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ESSAY ARTICLE

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Kurds' continuous struggle challenges Khomeini regime

Today the Kurdish movement, despite the blockade of Kurdish areas by the Islamic Republican Party (IRP) government of Iran, is by no means crushed. Nor has any blockade yet been able to sever the close bonds of the Kurds with other revolutionary forces of Iran. We have much to gain from a study of those ceaseless struggles as we too challenge the Khomeini regime in its barbaric attempts to transform the great Iranian revolution into its present counter-revolutionary stage.

I. FROM THE BEGINNING

The year 1978 witnessed historic sustained mass mobilizations that led to the overthrow of the Shah and the stranglehold of U.S. imperialism on Iran. From that beginning, Kurdish revolutionaries were not only active in Kurdistan, but were among the most militant revolutionaries in other parts of the country. The Kurdish areas were bursting with revolutionary activity during that decisive year. Numerous sit-ins burst forth in the Kurdish cities in support of political prisoners who were on hunger strike. In Marivan a sit-in and hunger strike were staged to demand the release of four peasants who were imprisoned for refusing to move off their land as the landlord had demanded. The struggle to be recognized as a people continues to this day.

The determined struggles of the brave and courageous Kurds for national self-determination has been nearly ceaseless ever since their emergence as a revolutionary force in the wake of the successful Russian Revolution of 1917.¹

The Iranian Revolution has been the latest test both of the Kurdish rebels and of the Iranian Left's commitment to self-determination. It is not accidental that the counter-revolution in Iran took some of its first decisive steps to gain full power by placing Kurdish revolutionaries in front of firing squads shortly after the Shah was overthrown when they refused to bow to Khomeini's oppressive rule. Khalkhali became the hanging judge when he ordered the executions of Kurdish revolutionaries.

And while some revolutionaries did solidarize with the Kurds, including joining them in their territory as fighters against the pasdaran (Khomeini's religious fighters — in actuality, thugs), nonetheless, much of the Left did not see that attack against the Kurds as a measure of the developing counter-revolution and thus failed decisively to raise an alternative banner of freedom. They failed to see self-determination of nations as one of the crucial pathways for the whole Iranian Revolution.

Today, some of the Left, though certainly opposing Khomeini's murderous counter-revolution, have again failed to begin working out the relation of self-determination of nations and full social revolution. They have, instead, begun criticizing the "backwardness" of the masses, including that of the Kurdish struggle, as being a cause for the failure of the revolution.

II. THE KURDISH STRUGGLE UNDER THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

After the overthrow of the Shah, the people of Kurdistan refused to allow the new rulers to dictate to them how they run their lives. Less than two months after the overthrow of the Shah, and ten days after the historic March 8, 1979 women's demonstrations in Teheran against Khomeini's order to wear the veil, the pishmarga (Kurdish fighters, "those who give up their lives ahead of everyone") in the Kurdish city of Sanandaj took over the local gendarmerie and set up barricades to defend the city against the army. The city radio station was taken over and people were called on to rise up against the central authorities. Those authorities attacked the city with heavy artillery, and only after hundreds were killed did they take control.

In late March the peasants in Turkeman Sahra, who had taken over the land, were massacred by the pasdaran. Close to 100,000 participated in a demonstration to mourn their deaths.

In the spring of 1979, the Kurdish regions witnessed an explosion of committees formed by workers, peasants, women and youth. The women's committees became the most active in the struggle against Khomeini's "holy war."

The demonstrations were endless. First, they demanded the release of peasants from prison. Then they supported the newly-formed labor union. Next they opposed local landlords who were training the pasdaran. Committees were set up to assist the peasants on water projects, distribution of food to the poor, medical aid to the villages.

In Sanandaj, when the pasdaran attempted to organize a "communist killing day," the pishmarga took over their headquarters and threw them out of the city. When, on July 10, the pasdaran started to shoot at the

participants in a demonstration, almost the entire city responded by burning down their headquarters. When the government attempted to flood the Kurdish cities with pasdaran from non-Kurdish areas, 50,000 Kurds from all over Kurdistan began a march to Marivan in protest. Despite the anti-communist agitation of local landlords, thousands of peasant men, women and children greeted the marchers by bringing them food and chanting: "Long live our brotherhood. Long live our struggle in unity."

On July 20, 1979 the Khomeini government launched a full scale military attack against the populations of Paveh and Sanandaj. The pishmarga fled to the mountains. Just as the women in Teheran had been the first to take to the streets against the Khomeini oppression, so the Kurdish women were the ones who took up the struggle and organized the mass mobilization against the army.

As one Kurdish woman put it: "It began with one woman who wore a red dress, and with a picture of her murdered husband went to the streets and called on the people to take to the streets and not to sit home and mourn. This led to spontaneous mass demonstrations. In the following days women were the only demonstrators. They organized against Khalkhali. Their activities finally brought the entire town into the streets, and the pishmarga were able to return from the mountains."

1. There are only a few works available in English on Kurdish history. The most recent is *People Without A Country: Kurds and Kurdistan* edited by Gerard Chalfond. See also Hanna Batali's *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*.

During the next two months, the widespread self-organized local committees of women and students in Sanandaj began reorganizing the entire administration of the city, challenging many forms of oppression. They raised the demand for the removal of the pasdaran.

On Oct. 26, the pasdaran once again began shooting people, this time with the backing of the army and with Phantom jets flying low over the city. The next morning the outraged people gathered at the city center demanding that the pishmarga take over the pasdaran headquarters. The pishmarga refused. A sit-in began demanding the unconditional expulsion of the pasdaran. By the next day the entire city was on general strike. Workers from all the factories joined with the bakers union, the seasonal workers union, local committees, women's committees and students. From all over Kurdistan, messages of solidarity along with food and other aid flooded the city. Messages of solidarity came from peasants in no less than 50 villages. Within days revolutionary courts were set up in the streets and many of the Islamic Republic lackeys and local landlords were arrested.

It was only after the almost total destruction of Sanandaj, including a large-scale massacre of the population, that the army was able to retake the city.

III. SIXTY YEARS OF THE KURDISH MOVEMENT

The Kurds in fact have been the testing ground for revolutions in the region for over 60 years. Over and over again they have been the most revolutionary of forces, but subjected to the most vicious of betrayals:

- In 1919, the Kurdish peasants in the region today known as Turkey rose up against the European imperialists, who, having just ended the holocaust of World War I, were busy carving up the war booty. Through their struggle, the Kurds extended their solidarity with the Russian Revolution and showed their refusal to limit the demand for national self-determination to the bourgeois notion of national equality. Thus, in 1923 when Mustafa Kemal — who a few years earlier had crushed the soviets that the Kurds had been creating throughout Northern Kurdistan under the impact of the Russian Revolution — proclaimed the establishment of a "Turkish State," the Kurds at once took up arms and a general revolt broke out. It took more than a decade and the

revolt. Even today martial law is maintained in four of the six Kurdish provinces of Turkey.

- At the end of World War II — when the Russian army still occupied northern Iran, while the Western-installed Shah held power in Teheran — the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and the Azerbaijan Republic were declared, independent of Iran. But Stalin's Russia was interested in obtaining oil concessions, not in solidifying with the struggles of the Kurds and Azerbaijani Turks; nor did the U.S. have any intention of relinquishing anything. Moreover, the demands raised by the Kurdish leadership for recognition as a national entity were so separate from any measures for revolutionizing social relations that in less than a year that leadership agreed to return to a limited autonomy within Iran. Within a few months of this agreement, the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad was occupied by Iranian armed forces.

- In the Iraqi Revolution of 1959, the Kurds were

most horrible atrocities by the regime to put down the a force demanding a deepening of revolution. Qassim, born of a Kurdish mother and an Arab father, had, upon coming to power, declared Iraq to be a nation based upon the association of Kurds and Arabs. He began reforms such as an eight-hour day, reduced rents, lowering food prices, and legalizing unions. The masses, especially the Kurds in Mosul and Kirkuk, moved to deepen the revolution. Qassim responded by calling upon his army and the native Communist Party to put down any such mass movement. Soon Qassim too was overthrown by the Baath Party.

Between 1963 and 1975 five conflicts broke out between the Iraqi army and the Kurds. In 1975 a pact between Iraq and Iran ended Iran's supplying of arms to the Kurds. This in turn led to the breakdown of much of the Kurdish movement that Mulla Mustafa Barez had set up. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds were dragged into the Shah's concentration camps. Many Kurds refused to turn in their arms and fled back into Iraq.

Today, following Iraq's invasion of Iran, Khomeini has often directed his forces against the Kurds, rather than against the Iraqi invasion. But as great a danger to the revolution is the disorientation introduced by the "ideas" of the counter-revolution as it its so-called anti-imperialism was any sort of ground for revolutionaries.

That counter-revolution hit out against the Kurds, against the women who demanded their liberation, and finally against the Left youth who began launching attacks against the Islamic Republican Party. However, much of the Left has argued that the revolution was "diverted" by the fact that women demanded their rights, and that the Kurds "so quickly" fought for self-determination. These actions, they argued, presented an easy target for counter-revolution to mobilize against. But the truth is that a revolution is not an undifferentiated whole marching towards an abstract goal.

Revolution is the concrete, individual passions and movement of a variety of forces — workers, peasants, national minorities, women and youth — towards a new society. Unity is necessary, but it can only be achieved if, at one and the same time, each part of the revolutionary movement is recognized as one of the pathways toward full social revolution. Only then can there be unity — the movement from below grounded to a philosophy of revolution. Such a unity of philosophy and revolution is Marx's Humanism, opposed both to capitalism and "vulgar communism," letting nothing interfere with its universalism of freedom and new human relations. Any other unity on the alleged ground of "anti-imperialism" which buries the contradictions within the revolution is a false unity.

The attack against concrete forces who demand their freedom has occurred before from within the revolutionary movement. Revolutionary Marxism has always had to fight such a tendency. Lenin in particular developed both before and after the Russian Revolution, theoretical and practical aspects of a Marxist position on the self-determination of nations. It becomes necessary to look at his contributions in this area, especially since some parts of the Left, including the Kurdish Left, have been distorting Lenin's position on the relation of the right of nations to self-determination to the process of social revolution.

IV. LENIN ON THE NATIONAL QUESTION AS INTEGRAL TO THE DIALECTICS OF REVOLUTION

After the outbreak of World War I the "national question" became a central question of the revolution for Lenin, one in which he had to battle other Bolshevik leaders until the last days of his life.

Prior to 1914 all Bolsheviks agreed to "self-determination of nations" as a "principle." With the outbreak of WWI and the betrayal of the established Marxist organization, the Second International, the theoretical ground on which Lenin was standing also collapsed. In search of a new revolutionary perspective he felt compelled to return to Marx's Marxism and its roots in the Hegelian dialectic.² It was this reorganization of his own thought that transformed the national question from a general principle to the very life of the revolution when the Irish dared to revolt against the British in the midst of the war.

Lenin now saw a new urgency in the question of self-determination. He saw the national struggles as "one of the bacilli which help the real power against imperialism to come on the scene, namely, the socialist proletariat." Lenin hit out against his fellow Bolshevik Bukharin, who had written "the slogan of 'self-determination' is first of all utopian and harmful . . . as a slogan which disseminates illusions." Lenin called this an "imperialist economism" — which is exactly what Stalin, first, and Brezhnev now practice.

After 1917 Lenin again had to fight his Bolshevik co-leaders who claimed that it was no longer necessary to have the right of self-determination since Russia was now a workers' state. Lenin replied " . . . we cannot deny it to a single one of the people living within the boundaries of the former Russian Empire."

The truth is that revolution is no mechanical question, but one involving living, fighting subjects of revolution determined to make themselves free.

2. For a study of Lenin's Philosophical Notebooks and his attitude to the national question see Raya Dunayevskaya's *Marxism and Freedom*, and her *Philosophy and Revolution*. See also Mouffe *Lenin's Lenin's Last Struggle*.

V. ONCE AGAIN, THE KURDS AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The pathway for the Kurdish movement and the Iranian Revolution lies through their continued revolutionary interchange. After all, the Iranian Revolution was one of the greatest of the decade. It threw out both

the Shah and U.S. imperialism. It could not have occurred without the Kurdish movement as integral to it. The point for us today is how can we re-establish that unity under the whip of a theocratic counter-revolution which despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric is not anti-capitalist, and is already in the process of welcoming foreign capitalism this time in its state (Russian) form rather than its private (Western) form.

Today only a new revolutionary unity can put a stop to this process. But this unity is not alone a question of activity, of going to the hills and fighting alongside the Kurds, though that too is necessary. Unless the Left grasps theoretically how self-determination of nations is integral to social revolution, and unless the Kurdish movement in turn sees that genuine self-determination can only be fully realized within the context of a socialist revolution, then the unity will only be "tactical" and not a genuine social, deeply-rooted unity.

Today the Kurdish revolutionaries continue to demand a vision of revolution that would mean genuine freedom being worked out. What is necessary for us — Iranian revolutionaries, Kurdish revolutionaries, American revolutionaries — is to work out a philosophy of revolution that would help us articulate fully humanity's quest for freedom. There are no short cuts, not from

state-capitalism calling itself Communism; certainly not from western capitalism; nor from the religious reaction of Khomeini's Islamic Republic. And a philosophy cannot be created out of anointing the Islamic Republic with the word "democratic." Religion, even if "democratic," cannot be a substitute for a total philosophy of social revolution, rooted in the movement from practice, from below. It is not the masses who are so backward that they will not grasp such a philosophy. If concretely and totally expressed.

It is rather revolutionary intellectuals who are backward in thinking that such a philosophy must be forsaken in favor of religious trappings. In order for the masses to accept it. Such ground opens the way to counter-revolution whether in today's immediate, theocratic state, or in a future state-capitalist one "cleansed" of religion, but having all the totalitarian aspects of today's theocratic state. Self-determination of nations remains a critical pathway toward the Iranian Revolution, freed from the stranglehold of Khomeini's regime. To return to the original goal of freedom of the Iranian Revolution; to deepen the revolution, it must be freed both from the native ruling class and the imperialisms, U.S. and Russian, in the wings. Only in that way will we also light a world path to truly class-less society.