29694594>

the conflict had simply been extremely 'unequal'. In fact, considering that the YPG/YPJ had resisted ISIS alone for weeks before the airstrikes had begun to help, with far inferior weaponry, 'one-sided' was clearly a very bad choice of words.

The Increasing Emergence of a 'De Facto Alliance'

According to Amberin Zaman at Al Monitor, the delivery of weapons to the YPG/YPJ in late October had taken a "de facto alliance between the Syrian Kurds and the United States to a new level". With Turkey having repeatedly "spurned... demands to allow weapons and fighters to cross through Turkey into the Syrian Kurdish enclave", **the USA had forced Turkey's hand by delivering weapons to the Rojavan militias itself**. In other words, while Erdoğan had said on October 18 that "it would be very, very wrong to expect us to openly say 'yes' to our NATO ally America to give this kind of [armed] support [to the PYD]", he would end up, just two days later, allowing Peshmerga troops to cross through Turkish territory, which would mark a sizeable shift in Ankara's anti-Rojavan strategy.

Furthermore, Zaman insists, **the "effectiveness" of the PKK and YPG/YPJ** in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria **had clearly "triggered a paradigm shift in US strategic thinking" between late September and late October**. According to John Kerry, for example, although the YPG/YPJ militias were considered by the USA to be "an offshoot group of the folks that our friends the Turks oppose", they were said to be "valiantly fighting ISIL", and the Americans could therefore not afford to "take [their] eye off the prize". While stressing that US assistance to the Rojavan defence forces was only "a momentary effort", then, the US Secretary of State was essentially arguing that they deserved support (at least for the time being).

For Zaman, "Turkey could have [easily] led the effort to support anti-IS forces in Kobani" many weeks before" (a decision that "would have bolstered the peace process... while averting the public relations disaster" that actually occurred), but it chose not to do so. Instead, she says, it opted to open a corridor to Kobani "only after the US... airdrops" occurred. And this move, she asserts, only increased "doubts about Turkey's commitment to working with its Western partners" even further, while "Erdoğan's domestic rivals... [would] now say he [was] America's poodle". With Ankara's corridor only accepting the passage of Peshmerga troops and weapons into Kobani, meanwhile, **Turkey was also apparently attempting "to drive a wedge between the PYD and the PKK"** which, according to Zaman, was "doomed to fail", with Abdullah Öcalan's ideologies commanding "the loyalty of Syrian and Turkish Kurds alike".

Opposing Turkey's position that legitimising the PKK would make the group less likely to seek peace in Turkish territory, meanwhile, Zaman insists that "**any US-PKK dialogue would [actually] make the PKK less likely to resume violence against the Turkish army**, as [such actions] would tarnish its burgeoning legitimacy". In other words, the PKK would be stupid to blow the chance it had for international political relations and acceptance. In fact, she argues, the progressive Kurdish movement had actually "used the media and global public opinion" to its advantage, using its status as a secular, pro-democratic force "to draw the US into the battle for Kobani". As a result of the increasing media coverage of the conflict, then, the battle had become "a symbol of the contest between IS and the coalition, one that the US could no longer afford to lose" and one that it could easily help to win.

At the same time, Zaman says, President Barzani had "turned the situation to his own advantage by projecting himself as a benevolent leader who [had sought to aid] fellow Kurds in their time of need", even though he was "probably unhappy about US engagement

with the PYD/PKK".¹⁰⁵⁴ Ankara's arrogant hostility, meanwhile, had left it looking ruthless, and Erdoğan had failed to use the conflict in Kobanî to his own government's advantage (believing instead that leaving it to fall to ISIS was actually in his best interests and those of his reactionary regime). In fact, by trying to force Rojavan militias to sacrifice their ideals as a precondition for support, Erdoğan had fostered a stubborn and aggressive image for himself in the press, which would leave him looking ever more like a "wannabe Sultan".¹⁰⁵⁵

In the end, the USA turned out to be more prepared to deal with the YPG/YPJ (temporarily at least) by presenting more acceptable preconditions, such as pushing the militias "to engage [more] with... the Free Syrian Army". In fact, Zaman argues that the USA's softened strategy could even have brought the "de facto non-aggression pact between the Syrian regime and the Kurds" to an end (even though the PYD had insisted on numerous occasions that its forces would not be used as soldiers in non-Kurdish territory).¹⁰⁵⁶ Whatever would happen in the following months, however, the truth was that **the increasing importance of the progressive Kurdish movement in the fight against ISIS had reached a watershed moment on October 20.**

November - Urban Warfare and the Undoing of ISIS

On November 11, Mark Joyella at TVNewser met NBC's chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel, who insisted that the Battle for Kobanî had so far been "the most dangerous, unpredictable war [he had ever] covered".¹⁰⁵⁷ French academic Romain Caillet, meanwhile, made it clear that, **although it may have initially "looked like Kobanî would fall", it was "now clear that it [would] not"**. SOHR statistics, for example, showing that "more than 600 jihadists and nearly 370 Kurdish fighters [had] died in the battle for Kobanî" (along with 24 civilians), clearly demonstrated that ISIS had been suffering more than the YPG/YPJ as a result of its offensive on the Rojavan city. In fact, according to Caillet, **ISIS had fallen "into a terrible trap" in the city**, and he reported on how "five French (jihadists) [were] killed in a single strike". At the same time, the director of the SOHR spoke of how Kobanî had "become the scene of "urban warfare in a town divided into two"". Due to the "high morale" of the YPG/YPJ and "their Peshmerga reinforcements", though, it was doubtful that the town would fall, and this reality was "making [ISIS] increasingly nervous".¹⁰⁵⁸

Ignorant Support for the YPG/YPJ by US Conservatives

In the course of writing this book, I had conversations in late 2014 with apparently pro-US Islamophobes on social media outlets who saw US forces (and their allies in the Middle East) as 'saviours' in the fight against ISIS, rather than as part of the oppressive and invasive regional dynamics that had led to the rise of the reactionary Wahhabi group in the first place. Blinded by the viewpoint that the USA was a beacon of 'freedom and democracy' that the world should aspire to, they clearly preferred to see their country as a positive force in the Middle East - an idea which the arguments in this book have almost entirely discredited. In fact, if anything good has ever come from US interference in the Muslim World, it has been purely accidental.

The aforementioned commentators, meanwhile, referred to ISIS as if it had sprung up out of nowhere, ignoring entirely the political context (in which the USA and its allies had been heavily involved) which had fuelled the group's quasi-fascist rampage through the region. Whilst highlighting the links between US policy in the Middle East and the rise of Wahhabi extremism, then, I insisted that all forms of bigotry and ignorance were responsible for such

¹⁰⁵⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-united-states-syria-Kobani-isis-game-changer.html>

¹⁰⁵⁵ <http://kurdishdailynews.org/2014/12/03/nobel-prize-not-awarded-objectively-erdogan-the-wannabe-sultan-says/>

¹⁰⁵⁶ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-united-states-syria-Kobani-isis-game-changer.html>

¹⁰⁵⁷ http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/nbcs-richard-engel-in-syria-the-most-dangerous-unpredictable-war-ive-covered_b245676

¹⁰⁵⁸ <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/155387-islamic-state-faces-war-of-attrition-in-syria-s-Kobani>

fanaticism. Here, I emphasised, the distinction between colonialism, imperialism, chauvinist nationalism, and religious extremism was largely irrelevant, in the sense that all had sought to control people and/or their resources in an oppressive manner at one point or another (though perhaps to different extents).

Having apparently forgotten about Cold War politics, then, or ignored the fact that Kurds are far from being a homogenous group of reactionary US puppets, they praised the YPG/YPJ forces fighting against ISIS in Rojava, sometimes explicitly referring to them as 'Peshmerga' (as if they were an extension of the army of Iraq's Kurdish nationalists). Keen on emphasising the difference between the YPG/YPJ and the Peshmerga (and the political systems they defend), however, I underlined that the Rojava Revolution sought to create both a system of social justice and an inclusive form of direct democracy, neither of which were present in Iraqi Kurdistan (or the USA). Consequently, they responded by claiming that the USA had a 'democratic system' and that it granted its citizens a large amount of freedom of speech (assertions that certainly contained elements of truth).

No Comparison between Plutocracy and Democracy

Although this book is not specifically about the USA and its political system, I feel it is worth mentioning my response to the conservative comments made above. First of all, for example, I pointed out that the Republican and Democratic Parties did not dominate US politics because they represented the interests of the American people, but rather because they had the financial and media support of different sections of the powerful capitalist class of the United States. Meanwhile, as Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky asserted in *Manufacturing Consent*, the mainstream US media and political parties had managed to gain their "credibility and legitimacy" primarily from the presence of "vigorous debate and dispute over many issues" (even if this debate was in reality "limited [only] to "responsible" opinions acceptable to some segment of the elite"). On matters agreed upon by the entire ruling elite of the USA (such as the continuing existence of the capitalist system), however, "the media [would] always toe the line". In fact, regarding these issues, **the mainstream media would neither tolerate nor acknowledge dissent**, unless it was "necessary for ridicule or derision".¹⁰⁵⁹ And, as a result of this reality, it would be impossible to say that true freedom of speech had a genuinely important role in the coverage of America's dominant media outlets.

In short, Western economic elites had realised in the early twentieth century that a significant amount of "freedom had been won by popular struggle", and that citizens could therefore no longer "be controlled by force". Consequently, these elites decided to vastly expand the "public relations and advertising industry", in an attempt "to control attitudes and beliefs". This shrewd expansion, for example, sought to keep the public "disciplined, passive, obedient and directed to other things" than politics. Therefore, as it was "owned by wealthy men who [had] every reason not to want certain ideas to be expressed", the media soon became an important tool for distracting Western citizens from their true political interests.¹⁰⁶⁰ In fact, according to Chomsky, "the US [was] basically a one-party state" run by "the business party, with two factions, Democrats and Republicans". Furthermore, he quoted "more serious political scientists in the mainstream" as describing the USA "not as a "democracy" but as a "polyarchy": **a system of elite decision and periodic public ratification**".¹⁰⁶¹

In yet another attempt to highlight the democratic calibre of the USA, however, the self-proclaimed 'conservative' Americans with whom I spoke claimed that people like Noam

¹⁰⁵⁹ <http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/198901--.htm>

¹⁰⁶⁰ <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20101101.htm>

¹⁰⁶¹ <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/20040102.htm>

Chomsky had long been free to work and speak in the country whose political system he criticised so much. This treatment, they insisted, would not have been given to him elsewhere. And, while acknowledging the truth in this assertion, I emphasised that **freedom of speech and political power are very different things**. It was therefore an incredibly deceptive and destructive ontological leap, I said, to claim that the presence of freedom in the USA meant that, by extension, it also had a praiseworthy form of democracy.

In fact, according to Ann Robertson and Bill Leumer at Global Research, there is a lot of truth in the statement that “**the more money one has, the more political power one can wield**” in the United States – a fact which in itself would suggest that the country’s political system was more of a plutocracy than a democracy. In other words, with economic elites dominating the mainstream media and fuelling the big two political parties, the freedom to speak possessed by ordinary citizens (like Chomsky) could never truly have a significant impact on political debate. Furthermore, Robertson and Leumer emphasise that such concentration of “money and power in the hands of a few” was always bound to happen in a capitalist system which was “left to its own devices”.¹⁰⁶²

Philosopher G. K. Chesterton, meanwhile, spoke in 1932 about how “capitalism is not democracy; and is admittedly, by trend and savour, rather against democracy”. In such an economic system, he said (much in agreement with Robertson and Leumer), plutocracy (which “by definition is not democracy”) was bound to be the natural political order of the day. In all truth, he insisted, “the industrial... world of the last hundred years [had] been much more unsuitable a setting for the experiment of the self-government [of the People] than would have been found in old conditions of agrarian or even nomadic life”. In short, it would be “horribly hard to turn what is called modern industrial democracy into a [genuine] democracy” as, in such an “inhuman time”, cruelty had ‘ceased to be human’. The “rich man”, for example, “instead of hanging six or seven of his enemies because he hates them, merely beggars and starves to death six or seven thousand people whom he does not hate, and has never seen, [simply] because they live at the other side of the world”.¹⁰⁶³ And, in a world dominated by such ‘rich men’, as is the capitalist world, the hope of popular self-government would always face almost insurmountable obstacles.

Back in Kobani in 2014, meanwhile, support from anywhere and anyone would have been welcome, but that did not mean that foreign forces had the right to take ownership of the YPG/YPJ’s valiant resistance away from the Rojavan militias. In fact, with the USA having previously worked together with Turkey and the KRG to undermine the directly democratic experience of the Rojava Revolution, the superpower and its cheerleaders (at home and abroad) could never rightfully claim to be truly on the side of democracy in the Middle East (a fact also made incredibly apparent when we look at the country’s past activity in the region). Additionally, while the system of popular self-government in Syrian Kurdistan was still ‘under development’, it could simply not be accurately equated to the effective plutocracy that was present in the West. All attempts by US conservatives (or any Western establishment apologists for that matter), therefore, required substantial criticism in the interests of preserving truth and perspective. And for precisely that reason, I have also sought to expose the hypocrisy of US elites wherever it has been appropriate in this book (even though American politics has not been its main focus).

A Continued Rise in Jihadi Militants

Meanwhile, Greg Miller at The Washington Post spoke on October 30 about how, according to US intelligence and counterterrorism officials, “**more than 1,000 foreign fighters [were still] streaming into Syria each month**”, a fact which had “so far been unchanged by

¹⁰⁶² <http://www.globalresearch.ca/money-power-and-politics-in-america/31609>

¹⁰⁶³ <http://www.chesterton.org/democracy-and-industrialism/>

[coalition] airstrikes". In fact, he asserted, the anti-ISIS campaign had apparently "neither deterred significant numbers of militants from traveling to the region nor triggered such outrage that even more [were] flocking to the fight" (though there were other consequences, as will be seen in the following sub-section). Nonetheless, "the overall number [continued] to rise", suggesting that, **as of October, the "total number of foreign fighters in Syria [exceeded] 16,000", a pace that had already eclipsed "that of any comparable conflict in recent decades, including the 1980s war in Afghanistan"** (another event in which Wahhabi-inspired Islamists had been used by the USA and its allies in an attempt to undermine an 'unfriendly' and 'uncooperative' regime outside the Western sphere of influence).

The high number of foreign fighters joining jihadists, Miller stressed, was due in part to "sophisticated recruiting campaigns", but also to the "relative ease with which militants from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe [could] make their way to that country" (thanks to Turkey's lax border controls). The country to have sent most fighters to Syria, he asserted, had been Tunisia, while over "2,000 fighters [had] come from countries in Europe". At the same time, Miller noted that "most militants entering Syria [had] done so through Turkey". Rand Corp counterterrorism expert Andrew Liepman, meanwhile, said: "I don't think 15,000 really scratches the surface yet". Although the airstrikes had "probably discouraged some people" from travelling to Syria, he affirmed, it had probably "encouraged others". More worrying, however, was that, while many fighters had initially gone to the country to fight the Assad regime, Western security officials were now expressing "mounting concern over more recent arrivals who [had] fought [instead] with the Islamic State or al-Nusra".¹⁰⁶⁴

IV) Charlie Hebdo and 'Blowback' in the West

In late October, CNN reported on how a soldier had been "gunned down in Canada's capital", with shots soon erupting "in the halls of the country's Parliament".¹⁰⁶⁵ In fact, Ottawa had seen two shootings in one day by Wahhabi convert Michael Zehaf-Bibeau when, only two days earlier, fellow convert Martin Rouleau Couture had killed Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent in a car attack. In December, meanwhile, the so-called 'Sydney Siege' would see Man Haron Monis, a Wahhabi sympathiser who had previously escaped 'persecution' in Iran, kill café manager Tori Johnson and barrister Katrina Dawson (who was actually said to have been "killed by fragments from a police bullet or bullets").¹⁰⁶⁶ The mainstream media unsurprisingly tried to focus on Monis's Iranian origins (because Iran was still considered one of the West's main enemies), but it was clear (from the fact that he had requested "the flag of the "Islamic State" terrorist organization be delivered to him" during the siege) where his loyalties actually lay. In reality, he had explicitly claimed "association with other ISIS "brothers"". ¹⁰⁶⁷ With all of these terrorist attacks, it became very clear that Wahhabi extremists were retaliating against the West for having supported destruction and oppression in the Middle East for so many decades and for having launched a campaign to defeat ISIS and other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.

On January 7, 2015, meanwhile, there was a terrorist attack against people at the Paris-based satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. Soon afterwards, Wahhabi converts Saïd Kouachi and Chérif Kouachi (in their early thirties), along with eighteen-year-old Hamid Mourad, were named as suspects in the killing of twelve people at the publication and, two days later, "an Al Qaeda cell in Yemen claimed they had directed the attack". It also came to light in the wake of the attack that Chérif had already been in jail for "helping to funnel prospective jihadi fighters from France to Iraq", while Saïd was said to have "received formal training

¹⁰⁶⁴ http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/airstrikes-against-the-islamic-state-have-not-affected-flow-of-foreign-fighters-to-syria/2014/10/30/aa1f124a-603e-11e4-91f7-5d89b5e8c251_story.html

¹⁰⁶⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/22/world/americas/canada-ottawa-shooting/>

¹⁰⁶⁶ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-31033369>

¹⁰⁶⁷ <http://landdestroyer.blogspot.mx/2014/12/who-created-cartoon-character-man-haron.html>

from Al Qaeda operatives” in Yemen. The brothers were both French citizens from Algerian families who were orphaned as children.¹⁰⁶⁸ Mourad, meanwhile, was said to have been seen “in class on the day of the attack”, and his classmates called his implication as a suspect “absurd”.¹⁰⁶⁹ The apparent reason for the attack was that Charlie Hebdo had previously published cartoons of Islamic prophet Muhammad in 2006, 2011, and 2012, with one of its offices even being “firebombed” in 2011 as a result.¹⁰⁷⁰

Images of Muhammad in Islam

According to Carol Kuruvilla at The Huffington Post, there is “no part in the Quran where Muhammad says that images of him are forbidden”, though there is mention of such a prohibition in the hadith, a sometimes controversial secondary text (based on oral reports of Muhammad’s actions and teachings) which is often consulted by many Muslims. The Islamic traditions which emerged after the prophet’s death, says Georgetown University professor John Esposito, saw their Christian counterparts as being “too deeply attached to icons and images”. In fact, it was almost certainly the former’s emphasis on how their prophets were men and not gods which led them to ban images of the Prophet Muhammad (rather than anything particular related to politics). The purpose of the prohibition, Esposito insists, was simply to prevent idolatry, and to stop followers from praying before statues and pictures. [Actually, such a belief was shared by many religious figures during the Christian Reformation, with some believers in England under the reign of King Edward VI even ‘whitewashing murals’ or ‘destroying stained-glass windows depicting Christ’ as a result of their convictions.]

Nonetheless, Kuruvilla says, “faithful Muslims have created images of the prophet for centuries”. In fact, the University of Michigan’s Christiane Gruber asserts that, since “around the 1300s”, paintings of Muhammad could be found in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Then, in the 1500s, artists began to “cover Muhammad’s face with a white veil” or “draw a bundle of bright flames in place of his head”, to signal not that he was divine, but that he was “different” or “touched by the divine”. Eventually, by the 1800s, images of the prophet were much less common, “although many examples still [existed] in Iran and Turkey”. In short, it was not the Quran which had prohibited images of Muhammad, but a general “consensus” which had “gradually developed among Muslim scholars” over time. In other words, it was a man-made ban rather than a supposedly divine one.

When Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published cartoons depicting Muhammad as a terrorist in 2005, however, “Muslim leaders around the world came forward to categorically condemn all images of Muhammad”, as they would also do with Charlie Hebdo in 2011, perhaps mainly because they came in a post-9/11 environment of Islamophobia and at a time when the USA and its allies were deeply embroiled in military interventions in the Muslim World. According to Gruber, meanwhile, the problem was “not so much that they [were] images [of Muhammad] but that they [were] disrespectful images” of him which represented for many part of an aggressive Western assault on Islam.¹⁰⁷¹

Who Should Apologise?

Open Democracy’s Yazan al-Saadi spoke on January 8 about how an attack on the “controversial French satirical magazine” Charlie Hebdo had seen “mainstream discourse immediately [rehash] the same [old] concepts and talking points about the importance of safeguarding freedom of speech, battling an ill-defined notion of terrorism, and maintaining western values” (which had been emphasised over and over again after the terrorist attacks

¹⁰⁶⁸ <http://heavy.com/news/2015/01/said-kouachi-cherif-kouachi-hamid-hamyd-mourad-terror-suspects-charlie-hebdo-terrorist-attack/>

¹⁰⁶⁹ <http://heavy.com/news/2015/01/hamid-mourad-charlie-hebdo-terror-suspect-arrest-yemen-cheriff-jouachi-said-kouachi/>

¹⁰⁷⁰ <http://time.com/3664927/charlie-hebdo-new-issue/>

¹⁰⁷¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/08/charlie-hebdo-muhammad-image_n_6432370.html?cps=gravity_2429_-2631494275097965701

in New York in 2001). Fundamentally, he says that there is “nothing heroic” about writers and artists “picking on the identities and beliefs of minorities”, while insisting that **satire should “be an act that punches up to power, and not down to the weak”**.

Meanwhile, al-Saadi argues that, while Muslims are suddenly asked to apologise after the barbaric acts of Wahhabi extremists, Christians and Jews in the West are never called upon to apologise “for the killing of Al-Jazeera’s staff by US forces in Iraq (as well as a number of other Arab journalists later on during that horrendous war) or the killing of tens of Palestinian journalists by the Zionist forces over the past decade”.¹⁰⁷² And Mark Steel at The Independent echoed al-Saadi’s comments, insisting that “Norway’s Christians didn’t have to apologise for [the murderous actions of] Anders Breivik” back in 2011, and that it ought to be “the same for Muslims now”.¹⁰⁷³ The reality, however, was that Islamic communities were being blamed as a whole for the actions of a few extremists (in a way that other religious groups had not been).

For al-Saadi, if anyone should apologise for Wahhabi extremism, it should be the French government, which has: long pursued “a foreign policy that is destructive of other societies, and furthers repression”; failed to acknowledge or apologise for “a history of military occupation and intervention in the North African and West Asian region (as well as elsewhere in the world)”; and been “part of the political support of states like Saudi Arabia (the beating heart of ferocious Islamic fundamentalist tenets) and Israel (the nation of Zionism, a racist and violent ideology, born out of ethnic cleansing and continued incremental genocide)”. Simply speaking, al-Saadi claims, “**political violence**” (or ‘terrorism’ as the West likes to call it) “**does not happen in a vacuum**”, and the world’s citizens need to be made a lot more aware of that fact.

Meanwhile, as twelve people were murdered in France, al-Saadi says, “a car bomb exploded in Sanaa, Yemen, killing at least 38 people”, but few people heard about it. And that exemplified a significant part of the problem, he insists. “What is true today, and has been true for a while”, he asserts, “is that ‘white’ lives matter more”, while “black and brown misery and deaths, on the other hand, have become so normalized, so accepted, so routine” that they are barely mentioned. For example, he stresses that “there were and are no Twitter hashtags for the dead civilians who were killed by French airstrikes during their military adventures in Mali, North Africa, and elsewhere”. Therefore, he argues, the unfortunate reality is that “**lives are simply not equal**” in today’s world and, **until that issue is dealt with, reactionaries will continue to unleash violent and indiscriminate attacks on innocent civilians**.¹⁰⁷⁴

Terrorism Is Best Countered with Justice, not Bigotry

On January 9, Ben Hayes at Open Democracy insisted that, whilst he supported the right of people to “show solidarity with the victims of [the] horrible crime [committed two days previously] by reposting” cartoons by Charlie Hebdo, he also sought to emphasise his “right not to do so” because he found them “bigoted and incendiary”. Too many people, he suggests, were accustomed to suspending “their critical faculties in the aftermath of terrorist attacks”, finding it much “easier to denounce [rather] than understand” the atrocities. However, he insists, it was simply a “fact that among the reasons a number of the magazine’s staff [had been] selected for assassination by [Wahhabi] maniacs [had been] its predilection for Muslim-baiting”. Stressing that “this [was] not a justification” for the attacks, he simultaneously argues that it was nonetheless “a relevant part of the historical record”.

¹⁰⁷² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/yazan-alsaadi/on-charlie-hebdo-freedom-of-speech-terrorism-and-value-of-lives>

¹⁰⁷³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/charlie-hebdo-how-exactly-would-we-like-muslims-to-condemn-these-attacks-9966176.html>

¹⁰⁷⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/yazan-alsaadi/on-charlie-hebdo-freedom-of-speech-terrorism-and-value-of-lives>

For Hayes, “terrorism is better countered with justice, despite the overwhelming “with us or against us” rhetoric” that is often expressed after terrorist attacks. While defending freedom means “defending speech you don’t agree with”, he maintains, there is often rampant hypocrisy in the West in this regard. The EU, for example, had previously decided to outlaw “public provocation to terrorism”, which specifically meant “speech which “[created] a danger” that such offences may be committed”, rather than incitation itself. Nevertheless, with the hashtag #KillAllMuslims “trending on Twitter”, and Europe’s “far right” increasing in strength, Hayes asserts, a direct non-Muslim form of incitation to violence was already apparently perfectly permissible in the continent (in clear violation of the continent’s laws).¹⁰⁷⁵

Journalists like Liam Smith at The Huffington Post, meanwhile, criticised statements similar to those made by Hayes, insisting that Charlie Hebdo had “[gone] after many right-wing targets (including [the] Front National [in France]) as well as the left and all religions indiscriminately”, publishing “similarly offensive images of Jews and Catholics”. In short, he says, “we need publications like Charlie Hebdo... because of exactly what their crude, offensive, and difficult work represents”. As the “challenge to authority” that it is, he stresses, we must recognise its value in “pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable, of breaking taboos, [and] of standing up to thugs”.¹⁰⁷⁶

Hayes, however, claims that the fact that Charlie Hebdo was an “equal opportunities offender”, targeting all mainstream religions and not just Islam, did not justify ignoring or condoning its expression of bigoted sentiments. Its “reification”, meanwhile, such as “the New Yorker’s likening of its “pioneering free expression” to that of Gandhi and Martin Luther”, was only likely to “play into the hands of the racists and fascists whose fondness for free speech extends only as far as their desire to use it to destroy human rights”, according to Hayes. In other words, the failure of some commentators to differentiate between free speech (however crude or discriminatory) and progressive or revolutionary publishing actually risked doing more harm than good. Finally, therefore, Hayes vehemently rejects “the imposition of a monoculture which tells me that standing up to terrorism and ridiculing Islam are two sides of the same coin”.¹⁰⁷⁷

According to Michel Warschawski at the Alternative Information Center (AIC), Charlie Hebdo had been “warning against the strengthening of fascism and racism in the entire Western world” for two decades before the 2015 attack on their offices. Therefore, “out of respect for the victims”, Warschawski insists, what the world really needed to do was not to suddenly repost the magazine’s sometimes-chauvinistic material, but to combat right-wing extremism by supporting progressive movements favouring greater inter-community cooperation and socio-economic justice. “Instead of supporting national – and even international – unity against Islam fundamentalism”, he asserts, “let’s strengthen, wherever we are, a broad anti-fascist front, where the Muslims will have their full legitimate place”.¹⁰⁷⁸

Who Were the Murderers?

On January 9, meanwhile, four hostages were killed “when a gunman took over a kosher grocery store in eastern Paris”,¹⁰⁷⁹ just “minutes after [the] two brothers behind the slaughter at [the] Charlie Hebdo magazine [had been] killed” in a shootout with police. The hostage taker, Amedy Coulibaly, “had threatened to kill the hostages if police moved in on the brothers”, who he insisted were his “officers”. He also told a TV station he was “a member

¹⁰⁷⁵ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ben-hayes/no-we%E2%80%99re-not-all-charlie-hebdo-nor-should-we-be>

¹⁰⁷⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/liam-smith/the-attack-on-charlie-heb_b_6448818.html

¹⁰⁷⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ben-hayes/no-we%E2%80%99re-not-all-charlie-hebdo-nor-should-we-be>

¹⁰⁷⁸ <http://www.alternativenews.org/english/index.php/michael-warschawski/352-the-massacre-in-charlie-hebdo>

¹⁰⁷⁹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/paris-attacks-four-hostages-killed-in-kosher-grocery-store-named-9970135.html>

of the Islamic State group".¹⁰⁸⁰ In fact, Amy Goodman at Democracy Now asserted that the killers at Charlie Hebdo and the grocery store had all been "members of the same Paris cell that a decade [before had] sent young French volunteers to Iraq to fight U.S. forces". Chérif Kouachi, for example, had "served 18 months in prison for his role in the group", while his brother Said had reportedly been "in Yemen in 2011 for several months training with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" (as mentioned earlier in this sub-section).¹⁰⁸¹

On Wednesday 14, The Independent's Heather Saul reported on how "a top al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader [had] released a video claiming responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attack and warning the West of more "tragedies and terror"". Nasr al-Ansi claimed that the massacre had come in "vengeance for the Prophet", and insisted that "France [belonged] to the "party of Satan" **because of its "annihilation of Muslims in Central Africa"**". His branch, he said, had chosen "the target, laid out the plan and financed the operation". Freedom of press or ideas in the West, he argued, was "always tamed except when spreading vile [images and words] and waging war on Allah and His Messengers and defaming the religion". In summary, he said: "**stop your insults on our Prophet and sanctities**"; "**stop spilling our blood**"; "**leave our lands**"; and "**quit plundering our resources**", or "you will not find... peace and stability".¹⁰⁸² And, with these words, al-Ansi emphasised in part the clearly political motives for the French attacks, even though the majority of the Western media would subsequently focus primarily on the so-called 'religious' motives.

Outrage and Right-Wing Opportunism

Two days after Coulibaly's attack, "at least 3.7 million people marched against extremism across France... in the biggest mobilisation ever recorded in the country".¹⁰⁸³ And, although there were pictures of a number of Western politicians supposedly leading the march in Paris, they would be criticised afterwards when "an aerial photograph emerged", showing they were actually not at the front of the demonstration, but had used it "as a handy PR opportunity".¹⁰⁸⁴ On French TV, for example, a "wide shot" of the photo had been displayed, showing "the front line of leaders... followed by just over a dozen rows [of] other dignitaries and officials - after which there was a large security presence maintaining a significant gap with the throngs of other marchers". At the same time, "nine of the countries represented by leaders and dignitaries" were "themselves in the bottom third of the World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders".¹⁰⁸⁵

Meanwhile, leader of France's far-right Front National (FN) party Marine Le Pen led a "counter-rally" in Beaucaire in the south of the country. Her movement, which was part of a "European-wide nationalist resurgence" that wanted "to evict from their homelands people [who] they [viewed] as Muslim subversives", saw it fit to "label all Muslims as hostile to traditional European cultural and religious values". Le Pen's "authoritarian program", for example, "[called] for a moratorium on immigration, a restoration of the death penalty and a "French first" policy on welfare benefits and employment". According to Jacob Heilbrunn at Reuters, the presence of Le Pen and her European counterparts (like UKIP in Britain) showed that "fascism [was] a specter that still [haunted] the continent".

¹⁰⁸⁰ <http://news.sky.com/story/1405106/hostages-killed-in-paris-supermarket-siege>

¹⁰⁸¹ http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/9/gilbert_achcar_on_the_clash_of

¹⁰⁸² <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/alqaeda-in-yemen-admits-responsibility-for-charlie-hebdo-attacks-and-warns-west-of-more-tragedies-and-terror-9976898.html>

¹⁰⁸³ http://news.yahoo.com/least-3-7-million-march-across-france-record-194221171.html;_ylt=AwrBJR8d1LJUBGIATTHQtdMD

¹⁰⁸⁴ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/nicolas-sarkozy-mocked-for-pushing-his-way-to-the-front-row-of-the-charlie-hebdo-rally-in-paris-9975326.html>

¹⁰⁸⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/paris-march-tv-wide-shots-reveal-a-different-perspective-on-world-leaders-at-largest-demonstration-in-frances-history-9972895.html>

These modern nationalist forces, Heilbrunn says, seek “to present themselves as legitimate leaders who are saying what the public really thinks but is afraid to say”, and have actually been gaining support as a result of this strategy. By depicting Europeans as the “victims of rapacious Muslim immigrants”, they “aim to come across as reasonable and socially acceptable, while sounding dog whistles to their followers about immigrant social parasites who are either stealing jobs from “real” Europeans or living off welfare”. And, whilst avoiding “speeches calling for the extermination of other races”, Le Pen and others firmly rejected the idea of a “single, united Europe with open borders”. In short, Heilbrunn insists, the continent’s far-right parties are “no longer” just a “noisy but fringe phenomenon” thanks to this tactical rebranding.

Nationalists “in France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, the Netherlands and Britain”, Heilbrunn asserts, were now “seizing on the tragic events in France to argue that they [had] been right all along” about how “open borders and liberal tolerance” had been “allowing a virulent jihadist virus to infect their countries”. Losing her reticence to criticise Islam in the wake of Wahhabi extremist attacks in Paris, for example, Le Pen had called the entire religion an “odious ideology”, while UKIP’s Nigel Farage had claimed that “a jihadist “fifth column” [existed] in France” as a “result of [the country’s] multi-cultural policies”.

In short, Heilbrunn says, “a new generation of leaders on the right has seized on Europe’s economic malaise to argue that the real culprit is Islamic immigrants taking jobs away from the native-born”. For him, this reactionary tactic was reminiscent of “the wave of anti-Semitism that helped propel fascist political parties to triumphs during the 1930s”. In Germany, for example, “weekly rallies against immigrants” were now “taking place under the rubric [of] Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident” - [or] PEGIDA”, with “at least 25,000” people marching in the country on the Monday following the Charlie Hebdo attacks. According to Heilbrunn, it was clear that “the demons that European leaders [had] tried to suppress after 1945 [were] back” and, in his opinion, “it [would not] be easy to exorcise them”.¹⁰⁸⁶

On January 12, meanwhile, the BBC also reported on the PEDIDA march, and on how the group’s supporters had ignored “calls from German politicians to stay away”. It also referred to how “tens of thousands of people [had] joined anti-Pegida rallies” elsewhere in Germany in response to the right-wing march, with “7,000 in Dresden, 30,000 in Leipzig, 20,000 in Munich and 19,000 in Hanover”. Ever since October 2014, the BBC affirmed, PEGIDA had “held weekly protests”, while this time its supporters “carried banners expressing solidarity” with the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists. Calling their protest a “mourning march”, they were clearly seeking to “capitalise on the terror attacks” and show their “growing dissatisfaction with - and even a distrust of - the political establishment”. Critics, meanwhile, pointed to PEDIDA’s hypocrisy, marching in memory of “those same people whom a week ago they were calling the ‘lying press’”.

At the same time, the building of the Hamburger Morgenpost (a Hamburg newspaper that had “republished controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad which had originally been printed by Charlie Hebdo in 2006”) had been “damaged by incendiary device” at the weekend. And, along with the events in France, such attacks would only serve to fuel the popularity of PEGIDA, which was effectively an “umbrella group for [the] German right wing, attracting support from mainstream conservatives to neo-Nazi factions and football hooligans”.¹⁰⁸⁷ Overall, then, reactionary sentiments were bubbling up to the surface in the wake of Wahhabi assaults in the West, and it looked very unlikely that Western political elites would take any of the progressive measures that would truly be needed in order to

¹⁰⁸⁶ <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/01/13/charlie-hebdo-fallout-specters-of-fascist-past-haunt-europes-new-nationalism/>

¹⁰⁸⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30777841>

take the support base away from bigoted right-wing parties or chauvinist quasi-religious movements.

The Importance of Understanding the Roots of ‘Counterbarbarism’

The University of London’s Gilbert Achcar, meanwhile, also asserted that there had been **predictable right-wing attempts “to blame Islam” as a whole** for the terrorist attacks, rather than Wahhabism and the self-interested political forces that had fuelled it. For Achcar, the attack on Charlie Hebdo was comparable to (though less destructive than) that of Anders Breivik in Norway in mid-2011, when 77 were killed and 319 were injured, or to “the massacre perpetrated by... ultra-Zionist killer Baruch Goldstein in Hebron in 1994”, in which 29 Palestinian Muslim worshippers were killed and another 125 wounded. While “**the barbarism of the strong**” was “**the primary responsible in [these] awful dynamics**”, Achcar argues, the “counterbarbarism” (or reactionism) which is created “on the side of those who see themselves as the downtrodden” can also be horrific.

The barbarism of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, argues Achcar, including “the torture in Abu Ghraib or the massacre in Fallujah”, had simply “bred a counterbarbarism represented by al-Qaeda”. Furthermore, he asserts, the USA’s alliance with Saudi Arabia (described earlier in this book) has, in addition to these barbaric imperialist actions, seen the “extremely offensive” ideology of Wahhabism spread largely unhindered through the Middle East. This reality, however, has been “blurred in the public opinion by the kind of characterization that we heard from the Bush administration”, such as the misleading idea that Wahhabi extremists hated the USA “because of [its] freedom and [its] democracy” (rather than because of the superpower’s brutally repressive and invasive foreign policy).

At the same time, Achcar says, the increasing radicalisation of young French citizens from Algerian families in the last few years has been related to “the overall racism and Islamophobia that are quite... pervasive in French society” and in the French media. This context, he asserts, is not helped by the fact that, in 2005, the French Parliament passed a law requiring schools to only teach pupils about “the positive role of [French] colonialism in... North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa”. As a result, he affirms, “**there are definitely [many] more Islamophobic-minded persons and militants in France than supporters of... this attack on Charlie Hebdo**”. Nonetheless, he says, in spite of the fact that only a “tiny minority” of French Muslims support Wahhabism, society suddenly sought to get an apology from the entire community, “as if it were their problem and their specific problem”, whilst completely ignoring that it was “a problem of the French society and the French state in the first place”. In order to stop the “clash of barbarism going further”, he insists, French (and other Western) societies desperately needed to deal with their colonial pasts and presents more effectively, rather than just brushing them under the carpet.¹⁰⁸⁸

Western Double Standards

Meanwhile, WikiLeaks criticised on Twitter the hypocrisy of Western governments who did not “defend freedom of speech all the time”, insisting that the UK, for example, had been “spending millions detaining [Julian] #Assange without charge”, while the USA continued to “drone and prosecute journalists”.¹⁰⁸⁹ The “round-the-clock guard” of Assange in particular, said the Metropolitan police commissioner in February 2015, was simply “sucking [the organisation’s] resources” away, with it having “spent £9m on policing the building” between June 2012 and October 2014.¹⁰⁹⁰ At the same time, WikiLeaks also referred to the firing of Maurice Sinet, aka Siné, from Charlie Hebdo in 2009 for allegedly

¹⁰⁸⁸ http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/9/gilbert_achcar_on_the_clash_of

¹⁰⁸⁹ <http://www.mediaite.com/online/wikileaks-tweets-hebdo-cartoons-blames-jewish-pro-censorship-lobby-for-legitimizing-attacks/>

¹⁰⁹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/feb/10/julian-assange-guard-london-police-10m-bill-ecuadorian-embassy>

“inciting racial hatred” against Jews, though his cartoons and comments were no more offensive than those drawn or made regarding Christians or Muslims.¹⁰⁹¹ According to “half-Jewish, half-Muslim and fully socialist-feminist lawyer, Gisele Halimi”, the magazine had, by “seeking to gag Siné”, made a big mistake and “dealt a terrible blow to freedom of expression”, showing that it was not quite the ‘equal opportunities offender’ that the West had made it out to be after January’s terrorist attack.¹⁰⁹²

Ben Norton at Mondo Weiss, meanwhile, spoke of how Israel had “touted as a “free speech” issue” the terrorist attacks in Paris, in spite of itself being “the first government in the world to ban pro-Palestinian demonstrations”, in what was a significant Zionist assault on freedom of speech. Amid the media clamour to support the Israeli stance, Norton says, “both the press and popular culture [continued] to ignore August 2014 UN documents that [inculped] Israel for engaging in very similar acts of terror” to those which had been committed in France. Here, he quotes Geneva-based NGO The Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) as reporting that, as a result of Israel’s 2014 assault on Gaza, “15 journalists [had] been killed (some of them being purposely targeted)”, while “many others [had] been injured because of the shelling of their homes” and “8 media outlets [had] been destroyed” altogether. At the same time, Norton asserts that “explicit violent repression of journalists” outside of military campaigns was “not new behavior for Israel” either.¹⁰⁹³

Netanyahu Not Welcome

According to Israel’s i24news on January 12, “a report on Israeli Channel 2 TV” had suggested that French President Francois Hollande had sent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas a message asking them “not to arrive at the solidarity rally” which took place in Paris. An anonymous source had apparently told newspaper Haaretz that Hollande had “wanted to keep the rally focused on solidarity and unity and did not want anything, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or [the] Jewish-Muslim relationship”, to distract attention away from that focus. He was apparently also “concerned that Netanyahu would use the event for his political campaign ahead of the March 17 elections, and make statements relating to French Jews that could hurt the show of solidarity the Elysee Palace was hoping for”.

The Israeli leader reportedly confirmed that he would not fly to Paris until Tuesday, in accordance with the French president’s wishes. After Israel’s Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Economy Minister Naftali Bennet (the leaders of reactionary parties which were a part of Likud’s governing right-wing coalition) announced they would attend the rally, however, the country’s prime minister also “quickly changed his mind”. Consequently, Hollande’s government was allegedly “livid with Netanyahu”, and clarified that his conduct would “have a negative effect on the relationship between the [two] countries”.¹⁰⁹⁴ Lieberman, meanwhile, was not exactly a pro-democratic participant in the rally either, remaining as he did “the only foreign minister in the world who [did] not officially live in the country he [represented], with a residence in an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank”. In fact, the controversial ultra-nationalist politician affirmed in early March: “those who are with us deserve everything, but those who are against us deserve to have their heads chopped off with an axe”.¹⁰⁹⁵ And precisely this type of comment was why the presence of Zionists (and other anti-democratic figures) at the Paris March contradicted the rhetoric of defending freedom and democracy with which Hollande’s pack of foreign dignitaries sought to associate themselves.

¹⁰⁹¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/4351672/French-cartoonist-Sine-on-trial-on-charges-of-anti-Semitism-over-Sarkozy-jibe.html>

¹⁰⁹² <http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=a5b3deff-d6c1-4a3c-89db-a0cf11f3eb72&k=31684>

¹⁰⁹³ <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/01/ignoring-targeting-journalists>

¹⁰⁹⁴ <http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/57421-150112-jerusalem-confirms-france-didnt-want-netanyahu-to-attend-solidarity-rally>

¹⁰⁹⁵ <http://www.newsweek.com/behead-arab-israelis-opposed-state-says-foreign-minister-312276>

The Dirty Hands of the Politicians at the Paris March

On the same day, TheIntercept.org's Jeremy Scahill told Democracy Now that the journey of more than forty world leaders to the solidarity march in Paris had been a "**circus of hypocrisy**", insisting that "every single one of those heads of state or representatives of governments there [had] waged their own wars against journalists". He speaks, for example, of: how the UK's David Cameron had "ordered The Guardian to smash with a hammer the hard drives that stored the files of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden"; how "blasphemy is considered a crime in Ireland"; how "multiple African and Arab leaders... [had] scores of journalists in prison" in their own countries; and how "Benjamin Netanyahu's government... [had] targeted for killing numerous journalists who [had] reported on the Palestinian side", and had "kidnapped, abducted, [and] jailed journalists". Scahill also suggests that Yemeni journalist Abdulelah Haider Shaye should have been sent as Yemen's representative, because he had languished in prison for years "on the direct orders of President Obama for having reported on secret U.S. strikes in Yemen that [had] killed scores of civilians". Sudan, meanwhile, "should have sent Sami al-Hajj, the Al Jazeera cameraman who was held for six years without charge in Guantánamo and repeatedly interrogated by U.S. operatives who were intent on proving that Al Jazeera had some sort of a link to al-Qaeda".

Amidst Scahill's comments that "hypocrisy was on full display in the streets of Paris when it came to the world leaders", Democracy Now's Amy Goodman insists that Reporters Without Borders had condemned the "**presence of 'predators' in [the] Paris march**", saying it was "appalled by the presence of leaders from countries where journalists and bloggers [were] systematically persecuted such as Egypt..., Russia..., Turkey..., and United Arab Emirates". And Scahill echoes these sentiments, criticising Egyptian leader General Sisi's presence in Paris in spite of presiding himself "over the imprisonment of multiple Al Jazeera journalists whose only crime was doing actual journalism", along with that of "scores of other Egyptian journalists that never [got] mentioned in the news media". Meanwhile, he says, "you have a surveillance state that unfairly targets Muslims and immigrants, in both the United States and in France", and that "has become its own hindrance, its own biggest obstacle to actually figuring out the reality of [actual terrorist] plots".

At the same time, Scahill asserts, "let's remember that the United States bombed Al Jazeera in Afghanistan very early on after 9/11, then bombed the Sheraton Hotel in Basra, Iraq, where Al Jazeera journalists were the only journalists", before killing "one of the most famous Al Jazeera correspondents in Baghdad in April of 2003". Later, he stresses, the coalition forces also "shelled the Palestine Hotel, killing a Reuters cameraman and the Spanish cameraman José Couso". **It is important**, therefore, "**not [to] act as though the West's hands are clean**" or that the hands of "any one of those world leaders" on the Paris march were "clean on these matters".¹⁰⁹⁶

The University of Ottawa's Dr Halyna Mokrushyna, meanwhile, supports Scahill's comments by speaking about how, in spite of Ukrainian President Poroshenko's talk of respect for democracy (and the "learning to live with differences, by respecting and accommodating" them, that it entailed), she had "not [seen] any sign of it coming from Kyiv". Solidarity with Charlie Hebdo in France, she asserts, means absolutely nothing about Ukrainian democracy if "the current Kyiv regime tries to squeeze Ukraine" into a "mono-ethnic" and "mono-cultural" mould (which does not suit the country) "by suppressing dissenting opinions". Furthermore, while speaking about how the Charlie Hebdo tragedy had supposedly "united all civilized countries", Poroshenko's regime was far from creating

¹⁰⁹⁶ http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/12/circus_of_hypocrisy_jeremy_scahill_on

one of these, having killed “over 4,800 civilians” since launching an “anti-terroristic operation” against the Donbas region in April 2014.¹⁰⁹⁷

Focussing on the Real Culprits

Victor Grossman at Counterpunch, meanwhile, speaks about how, even before the attacks on Charlie Hebdo, “polls had shown [that] 57% of non-immigrant Germans [were] mistrustful of Muslims”, and how this figure was unfortunately likely to increase. Although he has “no sympathy whatsoever for religious fanatics, be they Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist”, he insists, there is a “bothersome little voice” in his head stressing that, **“as a journalist, I might not have caricatured Christians while they faced lions in Rome’s old Coliseum, or even the most backward-looking Jewish daveners [fundamentalists] during Hitler’s reign”**. While attacking extremists like ISIS “is good”, he asserts, “lampooning the beliefs of so many Muslims in Europe, who face daily discrimination in schools and jobs, with mosques and minarets [being frequently] attacked physically”, is not. In short, he says, satire should be “unfettered”, but libel or the “ridiculing [of] prophets and beliefs which still provide solace to so many” should not be. **“Moses, Jesus, Buddha and Muhammad are long dead”, he argues, so the fact that “attacking them may sometimes take courage” does not mean that it suddenly becomes “wise or good”**.

Grossman then speaks of how “brutality is not somehow restricted to Islam or Muslims”. When the French colony of Madagascar rebelled in 1947, for example, the “well-armed French army of 30,000 men adopted “a strategy of terror and psychological warfare involving torture, collective punishment, the burning of villages, mass arrests, executions and rape”, killing an estimated 89,000 people and even throwing “a group of prisoners... out of an airplane” alive. In fact, when Madagascar’s prime minister ask France to “declassify archival materials on the uprising” in 2012, “the request was not approved”.

In Algeria, meanwhile, citizens also fought against French colonialism, and 1957 saw “General Massu’s paratroop division [make] use of its methods in Madagascar and Indochina”, undertaking “illegal executions”, “forced disappearances”, and torture of even “very young teenagers” and “old men of 75, 80 years or more”. One journalist, who was himself tortured by the French military, spoke about how it had even “buried old men alive”. At the same time, the government’s consistent denial of torture saw it censor “more than 250 books, newspapers and films in metropolitan France and 586 in Algeria”. Then, in 1961, French police even “attacked a demonstration of 30,000 Algerians”, forcing many “into the river Seine”. Ten thousand protesters, Grossman says, were arrested during this event.

The USA, meanwhile, tortured Abu Zubaydah, who was held in custody “for over twelve years” and “water-boarded 83 times”, being imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay before eventually being told “sorry, we discover that you are not Number 3, not a partner, [and] not even a fighter”. At the same time, Gul Rahman “was arrested at his doctor’s home after traveling to Islamabad for a medical checkup”, and died in November 2002 after torture.¹⁰⁹⁸ Regarding such cases, former US Vice President Dick Cheney insisted in December 2014 that he was “more concerned with bad guys who got... released” than “with a few that, in fact, were innocent”. In short, he stressed, there was “no problem as long as we [achieved] our objective”.

According to Conor Friedersdorf at The Atlantic, “once 9/11 [had] happened, Dick Cheney [and other Republicans simply] ceased to believe that the CIA should be subject to the U.S. Constitution, statutes passed by Congress, international treaties, or moral prohibitions

¹⁰⁹⁷ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/14/poroshenko-the-civilized/>

¹⁰⁹⁸ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/13/je-suis-charliebut-i-have-others/>

against torture”.¹⁰⁹⁹ And this attitude was reflected in the fact that “as many as twenty teenagers”, according to British attorney Clive Stafford Smith, had been imprisoned at Guantanamo, with one Afghan human rights worker even asserting that “one lad was only 12 or 13 when he was captured”. The so-called ‘free press’ of the West, however, very rarely gave details about these cases.

Another example of a Western attack on the media was in 2011, “when NATO planes (35% of them French) bombed the Libyan state TV station, killing three journalists and injuring 15”, much like a NATO attack on “the TV and radio station of Belgrade” in 1999, which had killed “sixteen Serbian Radio-TV employees”. Equally, non-combatants in US-backed coups throughout the world have often been targeted, such as US journalist and film-maker Charles Horman and singer-songwriter Victor Jara, who were “killed during the USA-backed putsch in Chile in 1973”. Meanwhile, “action based on a true belief in press freedom can be mercilessly punished”, Grossman insists, “as it was learned by Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden – or Mumia Abu-Jamal”.

While anger over assassinations and at “twisted” ideologies is just, Grossman says, distraction from “the true perpetrators” of horrors is likely to continue, with “those worsening the very social conditions which breed fanaticism” and “their marionettes” being free to go about business as usual.¹¹⁰⁰ In short, as RMIT University’s Dr. Binoy Kampmark claims, “**ignoring causality and replacing it with an infantile prescription: they do it, because they don’t like us**”, is **incredibly dangerous**.¹¹⁰¹ Far from allowing hatred to expand, then, Grossman stresses, what the world needs is to “close gaps, clasp hands and work together”, refusing to “forget those countless bloody deeds recorded largely in dusty archives – and their urgent lessons”. While affirming his solidarity with Charlie Hebdo, therefore, he also emphasises the necessity of remembering and showing solidarity with innocent victims of Western crimes like Gul Rahman, Abu Zubaydah, Charles Horman, Victor Jara, and many more. In other words, he appeals to the world’s citizens to **focus always on the wider context, and condemn all of those who deserve it whilst refusing to be selective with their criticism**.¹¹⁰²

The Need to Address the True Roots of Violence

Ramzy Baroud at Counterpunch, meanwhile, insists that terrorist acts in the West are not really about Islam, “even if the media and militants attacking western targets say so”. In short, he says, it is simply “convenient and self-validating... for many to conflate politics with religion”, in order to avoid serious contextual analysis and perspective. In fact, many political actors seek to “make non-issues the crux of the debate”, instead of entering into “a rational discussion about real issues”. And this strategy, Baroud suggests, sees these figures discuss the whole religion of Islam instead of focussing on the actual issues, such as: how the Wahhabi extremists of ISIS were reacting to repressive Ba’athist regimes in Syria and Iraq and Western-led attempts to replace them with more submissive administrations; how Boko Haram was a partial product of both colonialism and exploitation at the hands of oil-hungry corporations and corrupt rulers in Nigeria; and how Palestinian resistance was a response to decades of Zionist occupation, apartheid, and war crimes. In other words, Baroud argues, “we should be addressing the **real roots of violence**”, which **can be found in the “violent means used [by global economic elites] to achieve political domination and control of natural resources”** in the Middle East (and throughout the world).

Unfortunately, however, these ‘real roots’ are almost always ignored, Baroud says, with the post-Charlie-Hebdo-Massacre media overlooking: “François Hollande’s recent statement

¹⁰⁹⁹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/12/dick-chenev-defends-the-torture-innocents/383741/>

¹¹⁰⁰ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/13/je-suis-charliebut-i-have-others/>

¹¹⁰¹ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/14/the-war-against-radical-islam/>

¹¹⁰² <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/13/je-suis-charliebut-i-have-others/>

about being “ready” to bomb Libyan rebels” (made only days before the Wahhabi attacks in Paris); the French military’s “destructive role in Syria; its leadership role in the war in Libya; its war in Mali, and so on”. In fact, Baroud suggests, the **“violent responses to demeaning Islamic symbols” could actually be described as a simple reflection of “a real political sentiment”**, such as “a collective feeling of humiliation, hurt, pain and racism that extends to every corner of the globe”. It was always inevitable, then, that war (generally synonymous with terrorism), “which is constantly exported from the West to the rest of the world”, would eventually “be exported back to western cities”. **To truly end so-called ‘terrorist’ attacks in the West, therefore, the first step would not be to focus on the nature of Islam, but to seek the “end of western interventionism in the Middle East”**.¹¹⁰³

Brutality Breeds Brutality

Echoing the words of Scahill and others, author John Wight asserts that the Paris March was **“a festival of nauseating hypocrisy”**, with the presence of politicians “responsible for carnage and mayhem on a grand scale” at a protest supposedly campaigning “against terrorism and extremism [qualifying] not so much as the theatre of the absurd but as the **theatre of the grotesque**”. They were essentially “impostors”, he says, at a popular event which had hoped to push France forward towards greater peace and justice. Nonetheless, he insists, “the circular relationship that exists between Western extremism and Islamic extremism will not be broken anytime soon”. For, in a world in which “the vast majority of victims of Islamic extremism... are Muslims, just as they comprise the vast majority of victims of Western extremism”, the massacre in Paris was essentially (for the culprits) an act of “justice and power” (albeit a barbarically warped expression of both). And, although we may justly reject this violent political manifestation, to ascribe it “to evil, madness, and insanity” is neither accurate nor productive, according to Wight.

Instead, he argues, **the deeds of the Paris murderers were actually “acts of rebellion against the evil, madness, and insanity of the status quo, matching evil with evil, madness with madness, and insanity with insanity”**. Simplistically dismissing them as evil, then, is merely a politically-driven coping mechanism which “allows us to negate their humanity” and see them as “monsters, beyond the pale and therefore beyond any serious consideration”. The act was indeed “monstrous”, Wight stresses, but it was not any “more monstrous than the carnage that has been unleashed over many years by men who claim to act in our name”. In fact, he holds, **“the brutality and barbarism we witnessed on our TV screens” in January 2015 was “merely a microcosm of the brutality and barbarism that goes by the name [of so-called] Western civilisation”**. The Enlightenment may have produced “huge advances in science, medicine, and philosophy”, he asserts, but “it also provided justification for centuries of slavery, colonialism, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and super exploitation”. And this reality and context, he insists, must not be ignored.

The support that Charlie Hebdo received from many Western citizens in the wake of the Paris attacks, Wight claims, simply represented “the delimitation of [their] solidarity with all victims of extremism and barbarism”, allowing them to emphasise their ‘principles’ whilst ignoring their complicity in the economic system which created the global conditions responsible for giving birth to such reactionary actions. Quoting poet Aime Cesaire, he insists that **“a civilization which justifies colonization – and therefore force – is already a sick civilization”**, and one that, from “one denial to another, calls for its... [own] punishment”. In other words, if the culprits of the attack on Charlie Hebdo were “products of radical Islam” (a reactionary force born from the debris of invasion, occupation, exploitation, and oppression), then they were also, by extension, “products of [the] Western civilization” which had laid the foundations for Wahhabi extremism to grow in the first

¹¹⁰³ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/14/its-not-about-islam-it-never-was/>

place. Essentially, then, such terrorists ought to be considered “monsters of [the West’s] own creation”.¹¹⁰⁴

Revolutionary and Reactionary Uses of Freedom

There is no doubt that freedom, in the right hands, can be a powerful tool for societal revolution. For this reason alone, therefore, it must be defended at all costs. However, we must also be aware that freedom can also be used in a counterrevolutionary manner (as it often is in a plutocratic capitalist system). Consequently, progressive citizens must not fall into the trap of supporting all acts born from freedom simply because of their unconditional support for the ideal itself. In other words, we can dislike and even campaign against reactionary actions whilst at the same time defending the right of other citizens to champion them. For, as argued previously in this book, a bad idea cannot be destroyed through the curbing of freedoms or through physical attacks on its proponents, and can only be truly defeated by the proposal of a better idea.

In the light of the Charlie Hebdo murders, it became clearer than ever that, alongside free speech, the revolutionary insistence on respectful and reasoned debate was of great importance. After all, what kind of hope could a progressive movement ever have of attracting support around the world if it attacked in the crudest of manners the religious or cultural traditions held dear to a significant section of the planet’s oppressed inhabitants? With this thought considered, we must insist on the universal right to free expression, whilst at the same time recognising that obscenely disrespectful comments or images do more to divide different ethnic and religious groups than they do to unite them (thus having an essentially reactionary political impact). In other words, then, **freedom can be used in both a revolutionary and a reactionary way** and, although progressive activists should defend people’s right to the latter, we simultaneously need to unleash the former if we truly want to nurture peace, justice, and direct democracy in the world.

B) Turkish Obstinance and the Peace Process with the PKK

I) Turkey’s Stubborn Hostility towards Rojava

An ISIS Attack on Rojava ‘Made in Ankara’

Amed Dicle wrote at KurdishQuestion.com after the start of ISIS’s invasion of Kobanî about how **Turkey had been aware of the attack before it had even begun**. On September 15, he says, Kobanî foreign relations official Omer Alus had received “a phone call from a UN official telling him that preparations [had] been made for 400,000 people to flee to Turkey from Kobanî”. Calling from Turkey, the official (who was apparently very “aware of what [was] about to happen”) had clearly expected Kobanî to fall quickly, and wanted to emphasise that “the UN and Turkey [were] going to greet the refugees”. According to Dicle, “government institutions in Urfa were also making contingency plans for Kobanî to fall on the 20th of September”. This anticipated evacuation, therefore, seemed to be part of a much “deeper and larger plan; planned in Ankara”, he says.

It had long been apparent, though, according to Dicle, that Turkey wanted “to suffocate the Rojava Revolution”. For Ankara, he argues, the failure of the progressive Kurdish movement in Rojava would deal “a fatal blow” to “the model it [and its PKK allies proposed] for the whole of Kurdistan and the region”. As a result, he says, the Turkish government had “stalled the peace process and increased its preparations for war by building military stations across Kurdistan” ever “since Öcalan’s Newroz manifesto in

¹¹⁰⁴ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/01/14/i-am-not-charlie/>

2013". Turkey's complicity with ISIS and other jihadists in Syria, meanwhile, was simply another part of this aggressive strategy and, "once the Rojava Revolution [had been] suffocated", Dicle claims, Turkey would "no longer seek a partnership with ISIS".

For Dicle, **Turkey was "not discomfited" by the thought of ISIS controlling border crossings**, as had already been proven by the amicable relations between the two at the points where their paths crossed. Whilst temporarily appeasing the more conservative sections of the AKP government's support base, then, he says, such a phenomenon could later also help Ankara to justify "entering [northern] Syria to establish a "buffer zone"" there. And, for both reasons, along with the traditional establishment hostility to the Kurdish rights movement, "**Turkey preferred ISIS to a free Rojava**". In fact, Dicle suggests, the AKP and similar Islamist organisations in Turkey had been increasingly poisoned by "Kurdish phobia" in recent years, as the progressive Kurdish movement (with its shift away from armed conflict) was now the only force with "the strength to ruin Turkey's plan" of increasing its quasi-colonial control of the region.

Therefore, Dicle speaks of how the Kurdish movement saw **the plan to attack Kobanî** as one which had been "**made by Turkey and ISIS together**". In fact, it would have been "physically impossible to attack Kobanî without making use of the Turkish border", he says, asserting that "those coordinating the Kobanî attack [were] special forces and army officers who [had] previously fought against PKK guerrillas". This supposition, he insists, was the only way of explaining how the Turkish army conveniently 'did not spot' the "ISIS members who [were] manoeuvring through the Turkish border in order attack YPG positions from behind".

Meanwhile, Dicle claims, **Turkey had "arranged for the Begara tribe** in the [Tel Abyad] region", which separated the Cizîrê Canton from the Kobanî Canton, "**to form an army to fight the YPG**" in order to prevent YPG/YPJ forces from sending support to Kobanî from the east. "On the Turkish side of the border", he affirms, "two temporary border crossings [had] been formed" on "lands owned by government-owned TIGEM farmlands" to support these forces, and "no journalists [were] allowed near the area". In fact, Begara tribe leader Newaf El Besiri even affirmed, according to Dicle, "that the tribe's attack on Serêkanîye [had been] organised in Urfa" (in southern Turkey). Such plots aimed at weakening of Rojava (which was "not a strategic region for the USA"), Dicle asserts, would allow the Americans (and the Turkish State) to get "Kurds in Syria to plea for [their] support". And for precisely this reason, he argues, these state powers were slow to respond to ISIS's attack on Kobanî.¹¹⁰⁵

Turkey's Shifting Strategy Regarding ISIS and Rojava

I. Zekeriya Ayman, a Kurdish-Turkish activist living in Australia, wrote in late September about how, in an attempt to "convince the West it [did] not support the Islamic State", **the Turkish regime had "linked the adjective "terrorist" with "IS" for the very first time on September 23"** 2014. For Ayman, however, this was simply a tactical move designed to show America that Turkey was still a 'democratic' ally in the region. "The truth", he says, was "that IS [had] received vital support from the Turkish government". The latter, he insists, had become "an **easy bridge for IS foreign militants** to reach Syria, and Iraq", and had **treated ISIS casualties** in its hospitals (with the militants "even having a **hospital exclusively for their use**"). Erdoğan's government, meanwhile, had also provided "**basic needs** to IS under the guise of "humanitarian aid""; "**weapons and ammunitions** directly" to the group; and "**safe passage for arms deliveries** from elsewhere". It had also been "**opening and closing its borders to suit IS**". Furthermore, Ayman claims that ISIS fighters "trapped" in Syria and Iraq had been allowed to escape to Turkey "to regroup and train".

¹¹⁰⁵ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/who-is-planning-what-in-Kobani/246-who-is-planning-what-in-Kobani.html>

Since 2011, Ayman asserts, Turkey had been “the most enthusiastic government in the world about the demise of the Assad regime” in Syria. Prime Minister Erdoğan’s “interest in toppling the Syrian regime”, however, had seen itself come face to face with a “growing Kurdish resistance” in the country and the creation of a “revolutionary “liberated zone”” in Rojava. This area in northern Syria, Ayman says, had hindered Ankara’s efforts significantly, especially as Rojavans had refused to get involved in the quagmire of the civil war on behalf of international and regional powers (choosing instead to protect its own population from invaders and occupiers). The events in Rojava, he argues, represented “a real people’s revolution”, and “the first revolutionary project in the Middle East not supported by any major political power since the 2011 Arab Spring”. In fact, they began “generating hope in the Middle East”, he stresses, by suggesting that “revolution may be possible without the backing of the super powers”.

With the Turkish policy of creating a ‘buffer zone’ in northern Syria (to “stifle the Rojava Revolution”) having failed to catch on, however, **Ankara now sought to “revive its failed attempts to demolish the Rojava uprising” by exploiting the USA’s war to “destroy IS”**. It realised that it could not “rely on the IS [and other jihadists] to crush Kurdish resistance”, and that its “best bet [was] actually the US”. For example, “if a ground operation [were to follow] air strikes in Syria”, Turkey would “be more than happy to occupy Syria from [the] north”, according to Ayman.¹¹⁰⁶ With the AKP government seeking “to make Turkey a major player in the region and beyond”, he says, such an intervention would be a great propaganda victory for its leaders. And, amidst Ankara’s hopes of “constructing a foreign policy that was neither a continuation of Cold War deference to Washington nor the adoption of an alienated anti-Western posture”, such action would surely prove useful for Erdoğan and his party.¹¹⁰⁷

Overall, Ayman asserts, Turkey’s admission that ISIS militants were ‘terrorists’ did not show that the country would change its policy of trying to “kill the Rojava Revolution”, but that it would now attempt to “kill it from within [the US-led anti-ISIS] coalition”. Nonetheless, he insists, the AKP would “pay a hefty price, domestically, for its support of the US led coalition against IS”, with its “religious base” likely to “ask questions” about its support for a renewed Western-led military campaign in the Middle East. Erdoğan’s regime, however, knew that any internal loss of support would be a much “lower price than it would pay if it went against US interests”.¹¹⁰⁸

In early October, however, World Bulletin spoke of how Turkey was “in the process of drawing up plans for a buffer zone on the border in Syria that [would] secure regions controlled by the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic Front”, which would possibly only be manned by Turkish troops. According to an “unnamed security source”, the Turkish army “would still [be prepared to] form a buffer zone without foreign troops”, even though the Ankara had previously insisted that “a buffer zone should be created with international support”. The source did assert, though, that the buffer zone would “not include regions controlled by the [PYD or ISIS]”, perhaps due to the fact that occupying one or the other would likely cause a backlash from either progressive Kurds or reactionary Islamists inside Turkey. The PYD’s Salih Muslim, meanwhile, reasserted that, although a buffer zone in Rojavan territory would be considered an occupation, “the security of our borders [was still] more urgent than anything”, trying to convince the Turkish regime that Rojava had no intention of fighting against Turkey.¹¹⁰⁹

¹¹⁰⁶ <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/57438>

¹¹⁰⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/20128218848907396.html>

¹¹⁰⁸ <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/57438>

¹¹⁰⁹ <http://www.worldbulletin.net/turkey/145542/turkeys-top-general-vows-to-defend-aleppo-base>

Ankara's Definition of Terrorism

At the same time, Free Speech Radio News (FSRN) reported in early October about how the Turkish State, whilst officially committed to supporting the USA in its fight against ISIS, considered the progressive Kurdish movement to be just as much of a threat as the Wahhabi extremists. Anti-terrorism motions passed recently in the Turkish parliament, FSRN asserts, did not “specify the so-called Islamic State”, and chose instead to “authorize military action against “terrorist threats”” in general – which could be broadly applied to PKK-affiliated groups as well. President Erdoğan, for example, had “made it clear” that he thought “the fight against terrorism in the region should focus as much on the Kurdish rebel group the PKK as the Islamic State”.

According to Istanbul University's Nuray Mert, the “Islamist conservative background” of the AKP meant that the ruling party was “very reluctant” to call ISIS terrorists, while it was happy to label progressive Kurdish groups as such. In fact, he argues, Erdoğan and his followers were very “reluctant to be seen as critical of any movement, no matter how brutal... , made in the name of Islam”. Cengiz Aktar of Istanbul's Suleyman Sah University, meanwhile, asserts that “the Kurds in the region, be they Turkish Kurds or Syrian Kurds, [were] actually realizing, applying... , [and] practicing the autonomy that the Turkish Kurds [had] been fighting for [over the course of many] years”. And in Damascus and Ankara, he insists, the state regimes “[did] not like that”, and one sign of this fear was represented in the fact that numerous Kurdish refugees in Turkey were being prevented from returning to Kobani. “We want to go back to Kobani”, one refugee called Hasan said, “to join our brothers and sisters fighting against these [ISIS] terrorists... but the Turks are stopping us [from] returning”. In short, he insisted: “it has become a prison here”.¹¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, BBC correspondent Paul Wood met with a Kurdish smuggler on the Syrian-Turkish border, who had taken arms into Kobani and helped refugees cross into Turkey. The smuggler told Wood that, in his opinion, “the wars in Syria and Iraq [would] end in another Sykes-Picot” and “the Kurds [would] get shafted again”. At the same time, after hundreds of Turkish Kurds had crossed into Kobani for a solidarity march, they were met on their return to the border with “**volleys of tear gas, [and] then live rounds**” from the Turkish ‘security forces’. In these events, one person was “shot dead, another wounded, [and] another beaten unconscious with rifle butts”.

A Turkish journalist, meanwhile, asserted that there were “**still IS safehouses**” in Turkey. At the same time, the country's supposed allies in the FSA were largely ineffective at fighting ISIS. “**For all practical purposes**”, Wood said, “**the FSA barely [existed] in much of rebel-held Syria**”. For this reason, the “US-led coalition's air campaign [would] struggle to find a reliable [read subservient and capitalist] partner on the ground”.¹¹¹¹ The most effective force, in the YPG/YPJ and their allies, could simply not be seen as subservient to Western economic interests because they defended grassroots democracy in Rojava, and therefore could not be given the permanent ‘blessing’ of the West.

Turkish Border Crossings ‘Turn a Blind Eye’ to ISIS Fighters

In late 2014, France 24 quoted Diyarbakır human rights activist Şehbal Şenyurt as saying that she had “grown accustomed to witnessing... **would-be jihadists walk across the barren border between Turkey and Syria, in full view of bystanders, TV crews and Turkish border patrols** – who [would] do nothing to stop them”. While Kurdish fighters on the Syrian side of the border would shoot at the invaders, she affirmed, returned fire from ISIS would allow the group's new recruits to pass “safely through, ready to join the battle” in

¹¹¹⁰ <http://fsrn.org/2014/10/turkey-approves-possibility-of-military-action-against-terrorist-threats/>

¹¹¹¹ <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/notebook/9329302/pistols-airstrikes-and-smuggled-cows-a-letter-from-islamic-state-border-country/>

Kobani. Having monitored “areas known to be regularly crossed by militants en route to Syria” since the start of the ISIS siege on the city, Şenyurt and other volunteers had bravely faced “the threat of retaliation” in order to “try and stop the flow of jihadist fighters” into Syria.

After the start of the battle for Kobani, Şenyurt said, there had been “an increase in the number of vehicles crossing the border..., especially at night”. Although the Turkish border had “long been heavily guarded” as a result of the state’s conflict with the PKK, Şenyurt points out how “vehicles of all kinds [would now] come and go”, in spite of the fact that, normally, “there [was] very little traffic along this stretch of the border”. According to Diyarbakır lawyer Tahir Elci, meanwhile, ISIS and other jihadist groups active in Syria were being allowed to “enter Turkey to stock up and then... return” to the country. Although “that [was] against the law”, he stressed, it was nonetheless “the policy of the state”. And as long as the extremists opposed Assad, he argued, Ankara would continue “turning a blind eye to the flow of jihadists” across its borders.¹¹¹²

Inaction, Collaboration, and ‘Pakistanisation’ in Turkey

On October 7, Newsweek’s Alexander Christie-Miller spoke of how “the soldiers of NATO’s **second largest army [had] stood and watched** only a few hundred metres away” as ISIS raised its flag in Kobani, emphasising the “**potentially devastating long-term price Turkey may pay** for remaining ambivalent to the plight of the Kobani’s Kurdish defenders”. YPJ commander Delila Azad, for example, insisted that she and her forces had “urged the international community including Turkey to help our resistance against ISIS by sending us weapons, logistics and ammunitions”, but that this call had fallen “on deaf ears in the international community and in Turkey”. Furthermore, in her opinion, “the Turkish Government [had] not [responded] to [the] call because Turkey [supported the] Islamic State against [the] Kurds”.

Turkey may have appeared for years as a “bastion of stability in a troubled region”, Christie-Miller says, but its inaction on the question of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was now threatening to lead to increasing instability at home. Additionally, with the rise of Kurdish and secular opposition to Erdoğan’s Islamist government, ISIS sympathisers in Turkey looked like they might try to take advantage of the situation and add to tensions in the country for their own gain. In fact, Halil Karaveli (of security think tank the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute) warned that **Turkey was “in the first stage of ‘Pakistan-ization’”, referring to the AKP’s alleged tolerance of ISIS and other jihadists**. Then, he suggests, the latter might turn their eyes on Turkey in the “same way [that] jihadists fighting in Afghanistan went on to wreak havoc in Pakistan”.

Asli Aydintasbas, meanwhile, from Turkish paper Milliyet, affirmed that “Turkey’s Kurds [had] been given a front row seat to watch the destruction of their own people” in Kobani, and were not prepared to sit back and do nothing. Kobani may have been tiny, she said, “but it [had] gained an enormous symbolic meaning for Turkey’s Kurds, and I don’t think the government realises that”. Turkey’s 15 million Alevis, meanwhile, were also in a difficult position. “Regarded by ISIS as infidels”, they had “already [been complaining] of marginalization under the conservative Sunni-dominated leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”, and Turkey’s perceived complicity with the extremist group was bound to make the Alevis feel at risk from Turkey’s inaction too.

Overall, Christie-Miller asserts, “**Ankara’s seeming ambivalence [could] in part [be] explained by its long history of antagonism with the PKK – and the deep hatred of it**

¹¹¹² <http://www.france24.com/en/20141020-focus-turkey-syria-Kobani-kurds-border-islamic-state/>

harboured by much [of] Turkey's population". Another reason, however, was that, as crisis agency official Hugh Pope had said, **if Turkey's leaders "[went] one way, they [would] have an eruption within one section of their constituency, [while] if they [went] the other way, they [would] have an eruption within another section of it"**.¹¹¹³ In short, the AKP wanted to please its Islamist support base, but at the same time could not afford to keep antagonising minorities and secularists for much longer.

II) Protests and Increasing Tension in Turkey

The Turkish government, according to journalist Cengiz Candar, had **"opened a frontal attack against the PKK-HDP-PYD axis"** in late 2014, and this **offensive "against the top political representatives" of Kurds in Turkey and Syria** (and thus effectively "against the Kurdish political movement" as a whole in these countries) had put hopes of a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish Question in the region at risk. Whilst ambiguously criticising ISIS, Candar says, Erdoğan's government had taken "every opportunity to attack Kurdish political groups and undermine the peace process". In particular, he refers to online newspaper Diken, which reported on Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's claim that the PYD's "stance against the Free Syrian Army... [had] expelled all other Kurdish groups from the region and oppressed the Kurds". Davutoğlu then apparently went on to say that, "when IS saw that the FSA was weakened, it turned on the PYD". He continued, accusing the HDP of "ethnic blindness" and of significantly contributing to the "harm to the PYD in the Rojava problem". Subsequently, the PKK became the target for Davutoğlu's criticism, with him claiming that it had allowed ISIS to advance while it cooperated with Assad's regime in Syria (a clearly ludicrous claim when we look at the acts of the progressive Kurdish movement in the region).

Candar also insists that "each and every sentence [was] problematic" in what Davutoğlu had said, and that some were "even detached from reality". The Turkish-backed FSA, he asserts, had "kept changing its leaders and structure", being primarily composed at one point of "the Islamic Front, whose strongest component was al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra". This group, meanwhile, "did not even exist" in the Kurdish areas of Syria. At the same time, he stresses, **the FSA's "Islamist department" had fought against the PYD along with ISIS, while its "non-Islamist department" [had] never reconciled with the PYD on the issue of Kurdish rights, holding tight to Arab nationalism"**. In fact, even pro-Western Kurdish groups influenced by Turkey or Masoud Barzanî had "failed to reach a compromise with the FSA" as a result of its aforementioned inflexibility. Davutoğlu's remarks, affirms Candar, were therefore "devoid of any factual and justifiable basis".

Since the ISIS assault on Kobanî had gained the attention of the world, meanwhile, Erdoğan's rhetoric had deteriorated into "words that should have never come out of the mouth of a politician who [had] engaged in a dialogue with the PKK leader". Whilst addressing the world's indignation against ISIS, for example, he had asked: "why don't you speak out against the PKK?" The reality hiding behind the ill-thought-out words of the Turkish President, however, was that **the PKK (and the PYD) had: "begun talks for "permanent peace" with Ankara"; waged "defensive struggles in the Sinjar Mountains on Iraqi soil and in Kobanî in Syria"; and shown "no plans to expand its "cantons"**. In trying to compare the PKK and ISIS, therefore, Erdoğan was in a sense playing down both the brutal intolerance and expansionism of the latter and the popular and pluralist self-defence of the former. For, in reality, there was no commonality between the two groups, which could not have been more difficult.

¹¹¹³ http://www.newsweek.com/isis-take-kobane-natos-second-largest-army-sits-sidelines-275798?piano_t=1

Erdoğan's ill-advised words, meanwhile, had come at a point when Turkey and Syria's Kurds seemed "to have united around Kobani, removed the "fictitious border" between them, and launched a struggle for survival in Kobani". Kurdish political veteran and peace activist Sabri Ok, for example, insisted that "the Turkish state [was] pursuing a **dirty and sly policy**, whereby it [sought] to crush the Kurds via the IS gangs, while opening its door to the desperate people [of Kobani] on the assumption they [would] be forced to flee to Northern Kurdistan [Turkey]". For him, Ankara's demonisation of the Kurdish political movement was simply an attempt to justify its denial of both arms and reinforcements to the YPG/YPJ fighters in Kobani. And, in turn, this strategy would lead to the inevitable advance of ISIS, and the emptying of Kobani. Subsequently, he said, Turkey would be able to "set up a buffer zone under the pretext of humanitarian concern", and thus erode Kurdish autonomy in Kobani and elsewhere in Rojava.

Ok also asserted that **the KRG in Iraq was currently speaking "comfortably on behalf of the AKP"**. Its Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, for example, felt "compelled to cover up the AKP-IS links more than any AKP supporter would do". In fact, even though those "who [were resisting] at the border, who [were suffering] the blows of the [Turkish] police and soldiers' truncheons, [and] who [were] the target of tear gas and bullets [were saying] the opposite", Barzani's main focus was to stick up for his precious Turkish allies. And this indirect collusion with Turkish support for ISIS was perhaps a result of the fact that the KRG leader knew that, when Erbil came under threat from ISIS, it would be "propped up by US support and an intensive US air operation". The same, however, had not been forthcoming in Kobani, and had shown that the USA and its allies favoured "Ankara and Erbil over the Kurdish political movement in Turkey and Syria".¹¹¹⁴ It also showed, though, that Rojavans could not truly trust any of these state forces, no matter what temporary support they would give to them in the following weeks and months.

The KCK Growing Impatient with the Turkish State over Its Rojava Stance

Because of Ankara's inaction over Kobani, and its reported complicity with (or support for) ISIS and other jihadists in northern Syria, the KCK stated in late September that "the "state of no conflict" [between the Turkish State and the PKK] had been effectively ended by the actions of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)". It then said that, in response, it would "step up the fight in every sphere and by using any kind of measure to reciprocate the war waged by AKP against our people". The ruling regime, meanwhile, was accused by the organisation of "exploiting... Öcalan's efforts for peace" and of making the truce "meaningless" by seeking to weaken the progressive Kurdish movement (in both Turkey and Syria) rather than deal with it on equal terms.

The KCK also spoke of how the Turkish State had "blocked attempts by Turkish Kurds to enter Syrian Kurdistan", revealing that it was "deeply concerned that involvement in fighting IS could embolden and strengthen the PKK". Furthermore, the organisation affirmed that it would "take any kind of political and military step and invalidate the inauspicious and dirty policies pursued" by the Erdoğan regime. Abdullah Öcalan, meanwhile, "issued a statement through his lawyer expressing impatience with the AKP's stance on the peace process and accusing the authorities of being more ready to negotiate with IS than Kurds". At the same time, PKK military chief Murat Karayılan said that **the peace process with the Turkish government had effectively been "ended" by Ankara's actions**, but that Öcalan still had "the final say".¹¹¹⁵

Alexander Christie-Miller also spoke about how Turkey was jeopardising the peace process, saying that the latter was becoming "increasingly imperilled by the crisis in the besieged

¹¹¹⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/10/turkey-syria-kurds-kobane-isis-coalition-1.html#>

¹¹¹⁵ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/9/turkey5117.htm#.VCOVz-qWMCA.twitter>

town of Kobanî” and “by the Turkish government’s growing authoritarian streak”. With Kurdish politicians “accusing Turkey of either facilitating or else failing to act against the militants”, he says, Ankara’s “mandate for cross-border [military] incursions” meant nothing. Additionally, although the “peace initiative” had been “widely seen as Turkey’s best chance at resolving the conflict [with the PKK]”, the AKP regime’s request for the PKK to “lay down its arms” in exchange for insignificant token advances simply patronised members of the progressive Kurdish movement.

According to BDP MP Ertuğrul Kürkçü, “the ceasefire and the peace process [were] in a very fragile situation”. The armistice, he insisted, was “not only determined by the situation in Turkey, but [by] the situation in the entire Kurdish nation” (i.e. in all Kurdish areas throughout the Middle East). “The situation in Rojava, and particularly in Kobanî”, Kürkçü asserted, was being “seen by the Kurdish armed movement as a **proxy war by Turkey against Kurdish gains in Syria**”, which had been “regarded warily by Turkey”. According to Christie-Miller, “the growing belief among Kurds that Turkey [was] willing to allow Kobanî to fall” was now threatening to “**derail peace talks with the PKK**”. In short, the slow reaction in Ankara to the ISIS assault on Kobanî had “created a trauma in Kurdish minds”, said Cenk Sidar, CEO of consultancy firm Sidar Global Partners. “It [would] be very hard to restore trust”, he argued, and **if Kobanî were to fall, “the peace process [would] be over”**.

For Lehigh University’s Henri Barkey, however, “a return to war between Turkey and the PKK [was] unlikely”. Because the “economic situation [had] improved” in Turkish Kurdistan, and people there “[did] not want to go back to war”, the progressive Kurdish movement was much more likely to pursue other tactics to resist Turkish aggression. Nonetheless, Sidar underlined, “a comprehensive democratic climate” desperately needed to be built in Turkey, as “only in that context [could] the Kurdish issue be solved”.¹¹¹⁶

A Defeat for Turkey in Kobanî

Veysi Sarisözen at the Rojava Report claimed on October 5 that, “from a strategic perspective, Turkey [had already] suffered a major defeat” in Kobanî. In short, his article claims that the USA had not underestimated ISIS (as Obama wanted the world to believe), but had instead “[chosen] to look the other way”. In other words, then, the superpower was simply beginning to “speak openly about what they [had already] known for a long time” because the advances of ISIS and other jihadists could no longer be ignored by the world’s mainstream media.

With the refugee crisis in Kobanî, and the “heroic resistance” of the city’s YPG/YPJ fighters, it became even harder for the world to overlook what was happening there. The Rojava Report emphasises, though, that, “in the same way that the Nazis suffered defeat at Stalingrad from a strategic perspective despite the fact that the battle would go on for two more years and cost millions of lives”, Kobanî also looked set to be a strategic defeat for both ISIS and Turkey. The Turkish government could thus “no longer continue its gamble with ISIS”, and that is why, after many days of anti-ISIS resistance in Kobanî, it was finally forced to join the coalition of its international allies.

Turkey’s plan to destroy Rojava through complicity with ISIS had failed, but there would still be **long-term plans by the USA and the EU for a “Rojava without the YPG and PYD”**. And, even though this book has shown that some misguided commentators have claimed that Kurdish autonomy would contribute to the West’s plans to “break apart the Middle East, extract its riches and share its markets”, I agree with the Rojava Report in its assessment that a “victory in Kobanî and the liberation of the whole of Rojava [would] be a

¹¹¹⁶ http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0930/Islamic-State-Is-Turkey-jeopardizing-peace-with-Kurdish-minority?cmpid=addthis_twitter

major blow to the plans of the global powers". **Instead of contributing to the rule of a number of Western stooges in the region, the survival of the Rojava Revolution would effectively render borders meaningless and contribute to the dream of "a common confederal Middle East home and a society on a democratic national foundation formed from a synthesis of all ethnicities, religions, sects and cultures"**. Overall, Sarisözen says, **"the heroic defenders of Kobanî [had] become the hope and the spirit of humanity"**.¹¹¹⁷

Protests against Turkish Inaction and a Violent Response from the State

The BBC's Paul Adams said on October 4 that "a number of refugees on the border were demonstrating when Turkish authorities used tear gas to break it up".¹¹¹⁸ According to Adams, "Turkish Kurds and refugees from fighting in Syria [had] clashed with Turkish security forces on the border between the two countries" on a number of occasions. The word 'clash', however, suggested that there were two equal forces fighting, rather than one side which was largely helpless and another which was heavily armed, well-funded, and well-organised. **Turkish troops**, for example, **"used tear gas and water cannon to disperse protesters angry at the situation in Syria"**, where Turkey had prevented arms and reinforcements arriving in Kobanî to support its fight against ISIS. Meanwhile, unarmed Kurds were also "chased by soldiers from a rocky hill on the Turkish side [of the border] where they were watching the siege of Kobanî". Reports were also coming in at the time of four US air strikes in the "Kobanî area", though they clearly did not stop ISIS from advancing further into Kobanî.¹¹¹⁹

At the same time, Adams spoke about how "a squadron of Turkish tanks [sat] idle" just "a few hundred metres away" from Kobanî, in spite of government promises that it would not allow Kobanî to fall to ISIS. One excuse for not entering was that Ankara wanted "to create a no-fly zone before sending troops anywhere across the border". Prime Minister Davutoğlu's words, however, promising that Turkey would "do whatever [it could] to prevent [the fall of Kobanî] from happening" rang hollow as ISIS advanced into Kobanî and Turkish forces waited calmly just across the border.¹¹²⁰

Police Attacks on Journalists

The following day, Adams was reporting on the situation on the Syrian border when **"Turkish police... fired two tear gas canisters at a vehicle carrying a BBC reporting team"**, an event that was captured on video. The second canister smashed through the vehicle's rear window at "point blank range...", filling the van with tear gas and briefly setting fire to the vehicle".¹¹²¹ On October 6, meanwhile, the Rojava Report said that a number of **journalists** "covering the ISIS on attacks on Kobanî" had been **"arrested by Turkish soldiers as they attempted to cross the border at the Mürşitpınar Border Crossing"**. Both Mustafa Bali (of Özgür Basın) and Xizna Bado (of Ronahi TV), for example, were detained as they were escaping the "street-to-street fighting" in Kobanî for security reasons. At the same time, reporter Lezgin İbrahim, along with another "unidentified journalist", were being "held at a local military base". In other words, the **"media crackdown** on the Turkish-side of the border" was simply exemplified by the police attack on the BBC, but was in reality part of a much larger campaign to hinder journalistic freedom in the area.¹¹²²

KurdishQuestion.com reported, meanwhile, on the appearance of "posing Turkish soldiers" in the media. Mainstream Turkish media outlets, the website claimed, had shown "pictures

¹¹¹⁷ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/05/turkey-has-been-strategically-defeated-in-kobane/>

¹¹¹⁸ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29488474>

¹¹¹⁹ http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29490256?ocid=socialflow_twitter

¹¹²⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29474879>

¹¹²¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29499683>

¹¹²² <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/06/turkey-arresting-journalists-crossing-from-kobane/>

of soldiers ready for action”, but they “were in reality posing for photos”. The soldiers “actually had their backs to Kobanî and the Syrian border”, it argued, and they “were instead pointing their guns at the town of Suruç, inside the borders of Turkey”. The Turkish army, it said, had clearly felt “the need to indulge in **cheap PR tactics** in order to prove that they [were] not supporting ISIS”.¹¹²³ At the same time, though, the Turkish media was guilty of going along with these games.

On October 19, Iran’s Press TV reported on how **Serena Shim**, their US-Lebanese correspondent in Turkey, had “been **killed in a suspicious car accident near the Turkey-Syria border**”. Having covered the ongoing war in Kobanî, she died when her car “collided with a heavy vehicle”. The “identity and whereabouts of the truck driver [remained] unknown”, the media outlet reported. Shim had previously claimed, the news outlet said, that she had obtained stories of Wahhabi militants “infiltrating into Syria through the Turkish border”, and had in her possession images of them “crossing... in World Food Organization and other NGOs’ trucks”. In fact, she had also told Press TV just two days before her death that “**the Turkish intelligence agency had accused her of spying**” and that she “**feared being arrested**”. She had responded to these claims, meanwhile, by insisting that she had “never done anything aside [her] job”.¹¹²⁴

Later, on October 21, journalist Vijay Prashad spoke about Shim, and how she had been in Turkey to “cover the story of the Kobanî conflict and to look into the allegations of Turkish help to the Islamic State”. According to Prashad, “**evidence for the treatment of Islamic State fighters... [was] in plain sight... at Urfa’s Balıklıgöl State Hospital**”. Nonetheless, he says, Turkish intelligence (Millî İstihbarat Teşkilatı) had shown it was “mighty skittish about the story”, intimidating Shim for the work she was doing. Having alleged that ISIS militants “had been smuggled over the border [into Syria] in trucks with logos from the World Food Organization”, she had made a claim that no-one had yet made (though Syrian Kurdish journalist Barzan Iso “had already reported that **Qatari charities [had] been using the Jarabulus crossing [to the west of Kobanî] to get aid to the Islamic State**”). Iso and Prashad (who had also reported on aid being sent to ISIS from Turkey), however, “did not have any evidence that trucks with logos from international organizations were being used for this purpose”.

According to Prashad, Oğuzeli Airport in Gaziantep, Turkey, “had come to resemble the old airport in Peshawar (Pakistan), as [Wahhabi militants] disembarked with a glint in their eyes to join what they saw as a holy war”. In fact, a Kurdish commander had even told him that “**the Islamic State [was] to Turkey as the Taliban [was] to Pakistan**” (a statement that gains great significance if we consider what was seen in Chapter Five). In a country called the “largest prison for journalists” by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Shim’s allegations that “**she had footage of the IS militants making across the border in broad daylight**” were unlikely to pass into the mainstream media without Turkish resistance. Unsurprisingly, then, Shim was killed just two days later as she left Suruç. “The driver and truck vanished”, Prashad emphasises, although Turkish authorities would soon say “the driver of [a] cement mixer [had] been arrested”.

Shim was not the only reporter to suffer for her investigations, however. Earlier in October, “demonstrators in the town of Diyarbakir [had] attacked four reporters for the pro-Kurdish press – Bisar Durgut and Nihat Kutlu of the daily Azadiya Welat and Beritan Canözer and Sarya Gözüglü of JINHA”. Meanwhile, Kadri Bagdu had been “shot dead by two men on a motorcycle” in Adana “as he distributed the Kurdish daily papers Azadiya Welat and

¹¹²³ <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/north-kurdistan/the-new-war-correspondents-and-posing-turkish-soldiers/264-the-new-war-correspondents-and-posing-turkish-soldiers.html>

¹¹²⁴ http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/10/19/382854/press-tv-reporter-in-turkey-killed/?utm_content=bufferb7e3f&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer

Özgür Gündem".¹¹²⁵ In other words, then, there was clearly more than enough evidence to back up the unfavourable claim made by RSF above.

Repression of Protests Risks Sparking a New Revolution

Iskender Doğu, an editor of ROAR Magazine, wrote from the Turkish-Syrian border on October 10 about "the battle for Kobanî and the Kurdish struggle for democratic autonomy". He speaks of how, on October 7, Kurds across Turkey had taken to the streets in what were protests (and government repression) of "unprecedented... size and intensity". Doğu believes, after speaking with many people on the border at that time, "that this [was] the beginning of a new Kurdish uprising". Contrary to the presentations coming from "several mainstream media outlets", though, he says that the **protesters simply wanted "an end to Turkey's covert support for ISIS and for the border at Kobanî to be opened in order to let refugees out, and humanitarian aid and weapons in"**. They had told Doğu, meanwhile, that **"ISIS could never have grown as big as it did, and conquer as much of Rojava as it [had] done, were it not for the material, financial and logistical support the extremists [had] received from the Turkish state"**.

At the same time, six families who were staying "in the house of a local farmer" in a village near Suruç had told Doğu that they had "seen with their own eyes how a train [had] entered Syria from Turkey, laden with tanks and ammunition, destined for an unknown location in [an] ISIS-controlled area". Meanwhile, Abdurrahman Abdulkhadir, who "owned a coffeeshop" in the village of Xerbisan, had seen the YPG/YPJ "destroy four ISIS tanks". Then, soon after the event, he said, **a train crossed into Syria from Turkey "carrying exactly four tanks to make up for ISIS' losses at the hands of the YPG/YPJ"**. In fact, he would later see "a group of men with "big barreled guns..." coming from Turkey... right after the YPG/YPJ had forced ISIS into a retreat".

Meanwhile, every single refugee in Turkey who Doğu had spoken to had "expressed their full support for Rojava's social revolution". One man even told him **"his life had never been better than when democratic autonomy was installed in Rojava"**. Everyone **"could enjoy their freedom"**, he said, **"men and women were treated equally"**, and **"there was no friction between the different religious and ethnic groups"**. The "one thing that could change" the Kurdish destiny of "oppression and death", therefore, according to Doğu, was the Rojava Revolution, which "[had] now been all but exterminated in Kobanî". At the same time, Doğu asserts, two DAF activists participating in humanitarian activities on the border had stressed that the Rojava Revolution was "based on emancipation and direct democracy" and was "against [both] state formation and terrorist gangs".

Finally, though, Doğu speaks about how there may well be "a new generation of Kurds" which had been "radicalized [in resistance to the AKP's anti-democratic and anti-Kurdish policies] to such an extent that even the PKK [would find] it hard to keep them in line".¹¹²⁶ In other words, while both the HDP and PKK had officially asked Kurdish protesters to leave the streets (in order to avoid further violence), the seemingly imminent fall of Kobanî meant that tensions were uncontrollably high, and that even those most committed to peace were now growing increasingly impatient with Ankara's hostile policies towards the Rojava Revolution.

Government Censorship of the Media

¹¹²⁵ <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/10/21/the-death-of-a-reporter/>

¹¹²⁶ http://roarmag.org/2014/10/kurdistan-kobane-turkey-isis/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+roarmag+%28ROAR+Magazine%29 and @Le_Friquet

On October 12, KurdistanTribune.com's Dr Amy L. Beam reported on how, three days previously, the Turkish Communications Minister Lutfi Elvan had "stated that Twitter [had] withheld "provocative tweets against Turkey's national security" during the recent protests". He said that Ankara had "[done] what was necessary" and that a "considerable portion of those tweets [had been] blocked by Twitter". By October 11, however, **forty Kurdish protesters had "been shot dead allegedly by police using live ammunition"** in a crackdown on popular demonstrations in solidarity with the Kobanî resistance. In the meantime, **Turkish government was focussing its efforts on "blocking all tweets and websites describing these police murders"**, so it was difficult to confirm this information. It was also trying to ensure that **details about ISIS's advance in Kobanî were also hidden** from the population. In fact, as stated above, there were a significant number of state attacks on journalists, and around **"20 journalists reporting on Kobanî" were reportedly "being held in Urfa Suruç by Turkish police"**.

On Twitter, Beam asserts, her "links, photos, and certain hashtags [had] been blocked since Oct. 10", while "hundreds of websites [had been] blocked". Apparently, Elvan had cracked down on tweets saying things like "Turkey's PKK commander Buyik threatens to resume war in response to "the AKP's war against our people"", showing a "list of 29 Kurds killed by police during protest demonstrations", and relaying that the UN had said "thousands [were] likely to be massacred if jihadists [took] Kobanî".¹¹²⁷

Later on, in early 2015, Twitter would release its "biannual transparency report", in which it would emerge that the Turkish government had "made by far the most requests to remove content" from the social networking site in late 2014. And, out of 477 requests, "Twitter [had] complied with 50 per cent". The regime had also requested data on Twitter users on 496 occasions ("making it the third placed country on the list behind India with 1,938" and the USA with 3,229). Nonetheless, Twitter affirmed that it had "complied with none of Turkey's requests" regarding user data.¹¹²⁸

Kobanî as a Symbol of Kurdish Resistance

Ryan Lucas at the Associated Press spoke on October 12 about how Kobanî had been "transformed from a dusty backwater into a symbol of resistance for Kurds around the world". As street fights began in the town, meanwhile, Kurdish fighters and civilians described how "the few remaining civilians [had] sought shelter in basements". Nonetheless, although ISIS "[owned] the day" since taking "Kobanî's eastern districts" on October 6, the YPG/YPJ apparently "[ruled] after sundown when the Islamic State's heavy weapons [could not] effectively target Kurdish positions".

At the same time, 19-year-old fighter Boras explained how "Kurds [had] had to improvise" a lot since the urban battle had begun, doing things like "packing a truck tire with explosives and then rolling it down the hill toward Islamic State fighters". Kobanî policeman Aladeen Ali Kor, meanwhile, said there were some front lines where the Rojavan militias were "basically across the street" from the ISIS invaders. Boras, who was one of several fighters who had managed to cross over the Turkish border secretly to fight alongside the YPG/YPJ forces in Kobanî, insisted: "either Kobanî will fall and I will die, or we will win", showing the determined spirit held in the ranks of the defence forces of Syrian Kurdistan.¹¹²⁹

Meanwhile 47-year-old shepherd Ali spoke about how his 18-year-old daughter was fighting with the YPJ. "I have not reached her level of commitment", he said. Nonetheless, many resistance fighters in Rojava had, and it was this commitment which was leading to

¹¹²⁷ <http://kurdistantribune.com/2014/turkey-censors-twitter-websites-during-kobani-siege/>, @amybeam, and amybeam@yahoo.com

¹¹²⁸ <http://i100.independent.co.uk/article/the-country-that-makes-the-most-content-removal-requests-on-twitter--ekBKBAoQhe>

¹¹²⁹ http://news.yahoo.com/kurds-describe-fierce-battles-streets-kobani-175704510.html?soc_src=mediacontentsharebuttons and @relucasz

heavy ISIS losses in Kobanî, in spite of the fact that the Wahhabi jihadists significantly outgunned their progressive opponents. For example, Abu Mohammad al Amriki, who “had lived in the US for ten years or so before traveling to Syria” and had become “a poster boy for “Jihad Cool” foreign fighters” after shifting his allegiance from Jabhat al Nusra to ISIS, was allegedly killed by the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî. Although he had been heavily featured in “ISIS propaganda tailored for foreign audiences”, he was nonetheless placed on the frontlines, where the determined Rojavan militias were leaving ISIS with ever-increasing death tolls.

Kobanî refugees and Turkish Kurds, meanwhile, “gathered in the villages along the border and on the hills to the west of Kobanî to watch” the conflict, inspired by the indomitable resistance of the YPG/YPJ. At the same time, UN envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura also hoped for a Kurdish victory in Kobanî, urging Turkey “to let Kurdish volunteers reinforce Kurdish militias defending [the city]”. Ankara stayed true to its hostile anti-Rojavan stance, however, and, on October 10, “Turkish soldiers fired on Kurds from Qamishli who were protesting Turkey’s passive stance toward the battle” in Kobanî. Turkish intelligence officers, in the meantime, were also stepping up their efforts to stop Kurdish protests, “detaining 240 Kurds in a basketball court in Suruç” (21 of whom were “Kurdish activist journalists” and 30 of whom were “women and children”). These people were subsequently “interrogated about their political affiliations”. Then, a day later, “anti-terrorist police arrested three Western journalists” in Diyarbakır. And, amid these aggressive Turkish tactics, a 31-year-old PKK member said “**if Kobanî is finished, if the YPG fighters are all killed, there will be a big problem here. There will be war in Turkey**”.¹¹³⁰

Turkey Responsible for Great Human Suffering

Jacques Berès, surgeon and co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières, meanwhile, spoke out in early October about Turkish inaction over Kobanî, saying that, “if the city... [fell] into the hands of ISIS, **Turkey [would] have a huge responsibility in the genocide that [would inevitably] follow**”. In spite of working with the organisation for “more than forty years”, he asserted that “what [he had] actually seen in the past weeks in Syria”, where he had been on a humanitarian mission, was “**worse than anything [he had] ever seen in [his] entire life**”. In particular, he referred to the time he had spent in Rojava with the “young people and many women” of the YPG/YPJ who were fighting against the “ISIS barbarian hordes”, emphasising that “at least 40% of the fighters severely injured that [he had] medicated [there were] women”. He also underlined that “this [was] a feature unique to the region”, which stood “in contradiction with the typical misogyny of this area of the Middle East”. At the same time, his astonishment at having “seen women and young fighters repel the assaults of the jihadists with simple rifles and Kalashnikovs” was quite apparent. Mostly, he affirmed, **the Rojavan defence forces were “armed with courage”**, and many people “from Turkish Kurdistan [had also come] to help the resistance in Rojava”.

Emphasising the disparity in the arms of ISIS and those of the YPG, Berès insisted: “**we haven’t seen Western weapons here**”. He did reveal, however, that **he had “[seen] not only jihadists coming from Turkey but also armoured tanks passing through the Turkish border**”. The fact that Rojava was “a land rich in oil” (1,173 oil fields), he asserted, was one of the main reasons “which [attracted] not only ISIS but also Turkey” to the political process developing in the region. While over “60% of Syrian oil came from this region” before the war, he said, many were now shut down, though “the energy potential [was] very high”. Furthermore, he affirmed, the region was one of the “most prosperous and tolerant of all Syria” prior to the outbreak of the civil war, and an ISIS victory there would mean an end to all of that.

¹¹³⁰ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/12/kobani-still-stands-against-isis-and-all-odds-but-for-how-long.html>

Echoing the words of many Kurdish civilians and political figures, meanwhile, he concluded that “the problem [was] that the border with Turkey [remained] closed” and that the country had “built a wall 5 meters high”, meaning that “no weapons, no medicine, [and] not even a bag of rice or a litre of milk [could pass] through the border”. **Kurdish fighters**, he said, **were essentially “trapped between Turkish soldiers and ISIS gangs and they [could not] escape anywhere”**.¹¹³¹

Tensions Rise in Turkey and Protests Intensify

Between October 7 and 8, riot police in Turkey “used tear gas and water cannon” in “almost 30 cities” as “disturbances spread across the country”. It turned out to be “the worst violence for years”, and the BBC reported that it looked “set to build”. The main protests, the news outlet said, were “directed against the Turkish government”, with Kurds calling for support, whether direct or indirect, for the anti-ISIS resistance in Kobanî. Dozens of the deaths were said to have occurred “in the main Turkish-Kurdish city of Diyarbakir”, where “shops and buses” had been “set on fire” as **Kurdish activists and ISIS sympathisers clashed**. Much of the unrest and violence, however, was caused by the police cracking down on protesters.

At the same time, curfews were subsequently “imposed in several cities in south-eastern Turkey with large Kurdish populations”, and Turkish troops were deployed in the streets to prevent demonstrations from restarting. In some areas, it was “for the first time in over two decades”. Turkish Interior Minister Efkan Ala, meanwhile, accused the demonstrators of “betraying their own country” and warned them to stop protesting or encounter “unpredictable” consequences.

Predictably, most mainstream Turkish newspapers were “highly critical of the protests”, due to their historical opposition to the Kurdish rights movement. Hurriyet, for example, said they were a “threat to peace”, and especially to the peace process with the PKK. It also quoted President Erdoğan as saying that “Kurdish politicians [were] trying to use Kobanî to “blackmail” Turkey” into making concessions that were not in the interests of the state. Haberturk, meanwhile, which is also a ‘centre-right’ paper, portrayed protesters as “enemies of Turkey”. In fact, only the left-wing Birgun was “supportive of the protests”, placing the headline “**IS in Kobanî, AKP in Turkey**”.

Meanwhile, there were also injuries in the streets of Germany, where “hundreds of Kurdish demonstrators in Hamburg held a rally against IS militants” and ended up defending themselves against a “similar number” of ISIS sympathisers. The two groups, however, were “eventually separated by police firing water cannon”. Elsewhere, in Celle, violence broke out when ethnic Chechens fought with mostly Kurdish Yezîdîs.¹¹³² In Celle, RT reported, police had “failed to prevent clashes”, and “the two sides, armed with stones and bottles, attempted to break through police lines to attack each other”. At this point, “police in full anti-riot gear used pepper spray and batons” on the groups, and “a large police force [remained] in the city to prevent a possible escalation” of hostilities. The “Chechen nationals”, the news outlet said, had come to the town “from all over Germany”. Back in Hamburg, the clashes that ensued after Kurdish protesters were “attacked by a group of approximately 40 armed supporters of the Islamic State... resulted in four people being hospitalized with stab wounds”.¹¹³³

Hurriyet, meanwhile, reported that “**at least 26 people [had been] killed**”, with many more injured, in the protests throughout Turkey on October 7. The paper said that a curfew had

¹¹³¹ <http://autori.fanpage.it/syria-the-kurds-who-bravely-fight-against-isis/#ixzz3FCHgisH8> and <http://www.linkiesta.it/jacques-beres-syria-isis>

¹¹³² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29530640>

¹¹³³ <http://rt.com/news/194060-germany-kurds-muslims-brawls/>

subsequently been declared “in six Turkish provinces”. The majority of violence, it added, had come from “suspected members of **Hizbullah**, a radical Islamist grouping whose members [were] mostly Kurdish and [were] known for allegedly **aiding the state in the torture and murder of Kurdish activists in the 1990s**”. The group was thought to sympathise with ISIS, and therefore opposed the anti-ISIS resistance in Kobanî and the demonstrations in solidarity with the city’s struggle. PKK members and sympathisers, meanwhile, defended themselves and their right to protest.

In Diyarbakır, alleged members of **Hizbullah were said to have “strafed a crowd of protesters”**. Then, later on, a building belonging to the Islamist group was attacked in response. On October 8, meanwhile, ten people died, and half of them were “described as pro-Hizbullah”. Elsewhere, “members of the **Free Cause Party (Hüda Par)**, which [was] closely linked to Hizbullah, allegedly **opened fire on other protesters, killing two**”.¹¹³⁴ [Hüda Par, like Hizbullah, was said to have contributed to the Turkish State’s war against the PKK, and “was allegedly created by the state in the 1990s to fight the Kurdish movement”].¹¹³⁵

As a result of the violence, schools were closed in Diyarbakır on October 8, and all flights there were cancelled. The interior minister, meanwhile, said that the “eclipse of reason should be ended immediately and streets should be emptied”. However, **it was not the anti-ISIS protesters who lacked ‘reason’, but the AKP government and its Islamist supporters**. Early on October 7, for example, the **Turkish police had “refused to allow a protest”** after the HDP had called “for a demonstration in support of Kobanî”. This failure to allow peaceful protests was inevitably a key factor responsible for heightening tensions among a population already angry at Turkish inaction regarding Kobanî’s fight-back against ISIS.

Human rights lawyer Tamer Doğan, meanwhile, said that he had “tried to negotiate with the police” but was later “rushed to hospital after being injured during a police crackdown on protesters” in Istanbul (he had apparently been “hit in the head by a tear gas canister”). In fact, some of his colleagues subsequently “accused police of deliberately targeting [him]”. Elsewhere, in Sultangazi, police “also refused to permit a protest”, in which around 500 people sought to “march to the local headquarters of the... AKP” to show their opposition to its hostile stance concerning Kobanî. At the same time, an ultranationalist Islamist group “surrounded the district headquarters of the... DBP [the successor of the BDP]”, and 50 people were left trapped inside. And only three hours later would they finally be able to leave, thanks to a police escort.

In Istanbul’s Bağcılar district, shots were allegedly fired at protesters from “the local Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) building”. Then, when protesters tried to set fire to the building as a result, the MHP (backed into a corner as it was) suddenly “called for calm”. Meanwhile, police resorted to tear gas and water cannon during a protest in Ankara where several hundred people had gathered. In fact, just a day before, anti-ISIS protesters had been fired at “with live ammunition” in Adana.¹¹³⁶

On October 8, Prime Minister Davutoğlu blamed the HDP for having called on Kurds to protest rather than the police for having decided to ban the protest. The prime minister, seeking to demonise the protesters, said that they had sought to “destroy public order”. He also suggested yet again that the voice of the Kurds was meaningless because they had

¹¹³⁴ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/video-one-killed-several-injured-in-isis-protests-across-turkey-as-curfew-declared-in-two-provinces.aspx?pageID=238&nID=72659&NewsCatID=341>

¹¹³⁵ <http://www.gagrulce.net/100-thousand-kurds-chant-turkish-hizbullah-charlie-hebdo-protest-southeast-turkey/>

¹¹³⁶ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/video-one-killed-several-injured-in-isis-protests-across-turkey-as-curfew-declared-in-two-provinces.aspx?pageID=238&nID=72659&NewsCatID=341>

previously remained silent about atrocities committed by Assad in Syria (a claim which was not backed up with any kind of evidence).¹¹³⁷

A prominent AKP MP, meanwhile, released a “controversial tweet that expressed his preference for jihadists over supporters of the [PKK]”. This comment came as a response to the death of an Islamist from the Hüda Par amidst anti-government protests, even though it had been the authoritarian state forces and extremist reactionaries that had initiated the violence. “Hüda-Par supporters”, according to Hurriyet, “who allegedly [supported] the Turkish Hizbullah and ISIL”, said that PKK members had killed the man.¹¹³⁸

Rojava In Search of Peace and Turkey In Search of War

On October 8, Fehim Taştekin said that, “as the coffins of Turkish Kurdish youth who crossed over to [Kobani]... [crossed] the border” back into Turkey, “**the sensitivity of the Kurdish public [was] becoming more acute**”. At the same time, the anti-AKP rhetoric at the funerals was turning a lot bitterer. And this heightened tension essentially meant that “**the nature of the conflict [appeared] to be changing**”. For Taştekin, it had been “Turkish and Arab chauvinism”, which could not stomach Rojava’s “autonomy experiment”, which were largely to blame for the intensified jihadist assaults on Rojava. Turkey’s conditioning of support for the YPG/YPJ in Kobani, for example, appeared “to be on the same wavelength with IS”, he said. Furthermore, he asserted, ISIS was not just a “radical Islamic ideology”, but also “an Arab chauvinist organization”, which had previously been emasculated by the YPG/YPJ’s defence of the Al Jazira Canton and was seeking revenge.

From the ISIS militants they had killed, meanwhile, the YPG/YPJ had retrieved “ID cards of Turkish citizens”, a “Turkish military ID card”, and a number of “foreign passports stamped at Turkish customs points”. One YPG official, Redur Xelil, said: “we look at Turkey as a friend, but **we see that all terrorists come via Turkey**”. He insisted that the Rojava Revolution was “**not a part of the problems between Turkey and the PKK**”, and thus guaranteed “that **there [would] never be an attack on Turkey from Rojava**”. However, with Turkey treating ISIS casualties but not the injured of Rojava, he stressed, and allegedly giving weapons to the group, Turkish hostility towards Rojava seemed like it was based a lot more on ideology than on fears about Rojavan hostility to Turkey.¹¹³⁹

Turkey Cracks Down on Dissent at Universities

At the Middle Eastern Technical University (ODTÜ) in early October, Turkish police “fired tear gas and water cannon against students protesting in support of Syrian Kurds in Kobani”, and 25 people were “detained in a separate protest at Ankara University”. According to Hurriyet, “dozens of students had gathered on the campus of Ankara University... when around 100 police officers entered the precinct”. The paper asserted that “**around 20 students [had been] detained in a heavy-handed manner, as well as five professors who were trying to prevent police from taking students into custody**”. A water cannon truck, meanwhile, had also been dispatched “near to the campus”. The Rector’s Office temporarily cancelled all classes as a result.

At the same time, on the ODTÜ campus, protesters “tried to march to the headquarters of the [AKP]”, but police officers “resorted to rubber bullets, in addition to tear gas and water cannon” to stop them from doing so. However, such attacks on students were nothing new, as there had been “many police crackdowns” against ODTÜ students “since [the previous] year’s anti-government Gezi Park demonstrations” and the announcement of a road project

¹¹³⁷ <http://www.bignewsnetwork.com/index.php/sid/226481369>

¹¹³⁸ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/prominent-akp-mp-prefers-isis-killings-to-pkk.aspx?PageID=238&NID=72699&NewsCatID=338>

¹¹³⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-kurds-isis-kobani-war.html#>

that “would have crossed through the famously leafy campus”. At Istanbul University, meanwhile, there were attacks by the pro-jihadist Muslim Youth on a group of students, who claimed “security guards [had done] nothing to stop the assailants, who [had worn] hats and masks to hide their identity”. In fact, the same group had already attacked anti-ISIS students on September 26.¹¹⁴⁰

Social Activists Harassed and Killed

In early November,¹¹⁴¹ 28-year-old Kader Ortakaya, a woman from Urfa province in Turkey who had “stayed in the tents on the border with thousands of other people supporting Kobanî” for around a month, was “**shot and killed today by the Turkish soldiers while trying to cross into Kobanî**”.¹¹⁴² She had been an activist from the “Collective Freedom Platform” and had been studying a master’s degree at Marmara University. In spite of her peaceful activities, however, she was shot in the head as “Turkish troops fired real bullets and intense tear gas on artists affiliated to the Initiative for Free Art who [had] formed a human chain at [the] Suruç-Kobanî border” and on “people [on] the Kobanî side of the border”.¹¹⁴³ In other words, then, standing in solidarity with the anti-ISIS fighters of Kobanî was a very dangerous occupation thanks to the Turkish State’s hostile stance towards the city and its revolution.

III) The Deteriorating Peace Process with the PKK

HDP MP Sırrı Süreyya Önder spoke in October about the lack of progress in the Turkish State’s peace process with the PKK, saying that Abdullah Öcalan’s prison conditions had “not changed”, and that “more than 20 visits... [had] all taken place in the same room”. As “the main guarantor of peace”, Önder said, Öcalan needed to be treated much better. If not, he insisted, “the process [would] not develop”. Referring to Ankara’s policy on Kobanî, meanwhile, he asserted that “there are more foreign secret agents in our country than policemen”, and that “there is a **secret hand... aiming to sabotage the process**”. Önder also referred to the “Paris murders at the inception of the process” (in which three female PKK members were assassinated early on in 2013) as one example of the attempts to undermine negotiations. He also mentioned the fact that there were Turkish officials at the border with Kobanî that were “not allowing for injured Kurdish fighters to be treated” and were “arbitrarily blocking [them] from crossing the border”. This situation, he asserted, had only changed after Prime Minister Davutoğlu was directly informed about it (or became aware that other politicians knew about what was happening at the border).¹¹⁴⁴

Öcalan’s Commitment to Peace

On October 10, Milliyet columnist Serpil Çevikcan wrote about how, for the first time, a “midnight letter” from Abdullah Öcalan had been “delivered to HDP MP Pervin Buldan... via a “state mechanism””. She said that she had obtained this information “from both the pro-Kurdish HDP and the government side”. Buldan, she asserted, had allegedly “shared the content of the letter with HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş”, who then decided to communicate the information to government officials. The fact that Öcalan was able to get a letter out, Çevikcan insisted, was a sign of “the urgency of the situation” (amidst the violent government crackdown on protesters criticising the AKP’s stance on Kobanî discussed in the previous sub-section). Usually releasing statements “through a visit from his lawyer”,

¹¹⁴⁰ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/police-crack-down-on-kobane-protests-at-ankara-universities.aspx?pageID=238&nID=72743>

¹¹⁴¹ <http://turkeyharvest.blogspot.mx/2014/11/kader-ortakaya-killed-at-suruc-kobane.html> and <http://warincontext.org/2014/11/06/turkish-soldiers-kill-activist-kader-ortakaya-at-kobane-border/>

¹¹⁴² <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/woman-killed-by-turkish-army-at-border.html>

¹¹⁴³ <http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/soldiers-deliberately-targeted-ortakaya.htm>

¹¹⁴⁴ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/north-kurdistan/secret-hands-want-to-sabotage-the-process/341-secret-hands-want-to-sabotage-the-process.html>

Öcalan was suspected to have sent his letter to Demirtaş via MIT chief Hakan Fidan “using the WhatsApp application on a smartphone belonging to [his] lawyer”.

In the letter, Öcalan apparently pointed out that **“Kobani and [the] peace process being put forward as interdependent could be “abused for purposes of provocation”**”. He therefore “asked for the basis of dialogue for the peace process not to be damaged”, emphasising that “talks with the government should continue”. Meanwhile, he stressed, reactions to the Turkish regime’s treatment of the Kobani situation **“should be expressed by democratic means”**. In other words, he wanted the progressive Kurdish movement to “handle the peace process with care”. Then, after a HDP committee had met with Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan, **the two parties “agreed that dialogue would be continued”**. Whilst insisting that it was the right of all Turkish citizens to respond to government actions “through democratic means” rather than through violence, however, the HDP stressed that it would “not take a step back regarding Kobani”.¹¹⁴⁵

Kobani a Turning Point for the Peace Process

In early August 2014, the International Crisis Group (ICG) spoke about how the peace process in Turkey was “at a turning point”, saying that it would “either collapse” or “accelerate”. With both Ankara and the PKK apparently ‘playing for time’ (the government in order to “win one more election” and the PKK to “further build up quasi-state structures in the country’s predominantly-Kurdish south east”), the organisation reported on how a “worrying upsurge in hostilities” was challenging the two parties’ commitment to peace. In spite of having “few insuperable obstacles at home” and “two strong leaders”, it said, the lack of a peace deal meant that the PKK and the Turkish State could “not cooperate in fighting their [supposed] common enemy” (i.e. “increasing ceasefire violations, urban unrest and Islamist extremism”).

According to the ICG, both sides in the negotiations were to blame for the lack of progress made (though I would argue, looking at the evidence and arguments previously presented in this book, that it was principally the government that had lacked the initiative needed to advance). While both “realised that neither [could] beat the other outright” in a military conflict, the organisation said, a continuation of “harsh rhetoric”, a lack of “real public commitment”, and an agenda that was neither comprehensive nor urgent had led to deadlock. The AKP regime in particular had focussed mainly on a short-term strategy, with “a series of ad hoc initiatives” aimed at attracting Kurds away from the PKK rather than at arriving at a peace agreement with the progressive Kurdish movement.

In short, the ICG asserted that Turkey would need to seek “redress for the state’s past wrongdoings and reparations for victims”, accepting “scenarios in which... PKK figures [could] join legal Kurdish parties”. It also stressed that the PKK would need to declare “an end goal of full disarmament of its elements within Turkey’s borders” and to give up “all attempts to create parallel formations in the south east”. The ICG’s stance here, however, on giving up on the right to self-defence and self-governance, simply went against what the PKK believed in, and was therefore not a workable proposition. It also assumed that Turkey’s bourgeois democracy would be capable of providing Kurds with the type of self-rule and freedom that would help to solve the ‘Kurdish Question’. Focussing on a continuation of a centralised state bureaucracy and a lack of direct political participation in Kurdish communities (and others in Turkey), therefore, the ICG essentially started off from a problematic premise.

¹¹⁴⁵ <http://www.turkfile.com/kurdish-issue/2014/10/10/ocalans-midnight-letter-to-save-the-peace-process/>

For the ICG, the peace process was helpful for the AKP in the municipal and presidential elections of 2014, but would need to continue “at least until parliamentary polls in mid-2015” in order to truly cement the party’s control over the country’s political system. It had also helped to strengthen the PKK in south-eastern towns, the organisation asserted, and had seen the movement “acquire unprecedented international and domestic legitimacy”. Meanwhile, the ICG insisted, in order to prevent “regional states aiding and abetting armed PKK elements operating on its territory”, the Turkish regime had “an interest in reaching an agreement with its Kurdish-speaking population as soon as possible”. In fact, “both Turkish officials and Kurdish politicians privately [said that] they [preferred] each other to the Islamic State”, even if the rhetoric of the former in particular was very different in public.

Overall, the ICG underlined, the government and the PKK needed to “seek a common end goal”, with the former creating “the legal and political conditions, process and context that [would] build confidence”. Both, however, would need to compromise in order to reach a deal, the group stressed. And, although a solution like that proposed by the ICG essentially advocated a maintenance of the very system that perpetuated injustice, the PKK’s focus on building direct democracy up ‘from below’ meant that an end to the war (and thus a more peaceful environment) could perhaps be considered a step forward, even if it did not profoundly change the political structure in Turkey.

Essentially, the ICG argued, the Turkish state had to “root out the causes of armed conflict and build trust in the political system” (a premise that apparently ignored the fact that it was the political system itself that had caused the conflict). The government would have to reword “the anti-terror law and relevant articles of the Penal Code to ensure penalties [were] given only for incitement to violence, kidnappings, killings and other violent acts”. It would also need to undertake a “review of existing terrorism convictions to end the jailing of non-violent activists”. The Constitution, meanwhile, would need to be rephrased in order to “remove any sense of ethnic-based discrimination”, while “full mother-language education in Kurdish languages” would need to become available wherever appropriate. Additionally, “more decentralisation” would be necessary, as would guarantees that Kurdish municipalities had “the same access to finance and assets as all others”. **Perhaps most importantly for the good will of the peace deal, however, would be for the Turkish government to “refrain from public statements aggravating Turkey’s Kurds, such as equating the PKK with jihadis or threatening a return to heavy-handed security measures”.**

Finally, and more problematically, the ICG suggested that the PKK would need to “make clear that disarmament within Turkey [was] a desired goal of the movement”, a move that would leave its members and followers unable to protect themselves against the continuing crimes of the state. In my opinion, what the organisation failed to propose was that the Turkish State demilitarise in Kurdish areas before expecting Kurds themselves to disarm. Instead, it called on the PKK to “drop provocative and unrealistic demands for setting up a professional guerrilla “self-defence force” in Kurdish-speaking areas”, something that would give the Turkish regime the monopoly of violence in a country where citizens in Kurdish areas have little to no trust in the state ‘security’ apparatus thanks to decades of government misconduct.

The ICG also insisted that the PKK would need to “end the creation of illegal parallel structures that undermine the central government” (in other words saying that a more democratic form of self-government inside Turkey would be impossible).¹¹⁴⁶ In summary, then, the ICG report generally showed a large amount of sympathy with the Turkish state, accepting no inherent problems in its political system. Many of its demands therefore

¹¹⁴⁶ http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/turkey-cyprus/turkey/234-turkey-and-the-pkk-saving-the-peace-process.aspx?utm_source=turkey-report&utm_medium=1&utm_campaign=nremai

implied that the PKK was required to change its ideology if peace was to be obtained, while no such demand was made of the Turkish state. And such an unbalanced approach to the peace process in Turkey in the international arena was perhaps what gave Turkey the upper hand, allowing it to neglect negotiations in favour of aggression against Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

Tension Rising between Turkey and the PKK

On October 12, 2014, The New York Times reported on how, according to certain PKK commanders, the “peace process with the Turkish government and, indeed, the future of the region, [would] turn on the battle for Kobani and on Turkey’s response”. Cemil Bayik, for example, insisted that “**negotiations [could not] go on in an environment where [Ankara wanted] to create a massacre in Kobani**”. In other words, then, although Erdoğan’s rise to power had been facilitated by “a more conciliatory approach” towards Turkey’s Kurdish population, his stance on the ISIS assault on Rojava and Kobani had threatened to undo the steps made towards peace.¹¹⁴⁷

A day later, meanwhile, reports came in that Turkish police had “captured four members” of the PKK “in a clampdown” on the organisation. At the same time, The Daily Sabah relayed the baseless claim that the “deadly riots” in the country had been “perpetrated by the group”, an assertion that seemed to have been the official government line. Two of the men captured had allegedly been “preparing to launch attacks on security forces” and “alleged members” of ISIS, while the other two were said to have been “senior militants”. Policemen had supposedly found “three AK-47 rifles, two pistols, a large cache of ammunition and five grenades” in the car of the first two. Another sign that the aforementioned paper was echoing government rhetoric was the fact that the PKK was referred to as a ‘terrorist organisation’ at numerous points in the article, while there was not one mention of ISIS being a terrorist group. In my opinion, therefore, **such declarations were aimed at playing down the threat of ISIS** (in accordance with Ankara’s hostile stance towards Rojava), **whilst delegitimising the PKK and justifying a future end to the peace process.**¹¹⁴⁸

Turkey’s Attacks on the PKK

Then, on October 14, The Guardian reported on how **Turkish fighter jets** had “**bombarded**” **PKK positions** in the south-east of Turkey, allegedly in “retaliation for armed PKK offensives on several military outposts in the area”. The HPG, meanwhile, asserted that the **airstrikes** had “**violated the ceasefire**” between the PKK and the Turkish government.¹¹⁴⁹ At the same time, the BBC said that the attacks had caused “heavy casualties”, just as “French President Francois Hollande... appealed to the government in Ankara... to open its border” with Kobani.¹¹⁵⁰ Rudaw, however, would report that no PKK fighters had been killed in the Turkish attack.¹¹⁵¹

The Washington Post, meanwhile, spoke of how “PKK fighters [had] begun returning to Turkey from bases in northern Iraq where they had retrenched after the cease-fire was announced”. Furthermore, in contradiction to Turkish government claims, the Firat News Agency reported that “**the Turkish military had shelled PKK bases for three days**” **before the airstrikes took place**. In other words, it seemed like hostility was coming primarily from the state, perhaps bolstered by the fact that Öcalan had, just days before, asserted that the

¹¹⁴⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/world/middleeast/kurdish-rebels-assail-turkish-inaction-on-isis-as-peril-to-peace-talks.html?smid=tw-share&r=1>

¹¹⁴⁸ <http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2014/10/13/police-capture-4-including-top-figures-in-pkk-crackdown>

¹¹⁴⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/14/turkish-jets-bombard-kurdish-positions-pkk>

¹¹⁵⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29611582>

¹¹⁵¹ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/141020141>

peace process should continue in spite of heightened tensions. Nonetheless, with its aggressive actions, it seemed like Ankara was coming increasingly close to sparking off a renewed conflict that even Öcalan and the PKK's good will could not have prevented.

Masoud **Barzanî**, meanwhile, was following Turkey's lead, trying to take advantage of the ISIS assault on Kobanî to **encourage the PYD to "form an alliance" with the KDP-backed Kurdish National Council (KNC) in exchange for Turkey allowing arms into the city.** Such a coalition, however, would place Rojava in direct conflict with Assad, as the KNC actively supported anti-Assad rebels in Syria. Subsequently, the fragile détente with Assad would almost certainly be broken, and the autonomous and progressive political experience of Rojava would risk being corrupted by the influence of pro-KDP factions.¹¹⁵² Nonetheless, in the absence of a stable (or legal) flow of arms and ammunition to the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî, coalition airstrikes and limited airdrops would only be able to keep ISIS from taking over the city for so long.

On October 18, Turkish general prosecutor Zekeriya Oz demonstrated the paranoia and hostility of the state by insisting that, if Öcalan were to ask his followers "to start a fresh round of insurgency" (something which seemed unlikely given the PKK leader's previously stated commitment to continue talks almost 'no matter what'), the Turkish Supreme Court would "abolish and ultimately change his life imprisonment to the capital penalty". Essentially, though, this threat seemed more like a propaganda effort, aimed at showing the power and strength of the Turkish State to do whatever it wanted. And, showing that the world was aware of Ankara's semi-authoritarian political approach under the AKP, Russian deputy foreign minister Sergei Rybakov soon "criticized Turkey's pugnacious approach toward its neighbors and accused Erdoğan of trying to revive the Ottoman Empire", while insisting that a "'no-fly zone' inside Syrian territory... would be a prelude for another disastrous NATO invasion".¹¹⁵³

Rojava Calls for International Pressure on Turkey

In late October, Kobanî commander Meysa Abdo (aka Narin Afrin), claiming to be "fighting for the rights of women everywhere", stressed that, while "thankful to the coalition for its intensified airstrikes", **the YPG/YPJ "had been fighting without any logistical assistance from the outside world until the limited coalition airdrops of weapons and supplies on Oct. 20"**. Insisting that their "weapons still [could not] match those of the Islamic State", she said that her forces needed "more than merely rifles and grenades to carry out [their] own responsibilities and aid the coalition in its war against the jihadist forces". She highlighted that, "when fighters from other Kurdish regions in Northern Syria [had tried] to supply [them] with some of their armored vehicles and antitank missiles, Turkey [had] not allowed them to do so", complaining also about how President Erdoğan had "several times publicly equated [her] fighters, who [were] defending a diverse and democratic society, with the murderous Islamic State".

At the same time, she criticised that Turkey had conceded to allow "a small group of Iraqi Peshmerga fighters, and some Free Syrian Army brigades, to cross into Kobanî... without consulting [the YPG/YPJ]", whilst refusing to "allow other Syrian Kurds to cross Turkish territory to reach [Kobanî]". For her, this meant that the city was "**still effectively blockaded on all sides**". Meanwhile, with evidence having emerged "that Turkish forces [had] allowed the Islamic State's men and equipment to move back and forth across the border", she said, **it was clear that the AKP regime was "pursuing an anti-Kurdish policy"**,

¹¹⁵² http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/turkish-warplanes-hit-kurdish-rebels-as-tensions-stoked-by-islamic-state-fight/2014/10/14/cca48b44-538a-11e4-ba4b-f633e2c0453_story.html

¹¹⁵³ <http://awdnews.com/top-news/10004-turkish-general-prosecutor-we-might-execute-abdullah-%C3%B6calan.html>

and that its “priority [was] to suppress the Kurdish freedom movement in Northern Syria”.

Finally, she emphasised, “we have never been hostile to Turkey”, highlighting that Rojavans wanted to “see [the country] as a partner, not an enemy”. Nonetheless, she argued, Western governments needed to “increase their pressure on Turkey to open a corridor for Syrian Kurdish forces and their heavy weapons to reach the defenders of Kobanî through the border” (under the “supervision of the United Nations” if necessary). Such an allowance, she stressed, would put the YPG/YPJ “in a position to strike a deadly blow against the Islamic State”.¹¹⁵⁴

Ankara Sponsoring Terrorism While Claiming to Seek Peace

In late September, on top of all the previous criticisms of President Erdoğan, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri claimed the Turkish regime was “keen to provoke chaos to sow divisions in the Middle East region through its support for groups and terrorist organizations”.¹¹⁵⁵ Nonetheless, Erdoğan insisted in late October that the “reconciliation process with the Kurds [had continued] despite efforts to tarnish it”. At the same time, though, he stressed that “the international community [was] focusing too much on the battle over Kobanî”, saying in a very cold, heartless, and ignorant manner: “we’re only talking about Kobanî, a city on the Turkish border where there is almost no one left besides 2,000 fighters”.

Solidarity marches organised by the HDP, meanwhile, were criticised by Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who claimed they were “damaging to the peace process”. The Turkish state’s continued denial of “the constitutional existence of Kurds”, however, along with its hostile policy towards the Rojava Revolution, were clearly the real culprits of the deteriorating relationship between the state and its Kurdish population.¹¹⁵⁶ At the same time, though, the USA was somewhat forcing Ankara’s hand with its increasing de facto cooperation with the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî, leading the AKP regime to make ‘the best of a bad situation’ for its reputation.

C) Turkish Concessions and the KRG

Turkey’s Approval of Military Action Abroad

On October 1, a proposal was submitted in the Turkish parliament “to allow Turkish troops to conduct operations in Syria and Iraq, and to allow foreign forces to use Turkish military bases”. With “desperate civilians... huddled with their vehicles and livestock” on the border, meanwhile, and refugees “angry at... the refusal of the Turkish authorities to let them cross”, the plan seemed unlikely to change much in the lives of civilians.¹¹⁵⁷ The following day, the proposed measure was passed, with help from “the ultranationalist and fervently anti-Kurdish Nationalist Action Party (MHP)”. Al Monitor’s Cengiz Çandar speaks of how, back in 2003, a similar motion had been defeated by opposition parties and “some AKP defections”, causing “serious damage to US-Turkey relations” and placing Turkey “in a bystander position vis-a-vis developments in its immediate neighbourhood”. This time, however, the Islamist-nationalist right-wing bloc managed to defeat opposition from the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the HDP with ease.

¹¹⁵⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/29/opinion/turkeys-obstruction-of-Kobanis-battle-against-isis.html?smid=tw-share&_r=2

¹¹⁵⁵ <http://www.telesur.tv/english/news/Egypt-Calls-Turkey-a-Terrorism-Supporter-20140925-0060.html>

¹¹⁵⁶ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/turkey5212.htm>

¹¹⁵⁷ http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29442039?ocid=socialflow_twitter

The right to intervene in Syria and Iraq, Çandar says, would be “valid for one year”, and showed to a certain extent that President Erdoğan was beginning to “[bow] under American pressure” to commit Turkey to participating in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. Nonetheless, Turkish involvement would not be “on American terms”, he stresses. With the USA not prioritising the removal of the Assad regime in Syria, he says, Ankara was “in no hurry to join the military effort against the Islamic State, despite intensifying US pressure to do so”. In short, the Sunni Islamist AKP could not afford to be seen fighting actively “against what was initially a Sunni insurgency movement in Syria” and Iraq.

According to Çandar, Turkish officials had privately admitted (as seen earlier in this chapter) that they would “not rule out taking unilateral action in Syria, mainly for the purpose of establishing buffer zones within Syrian territory”. And such intentions were precisely what lay “at the heart of Kurdish suspicions of Turkey’s ulterior motives”, and had also been seen in its apparent “efforts to cleanse the Kurdish population of Syria from areas adjacent to Turkey’s borders” with the help of Wahhabi jihadists.

The AKP regime’s hostility to the progressive Kurdish movement, meanwhile, could be seen in “**the wording of the preamble of the parliamentary authority**”, which pointed to “**the existence of a newly escalated PKK threat**”. It spoke of “risks and threats against our national security along Turkey’s southern land borders”, and “increases in the number of other terror elements” in Syria and Iraq. For the Turkish regime, this reference to ‘other terror elements’ first reaffirmed the state’s belief that the PKK was a terrorist organisation, but also suggested that the PYD in Rojava was also to be considered as such. According to the National Post’s Marc Champion, then, Erdoğan’s priority with the parliamentary bill was to “see two adversaries crushed: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the Kurdish guerrillas running a de facto statelet in northern Syria”. And standing by as ISIS attacked the autonomous Rojavan city of Kobani, he says, “[served] one of those goals”, while the “proposal to impose a buffer zone in northern Syria would serve both”. For Çandar, therefore, the vote on military action was simply a Turkish ploy which would “serve as a precursor for Turkey to unilaterally step into Syria to establish safe havens” (which, in turn, would seek to “serve as a deterrent against Kurdish self-rule next to the Turkish border”). However, he insists, such a strategy would not be sustainable for long.¹¹⁵⁸

President Erdoğan, meanwhile, would soon comment on how “an effective struggle against ISIL or other terror organizations [would] be [Turkey’s] priority”, along with “the immediate removal of the administration in Damascus and Syria’s territorial unity”.¹¹⁵⁹ And, through these words, the AKP leader was insisting once again that no autonomous rule would be allowed in Rojava and that the defeat of the revolution in northern Syria would be just as much of a priority as any other action in the country. According to Hurriyet, however, the Turkish people themselves were “not keen on having a war with their neighbors anymore”, and would therefore be very reluctant to lend their support to a full-scale military intervention in Syria. Although “cross-border operations against the PKK” had been seen as “tolerable up to a certain extent”, the paper said, sending troops to neighbouring countries “other than for immediate or humanitarian responses” would be much less popular.¹¹⁶⁰

At the same time, The Independent’s Isabel Hunter spoke about how “opinions over Turkish involvement in the [anti-ISIS] coalition were split – especially among the Syrian Kurds who [had] found shelter in Turkey”. With many refugees having family in Kobani, suspicion was apparently “rife among Turkish and Syrian Kurds about the true motivation of Turkey’s entrance into the war”. In fact, one injured YPG fighter said that, if Turkish forces came

¹¹⁵⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-united-states-coalition-vote-military-action.html#>

¹¹⁵⁹ <http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/turkey-ponders-new-powers-to-fight-is-militants/ar-BB6Y5t2>

¹¹⁶⁰ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-is-trying-to-make-a-smaller-mistake.aspx?pageID=449&nID=72385&NewsCatID=409>

alone to Rojava, “they [would] help Isis”. Therefore, if they were to be involved in any actions, he insisted, “they must come as part of the international coalition”. According to two middle-aged refugees, meanwhile, “nothing positive could come from Turkey taking any military role against Isis”. For them, Turkey only wanted “to go and create a buffer zone” in northern Syria. In short, then, another refugee would affirm that Rojavans needed to “fight [their] own battles”.¹¹⁶¹

I) Peshmerga Enters Kobanî

Peshmerga Troops Allowed to Pass through Turkey into Kobanî

On October 20, as seen earlier in this chapter, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that Turkey would “allow Iraqi Kurdish fighters to cross the Syrian border” into Kobanî. In other words, while President Erdoğan had previously called the YPG/YPJ terrorists (insisting that they “must not be armed by Turkey or the US”), the American airdrops in the city had apparently led Turkey to change its approach and allow limited support (from its own allies) into Kobanî. According to the BBC’s Mark Lowen, Erdoğan’s hostile anti-Rojavan rhetoric had perhaps been an example of “realpolitik”, in which the Turkish government said “one thing for domestic consumption... and another to the White House, agreeing to help Kurdish fighters in a way that [was] acceptable back home”. The KRG, for example, had long been a Turkish ally, and was a “less threatening” Kurdish force “with which [the Turkish regime] could do business”. In short, as the KRG was a generally subservient capitalist force, prepared to give Turkey lucrative deals whilst not committing to justice and democracy for all Kurds, it was considered to be a perfect choice for AKP-sponsored aid to Kobanî.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, meanwhile, had previously stressed that it “would be “morally difficult” not to support the “valiant Kurds” in Syria. And this comment demonstrated that the fine US line between praise and criticism (based on Turkey’s stubborn definition of the PKK and its allies as terrorists) was becoming finer and finer, and that Turkey could not hold out for too much longer against its American allies. If Ankara did not think of an alternative to supporting the YPG/YPJ itself, it knew that the USA would almost certainly go ahead and back the Rojavan fighters anyway. And proposing support from Peshmerga troops for Kobanî was seemingly the best option that the Turkish regime could conjure up. According to Kobanî official Ismet Hesên, however, the YPG/YPJ forces “already had the initiative against IS and they needed heavy weapons rather than extra manpower”. Furthermore, having been uninformed about the decision to allow Peshmerga forces into the city, he said that “forces on the ground doing the fighting here should be consulted first”.¹¹⁶²

At the same time, Patrick Cockburn spoke at The Independent about how a “radical change in American policy towards direct cooperation with [Syrian] Kurdish fighters on the ground” had occurred, largely in response to Turkey’s long-standing prevention of “arms, ammunition and reinforcements [from] reaching [Kobanî]”. The “21 tons of weapons including anti-tank guns and medical supplies” which had been dropped in the city, he says, had forced the AKP regime in Turkey to rethink its strategy. Essentially, the USA “could not afford to allow Isis to win another victory which would be a humiliating setback for President Barack Obama’s campaign to degrade and destroy it”, and President Erdoğan knew that this was likely to mean increasing US support for (or collaboration with) the YPG/YPJ (and even the PKK). Turkey’s hostility, meanwhile, had made the American

¹¹⁶¹ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-against-isis-turkey-joins-western-coalition-in-fight-to-stop-militants-9771253.html>

¹¹⁶² http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29685830?ns_mchannel=social&ns_campaign=bbc_breaking&ns_source=twitter&ns_linkname=news_central

regime impatient, and it now needed to think of a way of regaining control of the situation in Syria (which it never really had in the first place).

Turkish claims that the allowance of Peshmerga fighters into Kobanî “came at the request of the US”, Cockburn insists, enabled Ankara to “save some face”, with the AKP government “having previously denounced as terrorist the political and military organisations of the Syrian Kurds, the PYD and YPG”.¹¹⁶³ While Obama had told Erdoğan about US plans to drop supplies over Kobanî, he had not sought Turkish permission (as it would almost certainly not have come), and US planes thus avoided Turkish airspace during the operation. The alliance between the two countries, then, was clearly strained, and this could be seen in the fact that, even though Turkey controlled the border with Kobanî on the ground, the USA saw it as the easier option to drop arms and medical supplies from the air. In essence, therefore, it was an expensive absurdity which had been brought about by Turkish inflexibility and a loss of American patience. Therefore, it seems that claims of an American request primarily served a propaganda purpose, as it was much more likely that Ankara had felt itself forced into allowing Peshmerga militants into Kobanî.

The Rupture between the USA and Turkey

Michael Rubin at the conservative and pro-Israeli Commentary Magazine spoke in late October about how the USA had been supporting Masoud Barzanî’s KRG in spite of the fact that “his popularity [was] largely limited to two Iraqi provinces: Duhok and Erbil” and that, “even in Erbil, his popularity [was] tenuous”. **Abdullah Öcalan**, meanwhile, **enjoyed “the support of perhaps 90 percent of Syrian Kurds”**, while remaining the **“most popular figure among Turkey’s Kurds”**. And, although Turkey had “long sought to declare Öcalan irrelevant”, says Rubin, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan had actually “reconfirmed Öcalan as the paramount Kurdish leader in Turkey when he had his administration negotiate a ceasefire” with the PKK. Ironically, though, Rubin claims, “Erdoğan was likely never sincere about achieving peace with the Kurds, or at least with those [who didn’t embrace] Sunni Islam as their predominant identity”. As justification for this statement, he emphasises that **“every Erdoğan outreach to the Kurds [had] occurred in the months before elections**, and [had been] abandoned in the weeks following them, when Erdoğan no longer needed Kurdish electoral support”. Thus, the AKP leader had simply been exploiting the good will of the PKK for his own interests.

Driven by his magazine’s bias against Islamism (even when that meant accepting the existence of left-wing secular forces), Rubin astutely affirms that the “KDP peshmerga would be out of place in Syria and [did] not have the skill or dedication that [the YPG had] exhibited”. For Rubin, then “if Erdoğan [thought that] Barzani’s peshmerga [could] save him, he [would be] kidding himself”, as Iraqi Kurdish fighters would simply have to “subordinate themselves to the YPG which [knew] the ground” and were, at that point at least, both “better motivated and more skilled”. In short, he says, the USA’s terrorist designation of the PKK was “probably long overdue for a review if not elimination”. In fact, showing pragmatic objectivity, he even insists that **the current Rojavan administration was actually governing Syrian Kurdistan “better than any other group which [held] territory [was running] its government”**. Essentially, he stresses, “nowhere else in Syria [could] girls walk to school without [an] escort (let alone attend school) or [was] there regularly scheduled municipal trash pick up”. He also goes on to say that “the YPG, meanwhile, [had] been the most effective force fighting ISIS and the Nusra Front”.

Echoing criticisms from the libertarian left, then, Rubin affirms that “the PKK... may not be perfect”, retaining as it did “too much of a personality cult around Öcalan” and requiring

¹¹⁶³ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-in-Kobani-us-loses-patience-with-turkey-and-resupplies-kurdish-fighters-by-plane--then-ankara-allows-reinforcements-through-9807183.html>

more transparency and democracy in its internal structures, but “in this, it [was] no different than Barzani’s KDP”. In fact, he asserts, the “only difference” between the PKK and KDP was that the former had “not indulged in the same sort of corruption that [had] transformed Barzani and his sons into billionaires”. And, whilst exaggerating significantly by claiming this was the only difference between the two groups, Rubin does effectively state here one of the key explanations for why Öcalan was far more popular than Barzani among Kurds. He also shows in his article why **even most of “the nearly 150 members of the [US] Congressional Turkey Caucus” now considered “Erdoğan to be more of a threat to peace than the PKK”**. In short, therefore, after “more than a decade of Erdoğan’s rule, **American officials [would] no longer... automatically side with Turkey”**.¹¹⁶⁴

YPG/YPJ Opposed to FSA Presence in Kobani

On October 27, YPG General Commander Siphon Hemo spoke about how “ISIS gangs were using all their forces” in Kobani, and were “even forcing civilians into conflict”. And, whilst emphasising that the “decision of the peshmerga to go to Kobani was positive”, he stressed that the FSA would be most “able to make a contribution to the Kobani resistance by fighting ISIS on other fronts”. The reason for his gratitude for Peshmerga support was that, for him “the resistance [against ISIS belonged] as much to the Kurdish people involved in resistance as it [did] to the YPG and YPJ fighters”. Their presence in Kobani, then, he insisted, “would give a boost to morale”.

Hemo then highlighted that “**some progressive groups within the FSA [were already] fighting alongside [the YPG/YPJ]**”, including the “Japhat Al Akrad (Kurdish Front) and Burkan Al Firat”. Other parts of the organisation (the more Arab nationalist or ‘moderate’ Islamist forces), however, would be more useful to the YPG/YPJ resistance in Rojava if they attacked ISIS “in Manbij or Jarablus”, he asserted, where they could open up “a second front” against the jihadis. The most important task for the FSA, he argued, ought to be to “hold on to its own areas”. Therefore, while he maintained that “the FSA’s attitude to the revolution in Rojava was positive”, he claimed that it was still being used as a tool by Ankara. As the Turkish State had been surprised by the strength of the Kobani resistance, he emphasised, it had thus sought to “send a group that it [favoured]” to the city. In summary, he said, Turkey needed to stop supporting ISIS because doing so would “bring harm on them”, even though “Kurdish people of Rojava had done no harm to Turkey and would not do so in the future”.¹¹⁶⁵

As the Peshmerga prepared to enter into Kobani, meanwhile, the “real SyrianFreePress Network” reported on how **the YPG/YPJ would “not allow the FSA to enter” the city**. Siphon Hemo had said, in particular, that “the FSA forces commanded by Abdul Jabbar al-Agedi” would be more helpful fighting elsewhere (as stressed above). At the same time, Kobani’s deputy YPG head Owj Alan Issou had insisted that coalition airstrikes were not attacking ISIS “outside the city where the terrorists [were] trafficking and transferring their forces” towards Kobani.¹¹⁶⁶ In other words, the YPG/YPJ was claiming that **the US-led anti-ISIS coalition was only providing limited support for Kobani, aiming to keep it from falling completely into ISIS hands but not seeking to prevent the group’s continued onslaught on the city**.

The Arrival of the Peshmerga and the Shifting Media Focus

In late October, Peshmerga doctor Izzettin Temo said that the KRG soldiers were “being treated badly by Turkish authorities, insisting there were “no facilities in the place [they

¹¹⁶⁴ <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/2014/10/20/has-obama-realized-the-pkk-can-be-allies/> and @mrubin1971

¹¹⁶⁵ <http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/ypg-commander-hemo-turkey-s-plans-have-failed.htm>

¹¹⁶⁶ <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930806001457> and <http://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/2014/10/29/syrian-kurds-reject-fsa-aid-in-kobani-battle/>

were] staying” and that they felt “like prisoners””. The Turkish State, meanwhile, had “not allowed the peshmerga to travel in their military uniforms and with their guns” and, in certain locations, Turkish soldiers had apparently become “angry because the people [had come] out onto the streets to greet the Peshmerga”. According to Temo, **Turkey’s ‘security forces were “mistreating and insulting [Peshmerga forces] because of this”**.¹¹⁶⁷

At the end of October, the Peshmerga finally arrived in Kobanî, bringing with them “jeeps, flatbed trucks, and machine guns”. According to Salih Muslim, their arms were “mainly artillery, or anti-armor, anti-tank weapons”.¹¹⁶⁸ In early November, meanwhile, KurdishQuestion.com reported on a “coordinated operation by YPG and peshmerga in Kobanî”, which had seen 43 ISIS members killed in 24 hours thanks to Kurdish rocket attacks.¹¹⁶⁹ Meanwhile, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzanî insisted that Peshmerga forces would “only stay in Syria **“temporarily”**” and that their presence was “geared at the **short-term goal** of aiding fellow Kurds in the embattled town”. His official stance was that there would be **no “major changes in the political equation of the region”** as a result of the intervention. In other words, the KRG would continue to be relatively hostile to the Rojava Revolution, and seek to strengthen its own allies in Syria, but would help Kobanî for the time being because it was in the propaganda interests of the ruling nationalists. At the same time, Barzanî asserted that “the American government [had] played a role in influencing Turkey to allow Kurdish Peshmerga troops to travel by land via Turkey to Syria” (supporting Ankara’s line that the decision had been a favour to the USA rather than a necessary strategic transformation). He then said: “we all know that it was a difficult decision” for the AKP regime.¹¹⁷⁰

According to Kobanî co-president Fayza Abdi, **the arrival of “around 150 Peshmerga” from the KRG with heavy artillery had helped secure YPG/YPJ territory in Kobanî, though the latter still ‘controlled the struggle’**. Welcoming US aid in the form of “some supplies and air strikes, which [were] now less frequent”, meanwhile, she seemed to suggest in early November that the **USA had now placed its focus on the Peshmerga and begun attempts to side-line the YPG/YPJ**.¹¹⁷¹ At the same time, the media was also beginning to shift the debate towards ‘Peshmergas’ and away from the PKK and the YPG/YPJ. Al Arabiya, for example, spoke about “women Peshmergas” and “female Peshmerga fighters” in Kobanî, even though the vast majority of female militants in the city belonged to the YPJ and not to the KRG Peshmerga. The outlet also spoke of “other PKK soldiers”, suggesting that, in their eyes, the nationalist Peshmerga and the progressive Kurdish movement were essentially the same thing.¹¹⁷²

Turkey trains Kurdish Peshmerga forces

On November 22, Al Arabiya also reported on how, according to a “senior Turkish official”, Turkish soldiers had been “training Kurdish Peshmerga fighters in northern Iraq” for three weeks and would “give similar assistance to a new national army unit in Baghdad”. The creation of the latter had been announced in September by new Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who was seeking to “build a cohesive force” and “incorporate local fighters”, thus depriving ISIS of safe havens “by allowing Iraq’s provinces to be responsible for their own security”.¹¹⁷³ Clearly discomfited by the important role that the PKK had played in fighting back ISIS in Iraq in late 2014, **Ankara was now looking to assure that forces not aligned**

¹¹⁶⁷ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/peshmerga-crossing-turkey-mistreated-by-turkish-authorities.html>

¹¹⁶⁸ <http://www.telesurtnet/english/news/Iraqi-Peshmerga-Arrive-in-Kobani-to-Fight-IS-20141031-0016.html>

¹¹⁶⁹ <http://kurdishquestion.com/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/coordinated-operation-by-ypg-and-peshmerga-in-Kobani/399-coordinated-operation-by-ypg-and-peshmerga-in-Kobani.html>

¹¹⁷⁰ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/02/Iraqi-Kurds-in-Kobani-temporarily-says-leader.html>

¹¹⁷¹ <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-0774-Women-are-leading-our-revolution#.VInMmXu8480>

¹¹⁷² <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/05/ISIS-warns-female-fighters-face-forced-marriage.html>

¹¹⁷³ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/22/Turkey-trains-Kurdish-Peshmerga-forces-in-fight-against-ISIS.html>

with the PKK and its allies were strengthened in the country – even if the Iraqi State was not supportive of Turkey’s goal of overthrowing Assad in Syria.

ISIS Suffering Heavy Losses in Kobanî

On December 1, meanwhile, Lebanese paper The Daily Star spoke about “heavy [ISIS] losses in Ain al-Arab” (using the Arabic name for Kobanî). With the jihadis having “launched an unprecedented attack against the border crossing” in the city, allegedly “from Turkish soil”, they had also apparently “**suffered some of their heaviest losses yet**” according to the SOHR. The rights group also claimed that Assad airstrikes had “killed 21 civilians including seven women and two children in the town of Jassem”, and “eight civilians including a child” in Anadan. The HDP’s Faysal Sariyildiz, meanwhile, pressed Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in parliament “over whether a probe had been launched into [the aforementioned] claims” of ISIS attacks from Turkey. At the same time, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem insisted that **US-led airstrikes in Syria would leave jihadis “unharmd” if they were not combined with a closure of Turkey’s border to foreign Islamist fighters.**¹¹⁷⁴

II) Erdoğan Still Playing Games

Does Turkey Support Erdoğan’s Stance?

On November 3, Jonathon Burch spoke at Rudaw about how “the majority” of Turkish citizens “may actually agree with Ankara’s approach” to the ISIS assault on Kobanî. Turkish pollster MetroPOLL, for example, had found that “some 56 percent of [2,752] Turks were against Turkey allowing “all kinds” of support to reach Kurdish fighters in Kobanî, compared with less than a third who favoured giving support”. At the same time, with “more than 85 percent” of the respondents considering “both ISIS and PKK as dangerous for Turkey”, some “43.7 percent [actually] said the Kurdish militants were more dangerous than ISIS” and only “41.6 percent... thought the jihadists posed a bigger danger”. Meanwhile, a mere forty percent of those taking the poll believed that the peace process with the PKK would succeed.¹¹⁷⁵ In particular, the AKP, the CHP, and the MHP were opposed to helping Kurds in Kobanî (with 50% of AKP supporters, 54% of CHP supporters, and 72% of MHP supporters against allowing support).¹¹⁷⁶

Furthermore, according to Today’s Zaman, President Erdoğan’s “**Kemalo-Islamist rhetoric** [had] influenced the [Turkish] masses” significantly, regarding both ISIS and the PKK.¹¹⁷⁷ According to the HDP’s Pervin Buldan, meanwhile, the AKP government had “kept on responding to [the progressive Kurdish delegation in the peace process] with a **threatening, interventionist and negative rhetoric**”, all in spite of the latter’s “consistent desire for peace”.¹¹⁷⁸ In short, then, the aggressive language of the AKP regime regarding the Rojava Revolution and the PKK had clearly had an impact on both the progress of peace negotiations and the opinion of Turkish citizens. At the same time, with Kurds making up “roughly 20% of Turkey’s population”, it seems very likely that a significant portion of the respondents of the MetroPOLL survey who said the PKK was not dangerous for Turkey were Kurds (suggesting a clear split between Turks and Kurds – at least as far as this limited poll was concerned).¹¹⁷⁹

¹¹⁷⁴ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Dec-01/279467-isis-suffers-heavy-losses-in-ain-al-arab.ashx>

¹¹⁷⁵ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/03112014>

¹¹⁷⁶ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/turkey-syria-isis-kurds-pkk.html#>

¹¹⁷⁷ <http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail.action?sessionId=ApqMrXTa3Agkyedm5RPLRO3Q?newsId=360995&columnistId=0>

¹¹⁷⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/turkey-syria-isis-kurds-pkk.html#>

¹¹⁷⁹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-may-support-independent-kurdistan-2014-7>

The Oppressive and Provocative Nature of the State

Days earlier, on October 16, Rudaw also wrote about how a “new government bill” in Turkey looked set to “**grant Turkish police greater powers in dealing with street protests**”. Kurdish militants, the site said, were likely to see this move as, effectively, a “declaration of war” against them. According to reports, police would now be allowed “expanded use of wiretapping”, the ability to confiscate property, and the power to restrict “access to defendants’ case files”. If the law were enacted, the KCK argued, the “forces of democracy and the Freedom Movement [would] resist”. In other words, then, the group insisted, “if the Turkish state does not want to initiate a period of violent conflict it must stop enacting these types of laws and must immediately take serious steps toward solving the Kurdish problem”.¹¹⁸⁰

Later, on October 20, Emily Feldman spoke at Mashable about how “Islamists and left-wing students” at Istanbul University had “battled across well-manicured gardens and commons”, in a ‘reawakening’ of “deep grudges” triggered by the Syrian Civil War. With the students having clashed “at least four [times] in as many weeks”, she said, “riot police now [stood] guard outside the university gates”, while students travelled in groups “for safety”. Twenty-two-year-old economics student Sena Ozcanli, for example, explained how “a group of baton-wielding Islamists [had] stormed past security to attack a group of left-wing students”. According to Feldman, many Turkish citizens believed that “**historic fractures between the country’s Islamists, nationalists, Kurds and liberals**” were now **deepening**. In short, tensions were high and, in Turkish Kurdistan, a group of “devout Muslims” accused of being ISIS supporters had apparently been “beaten to death”.

In Istanbul University’s department of literature, meanwhile, “a dozen men” had “launched glass bottles in all directions and shouted “Allahu Akbar”... before tearing a poster from the wall and brawling with more liberal students until squads of riot police intervened”. The Islamist aggressors in this attack were allegedly members of “a fundamentalist group called the “Young Muslims”, composed of both university students and outside supporters”. Self-identified socialist students, meanwhile, who subsequently “charged on the dean’s office to demand answers”, said that the poster which had been taken down had denounced the brutality of ISIS. Because of “a wall of riot police” (who would detain many of the irate students), however, the demonstrators “never reached the dean”. In other words, as seen in Sub-Section II of Section B, the Turkish State seemed to be more interested in cracking down on left-wing students than on reactionary pro-ISIS groups.

The above university was already well known “for its politically charged student body”, but the war in Syria had “ignited a particularly vigorous fire”, with “dozens of students [having] been detained and extra police [having] been dispatched to guard the campus near the city’s historical center... since late September”. Consequently, “the sense of distrust of the school administration [ran] deep... among the students”, many of whom “[believed that] **the authorities [had] allowed the “Young Muslims” to enter the university gates [in order] to deliver a beating to the school’s troublesome leftists**”. One protesting student, meanwhile, who had been detained by police before arriving at the dean’s office, said he had been told by one officer: “**We will do our will – not yours... The government runs this school, not you**”.¹¹⁸¹

ISIS Attacks on Kobanî Launched from Turkey

On November 29, İzzettin Küçük (the state-appointed Governor (Vali) of Urfa Province) “admitted that **ISIS [had] fighters in Turkey and [was] attacking Kobanê from the**

¹¹⁸⁰ <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/16102014>

¹¹⁸¹ http://mashable.com/2014/10/30/turkish-students-brawl-syria-war/?utm_cid=mash-com-Tw-main-link

Turkish-side of the border". The main reason for this declaration was that, earlier in the morning, ISIS had attacked the Mürşitpınar Border Crossing with Kobanî, with "a truck-bomb crossing from Turkey [detonating] along the border". Meanwhile, the YPG/YPJ had asserted that **ISIS had "launched an attack on the border gate and the city from positions within a unit of wheat-silos belonging to the TMO - a Turkish state organization"**. Later on, at a meeting with HDP MP İbrahim Ayhan, Governor Küçük officially "admitted that ISIS was attacking from Turkey".¹¹⁸²

The following day, the Rojava Report said that witnesses had backed up the claim made above, speaking of how "**ISIS truck bombs and fighters [had] crossed from Turkey**". According to Ismail (a local security officer (asayış) in Kobanî), for example, a truck from Turkey had "passed quickly through the border gate", and then "detonated". He insisted that "Turkey also had its armored cars over there", but that the ISIS fighters "were coming out from among them". Moving to the top of a building, he affirmed, he had seen "an ISIS fighter firing from atop a tree on [the Turkish] side and... [had] fired [back] at him". Elî, meanwhile, who was another security officer who had witnessed the event, asserted that "from around 04:00 in the morning the power was cut all along the border from the village of Mahser to the west" and that, during this time, the ISIS vehicle passed through the border crossing from Turkey.

Mihemed Heqî (a security officer who was injured in the assault) then spoke of how he had "heard [a] noise" and seen a green military vehicle with a "heavy machine-gun mounted on top... crossing through the border gate from Turkey and coming towards [him]". After it had passed by, "it turned onto the street and detonated", he affirmed, before causing the house in which he found himself to fall down on top of him. He also emphasised that "Turkey's armored cars" had been "waiting across the border" and that the vehicle had passed "right by them". Around fifty ISIS fighters, meanwhile, "[had gone] up into the silos and set up sniper positions". At the same time, Doctor Menav Kitlanî insisted, a "mortar round fell close to [him]" while he was on guard duty. Subsequently, "a bed [had] crossed through the [border] gate and detonated behind [him]". He highlighted that he had seen it come from Turkey with his own eyes and that it had been "the color of one of their [i.e. Turkish] vehicles".¹¹⁸³

To What Extent Was There Collaboration?

ROAR Magazine editor Iskender Doğu wrote on December 2 about how, although "Turkish complicity in the [aforementioned] attack [was] hard to prove", the events nonetheless raised "some important questions". ISIS, for example, had long been attacking Kobanî with "indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas with tanks, mortars and heavy artillery", suicide attacks, and car bombs (VBIEDs), but it had never attacked the city from Turkey. And, while it was "a **well-established fact that ISIS [had] launched its latest attack on Kobanî from Turkish soil**", Doğu insists, "the extent to which the Turkish military and/or state [had] been complicit in [the] event [remained] impossible to determine".

According to an open source analysis by RUSI's Aaron Stein, it was possible that ISIS had "entered Turkey without the latter's knowledge", though Doğu says that, "taking into consideration the heavy military presence at the border, with Turkish troops continuously patrolling the area with tanks and APCs [armoured personnel carriers], it [seemed] **highly unlikely – if not outright impossible – that two bomb-laden vehicles and a few dozen fighters [would have been able to] pass the border into Turkey unnoticed**". With "dozens of tanks" of the Turkish armed forces (TSK) "stationed on hills overlooking Kobanî", and

¹¹⁸² <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/11/29/urfa-governor-admits-isis-attacking-Kobani-from-turkey/>

¹¹⁸³ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/11/30/witnesses-say-isis-attacked-from-turkey/>

“regular patrols along the border fence and watch towers and outposts every few kilometres”, he asserts, **Turkish complicity or errors were very clear.**

The attack, according to the YPG/YPJ, had “ensued for the better part of the afternoon” and, for the majority of this time, “[had taken] place on Turkish soil”. Therefore, even if the Turkish military had not been complicit in the ISIS attack, “**at the very least they failed (or refused?) to engage with the militants** when it became clear that they were armed and present inside Turkey’s borders”. While Doğu insists that “reports and rumors of Turkish support for ISIS [had already] been doing their rounds for months” before the renewed ISIS attack on Kobanî in September 2014, he stresses that such claims had “become more persistent” after the start of the jihadists’ September offensive. The recent assault from Turkish soil, then, simply seemed to confirm what many activists and civilians already suspected – Turkish collusion with ISIS.

“Trustworthy reports”, Doğu says, had already revealed the provision of “logistical, medical, financial and military support” to ISIS from the Turkish regime in the form of: allowing “ISIS fighters to ‘travel through Turkish territory to reinforce fighters battling Kurdish forces’”; the endorsed shipment of “construction goods and materials... into ISIS-controlled territory”; the treatment of “injured ISIS fighters and commanders free of charge in Turkish hospitals”; the facilitation of “smuggling of oil across the border into Turkey from ISIS-controlled territory”; and even the provision of arms and “intelligence in the form of satellite imagery and other data”. The new attack, however, revealed perhaps **the desperation of both Turkey and ISIS at the continued resistance of Kobanî’s defenders.** It also showed that, although Ankara had allowed Peshmerga troops to pass through Turkish territory as a concession to its allies in both the USA and the KRG (and as an attempt to avoid negative press), it still hoped to draw out the battle between ISIS and the YPG/YPJ for as long as possible.

Here, Doğu says, it is important to understand Turkey’s “close relations with ISIS” in terms of the AKP’s Islamist background, the Turkish state’s “difficult relationship with its domestic Kurdish population”, and its “deep hatred for the Syrian regime led by Bashar al-Assad”. Therefore, the exchange of “180 ISIS members in exchange for 49 Turkish hostages”, the “impunity with which ISIS supporters [sought to] attack and intimidate students at Istanbul University”, and “the ease with which ISIS [was] able to draw a steady stream of recruits from the country’s poorer neighborhoods”, all showed not only “**some level of ideological agreement, if not outright cooperation**”, but the fact that the AKP regime essentially saw ISIS as “one of the lesser evils active in the region”. From the very start of unrest in Syria, Doğu asserts, Turkey had “been actively supporting anyone fighting against Assad, from the moderate revolutionaries of the Free Syrian Army to Islamist radicals such as the Al Nusra Front and ISIS”, all out of animosity for both the Assad regime and the progressive Kurdish movement. Thus, he suggests, there was little desire from the Turkish regime to stop its aggressive behaviour now, as both the Ba’athist government and the autonomous democratic administration of Rojava were still intact.

Believing that Islamists were not “a big threat to its own domestic security”, meanwhile, and that they had “the best chance of overthrowing the Syrian dictator”, the Turkish State’s “perception of the Islamist militants [could perhaps have been] best... described as a ‘necessary evil’”. With the ideological threat of “an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria, led by a close ally of the PKK and based upon the principles of horizontal democracy, gender equality and environmental sustainability”, Turkey could not simply sit by and allow the Rojava Revolution to flourish. Doing so, Doğu insists, would have inspired the Kurdish struggle in Turkey (which possessed “the same values”) to continue voicing “similar demands and [pursuing] similar goals, posing a possible threat to the territorial integrity [read oppressive bureaucratic dominance] of the Turkish state”. Ankara, then, at

the very least, favoured ISIS's onslaught against Kobanî and other areas in Rojava as a temporary strategic measure.

ISIS Attacking from All Four Sides

In the early morning attack from the Turkish side of the Mürşitpınar border crossing, "the advance of ISIS ground forces [had been] preceded by the deployment of one VBIED and two suicide bombers", as mentioned above. The fact was that the jihadis had previously "been prevented from reaching the crossing as every attack [had been] successfully repelled" by the YPG/YPJ, "small contingents of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and [the] 150 Peshmerga troops [which had come] from Iraqi Kurdistan". And it was almost certainly the desperation of the Wahhabi extremists which had led to their surprise attack from the Turkish side of the border.

In videos of the fighting, a Turkish flag was visible, and fighting was taking place around "the train station close to the border". YPG/YPJ fighters, meanwhile, could be seen "firing towards the grain silos" in Turkey, from which ISIS militants were apparently "shooting back at the defenders". At the same time, another video showed "the damaged border gate which [had] allegedly [been] blown-up when the VBIED detonated in its vicinity", providing proof "that the attackers [had] actually entered from Turkey, and [had] not [attacked] the border crossing from the east". Subsequently, fighting "continued throughout the day", and the jihadis were finally pushed back into Turkey before returning later on to the ISIS-controlled part of Kobanî. The surprise onslaught, Doğu asserts, had ended up being "**one of [ISIS's] most disastrous defeats**", with "more than 80 ISIS fighters" having lost their lives by the end of the weekend.

According to PYD co-chair Asya Abdullah, "all three directions" around the border crossing had previously been "under YPG control", and **the YPG/YPJ forces were therefore "100 percent certain that the ISIS suicide vehicle [had] entered Kobanî through Turkey"**. Even with this in mind, Abdullah insisted that Rojava had "always wanted good relations with Turkey", though she also asserted that the Turkish authorities desperately needed "to clarify their position" on ISIS. PYD spokesperson Nawaf Khalil, meanwhile, said: "[ISIS] used to attack the town from three sides. **Today, they are attacking from four sides**". Anonymous military sources from Turkey, however, argued that several ISIS militants had "entered Turkish soil during the clashes", but had only stayed for a "total duration of... 1 minute and 39 seconds".

In Doğu's opinion, "the most likely explanation" for the ISIS attack from Turkish soil was that "the Turkish military [had] to a certain extent [been] aware of ISIS' intentions to cross the border and attack Kobanî from the north, but it might have misjudged the situation as [it] did not expect ISIS to cross with two VBIEDs and several dozen fighters". Nonetheless, he asserts, the Turkish military and political establishment would be "thoroughly embarrassed when mainstream media across the globe headlined that ISIS had launched its attack from Turkish soil". The events, he says, may well have worked later on "in favor of the defenders" of Kobanî, as "more political pressure might [have been] exerted on Turkey to start actively opposing ISIS" (or significantly reduce its collusion with the jihadist group, at least).¹¹⁸⁴

D) Rojava, ISIS, Imperialism, and Nationalism

Overall, this book has shown that **imperialist strategies in the Middle East have led either directly or indirectly to the reactionary movements of nationalism and Islamism**, and that

¹¹⁸⁴ <http://roarmag.org/2014/12/isis-attacks-Kobani-from-turkey/> and @Le_Frique

the latter two have on numerous occasions proven themselves to be incapable of ending war, oppression, and injustice in the region. In the final chapters, I have demonstrated that the Rojava Revolution is the best real-world example existent today of a movement designed to truly deal with the causes of conflict, exploitation, and inequality. Therefore, I have argued that steps desperately need to be taken by international peace and justice activists to stand in solidarity with this progressive experience, and against the imperialist, nationalist, and Islamist forces that oppose it.

In Kobani, Stop the War's John Rees asserted in October 2014, the resistance movement in Rojava would be entirely capable of defeating ISIS "if Turkey opened its border with Syria to allow PKK fighters to join the defence of Kobani" and elsewhere in Syrian Kurdistan.¹¹⁸⁵ Lifting the blockade on the flow of arms to the canton, meanwhile, would also be able to bolster the struggle of the YPG/YPJ, allowing it to push ISIS back much more effectively. As this book goes to press, however, Ankara maintains its embargo on Rojava, in spite of the fact that the defence forces of Syrian Kurdistan have spent months collaborating with the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, a number of relatively progressive factions from within the FSA, and the Peshmerga forces of the KRG. In short, then, while the AKP regime in Turkey has been forced to make a number of concessions (in the broader context of the international fight against ISIS), it still clearly harbours a great amount of hostility towards the progressive system of Rojava.

In summary, it is not just the military resilience and effectiveness of the progressive Kurdish movement that is the real hope for change in the Middle East. Instead, it is the radically democratic system that the militants are protecting which truly highlights the way to take the base of support away from ISIS and the oppressive rulers of the region. Nonetheless, the survival of Rojava's revolutionary structures depends very much on how the Syrian Civil War ends and on how Rojavan forces deal with the attempts of imperialist, nationalist, and Islamist forces to dilute or destroy them. In this final section of the chapter, therefore, I will take a brief look at how the Syrian conflict is likely to end, how Rojavans have sought to overcome insurmountable obstacles through compromise and cooperation, and how Kobani turned out to be crucial in the fight against ISIS. In the first sub-section, however, I will emphasise for one final time that the existence of violent and reactionary political movements invoking the name of Islam does not mean that it is the religion itself which needs reform. Instead, I will argue, while it is essential for peaceful coexistence that humans forge a secular public mentality, it is the political situation that truly needs to be reformed. For, without a socio-economic revolution, in which people take directly democratic control over their own lives and resources, reactionary schools of political thought will continue to dominate, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world.

I) Does Islam Need Reform?

While I have sought in this book to show that political Islam is not the answer to the problems of the Muslim World, I have not aimed to attack the religion itself. Although I personally consider that only evidence and reasoned debate should guide political and societal progress, I also have a great amount of respect for certain religious figures (both past and present) who have respected these principles but have been driven in their fight for justice by their private religious beliefs. In fact, I know of no religion that is without its positive elements, and believe that the commonality of such elements should allow people from a variety of faith backgrounds to form the basis for humble and comradely discussion.

Unfortunately, however, **biased and inaccurate media coverage**, along with the aggressive rhetoric of bigoted individuals and organisations, has had the effect of portraying Islam in a

¹¹⁸⁵ <http://stopwar.org.uk/videos/isil-can-be-defeated-if-turkey-opens-its-border-to-kurds>

particularly negative light, helping to alienate Islamic communities in the West and discourage non-Muslims there from engaging with their Muslim sisters and brothers. In 2011, for example, Bill Maher claimed Muslims were “violent” and they “threaten us” (referring to people in the West), projecting in this way “a broad generalization onto more than 1 billion people”. And, because “religion [still] had way too much power” in the Muslim World,¹¹⁸⁶ he asserted, Islam was clearly “stuck in the Middle Ages”.¹¹⁸⁷ When criticised about his comments, meanwhile, the satirist defended himself by saying: “We are not bigoted people... We’re trying to stand up for the principles of liberalism!”¹¹⁸⁸ As seen in Chapter Six, however, liberal elites have often tended to be perfectly happy with discrimination, injustice, and oppression as long as an ‘enlightened’ or vanguardist dictator has been in charge.

At the same time, though, it is indeed worth exploring claims about the illiberal nature of Islam further in order to counter views explained by people like Georgetown University PhD candidate Nick Danforth. In early January 2015, for example, Danforth reported on how Catholic Pope Francis had prayed for “both Christian and Muslim victims” of ISIS in his Christmas address, showing the “manifest humility of the Vatican”. For him, this display of sympathy had raised the question of why “so many western countries” had seemingly “figured out how to separate church and state”, while Muslim countries had apparently struggled to do so. In fact, he even refers to how some commentators had concluded, much like Maher had, that the “Islamic world really needs its own Reformation”, and had posed figures like Fethullah Gülen or Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as “potential Martin Luthers” who could “finally help Islam make the jump from totalitarian fundamentalism to enlightened, liberal religion”.¹¹⁸⁹ There are many problems with such assertions, however, including: the lack of emphasis on the West’s role in creating and supporting authoritarian regimes and reactionary Wahhabi movements in the Muslim World; the incomplete explanation of what Europe’s Reformation was actually about; and the fact that the ‘potential reformists’ mentioned above are themselves somewhat anti-democratic figures. Below, I will discuss these issues in greater detail.

The ‘Reform of Islam’ According to an Egyptian Dictator

Sarah El Deeb and Lee Keath wrote in January 2015 about how “Egypt’s president [al-Sisi had] opened the new year with a dramatic call for a “revolution” in Islam to reform interpretations of the faith entrenched for hundreds of years”. These comments were the leader’s “boldest effort yet to position himself as a modernizer of Islam”, but the government-controlled Al-Azhar institution insisted nonetheless that al-Sisi had been referring primarily to the need for a “contemporary reading for religious texts to deal with our contemporary reality”. By “examining textbooks”, El Deeb and Keath say, the Egyptian regime had been seeking to remove inappropriate references, such as “texts on slavery and on refusing to greet Christians and Jews”. Previous opinions on such matters, the government had said, were just “opinions of scholars” which had been adopted centuries ago, and were therefore “not sacred”.

Trying to revitalise Egyptian nationalism, meanwhile, the government had sought to encourage citizens to believe that “love of nation is part of faith”. In fact, at the same time al-Sisi had sought to counter his strong Islamist opponents by presenting himself “as a pious proponent of a moderate, mainstream Islam”. According to religion researcher Amr Ezzat, however, “any religious modernization [would] ultimately be against al-Azhar, since it [had long been] the conservative fortress in the system”. For Ezzat, **Egyptians needed “the freedom to have more than one religious discourse to enrich discussion”, because**

¹¹⁸⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/oct/06/bill-maher-islam-ben-affleck>

¹¹⁸⁷ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/02/islam-will-not-have-its-own-reformation/>

¹¹⁸⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/oct/06/bill-maher-islam-ben-affleck>

¹¹⁸⁹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/02/islam-will-not-have-its-own-reformation/>

pluralism was currently “outlawed”. An embrace of such pluralism, he suggests, would be the only real way of improving the role of religion in Egyptian society.

The fact that the state’s authoritarian regime controlled al-Azhar, meanwhile, was a factor that would clearly alienate Islamists angry at the government for its crackdown against them, and would thus have little influence on the country’s Muslim community and its beliefs. Therefore, as the Brookings Institution’s H.A. Hellyer says, “**only independent voices [could] present a counter-narrative to militant thought...**, but al-Sissi [showed] no sign of allowing that”. In fact, Hellyer insists, **the regime wanted a form of Islam “rather docile to the needs of the state rather than independent”** from it, which would be no way of truly counteracting Wahhabi-inspired fundamentalism in Egypt.¹¹⁹⁰ In short, then, al-Sisi’s rhetoric about wanting to reform Islam was essentially both empty and self-serving.

Catholicism and the Reformation

Many problems abound with the assumptions made about the need for reformation in Islam, especially when we consider that **religious power is often combined with political or economic power**. When the Catholic Church essentially ruled Spain in the late fifteenth century, for example, the barbaric Spanish Inquisition was launched, but that did not mean that all Catholics could be called barbarians. What it did mean, however, was that the political system, with a lack of direct democracy, was barbaric. To claim that all believers at the time were supportive of the state’s brutal behaviour would be both an extreme and illogical generalisation and a show of great ignorance. For, in short, the ruthless decisions of authoritarian and quasi-religious political institutions (which have little or nothing to do with the often positive ideals at the heart of many faiths) can simply not be blamed on the citizens controlled by those bodies, or even on the theoretical teachings of the religion in question. Instead, it is only the self-interested ‘conservative’ elites dominating such countries which can be held truly responsible for the crimes committed in the name of religious beliefs.

Even in 1864, Pope Pius IX “proudly proclaimed [the Catholic Church’s] opposition to crucial aspects of democracy, such as voting”, whilst also condemning “liberalism, freedom of conscience, and progress”.¹¹⁹¹ Catholicism, therefore, was far from being a ‘liberal religion’. While the reformation may have had an impact on the political systems of countries outside of the church’s sphere of influence, therefore, it was still having very little impact within Catholic states. In fact, the so-called ‘Syllabus Of Errors’ of Pius IX actually condemned the ideas: that “the Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church”; that “the Roman Pontiff [could], and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization”; and that it was “no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship”.¹¹⁹² In other words, the Catholic Church was against secular government, against ‘progress’, and against religious pluralism, meaning that little had changed in the Church since the Reformation.

With the Roman Empire having “lost control of Europe during the first millennium”, and the pope having maintained “control over the church (and its extensive property) throughout Rome’s former territory”, **the Catholic Church had become a major political player in Europe**. As a result, “church leaders and their monarchical counterparts” came into conflict on numerous occasions, though they both “agreed... that church and state should be united”. Any monarchical attempts to reduce the power of the Church, however, would meet with resistance from the “considerable allies and resources” of the latter. As

¹¹⁹⁰ http://www.timesofisrael.com/from-egypts-leader-an-ambitious-call-for-reform-in-islam/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

¹¹⁹¹ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/02/islam-will-not-have-its-own-reformation/>

¹¹⁹² <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9svll.htm>

kings and queens hoped to choose popes, and popes sought to choose kings and queens, with both wanting “joint spiritual and temporal authority” on earth, **the power game was always going to lead to some sort of revolution at the top of society.**

In many countries, such changes came about as a result of the ‘Protestant Reformation’, with **European monarchs gaining the “theological justification to unite church and state under their authority instead of the Vatican’s”**. English King Henry VIII, for example, “made himself the head of the newly proclaimed Church of England” in 1534. And, while many Protestant historians would hail this as “a triumph of secularism”, Danforth says, Henry had “technically transformed England into a theocracy”, under a “supreme political and religious leader” with a “penchant for beheadings”.¹¹⁹³ In short, this process had **created a state that was very far from being ‘liberal’**.

According to Catholic priest Alexander Lucie-Smith, for example, the Reformation had been “by no means a shift towards liberalism, peace or democracy”. Martin Luther, he asserts, had actually “strongly supported the German princes in their efforts to put down peasants’ revolts”, and Lutheran princes had been “unflinching in dealing with various radicals such as the Anabaptists”. Nor was the process “a movement towards rationality and enlightenment”, Lucie-Smith says, insisting that Luther had cried “away with Aristotle”, opposing the “use of reason in theology” and insisting on reliance on ‘scripture alone’. In essence, Lucie-Smith asserts, **“the Reformation was an obscurantist movement”** (although its reactionaries were indeed responding to the very real authoritarianism and corruption of Catholic institutions).¹¹⁹⁴

Why ‘Secularism’ Really Arose in the West

Nonetheless, the unification of church and state propelled by the Reformation did eventually facilitate the growth of secularism in the West, as **the new rulers “were more serious about their new-found power than their theology”** (which could also be said of sections of Islamic royal families today). In short, their main aim was to get wealth and power and, in their new position “as religious authorities”, they were able to **“bend or warp religious rules for [these] earthly end goals”**. The increasing affluence of the higher echelons of their societies, meanwhile, which had been enabled by the continued theft of land and soon the plundering of foreign territories, now meant that they could afford to give citizens, little by little, ‘democratic’ concessions to prevent them from revolting successfully (as they had (temporarily) in the French Revolution).

Eventually, in the twentieth century, the British monarchy would find itself faced with an “elected parliament and generations of English common law”. In exchange for certain powers, though, it managed to maintain its privileged position at the top of society. Meanwhile, if the French Revolution had not been enough to scare the European aristocracy into undertaking certain ‘reforms’, the Marxist-led Russian Revolution would certainly manage to encourage it to speed up this process, whether through fear of popular insurrections or through simple common sense. And, by gradually moving away from violent rule in order to protect their wealth and impunity, the economic elites of many Western nations succeeded in avoiding working class revolts. Nonetheless, by keeping their own political power, these privileged sectors of society ended up sacrificing that of the establishment churches they represented.

The Vatican Helped to Fuel Fascism

¹¹⁹³ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/02/islam-will-not-have-its-own-reformation/>

¹¹⁹⁴ <http://www.catholicerald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2014/07/11/the-reformation-was-a-move-away-from-reason-not-towards-it/>

Catholic institutions in France and Italy, meanwhile, had suffered at the hands of 'liberal' forces, and the Vatican therefore "spent the better part of the 19th century on the political sidelines, refusing to engage" with the regimes surrounding it. In the early 1900s, however, it finally had to accept that political power now lay definitively with secular state institutions in order to retain its relevance. Only in 1929, however, after a "concordat with the Italian state", were Catholics finally able to "vote in civil elections without fear of damnation". Effectively, then, the church and state had chosen "to meet each other halfway", and the Vatican would even be allowed to "reclaim some of its former power and property" which had previously been taken away as a result.¹¹⁹⁵ In both Italy and Spain, however, the reactionary force of fascism was on the rise in a Europe increasingly hoping for profound socio-economic reforms.

Although the Catholic Church eventually opposed fascism, it initially stood alongside it in its quest to combat left-wing secularism. In 1933, for example, "the Catholic Church signed the Concordat with Hitler", in which the church, led by Pope Pius XI, "agreed not to oppose the political and social aims of the Nazi Party" (much in the same way that Wahhabi monarchs initially backed reactionary Islamist militants in Syria after the start of the civil war in 2011). The idea was that, by avoiding open criticism of Nazism, the German church would be able "to operate free from any interference". A gradual increase in persecution, however, meant that, "by 1939, most Catholic-based schools had disappeared in Nazi Germany".¹¹⁹⁶ As a result, the church hierarchy moved away from the ruling regime, albeit very slowly.

Mussolini, meanwhile, had hoped that the agreement he had made with the Vatican in 1929 "had tied the Church to the Fascists, and that his role in restoring the Church's independence had made Her subservient to him". In that year, for example, he had emphasised in parliament that his regime was "Catholic, but [was] before everything else exclusively and essentially Fascist". In 1932, though, Pope Pius emphasised that the only way Mussolini's government could truly show it was Catholic would be "to obey the Church and its head". Nonetheless, although the church would soon start "condemning state-worship in no uncertain terms", says Dr Harry Schnitker, "so many Catholic prelates of this period wore their rather exclusive nationalism on their sleeves". In fact, when Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, a number of these Catholic figures supported the war effort, even though it would enhance the power of Somali and Eritrean Muslim mercenaries (seeing them "promoted and rewarded") in its fight against the largely Christian forces of Ethiopia. At the same time, the Italian forces "used poison gas", and "at least 275,000" Ethiopian troops died as a result. In spite of high-level church figures supporting the horrific conflict, however, research would later show that "the vast majority of parish priests in [Italy] were resolutely opposed to the adventure".¹¹⁹⁷ In other words, the reactionary nature of the establishment did not necessarily reflect opinion among lower level clergymen and believers.

In Spain, "less than 5% of the overall population attended Mass regularly" before the civil war, but Pope Pius nonetheless hope "to restore Spain to Catholic control", issuing in 1933 "a papal encyclical inviting Spanish Catholics to join "a holy crusade for the integral restoration of the Church's right" in the country. Subsequently, bishops "called [for] open revolt" against the democratically elected centre-left government. The "right-wing parties in Spain", however, "were not popular enough to win much representation in the parliament", so the Church "engaged in electoral politics through Accion Católica, or Catholic Action" - a civil society attempt to increase Catholic influence in society. José María Gil-Robles, for example, who led the Acción Nacional (National Action) and Acción Popular (Popular

¹¹⁹⁵ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/02/islam-will-not-have-its-own-reformation/>

¹¹⁹⁶ http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/catholic_church_nazi_germany.htm

¹¹⁹⁷ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column.php?n=1649>

Action) parties under the Second Spanish Republic (1931-39), would later also form the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right (or CEDA). As “the main Catholic, proto-fascist political leader” in Spain, he “visited Adolf Hitler and envisioned a unified, exclusively Catholic state in Europe”.

After the overwhelming centre-left victory in the 1936 general elections, tensions between the left and right in Spain began to grow. The “main Catholic, openly fascist political organization was the Falange”, and “the entire Catholic Youth Organization [had] joined” the party, along with most of the followers of Gil-Robles. Trying to use physical violence to intimidate the left and increase their power, the party’s members essentially “employed the successful tactics of the Italian fascists and Nazis” but, when left-wing forces fought back, the civil war soon broke out. Both Pope Pius and future pope Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli would be “informed of the revolt months before it took place”, having been “in communication with the rebels”, and Pius would even take to “calling everyone who was not a fascist a Bolshevik, and blessing “all those who [had] taken the difficult and dangerous task to defend and reinstate the honor of God and Religion”. German bishops, meanwhile, “issued a pastoral letter praying that “Chancellor Hitler could succeed with the help of God to solve this terrible issue””, and later even called it a “war of defense”.

In fact, “Franco’s banner [would even be] raised over the Vatican” and, although Pius XI died “just before the final victory of General Franco”, Cardinal Pacelli (now Pope Pius XII) would congratulate the dictator, saying that the church wished to express its “paternal congratulations for the gift of peace and victory, with which God [had] chosen to crown [his] Christian heroism”. Nonetheless, people had been “murdered by Franco’s troops” during the Civil War “simply for not being Catholic”. After the Falange’s triumph, meanwhile, “priests made lists of citizens who did not attend mass”, and these would then be “rounded up for questioning and, often, execution”.¹¹⁹⁸

At the same time, “some 60,000 Italian soldiers” had travelled to the Iberian Peninsula during the conflict and, according to Schnitker, there was “no doubt that many of these ordinary soldiers [saw] their role as saviors of the Church in Spain”. Nonetheless, although “the Catholic and stringently anti-Nazi, but very authoritarian [and fascist], Vaterländische Front” in Austria had previously been “promised military protection [from Mussolini] in case of German aggression”, the “Italian-German co-operation during the Spanish Civil War” would turn out to make “the annexation of Austria by Germany in 1938 a possibility” – and thus help to increase the growing confidence of the Nazi regime in Germany.

Although the Spanish fascists essentially had the blessing of the Vatican, though, Pope Pius nonetheless sought to distance himself from their future crimes. Catholics, he said, regarding people who had previously been “persecuting” the church in Spain, had the duty to “love them” and “pray for them”.¹¹⁹⁹ In short, then, while opposing a secular socialist cause in Spain, Italy, and elsewhere, the church as a whole could not be compared directly to the fascists who would exploit religious anti-secularism and conservatism for their own gain. However, there is no doubt that talk of ‘holy crusades’, the ‘honour of God and Religion’, ‘wars of defence’, and the ‘heroism’ of fascist forces had at least partly fuelled the rise of fascism in Europe in the early twentieth century.

In the paragraphs above, it is difficult not to find the parallels with the emergence of reactionary Wahhabi forces in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For, in both cases, the mixture of politics with an autocratic and anti-secular religious establishment was, essentially, the root cause behind the growth of brutal right-wing extremism. The Vatican, for example, supported or collaborated with fascists in the 1920s and 1930s much in the

¹¹⁹⁸ http://www.iiipublishing.com/religion/catholic/popes/pius_xi_franco.html

¹¹⁹⁹ <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column.php?n=1649>

same way that Wahhabi elites backed jihadists from the 1970s onwards. And, in each context, imperialist and capitalist forces tended to welcome the developments, because they essentially weakened the largely secular and socialist labour movements in their respective countries (even though both economic and religious elites would eventually seek to dissociate themselves from the monsters they had helped to create when they got out of control).

The Dichotomy of the Elites and the Grassroots

Overall, then, there are very few differences between the rise of fascism in Europe and right-wing reaction in the Middle East. One similarity in particular between each development, however, is that there was significant opposition to both from within Christian and Muslim communities. While political, economic, and quasi-religious hierarchies played their self-interested games, for example, preachers and believers closer to the ground often participated in resistance movements (such as: Dr Edith Stein, who wrote a letter to the Pope asking him to openly denounce the Nazi regime, “to raise [his] voice to put a stop to [its] abuse of Christ’s name”, and to condemn the “idolization of race and governmental power” as “open heresy”;¹²⁰⁰ the White Rose, which was an intellectual student movement which contained “devout Lutherans”, “religious Catholics”, and non-Christians;¹²⁰¹ and Martin Niemöller, who “was a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps”, and would later criticise “the leaders of the Protestant churches” for having “been complicit through their silence in the Nazi imprisonment, persecution, and murder of millions of people”¹²⁰²). [Examples of Muslim opposition to ISIS and other reactionary Islamist groups have been seen on numerous occasions earlier in this book.]

For the reason stated above, it would be absurd to blame a whole religion and the entirety of its followers for the spread of brutal reactionary organisations. It would also be foolish, meanwhile, not to see that the lowest common denominator between the growth of fascism in both the Christian and Muslim Worlds has been socio-economic injustice and the rule of anti-democratic elites. Therefore, in each case, it was not the religion that needed to change, but the authoritarian political and social structures which the religious establishment had for too long sought to preserve.

In fact, despite pressure from reformist forces within the Catholic Church, former Catholic theology professor Rev. Paul Surlis spoke in early 2013 about how the official leaders of the church had refused “since around 1968 to embrace the structural changes and progressive teachings endorsed for the Church by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)”. The latter, known as Vatican II, had sought to generate a “transition from a centralized, monarchical papacy... to a church that would be governed by the bishops of the entire church in union with the pope”. It had also believed that “the wisdom of the People of God, i.e. rank-and-file members of the Church, should always be consulted”. In spite of these attempts at reform, however, the period between the council and the inauguration of Pope Francis in 2013 had seen popes make “every effort... to maintain the Church as a patriarchal [and authoritarian] community” and fail to implement Vatican II’s “deep structural changes”.¹²⁰³ In other words, while attempts had been made to move the church establishment in a less reactionary direction, profound changes had still not arrived in the early twenty-first century. And, as such, the powerful religious institution of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia was not the only one in the world in need of reform.

¹²⁰⁰ <http://www.bibbiaparola.org/relazionebraicocristiane.php?a=1a&id=314>

¹²⁰¹ http://www.white-rose-studies.org/The_Leaflets.html

¹²⁰² <http://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>

¹²⁰³ <http://www.alternet.org/belief/how-authoritarianism-created-crisis-engulfing-roman-catholic-church>

A 'Reformation' in Islam

In summary, the Reformation had a significant impact on Western politics, but it did not bring justice, peace, and democracy to citizens in the West. The limited concessions made by societal elites, meanwhile, were far from being enlightened gifts passed down from benevolent powers, but were rather rights that citizens had fought long and hard for (no doubt with many thousands dying and suffering in the process). The idea that 'totalitarian fundamentalism' (mentioned by Danforth as almost a characteristic of Islam today) was a purely Islamic characteristic, therefore, simply fails to understand the complex links between politics and religious institutions in the Muslim World. Just as Christianity itself was arguably never 'backwards' (instead having suffered primarily from the reactionary rule of bigoted, authoritarian, and self-interested elites), I would argue that the same can be said about Islam (and many other religions for that matter).

For Lucie-Smith, it was "clear that the Islamic world [had] already had several reformations..., the most recent of which [had been that of] Wahhabism", though the latter actually damaged Islam much more than it helped it. Therefore, he says, when commentators speak of "Islamic reformation", they do so "without any understanding of what the Reformation was all about". In other words, he stresses, Westerners ironically set about "telling Muslims what is good for them, while not [truly] understanding Christianity, let alone Islam". Overall, he asserts, the obliviousness of societal and media elites to in depth analysis simply shows an "ignorance of [both] history and theology".¹²⁰⁴

In addition to these comments, I would repeat once again that it is not the Islamic faith that needs an overhaul today, just like it was not the Christian faith that has needed overhauls on a number of occasions in the past. Instead, it is the power that certain religious institutions (often in cahoots with reactionary political organisations) have exerted over the lives of the world's citizens that has needed to change. For, while the right of all human beings to believe what they wish to believe (regarding issues that can neither be proven nor disproven) should be respected, groups that attempt to force beliefs onto others must always be opposed, as this has consistently been where problems have arisen and freedom has been suppressed.

Danforth rightly says that "**politics and circumstance shape religion, and its application to society, far more than abstract theology does**", and therein lies a point that requires emphasis: that the so-called 'liberal' West has played an immense role in bolstering anti-democratic regimes in the Middle East and fuelling political Islam in the fight against governments not in line with Western interests.¹²⁰⁵ In other words, **if many Islamic nations are totalitarian and fundamentalist today, this is in large part because of the conquests and interventions of supposedly 'enlightened' and liberal Western nations ever since the decline of the Ottoman Empire** (and even before). Therefore, to propound Western religion as a perfect model to follow because of its effective submission to capitalist interests essentially means advocating or defending the global dominance and exploitative empires of repressive economic elites. And, if this is what is meant by a 'reformation', Islam certainly does not need it.

In short, the Muslim World does not need a Henry VIII who can combine the state and church into one to facilitate the suppression of freedom and dissent, for it has already had its fair share of such figures. Nor does it need a liberal dictator like Robespierre in the French Revolution, who can attack religious institutions whilst exerting excessive power over his people, for, in Turkey's Atatürk, the Muslim World has already witnessed an incarnation of such 'liberal' thought. The only effective way of uniting all people in Islamic territories (and

¹²⁰⁴ <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2014/07/11/the-reformation-was-a-move-away-from-reason-not-towards-it/>

¹²⁰⁵ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/02/islam-will-not-have-its-own-reformation/>

allowing the positive elements of the faith to shine through), therefore, is for the people to free themselves from the powers controlling both their minds and their bodies (whether they are political, economic, or quasi-religious forces). What they need, then, is direct democratic control over their lives, and an open-minded secular education system based on solidarity, reason, and comradely debate, to ensure that they retain that control. And, under such democratic management, their right to hold whatever religious beliefs they want to in their own lives would be protected. In other words, therefore, the focus would not and should not be on making religious changes, but on making profound political changes that would lead to self-government, pluralism, mutual aid, and freedom (as the Rojava Revolution has sought to do).

II) Capitalism as the Real Root of Fascism

With fascism presenting the world with one of the most horrific forms of reactionary politics that arose primarily from Western nation states (which were supposedly 'liberal' or Christian), it is worth exploring here (very briefly) capitalism's role in its rise to prominence (in order to show that, just as the entire Islamic community should not be blamed for Wahhabi jihadism, the entire Christian community should not be blamed for the phenomenon of fascism). Thus, in this sub-section, I will explore the links between capitalists and the growth of fascism in Europe in the twentieth century.

Capitalists Better off with Nazis than with 'Communists'

According to Corey Robin at Jacobin Magazine, figures showing "the share of national income that went to capital in the US and in Germany between 1929 and 1938" demonstrate that "**capital was doing better under the Nazis than under FDR**". This phenomenon, Robin asserts, was "not because of overall increases in economic performance..., but because of the economic policies of the [fascist] regime". In fact, he says, "the first use of the word "privatization" (or "reprivatization") in English [actually] occurred in the 1930s, in the context of explaining economic policy" in Nazi Germany. As Germà Bell explains as the Economic History Review, "the Nazi regime transferred public ownership to the private sector" throughout the mid-1930s, going "against the mainstream trends in western capitalistic countries, none of which systematically reprivatized firms during the 1930s".¹²⁰⁶ In a sense, then, it could be even be seen during this period as an 'ultra-capitalist' force.

Historian Tim Stanley, meanwhile, stresses that the Nazi Party, in spite of placing the word 'socialist' in its name, had almost nothing to do with socialism. In fact, when Hitler "started arresting socialists and communists... within weeks of becoming Chancellor of Germany", it became very clear that he was no socialist sympathiser. On the contrary, he actually "defined his politics so absolutely as a war on Bolshevism - a pledge that won him the support of the middle-classes, industrialists and many foreign conservatives". Simply speaking, the Nazi leader "often called himself a socialist [as] a matter of fashion" rather than anything else, considering that, "in the 1920s and 1930s, socialism was the wave of the future".

Stanley explains how "Marxism is defined by class war, and socialism is accomplished with the total victory of the Proletariat over the ruling classes". In comparison, he says, "Hitler offered an alliance between labour and capital in the form of corporatism - with the express purpose of preventing class war". For Liberal writer George Bernard Shaw, who actually "expressed sympathy for Hitler when he came to power", the truth was that "the dictator's socialism [was] fraudulent", being primarily "a way of buying off the inevitable revolution".

¹²⁰⁶ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/04/capitalism-and-nazism/>

In short, Shaw affirmed, Hitler and other Nazis were merely wearing “**the latest mask of capitalism**”.

Meanwhile, Stanley asserts, in spite of continuing “the Weimar Republic’s policy of nationalisation”, the Nazi Party “privatised quite a few things”, including “some steelworks, four major banks and the railways”. At the same time, he stresses, “**industrialists did well in the Nazi years, helped by a state policy of crushing the unions and emphasising full employment over raising pay**”. When the economy was finally “socialised in the latter part of the 1930s”, Stanley says, it was only “to prepare for war”. In short, he notes, “politics held priority over consistent economic theory ...in the fascist state”, and Hitler “would’ve done anything to aid his conquest of Eastern Europe”. And, in the end, “a command economy proved to be better at building tanks than the free market”.

Overall, then, **Hitler “enjoyed the support of a bourgeoisie that accepted that sacrifices had to be made to defend their profits against socialism”**. For Stanley, this reality meant that, essentially, **Nazi Germany was “capitalism embracing aspects of socialist economics in order to defend the interests of capitalists”**. Meanwhile, any economic measures that resembled socialism under Hitler would be severely outweighed by the social measures he took. Where Marxism defined history as a “class struggle”, for example, Hitler saw it instead “as a racial conflict”, with Bolshevism being “a Jewish construct”. In other words, the Nazis’ “goals were, in fact, totally antithetical to the egalitarianism of socialism”, focussed as they were on “defeating the “Jewish” communist movement”. Essentially, Stanley says, “**fascism is the violent use of the state to achieve Right-wing objectives: social order, religious chauvinism, [and] the protection of private profit**”.¹²⁰⁷

Fascism not a Challenge to Capitalism

Director of the Third World Forum Samir Amin, meanwhile, explains how, in spite of the differences between far-right organisations in the early twentieth century, fascism was essentially “a particular political response to the challenges with which the management of capitalist society [was] confronted in specific circumstances”. The ideology was also an attempt to “manage the government and society in such a way as not to call the fundamental principles of capitalism into question, specifically private capitalist property, including that of modern monopoly capitalism”. In other words, it was just a particular way of “managing capitalism” rather than a challenge to its legitimacy, “even if “capitalism” or “plutocracies” were subject to long diatribes in the rhetoric of fascist speeches”. In short, Amin says, “the “alternative” proposed by these various forms of fascism... [were] always silent concerning the main point – private capitalist property”.

Only “in certain conjunctures of violent and deep crisis”, Amin argues, could a “fascist solution [appear] to be the best one for dominant capital”. For, amidst such social upheaval, he asserts, “the fascist choice for managing a capitalist society”, along with its “**categorical rejection of “democracy”**”, often seems like the only option in which capitalists can preserve their privileged position in society. In such circumstances, he says, the principles of plutocracy or bourgeois liberal democracy (such as “recognition of a diversity of opinions, recourse to electoral procedures to determine a majority, guarantee of the rights of the minority”) can no longer be upheld, and the fascist “values of submission to the requirements of collective discipline and the authority of the supreme leader and his main agents” must be adopted. As described in Chapters Two and Three in particular, meanwhile, “the proclamation of the supposed necessity of returning to the (“medieval”) past, of submitting to the state religion or to some supposed characteristic of the “race” or

¹²⁰⁷ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/timstanley/100261121/hitler-wasnt-a-socialist-stop-saying-he-was/>

the (ethnic) “nation” simply facilitates the formation of a perceived nationalist alliance between the working and capitalist classes in the target society.

In the early twentieth century, however, asserts Amin, there were four different manifestations of fascism. The first, he says, was “the fascism of the major “developed” capitalist powers that aspired to become dominant hegemonic powers in the world, or at least in the regional, capitalist system”. In Germany, for example, Nazis exploited the fact that their country was a major industrial power which had failed to “achieve its hegemonic aspirations” in the First World War. Hitler’s plan, then, was to bolster “the capitalism of the monopolies that had supported the rise of Nazism”, and to split territories up between his own regime and his “major opponents” – in an attempt to avoid all-out war with countries more powerful than his own. Japan, meanwhile, had “aspired to impose its domination over all of East Asia” with an “imperial” form of capitalist management, but eventually decided to jettison “liberal” institutions in favour of “a brutal form, managed directly by the military High Command”.

The second type of fascism, Amin argues, was that of “second rank capitalist powers”, such as Italy, Spain, and Portugal, where the right wing (backed by “the old aristocracy, [the] new bourgeoisie, [the] middle classes” and the Catholic Church) sought to deal with “the crisis of the 1920s and the growing communist threat” with increasing levels of violence and repression. These countries, however, neither sought to dominate Europe nor to vastly expand their imperial possessions. Mussolini, for example, knew very well “that the stability of his system rested on his alliance – as a subaltern – either with Great Britain (master of the Mediterranean) or Nazi Germany”. And, although his “hesitation between the two possible alliances continued right up to the eve of the Second World War”, the Spanish Civil War eventually pushed him to coordinate much more with the Nazis. Salazar and Franco in Portugal and Spain, meanwhile, were a lot more careful not to provoke major imperialist powers, and thus “were never... ostracized for their anti-democratic violence (under the pretext of anti-communism)” by the latter. In fact, Washington even “rehabilitated them after 1945”, bringing Salazar into the NATO alliance and installing military bases in Spain. Then, soon after the fall of their fascist dictators, the two Iberian countries would be brought into the European Community, which was a “guarantor by nature of the reactionary capitalist order”.

The third type of fascism, Amin explains, was that of the “defeated powers”, including that of France’s Vichy government and of Belgium’s Léon Degrelle and “the “Flemish” pseudo-government supported by the Nazis”. In France, Amin says, “the upper class chose “Hitler rather than the Popular Front”, preferring “submission to “German Europe” to the left-wing alternative. And, while French fascists retreated “into the background following the defeat of the Nazis”, they did not disappear. Meanwhile, upon “the initiation of European construction and France’s joining the Marshall Plan and NATO, i.e., the willing submission to U.S. hegemony”, the forces of the “conservative right and anti-communist, social-democratic right” which had participated in the Resistance would finally “break permanently with the radical left that came out of the anti-fascist and potentially anti-capitalist” movement.

The final type of fascism, according to Amin, was that of “the dependent societies of Eastern Europe”. In “Poland, the Baltic states, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Greece, and western Ukraine during the Polish era”, for example, there was a system of backward and “dependent capitalism”. In fact, “the reactionary ruling classes of these countries [even] supported Nazi Germany... [during] the interwar period”, and Poland’s “old hostility to Russian domination (Tsarist Russia), which became hostility to the communist Soviet Union, encouraged by the popularity of the Catholic Papacy”, should have “made this country into Germany’s vassal, on the Vichy model”. However, as “Hitler [saw] the Poles, like the

Russians, Ukrainians, and Serbs, [as] people destined for extermination, along with Jews, the Roma, and several others”, there was essentially “no place for a Polish fascism allied with Berlin”. Elsewhere, however, in “Horthy’s Hungary and Antonescu’s Romania”, fascists were simply “treated as subaltern allies of Nazi Germany”, as they were in Croatia.

In short, says Amin, “the Russian Revolution had obviously changed the situation with regard to the prospects of working-class struggles” in Europe, along with “the response of the reactionary propertied classes” there. As a result, “two camps took form from 1917”, in the form of a “pro-socialist (which became pro-Bolshevik)” grouping (which was “popular in large parts of the peasantry (which aspired to a radical agrarian reform for their benefit) and in intellectual circles”) and an “anti-socialist” grouping (formed of the landowning classes who were “complaisant with regard to anti-democratic governments under fascist influence”). Although the “political map of the conflicts between “pro-fascists” and “anti-fascists” in [the aforementioned] part of Eastern Europe was blurred”, then, by forms of local nationalism and the Nazis’ ethnic hostility to them, this did not make the unpalatable natures of fascist movements there any more acceptable.

The West’s Failure to Distance Itself from Fascism

According to Amin, “the right in European parliaments between the two world wars was always complaisant about fascism and even about the more repugnant Nazism”. US Senator Harry Truman, for example, “openly avowed” in the Second World War that the USA should “allow the war to wear out its protagonists”, before intervening “as late as possible to reap the benefits” (demonstrating the absence of “a principled anti-fascist position” in the US government). In fact, “the emphasis on hate for “Judeo-Bolshevism”” was “common to many politicians” until after the war, when “it was necessary to condemn anti-Semitism in principle” in order to defend the Zionists of Israel, who would soon turn out to be treasured “allies of Western imperialism against... the Arab people”.

Back in Europe, right-wingers in Western Europe found it necessary to “distinguish themselves from those who – within their own groups – had been accomplices and allies of fascism”. However, they were “only forced to retreat into the background... without really disappearing”. In fact, the West German government and “its patrons (the United States, and secondarily Great Britain and France)” effectively “left in place nearly all those who had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity” during the Second World War. Meanwhile, France saw “legal proceedings... initiated against the Resistance for “abusive executions for collaboration” when the Vichyists reappeared on the political scene with Antoine Pinay”, Italy saw fascism remain “in the ranks of Christian Democracy and the Catholic Church”, and Spain would eventually see “any reminder of Francoist crimes” prohibited as part of the “reconciliation” compromise of 1980.

The European centre-left, meanwhile, soon supported the right in a crackdown on communism, forgetting its previous anti-fascist characteristics. It also became overwhelmingly supportive of “social liberalism”, giving its “unconditional support for European construction”, which had been “systematically devised as a guarantee for the reactionary capitalist order”. In short, then, “a reactionary bloc combining the classic right and the social liberals [had] been consolidated”. At the same time, Eastern European fascists “found refuge in the United States and Canada” in the run up to 1990, and “were all pampered by the authorities for their fierce anti-communism” in spite of their previous war crimes. Later on, in 2004, “the governments of the so-called democratic states of the West supported, and even financed and organized, the “Orange Revolution” (i.e., the fascist counter-revolution) in Ukraine”, with “the “moderate” media (which [could not] openly acknowledge that they [supported] avowed fascists) [hiding] their support for these fascists” by substituting “the term “nationalist” for fascist”.

For Amin, the “so-called “nationalists” [would become good] friends of Washington, Brussels, and NATO”, even though their ‘nationalism’ amounted to “chauvinistic hatred of largely innocent neighboring people who were never responsible for their misfortunes”. For Ukrainians, for example, this aggression would be directed towards the Russians (rather than the Tsar or the bureaucratic Soviet leadership), while “the new extreme right in France, Austria, Switzerland, Greece, and elsewhere” would blame ‘immigrants’. And, although the capitalist plutocracies of the West believe that the “collusion between the classic parliamentary right and the social liberals makes it unnecessary... to resort to the services of an extreme right”, the fact is that “Europeans are clearly also victims of the spread of generalized monopoly capitalism”. Therefore, “when confronted with collusion between the right and the so-called socialist left”, many citizens often “take refuge in electoral abstention or in voting for the extreme right” – both of which allow nationalism to grow in strength.

In short, says Amin, “Hitler was a truly mentally ill person, yet he could force the big capitalists who had put him in power to follow him to the end of his madness”. At the same time, although figures like “Mussolini, Franco, Salazar, and Pétain were not mentally ill”, they nonetheless enjoyed the backing of capitalists, while “a large number of their associates and henchmen did not hesitate to perpetrate criminal acts”. In a climate of increasing social and economic inequality and unrest, therefore, it would be foolish to assume that the world’s capitalist class would not once again give its backing to the modern fascist forces of today.

The Equivalent of Fascism in the Muslim World

In the Muslim World, meanwhile, Amin claims that “the Western powers (the United States and its subaltern European allies) have made their choice”, giving “preferential support to the Muslim Brotherhood and/or other “Salafist” organizations of political Islam”. The reason, he says, is that “these reactionary political forces accept exercising their power within globalized neoliberalism (and thus abandoning any prospect for social justice and national independence)”. And the insurance of such an order, he insists, “is the sole objective pursued by the imperialist powers”, regardless of the suffering and oppression that it may cause. For Amin, it was clear with the Arab Spring “that a declining United States [had] given up on getting something better – a stable and submissive local government – in favor of this “second best”” (i.e. reactionary Islamism).

In summary, Amin stresses, “political Islam’s program belongs to the type of fascism found in dependent societies”, sharing “with all forms of fascism two fundamental characteristics: (1) the absence of a challenge to the essential aspects of the capitalist order ...and (2) the choice of anti-democratic, police-state forms of political management”. Essentially, then, “the anti-democratic option of the imperialist powers... accepts the possible “excesses”” of the reactionary regimes it helps to put in place. Furthermore, as with “other types of fascism”, the aforementioned “excesses are [actually] inscribed in the “genes” of their modes of thought: unquestioned submission to leaders, fanatic valorization of adherence to the state religion, and the formation of shock forces used to impose submission”. Fascism, Amin insists, “has returned to the West, East, and South; and this return is naturally connected with the spread of the systemic crisis of generalized, financialized, and globalized monopoly capitalism”.¹²⁰⁸

American Capitalists’ Support for European Fascists before the Second World War

¹²⁰⁸ <http://monthlyreview.org/2014/09/01/the-return-of-fascism-in-contemporary-capitalism/>

According to RationalRevolution.net, “a number of prominent and wealthy American businessmen helped to support fascist regimes in Europe from the 1920s through the 1940s”. The most famous and most noteworthy individuals and companies involved with these reactionary European governments, however, were: Ford; General Motors; media mogul William Randolph Hearst; oil magnate John Rockefeller; JFK’s father (and movie mogul) Joseph Kennedy; aviator Charles Lindbergh; banker Andrew Mellon (also head of aluminium producer Alcoa); chemical giant DuPont; Standard Oil (now Exxon); Industrial Manufacturer ITT; Allen Dulles (later director of the CIA); banker Prescott Bush (of the Bush political dynasty); National City Bank; and General Electric. In short, the fascist governments of Europe “were involved in a high level of construction, production, and international business”, and powerful capitalists did not want to be left out of that lucrative process. Additionally, “many of America’s wealthy were only mildly affected by the depression, if at all”, and were looking for the next profitable adventure to support. Others, meanwhile, genuinely believed in the fascist cause, and their partnership with right-wing reactionaries in Europe was more a sign of solidarity than anything else.

During the Spanish Civil War, “GM, Ford, DuPont, and Standard Oil were [all] working with Franco”, whilst also “supplying the [other] fascist powers of Europe”. This conflict would eventually turn out to be the crucial “first step in the building of fascist power in Europe”, and would be the “stepping-stone” that fascists in Italy and Germany needed to move onto the bigger project of continental domination. Therefore, “the support of American corporations, and lack of American intervention by the government”, played a significant role in installing reactionaries in power in Spain, whilst simultaneously facilitating the growth of fascism in Europe as a whole. In short, “American banks and businesses continued to support the fascist regimes of Europe legally up until the day Germany declared war on America”, and some even continued afterwards.

The du Ponts, RationalRevolution.net says, “helped to finance the Black Legion”, which was “an American anti-socialist group that used violence against union leaders and union members” and was very supportive of Nazism. The organisation “had ties with the Ku Klux Klan” too, “which was also a pro-Nazi group”. William Randolph Hearst, meanwhile, who was “one of the largest media moguls of all time”, worked together with the Nazi regime throughout the 1930s “to help promote a positive image of the Nazi party in American media”. Furthermore, he “received loans from Italian fascist bankers” at the same time. As a result of this propaganda campaign, “many Americans were led to believe that there was nothing terribly wrong going on in Europe” and, in fact, “even after the war [had] started some Americans continued to support the Nazi regime based on [what] they had been exposed to through Hearst media sources”. In one article from 1933, for example, former New Statesman editor Clifford Sharp wrote that Hitler was “recognized by the whole of the political and official intelligentsia as an exceedingly able man”. And Hearst’s publications “continued to present the fascist regimes in Europe in a positive light until America finally entered the war”.

Henry Ford, RationalRevolution.net asserts, “was an avowed anti-Semite, and significant contributor” to the Nazi cause, both physically and ideologically. In 1920, for example, Ford stated in a vehemently anti-Semitic book that the “International Jew” was “behind all war”, saying: “the Jew is a threat” and “the attacking force is Jewish”. Affirming that university students had a “choice... between the Anglo-Saxons and the Tribe of Judah”, he claimed that the “only absolute antidote to the Jewish influence [was] to call college students back to a pride of race”. After all, he stressed, the founding fathers of the USA were “men of the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic race”, and had come “from Europe with civilization in their blood and in their destiny”. For him, these people were “the Ruling People”, who had been “chosen throughout the centuries to Master the world”.

Essentially, Ford “believed in an international Jewish conspiracy”, which “went well beyond a matter of racism and not liking people”, and consisted instead of “a war between the Anglo way of life and that of the Jews”. As such, Ford’s publications “helped shape Hitler’s views on the Jews, and those of many people around the world”, and Baldur Von Shirach even claimed at the Nuremberg Trials that the American industrialist had been “the primary inspiration for his anti-Semitism”. Ford’s contribution to the fascist cause was not only ideological, however, and he actually “made large personal contributions to Hitler’s political campaigns”. As a result, Ford “received the Nazi German Eagle (first class)” in 1938, which was a diplomatic and honorary award given to figures sympathetic to Nazism. Hitler, meanwhile, “spoke of Ford in his speeches and had a portrait of Ford in his office”. In fact, even after the Second World War, “Ford never returned [his] medal..., despite public outcry”.

In summary, “**American corporations and wealthy individuals played an important part in the construction of the Nazi Empire** and the various fascist groups of Europe leading up to World War II”. According to RationalRevolution.net, “**without American support it is doubtful that the fascist powers of Europe would have ever achieved their positions of power** and been able to develop the military institutions necessary to wage the Second World War”. In the words of William E. Dodd, America’s Ambassador to Germany during the 1930s, a “clique of U.S. industrialists [was] hell-bent to bring a fascist state to supplant our democratic government and [was] working closely with the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy”. A significant number of “American ruling families”, he said in 1937 in a letter to the US president, were “close... to the Nazi regime”, and had “had a great deal to do with bringing fascist regimes into being in both Germany and Italy”. Overall, he stressed, these industrialists had “extended aid to help Fascism occupy the seat of power”, and were now “helping to keep it there”.

Capitalist Support for Fascists during the Second World War

According to “a report printed by the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary in 1974”, the actions of “General Motors, Ford and Chrysler [which “dominated motor vehicle production in both the United States and Germany”] prior to and during World War II” were incredibly influential. In short, the report insisted, these companies had “retained the economic and political power to affect the shape of governmental relations both within and between these nations in a manner which maximized corporate global profits”, and they thus possessed “**tremendous influence over the course of war and peace in the world**”. Instead of using their power for peace, however, they “**maximized [their] profits by supplying both sides**” (in a clearly unprincipled, self-interested, or even fascist manner) “with the materiel needed to conduct the war”.

In fact, the report asserted, “General Motors and Ford became an integral part of the Nazi war efforts”. The German plants of GM, for example, “built thousands of bomber and jet fighter propulsion systems for the Luftwaffe”, while Ford’s “truck assembly plant in Berlin”, which had opened in 1938, would be converted “by GM and Ford... to the production of military aircraft and trucks” after the “outbreak of war in September 1939”. Furthermore, the two industrial giants even shamelessly “demanded reparations from the U.S. Government” after the end of hostilities “for wartime damages sustained by their Axis facilities as a result of Allied bombing”. In other words, the corporations were interested only in their own profits, and not in the conflict between pro-fascist and anti-fascist capitalist powers. By hedging their bets and supporting both sides, then, they had managed to protect their own interests and corporate viability (no matter what form of capitalist management were to emerge after the war). At the same time, they had sought to bolster efforts to counteract the influence of the Soviet Union whilst not being seen as traitors by their own host countries. In 1940, for example, Vice President of General Motors Graeme K. Howard even wrote, in

'America and a New World Order', that America ought to "give full cooperation to the Nazi regime... as the better alternative to the spread of Communism".

"Perhaps one of the most egregious contributors to the Nazi cause", asserts RationalRevolution.net, "was IBM under the direction of Thomas J. Watson", which "helped to set up Nazi census databases through the use of data sorting machines", which would then be used to decide who would die and who would live. In other words, "**IBM increased the size and scope of the Holocaust, and did it for profit**". In fact, in exchange for these machines, which "had [been] developed especially for the Nazis", Watson would even be "awarded a medal by Adolph Hitler for his role in assisting in the Nazi regime". Unembarrassed about this praise, Watson would then express "the highest esteem for Hitler" and his regime.

Fascism in the USA

Charles Lindbergh, meanwhile, "was perhaps the most vocal and public supporter of the fascists", advocating an alliance with Germany "to fight against Communism and promote White racial superiority". In fact, "he was given the Service Cross of the German Eagle" in 1938 in thanks for his contributions. Then, two years later, he founded the America First Committee (AFC), which sought to "build opposition to FDR and FDR's support for American entry into the war in Europe".¹²⁰⁹ Other "prominent members of the Committee", according to ThirdWorldTraveler.com, were: "industrialist Henry Ford, Thomas McCarter, the Director of Chase National Bank, Robert Wood, Chairman of Sears Roebuck, [and] Douglas Stuart, a member of the Quaker Oats family and owner of the Fascist publication Scribner's Commentary".

The idea behind the AFC had come from a "1939 meeting between the German Consul of Boston, the German Consul of San Francisco, representatives of General Motors and Pierre DuPont, Colonel Lindbergh, movie mogul Joseph P. Kennedy, then ambassador to Britain, industrialist Henry Ford, Fascist advertising director Bruce Barton, former President Herbert Hoover, and Senator Vandenberg of Michigan". Although "not all of these men were Fascists", they were all "interested in making peace between the Fascist powers and the United States", whether for business reasons, anti-communist reasons, or ideological reasons.

Years before, according to ThirdWorldTraveler.com, the American Liberty League (ALL), had come "as close as the United States has come to overthrowing the elected President in a coup d'etat". Faced with the New Deal plans (which sought to relieve the suffering of the unemployed and exploited and reform the financial system to avoid another economic depression), "many of the wealthy industrialists in the country considered President Franklin Roosevelt at the minimum a "traitor to his class" and a pawn of "Jewish Communism"". Being formed by "a roll-call of the most powerful American capitalists... including J.P. Morgan, the DuPonts, Andrew Mellon, the Rockefellers, E.F. Hutton [an investment banker], and Joseph Pew of Sunoco [an oil corporation]", the ALL sought to defeat the president's seemingly progressive measures. Meanwhile, with "DuPont and Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors... in control of the powerful anti-labor National Association of Manufacturers (NAM)", Joseph Pews helped the NAM to subsidise "the Sentinels of the Republic, the first industrial group to declare "the New Deal is Communist" and to openly decry the "Jewish threat"".

In mid-1933, the ALL sought to organise an army of disgruntled World War One veterans, led by Major General Smedley D. Butler, to take over the American government. The plan

¹²⁰⁹ http://www.rationalrevolution.net/war/american_supporters_of_the_europ.htm

was to make Butler the 'Director of National Security', leaving President Roosevelt as a mere figurehead. The DuPonts, meanwhile, "were willing to finance weaponry for the entire army". Butler, however, opposed the scheme but, because he "needed evidence", he "continued to meet with the men from the Liberty League, while an editor friend assigned reporter Paul French of the Philadelphia Record and the New York Post to investigate" the plot. Unaware of his opposition, the ALL "offered [Butler] \$18000 in cash on 24 September 1933", and the meetings would go on for another year, "until French [finally] broke the story on 20 November 1934". Then, the ALL gradually faded into insignificance, while Butler subsequently revealed his reasons for not participating in the fascist coup. In his book 'War Is a Racket', he argued that, having "spent 33 years" in the Marines, he had "spent most of [that] time being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers". In other words, he said, he had been "a racketeer for capitalism".¹²¹⁰

The Crimes of I.G. Farben and other German Capitalists

I.G. Farben, which was "the largest chemical manufacturing enterprise in the world during the early part of the 20th century", would be "critical in the development of the German economy and war machine leading up to WWII". For example, "its international holdings along with its international business contracts with companies like Standard Oil, DuPont, Alcoa, and Dow Chemical" would prove to be "crucial in supplying the Nazi regime with the materials needed for war as well as financial support". In fact, even after the start of the war, "Ford and GM supplied European fascists with trucks and equipment as well as investing money in I.G. Farben plants". At the same time, "Standard Oil supplied the fascists with fuel", while "US Steel and Alcoa supplied them with critically needed metals", and "American banks gave them billions of dollars-worth of loans".¹²¹¹

According to The Morning Star, "companies such as IG Farben, Krupp Steel and Siemens [all] supported Adolf Hitler and in return reaped huge profits from slave labour organised by the Nazis". In fact, the paper asserts, "all three had huge works attached to Auschwitz". These German industrialists, it says, "met with Heinrich Himmler" (who was "one of the chief architects of the Holocaust", having "set up and [run] the concentration camps") around "once a month to discuss how they could best work with those running the camps".

When Soviet troops entered Auschwitz in 1945, they "discovered a number of large industrial factories in and around" the camp. One of these, The Morning Star asserts, was "a synthetic rubber and chemical factory of the gigantic IG Farben", whose successor organisation BASF SE is today the largest chemical producer in the world. In fact, the factory was "just a few miles from the main camp", and "it was Farben that [had] developed and sold the poison gas – Zyklon B – used in the gas chambers". Meanwhile, "company representatives" were said to have "toured the camp to select the 10,000 fit slave workers needed for their works". The company "also funded and helped with Josef Mengele's appalling so-called medical experiments on Auschwitz child prisoners". And, although it promised after the end of the war "to pay huge reparations to its former slave workers", it "never paid up in any significant measure". The "chemical and pharmaceutical giants like Bayer and Hoechst" in modern Germany, meanwhile, "can still trace their origins back to IG Farben".

At the same time, Krupp Steel (which is now ThyssenKrupp AG, one of the world's largest steel producers) was "another of the largest industrial combines in Germany that also used slave labour from Auschwitz". In order to make Nazi "armaments, tanks and super guns", in fact, it "employed more than 10,000 slaves from the camps". The "third large industrial complex at Auschwitz", meanwhile, "was owned by electrical and engineering giant

¹²¹⁰ http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Fascism/Support_Hitler_US.html

¹²¹¹ http://www.rationalrevolution.net/war/american_supporters_of_the_europ.htm

Siemens”, which is currently the largest engineering company in Europe. This well-known corporation actually “built the gas chambers and ovens that would kill so many concentration camp victims and their families”.

Daimler-Benz (now Daimler AG), meanwhile, “was a strong supporter of the Nazis and in return grew to win huge arms contracts”. Like the three companies mentioned above, it also “used thousands of slaves” during the Second World War. At the same time, Volkswagen’s predecessors “built buzz bombs and army staff-cars” for the Nazis and, according to German historians, “as much as one in eight of VW’s wartime workforce of 16,000 was slave labour”. Wartime head of VW Ferdinand Porsche, for example, even allegedly hired “concentration camp inmates for the factory’s labour camp”, having “contacted SS leader Heinrich Himmler directly to request slaves from Auschwitz”. In fact, even Hugo Boss was involved, being “an enthusiastic member of the Nazi Party” and manufacturing “Hitler Youth, storm trooper and SS uniforms using slave labour”.

In short, **“the Nazi war machine could not have existed without unquestioning and enthusiastic support from some of Germany’s biggest and richest capitalist concerns”**, which simply did “what capitalists always do”, concentrating “on making enormous profits whatever the real cost in human misery”. And this was not only a “shameful part played by German capitalist firms in the Nazi death camps”, but a sign of how “the capitalist class [was] so important to the success of Nazi Germany”.¹²¹²

III) Compromise, Cooperation, and Critical Thought

In order to bring about peace, justice, freedom, and direct democracy in the Middle East, and the wider world, there needs to be a constant recognition that “capitalism is exploitative in its nature”. By encouraging individuals “to see no value in anyone or anything except as means to making a profit for himself”, The Big Picture claims, this economic system ends up exploiting “anyone (and anything) it can – starting with the environment itself and ending with those who are most vulnerable – [such as] women and children”.¹²¹³ A search to end the rule of exploitative and anti-democratic political regimes, therefore, must also involve a search to replace capitalism with direct democratic control over economics and resources, along with a spirit of solidarity based on the immense creative potential that lies within all human communities across the globe.

In the pursuit of a revolutionary and directly democratic alternative to capitalism, however, progressive forces must not be afraid to engage with the inevitably imperfect political movements that exist in the world today. While we may tend to find the most perfect examples of solidarity, justice, and peace to be the most beautiful, we must at the same time constantly embrace the challenge that is debating with those who do not share our desire for a profound socio-economic transformation on earth. In other words, we need to learn how to navigate the often complicated reality with which we are faced, and accept that a perfect expression of human unity and cooperation will most likely be achieved only through a long series of partial gains and complex struggles. In short, while it may not always be popular on the Left to talk about compromise or cooperation with forces with which we do not agree, I strongly believe that radical change will only happen in human society when its working masses voluntarily choose to participate in such a process. And the simple fact is that, for this development to occur, an enormous educational campaign (which is not currently in progress) will need to take place. Therefore, any attempts to force the world’s workers into making any decision will simply result in either resentment, reactionism, or an unstable revolutionary process.

¹²¹² <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-8bdb-Not-just-concentration-camps-but-capitalist-factories-too#.VQhgNeG8480>

¹²¹³ <http://www.geopolitics.us/capitalism-is-exploitation/>

In a largely capitalist world, ruled by the economically and physically powerful, there will always be attempts to prevent or corrupt progressive political developments, and they must always be opposed. Nonetheless, a revolution which excludes those who have different opinions from us does not truly deserve to be called a revolution. For, as long as we believe that humans are essentially rational beings, we can only hope to permanently destroy reactionary ideas with revolutionary ideas. In other words, in order to convert followers of the former into followers of the latter, progressive activists must seek to convince them, through explaining the merits of the latter, to voluntarily choose to change the path they are on.

Criticise the Lies

One key aspect of counteracting reactionary ideas is revealing their misrepresentation (or mere fabrication) of information, especially when they come from forces which claim to be on the side of progressive forces. The hysteria and hypocritical arrogance of the political elites of the USA, for example, could be seen in a number of comments made in 2014 regarding the situation in the Middle East. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, for instance, claimed “the world [was] literally about to blow up”, while John McCain said: “we are now facing an existential threat [in Iraq and Syria] to the security of the United States of America”, with ISIS advances having “turned into one of the most serious threats to American security in recent history”. According to Micah Zenko at Foreign Policy, the truth was that ISIS was simply “not an existential threat to the United States”, and that such an assertion was an outright lie. Explaining his argument in greater detail, he emphasises that the Republican’s use of the word ‘existential’ suggested that the USA risked total destruction (something that ISIS leaders could not hope to achieve even in their wildest dreams). In fact, Zenko says, such irrationality within the political spheres of the USA had led even former Secretary of Defence Robert Gates to assert that: “the greatest national security threat to this country is the two square miles that encompasses the Capitol building and the White House”.

Other politicians, meanwhile, like Republican congressman Adam Kinzinger, insisted that “the withdrawal from Iraq was one of the biggest mistakes, I think, historically that’ll be shown that the United States has made in modern foreign policy”. Here, Zenko argues, Kinzinger was “partially correct”, in that “one of the biggest mistakes in foreign-policy history did [indeed] involve Iraq, an estimated 140,000 Iraqi and 4,425 U.S. troops’ lives lost, and \$815 billion in direct taxpayer costs (and counting)”. Far from an end to direct military action being a catalyst for chaos, then, suggests Zenko, it was the initial intervention itself that had caused such turmoil. In fact, with the ISIS threat growing, even the US Democrats inflated the supposedly benevolent role of the United States in world politics, with President Obama insisting that: “it is America that the world looks to for help”, and that “the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation” on the planet. For Zenko, this type of egotistical nationalist rhetoric (from both Democrats and Republicans) simply flew in the face of the fact that **America had long been “the world’s indispensable nation only when it [had been] in America’s narrow national interests to act as such**, which [had been] extremely selectively and rarely, making the concept meaningless”.

Another “trumped-up threat inflation” regarding ISIS, Zenko affirms, came from Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel, who said the group was “an imminent threat to every interest we have, whether it’s in Iraq or anywhere else”. For US citizens unaware about what these ‘interests’ were, it would perhaps be easy to believe Hagel’s fear-mongering comments but, as I have previously mentioned, ISIS could not possibly hope to endanger every single interest of US elites around the world (because there are simply so many of them in so many different places). Nonetheless, such statements effectively served to justify military action against the jihadist group to a decent part of the US population, and allowed people like

Pentagon spokesman Steve Warren to repeat the misrepresentation of facts that, “with every terrorist that we kill from the air, that is one less terrorist on the ground”. By hiding the reality that, “despite all the terrorists that the United States kills from the air, they somehow continue to multiply on the ground”, says Zenko, Warren and others simply sought to comfort US citizens where no comfort ought to have been found.

At the same time, other renowned fear-mongers, like Republican congresswoman Michele Bachmann, said that “people from Yemen, Iran, Iraq and other terrorist nations [were] making their way up through America’s southern border” (i.e. from Mexico). Department of Homeland Security official Francis X Taylor, however, would base his comments more on evidence, insisting at a congressional hearing that he was “unaware of any specific credible threat to the U.S. homeland”. And these words would also contradict the irrational exaggerations of Near Eastern affairs bureaucrat Anne Patterson, who would claim that “Iran’s ability to acquire a nuclear weapon [was] an existential threat to [the USA]”. For Zenko, it may well be true that a “nuclear Iran [if it existed] could pose an existential threat to Israel” but, even in that case, Israel’s own extensive arsenal would suggest that the Zionist State would be able to resist such a threat with ease. Regarding a threat to the USA, though, Zenko asserts, Iran could not possibly be an ‘existential’ threat, as the superpower was “6,500 miles away” and had “an estimated 4,650 nuclear warheads” in its possession.

While perceived perils were significantly overstated (so much so that they barely resembled reality), though, so were the ethical credentials of the American establishment. Secretary of State John Kerry, for example, insisted in September 2014 that: “the United States doesn’t ever trade its concern for human rights for any other objective” – something that is challenged almost entirely by both current and historical truths. In fact, on this occasion Kerry had the nerve to speak of the importance of human rights whilst in Cairo (and just after official visits to US allies in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Turkey), in spite of “these countries’ abysmal human rights records”.¹²¹⁴ In summary, then, the **simultaneous inferiority and superiority complex of the USA**, represented in much of its political rhetoric, causes **neurotic and dangerously extreme embellishment** when it comes both to supposed ‘threats’ to the USA and the morality of American actions abroad. Consequently, we should always hold everything leaving the mouths of representatives of the US establishment to the very highest standards of scrutiny if we hope to make our way successfully to the truth.

Could the Rise of ISIS Pave the Way for an End to the Syrian Civil War?

On September 16, Nina Larson at Lebanon’s Daily Star newspaper reported on how, according to UN investigators, the Assad regime and the mainstream opposition in Syria would need to “seek compromise to end... [the] bloody civil war and block the rise of murderous jihadists”. The two forces, then, would essentially need “to find common ground” and “commit to making compromises” in order to reach a peaceful settlement to the conflict, according to Paulo Pinheiro, the leader of the UN’s Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Syria. The lack of progress made by the international community (due to the political interests and strategies of regional and international state powers), he said, had “allowed the warring parties to operate with impunity” for too long, and had “nourished the violence that [had] consumed Syria”. Whilst detailing the “widespread abuses”, “war crimes and crimes against humanity” of the Syrian ‘security’ forces and their opponents, therefore, he emphasised that the two sides needed to come together to stop the brutality of ISIS (and its “massacres, beheading [of] boys as young as 15..., amputations and lashings in public squares..., [and] widespread use of child soldiers and stoning women to death for suspected adultery”).

¹²¹⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/31/the-best-worst-quotes-of-2014-lies-from-government-officials-and-politicians/>

In the aforementioned comments, Pinheiro was seemingly suggesting that the two sides of the Syrian Civil War ought to be forgiven for their crimes in the wake of ISIS's advance, whilst apparently failing to realise that neither side would truly bring about the profound economic, political, and social change needed to end social unrest in Syria. Of course, it would have been foolish to expect the UN to call for revolutionary changes in the country, but "insisting [that] dialogue was the only way forward" (rather than a progressive socio-economic transformation in the country) was simply misleading. Nonetheless, Pinheiro was indeed correct about the fact that the conflict would "not be resolved on the battlefield".¹²¹⁵

Compromise made between warring elites (and not including the Syrian people themselves), however, could never truly deal with the underlying causes of turmoil in the country. For, while ceasefires and political agreements may be able to stem the violence, only the direct involvement of Syrian communities in determining their own destiny would truly pave the way for a permanent termination of violent conflict. At the same time, though, Pinheiro was right about the need to deal with the radically reactionary ISIS jihadists in the short term, as their victory in the Syrian Civil War would have been the worst of all possible outcomes. The best possible outcome, meanwhile, would be dialogue and compromises between the main actors in the Syrian Civil War (including those of the Rojava Revolution – which could have a very positive impact on such talks and agreements).

The Dohuk Agreement between Progressive Rojavans and Kurdish Nationalists

On October 16, Rudaw said that the progressive administration of Rojava had met with pro-KDP parties in Iraqi Kurdistan in the hope of forging an anti-ISIS alliance that would facilitate arms transfers to YPG/YPJ fighters in Syrian Kurdistan.¹²¹⁶ Over a week later, the TEV-DEM's Aldar Xelil would talk about the "Duhok Agreement reached between [the] TEV-DEM and ENKS", and the three articles they had signed in order to enable **cooperation between the two groups**. "The 1st article", Xelil said, concerned "the formation of an assembly... for Rojava Kurds and an official Kurdish body". The aforementioned assembly would have 30 seats, for example, with the TEV-DEM and ENKS holding 40% each, and other groupings holding 20%. The purpose of the body would be primarily to "forward certain views to the autonomous administration" rather than to determine policy. In other words, Xelil asserted, it would be "something like a **consultative assembly**... [but] only for the Kurds" – reflecting the nationalist beliefs of the ENKS and their KRG backers.

The seats of the ENKS in the assembly would be split between its "9 different parties", which would then choose among themselves who would take the additional three seats. Those of the TEV-DEM, meanwhile, would be shared between its "civil society organizations..., women's organizations, youth organizations and [six] different parties". Both groupings would then meet, and other applying parties would also be included. If many different parties applied, Xelil stressed, there would be an election, with the "24 people [voting to] choose the remaining 6". The important thing to mention here, in light of the comments made about Rojava in the last three chapters, is that, while this assembly would not be an example of direct democracy, it would seemingly not have any concrete political power.

At the same time, Xelil said, the second article of the agreement covered "relations with the administration of Democratic Autonomy", considering that the ENKS had previously opposed the system. The latter, for example, had seemingly agreed to accept the administration as a "common project". According to Xelil, **the ENKS parties "accepted**

¹²¹⁵ <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Sep-16/270851-assad-opposition-must-compromise-to-beat-isis-un.ashx#axzz3DO9gtXH9>

¹²¹⁶ <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/15102014>

themselves as a part of this project", while nonetheless insisting that they had "some proposals" (Xelil asserted that a committee would be "formed within the official body [to debate] these proposals"). ENKS parties, meanwhile, would "take part in the legislative and executive assemblies" of Rojava (the Meclisa Zagonsaz and council of ministers respectively), but only up until the elections in the Rojavan Cantons (which had been temporarily postponed due to ISIS attacks). "Elections", Xelil affirmed, were "the main foundation" of these electoral bodies, and the second article of the Dohuk agreement would be "no longer binding" after they had taken place.

Regarding "the Social Contract and other aspects of the system", meanwhile, the TEV-DEM insisted it was "open to change" and debate, though the ENKS had no concrete proposals regarding these features of the Rojava Revolution. Most importantly, though, the third article of the Dohuk agreement sought to arrange the ENKS's participation in the defence of Rojava. The TEV-DEM asserted, as it had before, that the ENKS would have to discuss how it would take part "within the established bodies" of the YPG and YPJ, and that the ENKS and a YPG/YPJ committee would then "figure out how to come to an agreement".

When the TEV-DEM and ENKS had previously disagreed with each other, Xelil emphasised, "there was neither the autonomous administration nor ISIS". In other words, then, the jihadi group had "upset the balance", seeing "a common enemy" for both progressive and nationalist forces emerge. For Xelil, "everything the revolution [represented had been] becoming clearer [in Kobanî]". He also affirmed that, "up until now [the] ENKS was not a popular force", having "only... one thing" in its favour – positive "relations with certain powers and certain states" (i.e. Turkey and the KRG). Now, though, he stressed: "we are in these meetings as well".

As the ENKS, backed up by the KDP, had "been categorically against the Rojava Revolution" in the beginning, the weakening of the KDP and strengthening of the YPG/YPJ after the events of Şengal had seen both groups lose "a lot of prestige", meaning that they now had to seek some sort of compromise with the PKK and its allies. In fact, Xelil highlighted, "most of the resistance in the South [i.e. Iraqi Kurdistan]" was "formed from our people", and the KDP was now to a large extent "dependent" on the progressive Kurdish movement. With the Dohuk Agreement, he argued, the KDP and its allies "wanted to say to the world "look I still have influence"", especially with the Kobanî resistance showing the KDP that the autonomous administration in Rojava was "moving forward" and was not going away.

In Turkey, Xelil claimed, "Erdoğan really wanted Kobanî to fall..., [and] more than ISIS". Having used "delay tactics", however, aiming not to get directly involve, he eventually lost out when the Kobanî resistance "convinced everyone that it would not fall". According to the YPG/YPJ, meanwhile, ISIS communications had been heard saying: "if we win this battle we will win the whole of Syria. If we lose we will lose everything". In other words, Kobanî was an incredibly important strategic aim for the group (a suggestion backed up by the fact that ISIS had "stopped fighting against everyone over the whole of Syria", and had "sent all their forces to Kobanî"). In spite of the jihadis' insistence, however, the fact that the "19th of July Revolution began in Kobanî" had meant that it was also considered to be both "strategic and meaningful" for Rojavans.

In Stalingrad, Xelil asserted, "the balance of the Second World War" had been changed, and Kobanî was now playing the same role as that battle in the fight against Wahhabi reactionism. For, with "1,500 fighters [having] come from Bakur [North Kurdistan]", and even the USA lending limited support to the resistance (for its own propaganda purposes), Kobanî and the YPG/YPJ had become central to the fight against ISIS. And, although **Rojavans** had "not [been] accepted at the First and Second Geneva Conferences", he argued,

they were “now at the forefront... of the Syrian revolution”, and it was becoming clearer and clearer that “there [would] be no Syrian revolution without [them]”.¹²¹⁷

Strategic Kurdish Unity

On October 28, news came out about how the “Dohuk agreement between Syrian Kurdish political parties” had represented the possibility that the KDP and PKK were “close to a strategic agreement” in the fight against ISIS. The Interactive Investor, for example, insisted that the finalisation of the agreement in Iraqi Kurdistan “under the observation of KRG President Massoud Barzani” looked set to have a “**positive impact on the perception of Syrian Kurdistan and the PYD**” in the international community. The agreement, it stated, could even “make it easier” for the KDP and PKK to “sign a strategic agreement similar... [to that of] the KDP and PUK” in northern Iraq, in which they had agreed to coexist peacefully in exchange for certain concessions. In fact, according to PYD member Sherzan Yazidi, the Dohuk Agreement had “been the main factor in the KDP and PKK fostering closer ties recently”.¹²¹⁸

Meanwhile, on November 8, M Ali Çelebi spoke at the Rojava Report about how the “October 22 Duhok Agreement... [had] prepared the way for meetings between parties from Rojava, the KCK and the KRG”. In one of the agreement’s articles, Çelebi said, the “KCK and the Hewler (Erbil) government [were said to have been the] guarantors of the agreement”. Furthermore, after the accords had been signed, “a delegation from ENKS and TEV-DEM [had apparently gone] to Kandil to discuss the current situation with the KCK”. Subsequently, the latter “stressed that **the alliance was historical and that it was important in the fight against ISIS**. Later on, the delegation “took part in a series of meetings with the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) in Hewler over the first week of November”, representing a certain **rapprochement between the forces of Rojava and those of the mainstream anti-Assad movement**.

Once again (as described above), meanwhile, Çelebi emphasised that the Kurdish consultative assembly agreed on in Article One of the Dohuk Agreement would only “be able to make binding decisions regarding the general situation of the Kurds”, while the **Rojava cantons would “be able to make their own decisions as before”**. Furthermore, regarding the third article of the accords (in which the focus is on self-defence in Rojava), one Rojavan administrator insisted that the command of the region’s defence forces would ““certainly” remain with the YPG and YPJ”. ENKS units, they asserted, would simply “be integrated into the general command, while the commanders of these forces [would] serve in positions in the high command”. The focus, they stressed, was on creating unified defence forces, and avoiding the inter-militia conflicts seen elsewhere in the world (and in Iraqi Kurdistan in the 1990s).

Finally, referring to the delivery of weapons and Peshmerga troops to Kobanî in late October, Çelebi insisted that the actions had been “meaningful for Kurdish unity”, although such unity (and the compromises made to achieve it) would have to be preserved if Kurdish communities were to avoid further infighting in the future. He also emphasised that the **continued refusal of the KRG to officially recognise Rojavan autonomy**, “while allowing the Turkish Armed Forces to keep bases in places like Bamerni and Kani Masi and [allowing] them to conduct reconnaissance flights”, **would inevitably obstruct such unity**. To avoid such obstacles, he asserted, the KDP would need to “turn away from the anti-PYD policies that it [had] forced onto Rojava as part of Turkey’s anti-Kurdish paradigm”. It would also have to “recognize the cantons” and stop “being the [main] obstacle to the

¹²¹⁷ <http://rojavarreport.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/TEV-DEM-rep-Kobani-has-upset-their-plans/>

¹²¹⁸ <http://basnews.com/en/News/Details/KDP-and-PKK-Move-Toward-Strategic-Agreement-/39942> and <http://www.iii.co.uk/investment/detail?code=cotn%3AGKP.L&display=discussion&threshold=0&action=detail&id=11417516>

Kurdish National Congress". In summary, then, for such strategic unity to continue more permanently, a "new mode of organization" would be necessary, "capable of including all peoples and faiths" and committed to "democratize and run along egalitarian principles".¹²¹⁹

In short, therefore, while the progressive Kurdish movement's valiant resistance against ISIS had forced the nationalists in the KRG to broker a deal, Rojavans were still wary of the essentially reactionary character of Kurdish nationalist groups. Instead of refusing to cooperate or compromise with them, however, they saw both the opportunity to protect their own territories from jihadist aggression and the opportunity to increase their influence in the Kurdish community – choosing to convince citizens to follow their progressive ideas rather than to force them to do so. And, in this way, the Rojava Revolution may well have allowed reactionary forces to increase their levels of participation in the autonomous administration, but it had also set about following its principles of creating a progressive system in which all citizens would be included, with no-one left behind – no matter what their beliefs were.

Critical Analysis of Increased Aid for Kobanî

In December 2014, an article by Errol Babacan and Murat Çakır was published at Jacobin Magazine, in which the authors insisted that "real international solidarity" for Rojava's battle against ISIS would not come "in the form of military intervention". Calling "expansion of military assistance from the United States and the opening of Turkish territory to Peshmerga forces" from the KRG "questionably timed", they speak about how "international attention on the region [had] noticeably abated with the arrival of the Peshmerga reinforcements" at the end of October. Furthermore, they assert, the struggle in Kobanî and elsewhere in Rojava remained "in part a battle over the appropriate means of international solidarity". In particular, with Syrian Kurdistan facing "a spreading wildfire", they stress that "care [had] to be taken not to call for aid from those who [had] set the fire in the first place and then doused it with gasoline", referring in part to Turkey but also to the USA, Europe, and their dictatorial regional allies.

Specifically, say Babacan and Çakır, "Turkey's active prevention of aid [contradicted] any private promises made" of ensuring that Kobanî would not fall, thus erasing "any doubts about the Turkish government's true nature". At the same time, they insist, we should analyse in greater depth "the expansion of military assistance from the US and the opening of Turkish territory to the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga". For them, it was clear that **"the US [had] stepped up its bombing in and around Kobanê just as immense international sympathy was emerging"**, and in spite of the fact that, days before, its leaders "had made its indifference toward Kobanê all too explicit".

While it was "perhaps conceivable that the US had to react to public pressure", therefore, Babacan and Çakır assert, it was also important to ask: why "more arms [had not been] delivered directly" to the YPG/YPJ; why "the US and other NATO members [did not] use their influence with Turkey to force policy changes that [had] been hemming in Rojava"; and why "the same Peshmerga that [had previously] helped militarily impose an economic [and humanitarian] embargo on Rojava" had suddenly "hurried to Rojava's aid". Furthermore, Babacan and Çakır stress, **"neither the US nor any other country [had] taken concrete steps to fulfil the actual demands Rojava [had] made that its autonomous defense be made possible"**. For, in the end, such support would require "sustained pressure on NATO-member Turkey to open a corridor for reinforcements from Rojava's own self-defense forces further east" – something that no ally of Ankara was truly willing to do.

¹²¹⁹ <http://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/11/08/duhok-the-kdp-and-the-snc/>

At the same time, Babacan and Çakır argue, it was also necessary to question the KRG's aims behind the Dohuk Agreement, especially as "KRG-associated sources" had declared that the "coordinating council" mentioned in the accords would seek to "function as a central government and [stand] above Rojava's cantons" (something which would almost certainly be opposed by progressive forces in Rojava). Such comments, the writers insist, were simply "reminders that real aid [to Syrian Kurdistan would be] bound to conditions fundamentally disruptive to Rojava's democratic and emancipatory project". In other words, then, **Rojavans could "plainly not expect substantial aid from other states without abandoning their own achievements"**. The USA in particular, Babacan and Çakır say, "certainly [had] no sympathy for the politics on the ground in Rojava". In fact, "only joining some loose alliance against the IS [had] given them reason to send support", and even that was "too weak" a reason to justify "fully [overruling] the interests of US allies in the region, [meaning] Turkey and the KRG in particular".

The "significance of Rojava from the perspective of the international left", Babacan and Çakır stress, "cannot be overstated", but the fact is that the "continued existence" of the progressive revolution in Rojava could "not be ensured without international solidarity". Rather than "working for military intervention and arms shipments", however, "the implementation of which [left-wingers could] not meaningfully influence", what the Western Left really needed to focus on was exposing "the doings of NATO-member Turkey" for what they were: "the intentional delivery of the people of Rojava into the hands of the IS" with the aim of forcing the region's revolutionary political experiment into submission.

In short, Babacan and Çakır assert, "the units of the YPG/YPJ [had long] declared that they [could], together with the PKK, manage the defense of Rojava on their own", without any outside support. The only thing they would need would be for Turkey to "open a corridor through its territory for military resupply and logistical resourcing", and to "abandon its de facto support of the IS". Meanwhile, the "lifting of Turkey's embargo on Rojava", which had "yet to be attained", would also be a massive step forward for the region. The task of Western activists, therefore, was to **pressure their governments into forcing Turkey "to end both its proxy war in Syria as well as its repression of political protest"**, whilst at the same time maintaining "a more sceptical stance towards Western governments' goals in the region".¹²²⁰

IV) Victory in Kobanî and the Need for Perspective

On January 27, 2015, Dilar Dirik spoke about how, "after 135 days of fearless resistance, the people of Kobanî [had finally] liberated the city". Their "epic and unbelievable resistance", she said, had been simply "the most glorious resistance of our time". And, while international and regional political forces finally "supported the same people they had previously marginalised" after the struggle of the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî had garnered significant media attention, the fact remained that it was always a Rojavan battle, led overwhelmingly by Rojavans. The aforementioned state actors, Dirik insists, were essentially just tagalongs, for it was only after "the people in Kobanî had already resisted for more than a month all by themselves" that the US-led coalition finally "saw an opportunity to show that their strategy against ISIS [worked]".

Proof of the self-interested and unscrupulous nature of the international coalition forces, Dirik asserts, was that, even though "everyone [had now appropriated] Kobanî's resistance for their own agendas", those actually leading the resistance on the ground were still

¹²²⁰ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/the-battle-for-kobane/>

described as 'terrorists', while "there [were still] no consequences for the states that [had] explicitly contributed to the rise of ISIS". While Rojavans had, "for the last three years", attempted "to warn the world about ISIS", they had been "completely ignored", with their comments being "discarded as conspiracy theories". The inconvenient truth, as seen previously in this book, was simply that, by listening to the autonomous administration of Rojava, dominant international political actors would be forced "to acknowledge that the anti-Assad block [had] indirectly or directly supported and sponsored jihadist murderers in Syria".

With these facts considered, Dirik asks, "are we really expected to congratulate the main instigators of war and conflict in the Middle East for liberating Kobani?" For her, the answer is no, because it is **absolutely vital that the actions of "those who funded or at least turned a blind eye to murderous jihadists" not be forgotten**. At the same time, the forces which had "started unjust wars and destroyed the region with their policies", whilst appeasing "the Turkish state, which [had] supported extremist rapists and murderers", could not possibly be seen all of a sudden as progressive political actors. The simple reality, Dirik asserts, was that, "literally overnight, after thousands of people had been murdered already, ISIS [quickly] became an "issue", around the same time in which [the jihadist group had] crossed over into Iraq - the failed state into which the US [had] poured billions of dollars after invading and where many forces [held both] strategic economic and political interests". It was only at this point, she says, when the actions of the Wahhabi extremists threatened capitalist interests in Iraq, that "the same states [which had] formerly supported the jihadists" in Syria (such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia) "suddenly became part of the coalition against them".

In short, international and regional powers had been completely complicit with the spread of Wahhabi-inspired jihadism in Syria between 2011 and 2014, largely out of their fervour to defeat the Ba'athist regime in Damascus and prevent any slightly progressive opposition force from gaining the upper hand in the civil war. As part of this strategy, Dirik says, Rojavan activists "were not invited... when major international actors met at the so-called Geneva-II conference" in January 2014 to "discuss a resolution to the war in Syria". In fact, she asserts, the international community actually adopted, with the aim of pacifying the Turkish state, "an explicitly hostile attitude towards Rojava", collaborating with the marginalisation of Rojava "long before it marginalised the jihadists in Syria". In reality, therefore, **Rojavans resisted Wahhabi jihadism in spite of the actions of the international political establishment rather than because of them**.

"Without relying on anyone's approval", then, "the people of Rojava declared three autonomous cantons at the same time as the Geneva-II conference" in order to make their message very clear: "we will build our autonomy" whether you like it or not. And, for Dirik, this determination held by Rojavans to govern themselves was what "kept them going" through their struggle against Wahhabi jihadism. Essentially, she says, the people fighting in Kobani had "an ideology, a world view, [and] a vision", which gave them the "determination and willingness to sacrifice", without which "no air strikes on earth would have saved the city". In other words, "the resilience of the people on the ground" (which had seen "elderly women in their 60s [establish] their autonomous "mother's" self-defense battalions... half a year before US-led air strikes" occurred) was what gave the 'anti-ISIS coalition' "the opportunity... to "rescue" Kobani for its own interests". According to Dirik, there was no other way of explaining how US officials had gone so quickly from talking about how "Kobani is about to fall and it is not our priority to save it" to putting all efforts into protecting it".

Overall, Dirik asserts, the "Rojava revolution has been a people's struggle from the beginning", no matter how many self-interested US-led airstrikes would subsequently rain

down on ISIS in Kobanî. It had long refused to be “co-opted by anyone due to geopolitical conditions and survived by relying on its own strength”, she stresses. And, although “even right-wingers and Islamophobes” were now “praising” and “instrumentalising” the Battle for Kobanî (in their search for “a piece of the victory pie”), the fact was that the fighters on the ground still emphasised that it was the libertarian socialist “philosophy of the PKK that [had motivated] their struggle”.

In other words, Dirik highlights, it had been “the refusal to accept the parameters of the global system” that had successfully “mobilised the population” of Kobanî to resist ISIS advances. The “anticipation of such a free life”, meanwhile, had been “the main motor of the Kobanî resistance”, in “radical contrast to the monopolist “one religion, one language, one nation, one state, one flag”-policies, the dictatorships, [the] monarchies, [the] sectarian tyrannies, and [the] patriarchal violence” currently prevalent in the region. Ideology, Dirik says, was key for the Rojavan resistance. And, if any proof of this fact was required, we would only have to look as far as Mosul, the second largest city of Iraq, which “fell into ISIS’s hands within days, even though the US had put billions of dollars into training the Iraqi army”.

In summary, Dirik argues, it had been commitment to libertarian socialism that had turned the outgunned and out-financed city of Kobanî into “a fortress of resistance for people across the globe”, showing them that “the possibility of a different future [was] well alive”. Therefore, it was impossible to “separate the political mobilisation of the people in Rojava from their victories against ISIS”, she stresses. For her, “the least we can do to honor the fighters of Kobanî is to respect and support [the] political aims” of “the smiling people of Kobanî”, who had “stuck to their liberationist revolutionary principles” in spite of being “surrounded by the dark flag of ISIS, the bloodthirsty Assad-regime, the vicious Turkish state, a suffocating embargo, cold-blooded foreign policy calculations by global hegemonic powers, ethnic tensions, and sectarian wars”. In short, Dirik claims, **the best way to “honor the braveness of these selfless human beings and the victims of the war” is to expose “the policies and interests of the states and structures that created this inferno to begin with”**.¹²²¹

ISIS ‘Broken’ in Kobanî

Even in early November 2014, Amed Dicle had spoken at KurdishQuestion.com about how ISIS was “aware that it [had] been broken in Kobanî”. Both “on the frontline and from ISIS’s internal walkie-talkie communications”, he insisted, “the psychological impact of this loss [was] clearly visible”. However, as long as ISIS controlled Raqqa, Jarabulus and Tel Abyad, he said, “Kobanî [would] remain... a war zone”. While “a victory against ISIS in Kobanî [would] lead to the long term defeat of ISIS in the rest of Syria”, he asserted, the process “may last for much of next year [2015]”.¹²²² Nonetheless, the Rojava Revolution’s successes against the jihadists would soon pave the way for communities under ISIS control elsewhere in Syria (and Iraq) to stand up and defend themselves by following the Rojavan example – forging comradely ties with different ethnic and religious groups.

On January 26, Columbia University’s David L. Phillips would speak about how “the battle for Kobani [had represented] a turning point in the war against Daesh” (or ISIS). In fact, he said, “shifting alliances [had even] made the Kurds indispensable to America’s fight against Islamic extremists”. Although the “outgunned and outmanned” YPG/YPJ had “fought heroically to defend Kobanî” from the very beginning, he asserted, “the Obama administration [had] first turned a blind eye to Kobani’s suffering”. When ISIS was finally forced out of the city with the support of airstrikes and Peshmerga heavy arms, “nearly

¹²²¹ <http://www.kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/why-kobani-did-not-fall/570-why-kobani-did-not-fall.html>

¹²²² <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/insight-research/analysis/kobane-isis-and-turkey/432-kobane-isis-and-turkey.html>

1,000 Daesh combatants [had been] killed”, while “more than 300 Kurds” and “many civilians” had also died.¹²²³ [Kurdish-affairs expert Mutlu Çiviroğlu would later claim that “some 3,700 Islamic State fighters and 400 YPG combatants [had] died in Kobani”, citing SOHR and YPG figures (while stressing that “most of the Kurds who [had] died were from Turkey”).]¹²²⁴ The conflict, Phillips stressed, had proved to be a “major setback for Daesh’s propaganda campaign”, with the group previously having used “its aura of invincibility to gain recruits”.

The most important aspect of victory in Kobani, however, according to Phillips, had perhaps been to give “global attention to the Kurds of Syria and their social revolution, which is based on grass-roots democracy, women’s empowerment, and environmental sustainability”. At the same time, it had been a “public-relations disaster for Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”, who had stubbornly kept the Turkish border sealed “to cut off Kobani’s defenders” from outside support. In fact, even Phillips argued that that Ankara had been “providing military, logistical, financial and medical support for Daesh and other jihadists”. Meanwhile, the battle to save Kobani had also done “what no Kurdish leader could do”, uniting “Kurds from Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran” around a “common cause”, which was to resist “the Islamic State’s fascist nihilism”. Overall, Phillips emphasised, although “cooperation between Washington and the... Syrian Kurds [was] shallow and should expand”, **Kobani would** nonetheless “**be enshrined as the turning point in the struggle to destroy the Islamic State**”.¹²²⁵

ISIS Admits Defeat in Kobani

On January 30, 2015, Bill Roggio at the Long War Journal reported on how ISIS had “officially acknowledged” in a video released by official propaganda outlet ‘Amaq News Agency’ that “its forces [had] withdrawn from the Kurdish town of Kobanê”. In the footage, “two unidentified jihadists who fought in Kobanê... credited the air campaign by the US-led Coalition with forcing their retreat”, rather than the firm resistance put up by the YPG/YPJ and their allies on the ground. “They flattened the land with their rockets”, one militant said, having “bombarded [it] day and night”, and they had thus been “forced to retreat”. The other, meanwhile, “warned that the Islamic State would “return” to Kobane, presumably once Coalition aircraft [had turned] their attention elsewhere”. Having “executed 606 airstrikes on the jihadist group in the area [in and around Kobani] between Sept. 27, 2014 and Jan. 20, 2015” (which would represent “more than 71 percent of the total number of Coalition airstrikes in Syria during that timeframe”), the US-led coalition had definitively had an impact on the conflict, but the Wahhabi jihadists were clearly trying to place the focus on the aerial campaign rather than on the defiance of the largely Kurdish ground forces.¹²²⁶

Bassem Mroue at Canada’s Post, meanwhile, spoke on January 31 about how, according to activists and Kurdish officials, Kobani had been “almost cleared of IS fighters” on January 26. At the same time, one masked ISIS militant with “a north African accent” appeared in a video saying: “we [have] retreated a bit from Ayn al-Islam [their name for Kobani] because of the bombardment and the killing of some brothers” – an understatement if ever there was one. According to Mroue, the group’s “failure to capture and hold Kobani” had in reality been “a major blow”. As stated above, the jihadists’ focus on the aerial campaign of the US-led coalition was aimed at “downplaying the role played by Kurdish militiamen – whom they [referred] to as “rats””, showing both their ethnic and religious hatred for the city’s

¹²²³ <http://www.cnn.com/id/102372884>

¹²²⁴ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKBN0LA0PT20150206?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews> and @aylajan

¹²²⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/id/102372884>

¹²²⁶ http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2015/01/islamic_state_admits_its_force.php?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

Kurds. In fact, precisely to clear the Kobanî Canton of these quasi-religious chauvinists, the YPG/YPJ had now “launched a counterattack to retake some of the surrounding villages..., many of which [remained] in IS hands”.¹²²⁷

Increasing ISIS Defections

Around two weeks after the defeat of ISIS in Kobanî, Heather Saul at The Independent spoke about how “the number of fighters defecting from Isis [was now] causing the extremist group to seal off barriers and checkpoints throughout the city of Raqqa”. According to activists from ‘Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently’ (or RBSS) had claimed that “tension [was] growing within Isis’ ranks” in the city “after a number of its members [had] defected and fled to Turkey”. A large number of the defectors, the group said, had been “marked for suicide bombing missions, meaning their desertion [had] served the group a “painful punch””. Not all of them left the fight in Syria altogether, though, with “some of those who [had] escaped reportedly [going] to areas controlled by Jabhat al Nusra”. International correspondent Elijah J Magnier, meanwhile, said that ““many” Isis foreign fighters [had] fled to Turkey because they were [simply] unwilling to continue fighting”. Because of their perceived treachery, the unlucky defectors who were caught by ISIS would soon be executed.¹²²⁸

Meanwhile, however, Alessandria Masi at the International Business Times would soon assert that, while “more foreign and local fighters... [had] defected this year than ever before”, ISIS had in fact “found a way to use this to its advantage and infiltrate terrorists in Western cities”. In other words, although the group had “caught and executed hundreds of fighters since December for attempting to flee”, it had also sent a number of false defectors out as part of “a dangerous division of Daesh”, according to Abu Mohammad of RBSS. With the Wahhabi jihadist organisation having recently “formed the “Anwar al-Awlaki Battalion,” a unit composed solely of English-speaking foreign fighters who [had] reportedly received orders to carry out an attack in a Western country”, Raqqa-based activists said, “many foreign fighters had [now] disappeared from the city”. Having “contacts within the terrorist group”, these activists asserted that the publishing of rumours of its members’ defections was simply a tactic used “to facilitate their entry process into Western countries, allowing them to join the militants [there] and implement terrorist operations”.¹²²⁹

The Rebuilding of Life in Kobanî

After the liberation of Kobanî, an Associated Press video “showed widespread destruction” in the city, with “streets littered with debris and abandoned neighbourhoods”. The “statue of an eagle spreading its wings” in the settlement’s famous Azadiya (or Freedom) Square, however, “stood intact in the middle of the destruction”. Situated “near the so-called Kurdish security quarter – an eastern district where Kurdish militiamen maintained security buildings and offices”, the area had previously been “occupied by IS fighters for about two months until they were [finally] forced out earlier in January”.¹²³⁰ Around the square, Reuters reported, the eagle statue may have survived, but the neighbourhood was nonetheless full of “flattened tower blocks and cratered streets”.¹²³¹ According to Al Jazeera,

¹²²⁷ http://news.nationalpost.com/2015/01/31/isis-admits-defeat-in-kobani-for-the-first-time-blaming-u-s-warplanes-bombarding-us-night-and-day/#_federated=1

¹²²⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/suicide-bombers-defecting-from-isis-and-fleeing-to-turkey-or-rival-militant-groups-10034138.html>

¹²²⁹ <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-fighters-are-faking-defections-infiltrate-their-home-countries-1814760>

¹²³⁰ http://news.nationalpost.com/2015/01/31/isis-admits-defeat-in-kobani-for-the-first-time-blaming-u-s-warplanes-bombarding-us-night-and-day/#_federated=1

¹²³¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKBN0LA0PT20150206?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews> and @aylajean

meanwhile, Kurds returning to Kobanî after the end of the conflict had found “at least half of the town destroyed”.¹²³²

On January 30, “following the liberation of Kobanê on the 134th day of the resistance against ISIS gangs”, the autonomous political administration of the Kobanî Canton “held a meeting to take effective decisions for the rebuilding of the war-torn city”. Subsequently, a press conference was held in Azadiya Square “to announce the decisions taken for the rebuilding process”, in which the canton’s ‘Prime Minister’ Enwer Müslim asserted that “a commission [consisting of “engineers and other experts in urban planning”] had been set up to carry out a survey across the urban area to assess the scope of the damage and to determine the needs of rebuilding as well as to conduct international relations”. According to Müslim, the commission would “be in touch with international NGOs as well as states”, as there would be a desperate need for both “aid and support” in the process of rebuilding the city.¹²³³

Almost before the dust had settled, meanwhile, Turkish President Erdoğan “ruled out any possibility that Turkey would rebuild... Kobanî”, slamming at the same time the anti-ISIS coalition “for destroying the town through its bombardments” – making very little mention of the damage that the jihadists themselves had caused to the city.¹²³⁴ How, then, asks Diana Darke at The Guardian, would the residents of Kobanî “find the strength to rebuild what they [had] lost” in the city, especially considering that it looked “like an apocalyptic wasteland” and there was “little... left standing in the eastern areas”? The answer, she says, is that “material loss is only a temporary setback, especially if something has been achieved through the sacrifice”. Because of “the courage and dignity of the Syrian Kurdish fighters” in the city, she insists, “many [would] rush to invest and help with their rebuilding” (even if Ankara would not). In short, she suggests, the fact that “the surviving residents of Kobanî” had garnered “a lot of international support” (having “attracted the attention of the world’s media” with their valiant struggle and progressive political system) would mean that their hope of rebuilding their city and their lives would be a lot easier to keep alive.¹²³⁵

According to Yvo Fitzherbert at ROAR Magazine, meanwhile, “more than 80 percent of the city [had] been destroyed entirely, reduced to little but a heap of rubble”. As a result of the ISIS occupation of the city’s eastern quarters, “the urban center [had] shifted west”, he said on February 18, as it was “the only part of the city where life still [existed]”. Nonetheless, he asserts, a school was now functioning, even though it was only “a concrete foundation of a house on the western outskirts of the city”. In the basement, he stresses, there was “a bustling environment of alternative education”.

Although the Turkish border still decided to let supplies into Kobanî “at its own discretion”, Fitzherbert affirms, a family-run bakery had effectively “fed the resistance”, and now remained the main source of food in the city. Having “provided bread for free for all the fighters and the citizens that stayed behind in Kobanî”, it had previously “been a target of ISIS” (which had already destroyed a larger bakery “in the early days of the fighting”). In addition to the small bakery which had stayed open throughout the jihadist siege, the city’s bigger bakery had now been rebuilt (even though it “had taken them ten days to rebuild because of the damage inflicted by ISIS’s mortar shells”). At the same time, “the depot [was] where all citizens [went] to collect whatever supplies they [needed]”. Here, they could find, “piles of canned food, a selection of fresh vegetables, oil and household supplies”, but within a “moneyless economy”.

¹²³² http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2015/01/islamic-state-admits-its-force.php?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter

¹²³³ <http://en.firatnews.com/news/news/commission-set-up-to-rebuild-kobane.htm>

¹²³⁴ http://www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_erdogan-rules-out-rebuilding-kurdish-town-of-kobani_371244.html

¹²³⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/03/kobani-destruction-opportunity-rebuilding-hope-isis-syria>

International Support and a Humanitarian Corridor Still Necessary

Kobani, Fitzherbert says, “still [felt] very much like a ghost city”, with the “unexploded bombs... scattered everywhere” causing “a loud explosion” now and again. In fact, he adds, “half a dozen people [had] died as a result of such accidents in the [previous] week alone”. With political activists in Kobani asserting that “until all bombs and explosives [were] removed from Kobani, the city and villages [would] not be safe”, meanwhile, it was clear that it would “take a long time for normal life to resume” in the area. And this was precisely the reason why local officials had “issued a call-out for international support in clearing the city” which, according to Fitzherbert, was “likely to go unnoticed unless strong pressure [was] exerted to open a humanitarian corridor” from Turkey into Kobani. The city, he affirms, much like “the other Rojavan cantons of Afrin and Cezire”, still “faced an unjust embargo from the international community”, which meant that “no permission” could be given “for construction vehicles or building materials to enter Kobani”.

For HDP member Ibrahim Ayhan, “no help [would] be properly delivered” to Kobani “until the border [was] fully free”. Additionally, a continuation of the status quo would mean that refugees in Turkey, “anxious to return to the homeland”, would almost certainly “not be able to return for months”. In short, Fitzherbert asserts, “Kobani [would] forever resemble a destroyed city” unless a humanitarian corridor were to be opened – as had been the “urgent appeal” of Kobani officials.

In fact, according to some in Kobani, “the policy [of bombing] Kobani into oblivion [had] firmly forced [Rojava’s] administration from one of self-dependence to dependency”, temporarily at least. In the words of local journalist Mustafa, for example, the decision of the US-led coalition had been “a form of punishment for our system”. Fearing their economic interests would be threatened by a continuation of autonomous self-government in Rojava, Mustafa suggested, imperialists and regional powers alike had consciously chosen “to target ISIS purely within the city’s confines, [thus] condemning Kobani to dust and rubble”, rather than “targeting the supply routes that ISIS used continuously throughout the siege”.

This alleged international strategy, Fitzherbert suggests, may be one of the main reasons why, “as of yet there [had] been **no support to help the Kurds rebuild their city**” from state powers. At the same time, however, Kurds simply could “not rebuild the city alone”, largely because of “the sheer extent of the destruction” there. While the embargo suffered by Rojavans before the siege had “made life difficult”, Fitzherbert says, the problem “could be negotiated around”. Now, though, with Kobani lying “in total ruins”, Kobani’s inhabitants needed help a lot more urgently. And, in this urgency, Fitzherbert emphasises, it was important to pay “careful attention” in ensuring that “the rebuilding of the town [would] be done in the same spirit of self-dependence that [had been] used to liberate the city”.¹²³⁶

In early March 2015, Hawar News reported on how “more than 2000 Kobani people who [had] been staying in North Kurdistan” had begun to return to Kobani. “Aid committees in Kobani”, the agency said, had “[welcomed] the returners and [planned] to settle them in appropriate places”. Meanwhile, since the victory of January 26, “around 15 thousand people” were said to have returned to the city.¹²³⁷ With Kobani officials claiming that “almost 1,200 buildings... had been destroyed and more than 3,000 buildings [had been] damaged during the ISIS attacks” on the city, however, the local administration clearly had a difficult job on their hands.¹²³⁸

¹²³⁶ <http://roarmag.org/2015/02/rebuilding-kobani-vpg-pyd/>

¹²³⁷ <http://en.hawarnews.com/kobani-15-thousand-people-have-returned-so-far/>

¹²³⁸ <http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2015/03/15/turkish-municipalities-to-rebuild-kobani>

On March 9, Fitzherbert spoke about how the liberation of Kobanî had not only been achieved by the YPG/YPJ, but also by “numerous acts of determined resistance” by non-combatants. For him, it would be these “more modest, less glamorous acts of courage” which would truly define the battle. Although “as few as 10,000 people [had] remained in the city” during the ISIS siege, the Rojavan administration now reported that 35,000 were living in the city. Some of the returning families “whose homes [had] been destroyed [were] being placed in houses in the villages surrounding Kobanê”, while others were being placed in houses “vacated by the owners who [had not yet] returned”.

Over in Turkey, the pro-Kurdish Democratic Regions Party (DBP) had “gone to considerable efforts to make life comfortable for the fleeing Kobane refugees”, with “16,000 refugees [having] been placed in the six refugee camps provided by the DBP”. One man claimed: “the time will come to return but, until help is given to our city, we cannot return”. And Fitzherbert backed up this assertion, insisting that it would be “hard to imagine the city being rebuilt until a humanitarian corridor [was] opened”. According to one shop owner, the long-standing Turkish embargo on Kobanî was now much more of an impediment. “We cannot smuggle cement across the border”, he stressed. In short, the citizens of the city would “continue to be haunted by the war unless a corridor was initiated”.¹²³⁹

On March 15, though, some good news seemed to arrive for the residents of Kobanî, with Zeynel Yaman speaking at the Daily Sabah about how Kobanî would be assisted in the reconstruction process by Turkish municipalities. The Turkish Municipalities Union, he said, had decided, almost a month and a half after the defeat of ISIS in the Rojavan city, that “municipalities across the country would [be allowed to] unite to help the people of Kobanî”. Municipalities, the union asserted, “would be able to contact the Kobani local government to seek advice on how to help [with] the rebuilding and the repopulation of the town”. And, while “local [Rojavan] organizations [had already] begun to open pharmacies, markets and other shops” in the city, the aforementioned support from sections of the Turkish population would essentially be a positive step forward in the process of reconstruction.¹²⁴⁰

Aid not Keeping up with the Desire of Kobanî Refugees to Return

On March 17, Emily Feldman at Mashable spoke about how, although Kobanî had been “cleared of ISIS fighters”, civilians had nonetheless been “cautioned not to return”, because of “the lack of electricity, clean water and infrastructure”, and the fact that he jihadists had “left the place rigged up with explosives” as “a parting gift” that would kill “at least 19 civilians” between January and March. In spite of the warnings, however, “refugees desperate to return to whatever [was] left of their homes” came flooding across the border after Kobanî’s liberation. According to Feldman, around “40,000 [had] already returned” by the time she wrote, and “thousands more [were] pouring in each week”. In spite of the scarcity of resources, she affirms, and the fact that they would “have to sleep in camps”, the returning civilians simply did not care. Perhaps saying a lot about their previous treatment at the hands of Turkish authorities, she suggests, the citizens would simply “rather live like refugees at home” than in Turkey.

According to reconstruction spokesman Idris Nassan, meanwhile, “Kobani [had] not yet received any funds or resources for rebuilding from any government, including the United States”. He did say that the Kobanî Canton had “received a handful of offers for technical and financial support from individuals and non-government organizations”, but that it was nowhere near enough. While “a German organization specialized in bomb removal [had] offered to pitch in; Canadian, Italian and other European groups [had] offered to build

¹²³⁹ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/kobane-families-return-liberated-city-what-awaits-them-1732971428>

¹²⁴⁰ <http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2015/03/15/turkish-municipalities-to-rebuild-kobani>

hospitals and schools; [and] medical groups and trade unions [had] offered assistance”, Feldman asserts that “reconstruction [would likely] cost billions of dollars”.

In the opinion of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s David Pollock, governments might simply have been “holding off until things stabilize more”. Officials in Kobani, however, could not afford to think in that way, scrambling as they were “to accommodate the incoming flow of [thousands of] civilians”. Simply speaking, Nassan asserted that, “if [citizens were] not allowed to enter officially, they [would] enter illegally”. Such was their desperation, he stressed, to not “be away from home any longer”.¹²⁴¹

Turkish Hostility United the Kurds

On January 29, Amberin Zaman at U.S. News spoke about how, “for the first time, the United States [was] overtly cooperating with the PKK”, which was “arguably the most influential Kurdish movement in the world”. In spite of the superpower’s “continued inclusion” of the party on its “list of terrorist organizations”, she says, “changing relations between the United States and the PKK” had become inevitable “when US C-130 cargo planes dropped aid and weapons” into Kobani in late October 2014. This course of action, however, would also leave Turkey “in shock”, she asserts, deepening “long-running suspicions [in Ankara] about US intentions in the region”. And, as could perhaps have been expected, President Erdoğan “made little effort to mask his displeasure over the turn of events”, asserting on January 26, 2015, that he had previously “asked US President Barack Obama not to intervene on the side of the Kurds”, while telling him he would “be making a mistake” by doing so.

According to one unnamed Western diplomat, Zaman reports, “Turkish policy [towards Kobani had] united the Kurds if not their leaders”. Nonetheless, she stresses, Turkey could “continue to make life difficult for them all the same”, especially with Syrian Kurds “growing increasingly dependent on the flow of aid from Turkey”. In spite of “all of Erdoğan’s chest thumping”, however, a military incursion over the flat Syrian-Turkish border would be very unlikely, as it would almost certainly cause an “international outcry” and “huge... domestic repercussions”. At the same time, the AKP could not afford a resurrection of the civil war, because it was “betting on a fourth straight victory in parliamentary elections due to be held on June 7” 2015. Erdoğan’s aggressive comments, though, did “suggest that Turkey [would] keep political and economic pressure on the Syrian Kurds and continue to badger them to join the Istanbul-based Syrian opposition and to declare war against the [Assad] regime”. In turn, Zaman says, the AKP leader was taking the risk of “further undermining support for the peace process among Turkey’s Kurds” and “potentially triggering a fresh cycle of violence and instability”.¹²⁴²

The War and Suffering to Continue

With “twisted hunks of cars strewn along the streets” and fighting having “moved to the dusty outskirts” of Kobani, Ayla Jean Yackley at Reuters spoke in early February 2015 about the problems that still faced the Rojava Revolution in Kobani. First, she said, the YPG/YPJ would need to retake “the 400 or so villages that... ISIS [had] steamrolled through in September” because, as Kobani’s Idris Nassan would affirm, the group would simply “attack [Rojava] again” if it were not totally destroyed. The SOHR’s Rami Abdulrahman, meanwhile, stressed that ISIS had “relocated some fighters from the countryside north of Aleppo to villages around Kobani”, in an attempt to make it harder for the YPG/YPJ to regain control over them.

¹²⁴¹ <http://mashable.com/2015/03/18/kobani-rebuilding/>

¹²⁴² <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/01/29/kurdish-victory-in-kobani-defeat-for-turkish-policy>

According to Kobani official Anwar Müslim, Yackley asserted, the “battle for Kobani [had] weakened ISIS”, with “its best fighters [having perished] and much of its heavy weaponry [having been] depleted”. Victory in Kobani, meanwhile, had also helped to “[remove] the fear from other parts of Rojava”, he said, which had also been fighting against the jihadist group. In fact, Mutlu Çiviroğlu would even affirm that “the defeat at Kobani [had been] a big blow to ISIS’ reputation that it [could] take anywhere it [wanted]”. For him, in addition to proving that the YPG/YPJ was “the most effective force on the ground against ISIS”, victory in the city would also “encourage more people to put up a fight” elsewhere in the region.

Although there was still “a lack of power and water”, Nassan asserted, “15,000 civilians [were] in the city”, meaning that “the spread of disease [was] a danger”, especially as “corpses of Islamic State fighters [were still] poking out of the rubble”. At the same time, meanwhile, “Syrian government forces [had] also battled [with] Kurds” the previous month, “breaking a tacit agreement between the two sides to focus on other enemies in the war”. In short, there were still significant physical obstacles to overcome to ensure the safety of Rojavan citizens and their progressive political project.¹²⁴³

The Nationalist Threat to Progressive Revolution in the Region

Meanwhile, there was also an ideological threat to the Revolution, with Peshmerga presence in Syria aiming to show Rojava’s Kurds that the nationalist KRG (which had long been complicit in the isolation of the region amid its self-interested obedience to Turkey’s anti-PKK policy) actually cared about the lives of the innocent civilians. In short, having abandoned Yezîdis in Şengal and shown its forces to be inferior to those of the progressive Kurdish movement, the ruling nationalists in Iraqi Kurdistan were now seeking to improve their severely damaged reputation and avoid gifting the PKK and its allies with any more popularity. And one example of this new strategy was KRG president Masoud Barzani’s presence “near the Mosul Dam, at the foot of a mountain only 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) from the battle raging between the peshmerga forces and the Islamic State (IS)”.

Al-Monitor’s Mustafa al-Kadhimi, for example, spoke on February 2, 2015, about how the KDP patriarch was on the frontline of the battle, leading “from a simple caravan that [was] the closest point a military commander could get to his soldiers”. Northern Mosul, which had been “liberated in August 2014 by the peshmerga forces with the support of the international coalition air force”, was now the propaganda target of Kurdish nationalism, with Barzani’s presence “on the battlefield” being said to have had “a crucial impact on the soldiers”. According to some Peshmerga soldiers, the Kurdish president’s “critical field decisions..., based on his long experience in similar battles..., would [simply] not have been taken had the decision-makers not been [so] close to the constantly changing battlefield”. With “many Iraqis [agreeing] that the distance between [military] forces and leaders [had been] one of the [main] mistakes that led to IS’ rapid expansion in Iraqi cities” in 2014, however, it was much more likely that Barzani’s decision was to do with improving his regimes image rather than a genuine interest in democratising the structure of the Peshmerga. At the same time, though, civilians without a decent understanding of the KDP’s true nature almost certainly risked being fooled by Barzani’s self-interested actions.¹²⁴⁴

At The Daily Beast on February 19, Jesse Rosenfeld spoke from Kirkuk in Iraq about how “tensions in the ancient city... [were] threatening to boil over as Kurdish forces [moved] to turn their battle lines with ISIS into the border for a Kurdish state”. With the

¹²⁴³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds-idUSKBN0LA0PT20150206?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews> and @aylajean

¹²⁴⁴ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/iraq-mosul-dam-barzani-peshmerga.html#>

KRG seeking to control the oil and gas-rich province, “hostilities with Shia Arabs [were] growing increasingly dangerous”, he says. Even with ISIS “practically on the city’s doorstep, Masoud Barzani... [had] opposed arming the city’s Arab and Turkmen population”, seeking to retain the KRG’s monopoly of violence in the settlement. Local PKK area commander Ageed Kalary, whose forces had been “key to holding back the bloody, repressive forces of ISIS for the [previous] seven months”, would condemn “in no uncertain terms Barzani’s assertion warning off the Shia” militias from entering Kirkuk. Such statements, he said, would “only push separation” at a time when unity was of utmost importance. For him, then, it was simply “dangerous to pick a fight with Shia militias based on [self-interested] Kurdish ambitions for territory in the future”.

Inside Kirkuk, meanwhile, says Rosenfeld, “the sense of division and instability [was] everywhere”. With bombings “a regular occurrence” and Iraq’s “most diverse metropolis” being “incredibly segregated and increasingly polarized”, he asserts, Sunni Arab communities were often “targeted for individual acts of vengeance when civilians in Shia, Turkmen or Kurdish neighborhoods [were] hit by ISIS terror attacks”. Furthermore, the Sunnis did not have “community militias to protect them” like the Shia and Turkmen did, and sometimes felt “neglected by Kurdish authorities”. One refugee from Tikrit, for example, said “we haven’t received any support since we arrived here”. According to Rosenfeld, the longer the war with ISIS continued, the more it would inevitably ‘chip away’ at Kirkuk’s already poor social cohesion.¹²⁴⁵

V) Post-Kobani Progress and Dilemmas

The Anti-ISIS Resistance Spreads out from Kobani

On February 11, Zeina Karam and Mohammed Rasool at Yahoo News spoke about how victory in Kobani had been “only the beginning” for the YPG/YPJ. Seeking to “build on an alliance with moderate rebels in Syria and become the chief force fighting the extremists in the country”, the reporters said, the Rojavan militias (along with Peshmerga and progressive FSA fighters) had “swept outward from Kobani to clear the surrounding countryside, seizing about 100 villages from the militants”. According to YPG/YPJ commanders, they affirmed, the aim was now “to liberate all Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria and then [afterwards] to go farther, to help liberate Arab majority areas that [had] become Islamic State strongholds”. In particular, the “strategic town” of Tal Abyad would be a point of focus, as it lay “on a border crossing with Turkey” and was “a major source of commerce for the extremists” (as explained earlier in this book). More importantly for the YPG/YPJ, however, was that the town “[separated] Kobani and the Kurdish-held city of Hassakeh”.

Although the YPG/YPJ had previously sought to avoid conflicts in non-Kurdish areas, it was clearly in their interests to support allied Arab groups in their quest to push ISIS out of predominantly Arab areas of Syria. Furthermore, as “the Kurds [had proven themselves] to be a very reliable partner on the ground where none other [existed] in Syria”, according to Mutlu Çiviroğlu, it was also in the interests of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition to encourage further cooperation between the YPG/YPJ and the FSA (even if it would only be with the more progressive battalions of the latter). If the West was truly “looking for a partner” on the ground, said Çiviroğlu, Kobani had clearly provided “a successful example where Kurds and Arabs could work together to get rid of ISIS”. In other words, he stressed, whether the West had serious reservations about the ideology of the Rojava Revolution or not, it would do well to recognise that the multi-ethnic (and multi-religious) cooperation exemplified in Syrian Kurdistan was simply “a good model”.

¹²⁴⁵ <http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/south-kurdistan/what-is-happening-in-kirkuk.html> and <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/17/in-kirkuk-the-epicenter-of-iraq-s-next-civil-war.html>

According to senior FSA commander Abdul Jabbar al-Oqaidi, fighting alongside the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî had “built confidence between the Kurds and the FSA, and it [had] also dispelled suspicions among many FSA members that the Kurds were Assad supporters”. For him, this alliance would eventually “shape the future of a free Syria”. At the same time, YPG spokesman Shorsh Hassan would say the defence militias of Rojava were “proud of their (FSA) presence” in the battle against ISIS, and that the fact that progressive FSA troops had “offered up martyrs” in the conflict would ‘never be forgotten’. In short, Hassan stressed, “we will continue to liberate all of Rojava and all Syrian soil from this terrorist organization”. This, he said, was “the promise we have made to ourselves and to the Kurdish and Syrian people”.¹²⁴⁶

Meanwhile, on February 19, the BBC reported on how “Syrian Kurdish fighters and rebel forces [had] advanced into Raqqa province”, having “taken about 240 surrounding villages” since their victory in Kobanî almost a month earlier. The corporation also stated that the YPG/YPJ (along with the “Raqqa Revolutionaries Brigades, Shams al-Shamal (Sun of the North) and Jabhat al-Akrad (Kurdish Front)”) were “now believed to be only 25km (15 miles) from Tal Abyad”, having “advanced steadily into IS-held territory since securing control of Kobanê”. At the same time, the YPG/YPJ and their allies were “now in control of about 35km of the motorway connecting the cities of Aleppo, in the west, and Hassakeh, in the west”, according to the SOHR. Essentially, then, this meant that they were only “56km (35 miles) from the city of Raqqa”.¹²⁴⁷ According to the SOHR, meanwhile, the YPG/YPJ and their allies had “captured 19 villages in Raqqa province”.¹²⁴⁸

A Turkish Operation in Communication with Rojava

Towards the end of February, in what would be the “first-ever incursion by Turkey since the Syrian civil war began in 2011”, a surprising development occurred (given previous Turkish hostility and refusals to cooperate with the autonomous administration of Rojava).¹²⁴⁹ On February 24, Elie Hanna of Jordan’s Al Bawaba news website would report on how “Turkish troops [had] entered Syria, as part of a well-planned operation, to relocate the remains of Suleyman Shah”. This “seamless” operation... without clashes”, he said, had “relied on alliances and understandings forged by Ankara” with both the YPG/YPJ and ISIS, as it was to be “carried out on Syrian territories that [were] controlled by Turkey’s supposed enemies”. In fact, he asserted, while Turkey had “exerted a great influence over most major factions” in the Syrian opposition movement, it had also been perhaps “the only major power to have entered into tacit agreements with ISIS”.

According to Hanna, Turkey was now “implementing a new strategy in north Syria”, which was apparent in the way in which “Turkish military vehicles arrived in Syria” on February 22 through Kobanî’s Mürşitpınar border crossing after months of refusing to enter the city to back the progressive anti-ISIS fighters there. In short, the way in which they “peacefully entered locations manned by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG)” clearly demonstrated that Ankara’s refusal to deal with officials in Rojava had, at the very least, been temporarily put on hold.¹²⁵⁰ In fact, HDP MP Hasip Kaplan would even say that “the evacuation had been “launched jointly between the Turkish military and Syrian Kurdish YPG militias”, in what had been “a milestone” first instance of “a joint operation” being conducted “with a group affiliated with the PKK”.¹²⁵¹

¹²⁴⁶ <http://news.yahoo.com/fresh-off-victory-over-kobani-kurds-seek-more-070116655.html>

¹²⁴⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31534057>

¹²⁴⁸ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syria-week-review-february-16-23>

¹²⁴⁹ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/02/23/syri-f23.html>

¹²⁵⁰ <http://www.albawaba.com/news/how-did-turkish-troops-manage-safely-enter-and-exit-syria-660768>

¹²⁵¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/22/turkish-military-completes-operation-to-evacuate-troops-from-tomb-in-syria>

Meanwhile, Hanna affirmed, the YPG had “confirmed that several of its members, “designated by the leadership,” [had] met with Turkish officials for four days before the operation, helping to set up its plan and determine their own role in it”. At the same time, “Turkey confirmed that it had contacted its allies, the peshmerga in Kobani” in order to facilitate safe passage through the city. Consequently, the day before the operation, the Euphrates Volcano Operations Room (having “reached the surroundings... [of] the tomb of Sultan Suleiman Shah” in recent days) declared that regions the Turkish army would pass through were to be considered “a military zone”. On the day itself, the YPG media centre reported, YPG/YPJ units had led and “transported Turkish soldiers in their vehicles to the tomb of Suleiman Shah”.¹²⁵² Then, after the troops had removed “every artefact from the tomb”, they “blew up the building, leaving only rubble behind”.¹²⁵³

According to Lebanon’s Al-Akhbar, Turkish tanks had been “backed by drones and reconnaissance planes” as they entered Syria under cover of darkness to evacuate around 40 troops “guarding the mausoleum complex of Suleyman Shah, grandfather of the Ottoman empire’s founder Osman I”. [Under the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923, the tomb site on the River Euphrates had been officially considered “sovereign Turkish territory”, even though it would be found in the new state of Syria.] Later on, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu would assert that “572 Turkish soldiers using 39 tanks, 57 armored vehicles and 100 other military vehicles [had been] involved in the operation”, which was called “Shah Firat” (or Shah Euphrates).¹²⁵⁴

Renowned Turkish reporter Metehan Demir, meanwhile, spoke of how “ISIS [had long] been providing water and food to the [Turkish] soldiers who [had] been trapped in the tomb”. In fact, Ankara had also “delivered supplies to its soldiers in the tomb back in April 2014 and replaced them”, making it difficult to believe that Turkey had genuine concerns “regarding a military response from ISIS”. At the same time, one opposition leader in the region, Munzir Salal, even asserted that “coordination between the Turkish government and ISIS [was] not new”. The aforementioned delivery of supplies, for example, had occurred under the understanding that “the Turks would supply arms [to the jihadist group] and take down the Turkish flag raised on the tomb”. And in the February operation to evacuate the Suleyman Shah tomb, there was also an understanding between Ankara and ISIS. According to The Aleppo Media Center, for example, “ISIS insurgents accompanied Turkish Army troops near the tomb of Suleiman Shah in the countryside of Manbij as they returned to Turkey”.¹²⁵⁵ Turkish officials, meanwhile, would insist that ISIS had made “no effort to resist or attack the withdrawal convoy”.¹²⁵⁶

After the “several-hour long operation”, Hanna affirmed, in which not a single bullet had been fired, Turkish forces soon “placed the [Syrian] village of Esmesi” or ‘Esme’ “under the control of the army”. This site (to the west of the city of Kobani, within the Kobani Canton, and around 200 metres away from the Turkish border), where troops had “raised the Turkish flag”, would now be “the new location of the tomb”, though the remains would be “temporarily moved to Turkey” while military forces made the necessary preparations in Esme.¹²⁵⁷ When ready, the site would be “occupied by Turkish troops”.¹²⁵⁸ Furthermore, Ankara would now see this village, for the moment at least, as a “part of Turkish territories”. Perhaps even more surprisingly, however, was that the tomb would soon be “guarded by the PYD”, which, according to Hanna, would now need to “think twice... before adopting policies that [contradicted] Turkish interests”. Nonetheless, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu would soon explain that, while Turkey was “evacuating the

¹²⁵² <http://www.albawaba.com/news/how-did-turkish-troops-manage-safely-enter-and-exit-syria-660768>

¹²⁵³ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/02/23/syri-f23.html>

¹²⁵⁴ <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syria-week-review-february-16-23>

¹²⁵⁵ <http://www.albawaba.com/news/how-did-turkish-troops-manage-safely-enter-and-exit-syria-660768>

¹²⁵⁶ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/02/23/syri-f23.html>

¹²⁵⁷ <http://www.albawaba.com/news/how-did-turkish-troops-manage-safely-enter-and-exit-syria-660768>

¹²⁵⁸ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/02/23/syri-f23.html>

location” of the tomb, the land was still considered to be Turkish and the tomb would thus return in the future. “No lands”, he asserted, “shall be abandoned”.¹²⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Prime Minister Davutoğlu would assert that the tomb “would be returned to its previous location once conditions allowed”.¹²⁶⁰

Overall, it seemed clear that a short term agreement had been made between Rojava and Turkey, most likely resembling a sort of insurance policy for both forces. Presumably, with the tomb being placed so closely to the heart of the Rojava Revolution, Ankara would be given the confidence that no attacks would come from Rojava (as if they did the former would use the tomb as an excuse to invade) and Kobani would be given the confidence that no attacks would come from Turkish soil (as, if they did, Rojavan forces could take possession of the tomb). At the same time, however, the action could possibly have been used as a gesture of good will between by Rojava, in the hope that Ankara would open up a humanitarian corridor to Kobani, end its embargo, or even show greater commitment to the peace process with the PKK.

Significant Advances against ISIS

According to Patrick Martin at the World Socialist Web Site, the Turkish incursion into Syria was “of far more than [just] historical or ceremonial significance”. In particular, it showed unprecedented Turkish coordination “with the Syrian Kurdish forces who up to [then] Turkey [had] treated with hostility because of their links with the [PKK]”. Meanwhile, at the same time as the Turkish incursion, “whose size and scope would certainly have distracted the attention of ISIS forces”, the YPG/YPJ “launched an offensive... aimed at expanding its control of the northeastern province of Hassakeh, pushing back ISIS forces around the town of Tal Hamis”. Furthermore, while the Rojavan militias took around “20 villages, farms and hamlets in the area” in an offensive synchronised with coalition airstrikes, Peshmerga forces “pushed westward, gaining ground at the expense of ISIS and reportedly cutting the main highway between Mosul... and the Islamic fundamentalist group’s headquarters at Raqqa”. And, according to Martin, these simultaneous actions (combined with the “Turkish incursion and the actions of... Shiite and Iraqi army troops” in Iraq) seemed to suggest that “major US-backed military operations” against ISIS may have already begun.¹²⁶¹

According to Al-Akhbar, the Syrian army was also on the offensive, concentrating “its efforts on encircling Aleppo, cutting off rebel supply routes through Turkey”, and advancing “in the northeast provinces of Hasaka and Deir Ezzor” (the YPG/YPJ had just recaptured “several villages” from ISIS in Hasaka). Clearly aware that the YPG/YPJ and its allies were increasing their areas of control with the support of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, Damascus was apparently hoping to take advantage itself of the weakening of jihadist forces.¹²⁶²

On February 28, the Rojava Report spoke about how the YPG/YPJ (along with their Arab and Syriac allies) had “succeeded in liberating the whole of Til Hemis from ISIS following operations which [had begun] a week [before] and **at the request of local communities**”. Having “served as an ISIS base within the Cizîrê Canton”, Til Hemis had been the focus of a week-long operation in which “95 nearby villages” would also be liberated from the Wahhabi jihadists. The joint YPG/YPJ operation had involved “units attached to the Syriac Military Council, Sutoro Units and Cêş El-Senadid (Army Of the Brave) – a military force made up of local Arab tribesmen”, and “at least 211 ISIS fighters, including a number of commanders”, had been killed as a result.¹²⁶³

¹²⁵⁹ <http://www.albawaba.com/news/how-did-turkish-troops-manage-safely-enter-and-exit-syria-660768>

¹²⁶⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/22/turkish-military-completes-operation-to-evacuate-troops-from-tomb-in-syria>

¹²⁶¹ <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/02/23/syri-f23.html>

¹²⁶² <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/syria-week-review-february-16-23>

¹²⁶³ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/02/28/til-hemis-liberated-by-joint-operation-of-vpgypj-syriac-units-and-local-arab-tribes/>

On March 15, 2015, Ruth Pollard at The Age spoke about how she had “crossed the border from Iraqi Kurdistan into north-eastern Syria, taking a boat across the fast-flowing Tigris River that forms the frontier between the two countries”. Arriving in Rojava at a point of expanded YPG/YPJ offensives against ISIS in Syria, she said, the Rojavan forces were “also dreaming of opening safe passages between their cantons, [currently] separated by hundreds of kilometres and thousands of [Wahhabi] militants”. In particular, the progressive militias were aiming to take back Tel Hemis, which had been occupied by ISIS for a number of months (with the Wahhabi group “torching villages, kidnapping and killing residents and forcing upwards of 12,000 to flee”).

“Following the advance” of the YPG/YPJ, Pollard asserted, she noted that, “less than 24 hours earlier”, the groups “had liberated a string of villages from IS control”. In one of these villages, Tel Marouf, “which just two days [previously had been] under the control of IS”, she saw windows smashed, the “minaret of the town’s largest mosque... blown apart”, and “nearby graves... destroyed”. ISIS graffiti, meanwhile, had been “scrawled on the walls of mosques, shops and houses, marking territory it held only hours earlier”. Just “two days later”, however, “YPG forces backed by US-led airstrikes took Tel Hamis, cutting off a vital supply line for IS”. In fact, estimates suggested that “at least 175 [ISIS militants had] died in the fight for Tel Hamis”, while “dozens of YPG fighters – including Australian Ashley Johnson” had also fallen.¹²⁶⁴

Increasing Diplomatic Recognition

On March 9, the Rojava Report published an article by M. Ali Çelebi about how the victory in Kobanî had opened the way for greater direct diplomacy between Rojavan officials and governments elsewhere in the world. For example, he speaks of how “French President François Hollande [had] hosted PYD co-president Asya Abdullah and member of the YPJ Military Council Nesrin Abdullah” on February 8, in what had been “the first open meeting between a PYD co-president and a head of state”. With other states wanting to be seen ‘on the side of success’, meanwhile, “the PYD [was now] being invited to many different countries”, he asserts. “Off the record”, he says, “PYD leaders [had] met with heads of state in Europe before”, although the USA had long “refused to grant visas to PYD co-president Muslim and the PYD leadership”.

Nonetheless, Çelebi asserts, Washington was now changing tactics. Having “become a player in the Syrian crisis in order to protect its regional allies and its energy routes”, he says, the superpower had now “decided to open its doors to the PYD after the victory in Kobanê”. The Obama Administration, he stresses, would soon “host the president of the Kobanê Canton Enwer Muslim and a delegation which [would accompany him]”. In addition to the defeat of ISIS in Kobanî, he notes, “the preparations for an operation to push ISIS out of Mosul” had “influenced this invitation” to a certain extent. At the same time, he insists, the USA “wanted to negotiate over the future of Syria and Rojava and to speak about the PYD’s experiences”.

Having been “hosted in Ankara (February 20-23, 2015) in order to provide for coordination between Turkey and the YPG and PYD during preparations for the operation to relocate the Süleymanşah Tomb”, Çelebi says, Enwer Muslim had now “begun the process of applying for visas for future visits to the United States and European countries”. With these recent events, he adds, it was clearer than ever that Turkey needed to “abandon its exclusionary policies regarding Syria and Rojava”, insisting that “**the obligatory change in position from the United States [would potentially] prepare the ground for a recognition of the**

¹²⁶⁴ <http://www.theage.com.au/world/kurds-unite-to-build-kurdistan-in-defiance-of-islamic-state-20150314-141xwp.html>

cantons". If it did not change its stance, he stresses, it would increasingly lose the faith of citizens in Turkish Kurdistan, who would in turn increasingly look to Rojava for inspiration.¹²⁶⁵

Rojava's First Elections

Amidst the intensified battles against ISIS, Ruth Pollard stresses, the Cizîrê Canton, "home to 1.5 million people", was planning to hold municipal elections on March 13, 2015. Before she left the region, she spoke about how at least "513 people [had] registered as election candidates – 296 men and 217 women – for 329 seats in 13 municipalities". And, although co-chair of the election committee Azzedine Ahmed Farhan would assert that it had "not been easy to prepare for this election [whilst] surrounded by fighting", it was something that Rojava "had to do". Admitting that "we are new to democracy", he said that "each election [would] be a learning process for us" but that, in the end, Rojavans "want to create a democracy" in spite of the fact that they had "enemies all around us who want to destroy it".¹²⁶⁶ For example, the "ENKS, under the leadership and the active sponsorship of KRG President Massoud Barzani", was not a big fan of Rojava's form of democratic autonomy. Nonetheless, in spite of the measures agreed upon in the Duhok Agreement not yet having been implemented, "the desire to find a consensus still [seemed] to be on track" in early March.¹²⁶⁷

On March 14, the Rojava Report spoke about how "voters in 12 cities across the Cizîrê Canton of Rojava" had gone to the polls "to elect municipal councils". Between 8am and 8pm on the previous day, the website reported, "160 polling stations [had been] opened" across the canton, marking "the first time free elections [had] taken place in the region on this scale". It also added that "the Rojava Public Protection Forces (Asayîş) in cooperation with the Syriac Public Protection forces affiliated with Sutoro [had] provided security for the voting". Meanwhile, "a delegation from South Kurdistan" was said to have maintained a presence in Rojava "in order to monitor the elections".

There were "high levels [of] participation" in the elections, according to the Rojava Report, along with "a general atmosphere of excitement". Female co-governor of Cizîrê Hadya Yousef, meanwhile, asserted that "the elections [had] **cemented the legitimacy of the administration of democratic autonomy**". At the same time, Rêzan Gulo, president of the association for the Families of Martyrs, spoke about how "candidates had been chosen based on their will to pursue freedom". Overall, "565 candidates [had] stood for 12 municipal councils", according to the Rojava High Election Commission. Furthermore, of these candidates, 237 were women, 28 were Arab, 23 were Syriac, eight were Qeldani, another eight were Asûrî, and one was Chechen.¹²⁶⁸

With "mayors and municipal councils" being elected in the "first ever local elections" in Cizîrê Canton, Til Tamir was the only place to have polls delayed by fighting between the YPG/YPJ and ISIS. A "very rich agricultural area", the latter was considered by Syriacs to be a "historical place". In an interview published by the Rojava Report, Îshoc Gewriya, the president of the Syriac Union Party, spoke from Qamişlo about how "ISIS had built up its forces in Manacir between Til Tamir and Serekaniyê", taking advantage of the fact that the Manacir region was "predominantly inhabited by Arabs" who had been "brought from Rakka... during the... first part of the 1970's... as part of the Arab belt policy which sought to Arabize these areas". According to Gewriya, meanwhile, "Syriacs had lived in the region... for more than 7,000 years" and, only ten years previously, Til Tamir had been

¹²⁶⁵ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/03/09/enwer-muslim-going-to-the-united-states/>

¹²⁶⁶ <http://www.theage.com.au/world/kurds-unite-to-build-kurdistan-in-defiance-of-islamic-state-20150314-141xwp.html>

¹²⁶⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/evangelos-aretaios/rojava-revolution#.VQbpYzPC9KE.twitter>

¹²⁶⁸ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/03/14/rojava-goes-to-the-polls-2/>

“around 60% Syriac”, among “a population of around 40 thousand”. Overall, he stressed, Syria needed “a federal system without a center” so that the “voice of oppressed peoples” could be heard. “Every people”, he asserted, “needs to learn to live with its own language, culture, civilization and to live with one another without attempting to assimilate one another”. And, in the fight to put out the “fire of sectarianism”, the Rojava Revolution’s focus on secularism and solidarity presented the country with a way forward.¹²⁶⁹

Obstacles Facing the Rojava Revolution

Explaining the political system in Rojava, Pollard insisted that the “philosophy [centred] on local committees that [sought to] draw everyday citizens into decision-making roles on issues such as education, health and infrastructure”. Although there was “just two hours of government-provided electricity per day”, for example, extra electricity was being “fuelled by generators that local communities [had banded] together to buy”. In spite of these difficulties, and the fact that “the economy [had] been crippled by years of war” and hostile embargoes, however, Hadya Yousef insisted that the administration was still committed to “self-governing autonomy”. In fact, she stressed, “when the rebuilding of a democratic Syria begins, our self-governing model will play a big role”.

With Abdullah Öcalan’s image being “displayed prominently throughout the Jazira canton”, Pollard said, and appearing “on banners hanging from bridges” and “stickers on car windscreens”, it was not unusual to see “his nickname “Apo” scrawled on the walls of newly liberated towns and villages”. For this reason, she suggested, “opposition activists” claimed that the PKK was “attempting to turn Rojava into a one-party state”. Nonetheless, political leaders ardently denied this assertion, “pointing to the six political parties running in the upcoming election”. In fact, Yousef insisted the “project in Rojava [was] reaching an historic point” with its first elections.

At the same time, Pollard stressed, there were still significant obstacles to overcome in Rojava. For example, one teacher in Qamişlo said that the school system was essentially “still dominated by slogans and materials that [were] supportive of Assad”, and that it would “take the total dismantling of the Assad regime and a complete overthrow of the old mentality of everyone involved in the system” in order to truly reform education in the region. And while he insisted that “the election [was] a step in the right direction” and that “the repression of Kurdish language, culture and history [had] ended, prompting a blossoming of art, music and culture throughout Rojava”, it would nonetheless “take at least a generation to build a brighter future for his children”.

Another obstacle to complete libertarian socialist progress in Rojava was the conscription law, which the battle against ISIS and other Wahhabi jihadists had forced the region’s autonomous administration to implement. On a “disused Syrian army base in Remalan”, Pollard said, around “400-500 young men” were being trained for a new conscripted army, which was expected “to grow to 5000-6000 soldiers”. As well as “military training”, these conscripts would also “receive lessons in “ideology, democracy and equality””. After this preparation had finished, meanwhile, “some fighters [would] go into the YPG forces, some [would] move into other forces such as the police”, and “others [would] just return to their villages, armed, trained and ready to repel an IS onslaught”.

According to one diplomat in Erbil, meanwhile, “there was a “degree of shame” [in the KRG] about what [had been] seen by some to be the failure of Iraqi Kurds to protect civilians” against ISIS in 2014. And, because of this, he said, it had been necessary for Barzanî to do deals with both the YPG/YPJ and the PKK. “There is no doubt that Barzani...

¹²⁶⁹ <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2015/03/17/interview-with-president-gewriya-of-syriac-unity-party-in-qamishlo/>

does deals with [the] Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG”, he stressed, “but he in essence holds his nose when he does” so. In other words, as political analyst Hiwa Osman would insist, his reluctance to forge a strategic alliance with the progressive Kurdish movement had been forcibly incapacitated (if only for the time being) by the fact that ISIS had “created a new reality in the region”. Essentially, though, government failures in the fight against ISIS were perhaps one of the least of the worries of Iraqi Kurds.

Although critics were accustomed to speaking about the KRG as “the ultimate place in the Middle East that has all the values that the West loves”, Osman argued, “the president [was] Mr Barzani, the prime minister [was] Mr Barzani, the head of intelligence [was] Mr Barzani, [and] the head of counterintelligence forces [was] Mr Barzani”. In short, he stressed, “we have seven or eight Mr Barzanis in leadership positions”, showing that “nepotism [was] at its peak” and “corruption [was] still at its peak”. Therefore, “instead of worrying about Syrian Kurdistan”, he said, “Iraqi Kurdistan should be supporting the upcoming elections” in Rojava. While the process would “no doubt have many problems”, he admitted, it would nonetheless “be an important message to the world that [Kurds in both Syria and Iraq were willing to] fight with one hand” and “build with the other”. In short, he added, “a new map is imposing itself on all of us” and, while it was Sykes-Picot in the past, “today it is the people’s map”. And with the failure of the “Arab revolutions of Syria, Egypt and Libya”, he noted, it was clear that people were now “looking for something else” – something of greater meaning for their own lives.¹²⁷⁰

On March 14, Bas News reported on how Masoud Barzanî had “criticised” the first election in Rojava, at the same time as Damascus was reportedly “considering officially recognising it”. Barzanî’s spokesman, Omed Sabah, insisted that Cizîrê’s elections were “unacceptable”, claiming that the KRG president had “always attempted to unify Kurds in Syrian Kurdistan”. The poll, he said, was in “direct contravention” of the Duhok Agreement, echoing the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which had “boycotted the election process, accusing the PYD Council of neglecting their demands”. Meanwhile, Syrian Information Minister Omran Zoghbi announced that the Syrian regime was “discussing officially recognising the autonomous administration of Syrian Kurdistan... within the law and constitution”. Kurds, he stressed, were “part of Syria”, and were “fighting the terrorists too”.¹²⁷¹

The PYD Still Aware of Imperialist Plans for the Middle East

The PYD and others in Rojava, according to Wassim Ibrahim at Al-Monitor, showed in early March 2015 that they were “fully aware of the scheme that [was] being plotted for the region”. The Battle for Kobanî, they said, had not changed their perspective of this issue, and they “still [believed] that international powers [sought] to change the map of the Middle East and eliminate the border [system] drawn [in] the Sykes-Picot agreement”. The PYD in particular, Ibrahim asserts, was “getting ready to step up and play its role in this game, stressing that the region’s future [was] one for federal states” and that it would “defend the “self-management” model” because “the nation-state model [had] “expired””.

In an interview, Salih Muslim had argued that, although “the battles to free [Kobanî] and its surroundings [were] still underway”, the “direction in which they [were] going [had] now been identified”. The victory of the YPG/YPJ in Kobanî, he said, had marked “the beginning of a comprehensive defeat” for ISIS, and was “the preamble of their collapse”. Meanwhile, “around 160 peshmerga fighters [were] still on the battlefield in Syria”, having previously used their “MILAN anti-tank missiles” to help the Rojavan defence forces push ISIS out of Kobanî. Then, speaking about “the political price” of allowing Peshmerga forces to enter the

¹²⁷⁰ <http://www.theage.com.au/world/kurds-unite-to-build-kurdistan-in-defiance-of-islamic-state-20150314-141xwp.html>

¹²⁷¹ <http://basnews.com/en/news/2015/03/14/krgelections-in-jazira-are-not-acceptable/>

city, Muslim insisted that “what [had] happened was not on Turkey’s conditions”, and was more a result of “US pressure”.

If Rojavans were not committed to defending their directly democratic model of government, Muslim said, they would probably not have been resisting ISIS advances with such dedication. “We are defending a model that will be adopted in the Middle East and the future Syria”, he insisted, adding that “the war and the unrest might continue for 10 years” and that a lasting solution (based on “coexistence and democracy”) desperately needed to be fostered. The mentality of European forces, however, was “still classic”, as they were “talking about the state”, which the PYD believed was “not valid for the Middle East”. For Muslim, this point of view had to be changed. Referring to Kurdish nationalists, meanwhile, he asserted that Kurds were one people but did “not necessarily share the same mentality”. Although “the nation-state [had] gone out of fashion”, he stressed, Kurds influenced by nationalism still needed “some time in order... to be convinced” of democratic self-management.

At the same time, Muslim suggested, “serious attempts [were] being made to change the previous borders of the Middle East map”, though it was an unspecified ‘they’ who were the alleged protagonists of this scheme. The nearest he came to specifying these actors was with a reference to “regional countries”, though “changing the border stated in the Sykes-Picot agreement” was also said to be pushing “some international actors... to engage in an attempt to remove some ethnic components from specific areas” in the region. Although this idea was “not new”, he said, “the attempt [was] now serious”. Ever “since the invasion of Kuwait”, he stressed, it had been “said that the border should be changed”, with some asserting that “Iraq should be divided into three parts”. Therefore, “in order for these interests to be achieved” today, some forces believed that “the presence of some components must be ended”.

Amidst this context, Muslim argued, it was necessary for the world to support the secular and pluralist model proposed by the Rojava Revolution. The “presence of unjustified European reservations”, meanwhile, was “part of political calculation” which sought to preserve the centralised states of Syria and Turkey. Rojavans, though, according to Muslim, did “not acquire legitimacy from the regimes in Damascus or Turkey”, which were essentially “ethnic countries”. If international actors truly wished to cooperate with the progressive Rojavan model, he asserted, they were more than welcome to do so, but at the moment there was still nothing close to an acceptance of the system put in place in Rojava. Dealing with the YPG/YPJ and the autonomous administration was one thing, he said, but recognition was “another thing” entirely.¹²⁷²

Conclusion

By the Cizîrê elections of March 2015, an ever-expanding number of Western left-wingers (and non-left-wingers) had begun to comment on events in Rojava, with some referring directly to the progressive political system being set up in the region and others seeking to focus on the US-led anti-ISIS coalition. Nonetheless, Rojava was now officially ‘on the map’ as far as the media was concerned, even though many people around the world still knew very little about it. On March 10, author Owen Jones spoke at The Guardian about how “Turkey [had] facilitated the rise of Isis, allowing its militants to flood across its porous border with Syria”, primarily because it feared the consolidation of “another liberated enclave” on its borders “that could embolden its own Kurdish minority”. Meanwhile, he says, “Western allies including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait [had] proved crucial in

¹²⁷² <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2015/03/syria-pyd-kurds-federalism-middle-east.html#>

exporting fundamentalist ideology, as well as funds and arms for jihadi groups” in Syria, simply stoking the reactionary flames of the Syrian Civil War.

In short, then, Jones asserts, ISIS was “the bastard child of Assad’s repression of the Syrian people, catastrophic western intervention and the scandalous role of the Arab despots” (and, although Jones left other dictators off his list, ISIS was clearly also a product of the general pervasive atmosphere of authoritarian sectarianism in the Middle East). The presence of “socialists and anarchists” helping to drive the jihadist group back, he stresses, “should be a source of immense pride for the international left”. Furthermore, he says, “this struggle [could contain] the seeds of a different Middle East”, with the “new society... hatching” in Rojava (“run on radically democratic and feminist lines”) potentially “[giving] heart to all those who crave freedom... in the aftermath of the abortive Arab spring”.¹²⁷³ And, overall, Jones is right in his assertions. The revolutionary experiment being carried out in Rojava should indeed be, simultaneously, a source of pride, inspiration, and hope.

At the same time, however, this book would lose all credibility if it failed to acknowledge at this point that, as stressed earlier in this book, the Rojava Revolution is not perfect, and the ideas it holds so dearly have not been (and may not be) entirely implemented. In fact, there are a large number of obstacles that the process has faced already, and that it is likely to continue facing in the future. For example, it will need to confront: the persistence of nationalism, feudalism, and chauvinist conservatism in some sectors of Rojavan and wider Kurdish society; the seemingly excessive veneration of Abdullah Öcalan in pro-PKK circles; the pseudo-religious bigotry spread in neighbouring areas by ISIS and other right-wing Islamist reactionaries; an erroneous belief in the benevolent intention of Western political elites in the region; and an incomplete (or absent) understanding of the fundamentally anti-democratic nature of the capitalist system. At the same time, the progressive and directly democratic elements of the revolutionary process must eventually, in times of reduced conflict, ensure an end to military conscription (put in place primarily due to wartime desperation and necessity) and a reduction in (or elimination of) the power of state-like institutions created in autonomous Rojava. And, finally, the Revolution will have to prepare for the possible continuation of a centralised Syrian State (whether under Ba’athist, Islamist, or nationalist control), whilst resisting and challenging the self-interested schemes of international and regional powers to ensure their own economic (and political) concerns and activities in the Middle East are protected.

With so many obstacles ahead of them, therefore, it may indeed seem like Rojavans (in the process of creating progressive, secular, and directly democratic structures) have all the odds in the world stacked against them. Nonetheless, international sympathisers must remember that the region has already survived a long and painful economic embargo imposed upon it by Turkey and the KRG (largely supported by their Western allies). Furthermore, we must also acknowledge that Rojava’s isolated, under-armed, and underfunded defence forces managed to hold ISIS (and other Wahhabi jihadists) back almost entirely on their own for years until US-led airstrikes increasingly pushed the group out of Iraq (and into Syria) in late 2014. In fact, in spite of the extreme hardships they had already faced, the YPG/YPJ resisted ISIS alone in Kobanî for weeks (completely surrounded and cut off from the support they could have received from their allies elsewhere) where much better-financed and better-armed forces elsewhere in the region had resisted the jihadist group for hours or days. In other words, then, we must not forget, and we must certainly not underestimate, the spirit and determination of humans to persevere through adversity when they have dreams of progress in their hearts and minds.

¹²⁷³ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/10/revolutionary-kurdish-isis-ivana-hoffman>

Therefore, whilst looking at the situation in the Middle East as objectively as possible throughout the process of writing this book, nothing has taken away my belief in humanity, and nothing has destroyed my hope for a better world. On the contrary, the courage and compassion I have seen amidst the death and destruction so commonplace in my research has almost brought me to tears on a number of occasions. Whether it was the fighter sacrificing his life for his comrades by dropping a grenade into an ISIS tank; the women fighting to their last breath when surrounded by jihadi militants; or the middle-aged couple saying their bodies may have been in Turkey but their hearts were with their twenty-year-old daughter fighting with the YPJ in Kobani, **the stories of heroism are simply immense.** Furthermore, the unity that has been forged in Rojava between Kurds, Assyrians, Arabs, Turkmen, and others has been truly inspirational. And, at the same time, the fact that so many of these unified, autonomous forces have been slaughtered barbarically by the brainwashed and bigoted fighters of ISIS merely increases in my heart what the Zapatistas have called '**dignified rage**'. Consequently, this feeling (which is a response to the horrors we experience in life and can only be useful if it inspires in us a will to fight with all our hearts for justice, equality, and freedom) has served to convince me that there is no other way in which I would prefer to spend my time than in the service of truth, progress, and revolutionary solidarity.

Overall, it is very clear that the survival of the autonomous, democratic, and libertarian socialist experience in Rojava depends on how the Syrian Civil War and the ISIS insurgency develop in the coming months. Whether the progressive political experiment survives or not, however, the fact is that it has given people in the Middle East and throughout the world a **concrete example of the path the region (and the world) must follow if it is to attain justice and peace.** The only way in which working people can truly escape oppression and exploitation is if they **govern themselves and have control of their own land and their own resources.** And they can only govern themselves in peace if they **cooperate with each other, and encourage unity between all individuals – regardless of their ethnicities, traditions, or religions.** In short, only by unifying around principles of justice and equality for all will individuals be able to resist the power of imperialist nations, fight back against exploitative regional elites, and extinguish the threat of religious or ethnic sectarianism.

If we truly wish to support the revolutionary experience in Rojava, therefore, we must avoid falling into the trap of supporting Western political elites with their continued interference in the Middle East. We must also avoid praising or pardoning existent regimes in the region which have committed their own crimes. Most importantly of all, however, **we must spread the word about the progress Rojavan communities have made,** and we must encourage international solidarity towards their inclusive revolution and their resistance to the brutal, authoritarian forces of ISIS.

I do not beg you, the reader, to follow any particular political group or philosophy. Nor do I suggest that you blindly believe everything you have read within these pages. On the contrary, I want you to reflect on the words of this book and come to your own independent conclusions. I do, however, ask that you embrace equality, justice, and people's democracy, whilst opposing discrimination, exploitation, and authoritarianism in all their forms. In short, then, I call on you to support humanity's search for peace. And one of the best ways to do that today is to be aware of movements pursuing that goal, share knowledge about them with those around you, and do whatever you can to support them – whether in your local community, within your own country's political structures, or through direct contact.

Epilogue

This book is not a full historical account of all of the factors that have led to the current political situation in the Middle East. Nor does it claim to have delved comprehensively into the complex history of capitalism, Zionism, imperialism, nationalism, politicised religion, or even socialism. What it has sought to do, however, is present in straightforward language the main causes of injustice in the region, and provide the reader with a general outline through which to understand the context better (in spite of the drawbacks that such a broad overview may have). In other words, while I have sought to provide as comprehensive a basis as possible for those interested in finding out more about the Rojava Revolution and the progressive political system that is being implemented in Syrian Kurdistan, there would still be information missing even if twice as many pages had been written. Therefore, I ask you to continue reading, to continue analysing, and to continue spreading the word. And, if I have helped to clarify the key issues in your mind, whilst encouraging further interest or investigation, then my mission will have been accomplished.

By way of a 'final word', I would like to emphasise that fear and ignorance will always be exploited, both by the world's dominant economic and political elites and by reactionary chauvinists. The best way to combat these forces, then, is to fight against both fear and ignorance, by spreading both hope and truth. For, what we should truly fear the most is, in reality, continued oppression, injustice, and exploitation in the world – which will always strengthen either imperialists or bigoted reactionaries (whether pseudo-religious, political, or ethnic). As long as there is ignorance, however, the fear felt by the world's citizens will continue to be misdirected (often with the help of mainstream media misinformation or manipulation) towards supporting further government control over their lives and continued interference in the politics of other countries. Therefore, I have written this book with the aim of spreading truth and putting up an informed resistance to a human consciousness too often governed by lies.

At the same time, though, I am not a dogmatic or disconnected optimist. It is the never-ending search for reason and evidence that has led me to support what I support and oppose what I oppose. In the words of historian Tim Stanley, "power corrupts everyone: Left, Right, men, women, gay, straight, black, white, religious, atheist".¹²⁷⁴ And that fact, backed up by a knowledge and understanding of the past, has definitively made me an advocate of freedom and popular democracy. Simply speaking, when power belongs to everyone and no-one simultaneously, there is no possibility of it being abused in the way it has been under authoritarian political leaders throughout human history. However, I am also a believer in the power of solidarity, equality, and cooperation, in spite of the fact that they all seem, very often, to be very far away.

The main reason for my continued hope in a progressive model for humanity is that, as Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano has said, utopia is like the horizon.¹²⁷⁵ In other words, although we walk towards it without ever truly reaching it, we would simply stop walking if we stopped seeking it out. While we might accidentally stumble towards a better world (or an even worse world), then, the only way to truly ensure some sort of advance (imperfect as it may be) is to keep walking towards the horizon (with our minds grounded in reason and evidence, of course). In the same way, while I have not sought to glorify the Rojava Revolution in this book, I do believe it takes us one step closer to the horizon, offering us hope for a better Middle East and a better world. Like all other political processes, it definitely has its imperfections, but it nonetheless a beautiful example of humanity's search for dignity, justice, equality, and freedom.

¹²⁷⁴ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/timstanley/100261121/hitler-wasnt-a-socialist-stop-saying-he-was/>

¹²⁷⁵ http://www.academia.edu/3983109/Democratic_Confederalism_as_a_Kurdish_Spring_the_PKK_and_the_quest_for_radical_democracy p.185

Essentially, what the Rojava Revolution and other attempts to forge direct democracy reveal to us is that, if people truly have total control over their own destinies and that of their community, they only have themselves to blame if they do not achieve what they want to achieve. If they delegate their destinies to others, however, they can seek to avoid blame, and thus avoid taking responsibility for their own lives, their own happiness, and the wellbeing of their communities. Therefore, the more control people have over their own lives, their own natural resources, their own land, and their own communities, the more they will develop as the creative human beings they have the potential to be. In short, they will experience first-hand the power of cooperation and the power of autonomy, which will in turn allow them to experience true freedom and true justice. And neither imperialists, nor nationalists, nor religious fundamentalists could ever bring all of this to the People. They need to demand it; take it; and build it with their own hands. And that is why the inhabitants of Rojava have not tried to take over the whole of Syria, and why they are focussing primarily on their own communities, because that is where true revolution begins - with autonomous control of one's own community.

Therefore, all of those who seek a better world should see themselves reflected in the experiences of Rojava, which represent the search for equality, cooperation, peace, and justice. And that is why we should show solidarity with Rojavans. They are us, and we are them. Their eyes are on the horizon, just like ours, and if we move towards that horizon together in harmony with them, we will advance much further and much more quickly.

In this story, which is far from approaching its end, we will all need to be protagonists. For, without our participation, the ending is unlikely to look as we want it to look. Therefore, we must become more and more active in our search to ensure that it is we, the People, who determine the outcome of this wonderfully complex chronicle that is human existence.

For democracy and freedom;
For peace and justice;
For love and solidarity;
The struggle must continue.