

Middle-East - From Sykes-Picot to “Islamic State”: Imperialism’s Bloody Wreckage

Friday 7 November 2014, by [MATHER Yassamine](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2014).

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WHEN THE JIHADIST group Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS) changed its name and declared the establishment of the Caliphate, it did so with the release of a promotional video entitled “The End of Sykes-Picot.” This was a reference to the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement that marked the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of two zones of influence, British and French.

The current civil wars in Syria and Iraq, decades of conflict between Kurds in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria and the central government in these countries, the establishment of the state of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can all be traced back to that era. To understand the present situation in the Middle East we need to remember that with the exception of Egypt, most Arab states are recent creations, less than a century old.

Although the mass media are keen to blame the more recent conflicts on a “Sunni-Shia divide,” there is a more complicated story of arbitrary borders dividing nationalities, of local rulers deliberately chosen from religious minorities imposed by the colonial powers aiming to divide and rule, of elites from minority religions promoted as economic and financial partners of imperialist countries.

“A line in the sand” [1] drawn by the two diplomats on a map of the region went from A (Acre in Palestine) to the second K in Kirkuk (present-day Iraq). The region north of this line including modern day Syria and Lebanon were given to France; regions south of the line became zones of British influence including the provinces of Basra, Baghdad, Transjordan and Palestine.

Even then the agreement had its critics: T.E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia” who knew a lot more than Sykes about national and religious differences in the region, warned of conflicts within the Arab regions. U.S. president Woodrow Wilson commented: “Peoples and provinces are not to be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as mere chattels and pawns in a game... Every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned.” [2]

Why is this history important? First, it will help us understand the current regional, civil and sectarian conflicts in the Middle East. Second, it shows the arbitrary nature of the current borders in the region. Third, it shows how foolish it is to seek solutions that involve interventions (humanitarian

or otherwise) by world powers. They are an integral part of the problem. Last but not least, it should put in context the obsession of the peoples of the region with conspiracy theories and the role of foreign powers.

Ottoman Empire and Decay

The end of the First World War led to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, following a decline that had started decades before.

The Ottoman state was established under Osman Bey in Anatolia in 1299. In 1453, Mehmet the Second, who had conquered Constantinople, declared the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. Its territories were expanded in the 15th and 16th centuries, and control of the majority of land trade routes between Asia and Europe gave it economic prosperity.

In 1520 Sultan Selim I defeated the Persian Safavid dynasty's Shah Ismail, and also conquered Egypt. All this consolidated the empire's position as a regional power, allowing further expansion with the capture of Belgrade and overall control of large parts of Hungary.

Covering a vast area (at times from Vienna to today's Iran, from Yemen to Algeria) with many nationalities and religions, the theocratic Ottoman Empire relied on its military bureaucratic apparatus. The army, at times composed of mercenaries and professionals, was used to keep control of the vast territory in an empire with no geographic or national coherence, faced with constant wars and rebellions. The corrupt and ill-equipped state came to be called "the sick man of Europe" and only survived because of inter-imperialist conflict.

In its heyday the empire had used the concept of millet to rule. For example, all Orthodox Christians were considered as constituting a millet, while all Jews constituted another millet. Each was allowed to elect its own religious leader and enforce its own religious laws; Sharia or Islamic law had no jurisdiction over non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. The 32 provinces of the Ottoman empire were considered Ottoman elayats with each governed by a vali (administrator).

The decline of the empire began in the late 18th century when Selim III was removed from power by Mustafa IV. Rebellion by many ethnic groups led to the Treaties of Jassy and of Lausanne. In addition the empire had already been weakened by economic devastation as well as wars against Russia.

Attempts to reform and modernise (Tanzimat) failed, and the declared aim of facilitating a catchup with the western world appeared to be a failure. As the empire weakened, Western notions of nationalism stimulated differences amongst larger groups under the Ottoman Empire.

In July 1908, a Young Turk rebellion in Macedonia supported by an Albanian uprising in Kosovo and Macedonia escalated into widespread insurrection and mutiny within the imperial army. Sultan Abdul Hamid's autocratic regime, which had lasted more than 35 years, surrendered to demands made by the Young Turks to restore constitutional rule.

In an article titled "Events in the Balkans and in Persia," Lenin pointed out that capitalist powers' enthusiasm for Turkish constitutional reforms and moderation was driven by a desire to "bite off" as big a piece as they could and expand their colonies. [3] In fact the Turkish revolution was praised precisely because it was weak, and hostile to proletarian struggles. Colonial powers were plotting the demise of the Ottoman Empire with various Arab tribal leaders.

Once initial enthusiasm about the constitutional system died down, there was little progress towards democracy. Dissatisfaction with the new regime became evident as early as 1909. The newly established political system assumed that the citizens of the empire could unite under a single flag representing Ottomanism, but the process of replacing the imperial institutions with constitutional administration and electoral policies was neither as simple nor as bloodless as the regime change itself. The periphery of the empire continued to witness local revolutions.

Nine months into the new government, fundamentalists united to overthrow the second constitutional government and to reinstate the caliphate, eliminate secular policies, and restore rule of the Sharia. History books refer to the counter coup as the Incident of 31 March 1909. It failed, however, and on the 27th of April Abdul Hamid II was removed from the throne and Sultan Mehmet V installed. The new Sultan proclaimed the equality of all subjects in matters of taxes, military service (allowing Christians into the military for the first time), and religious minorities' political rights.

The new constitution could not address certain areas because of their international character, including the Ottoman Bank (which had British and French shareholders) or the Ottoman Public Debt Administration. The position of Sultan was greatly reduced, while still retaining some powers such as the ability to declare war.

War with Italy over control of Tripoli (Libya) in 1911 and the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 further weakened the empire as it lost territories throughout these regions. By the time the First World War started, the Ottoman Empire was politically weak and financially bankrupt. British forces in the Persian Gulf declared Kuwait an “independent sheikdom under British protectorate,” ignoring completely the Anglo-Ottoman Convention.

One could argue that sectarian divisions go back to the Capitulations in the Ottoman Empire, as these practices accepted privileges based on religion. Foreigners, mainly Christians, had secured a list of privileges including the law that they could not be tried under local jurisdiction. Foreign firms and individuals were exempt from any form of taxation.

At a time when most of the financial sector, industry, and railway construction were in the hands of non-Muslim people — Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Italians, French, Germans and English, all exempt from Ottoman (local) jurisdiction — capitulation became a source of popular discontent, and paved the way for more corruption as lawmakers associated with various non-Muslim jurisdictions took bribes and maintained a discriminatory tax system.

War, Imperial Collapse and Sykes-Picot

In the Middle East, World War I was fought between 29 October 1914, and 30 October 1918. The combatants were on the one hand, the Ottoman Empire (including Kurds, Circassians, Turcomans and some Arab, Berber and Iranian tribes), with some assistance from the other Central Powers, and on the other hand, the British and the Russians (with the aid of the Armenians, Assyrians, Jews and the majority of Arabs) among the Allies.

Both sides used local asymmetrical partisan forces. On the Allied side were Arabs who participated in the Arab Revolt, and Armenian militia who participated in the Armenian Resistance. Armenian volunteer units and militia formed the Armenian Corps of the First Republic of Armenia in 1918. In addition, the Assyrians also joined with the allies following the Assyrian Genocide. The Turkish Ottomans had the support of Kurds, Turcomans, Circassians, Chechens and a number of Iranian, Arab and Berber groups.

Russian participation ended with the Armistice of Erzincan (5 December 1917) and the Bolshevik government withdrew from the war with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (3 March 1918). The Ottomans accepted the Armistice of Mudros with the Allies on 30 October 1918, and signed the Treaty of Sèvres on 10 August 1920 and later the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923.

The Ottoman Empire had allied itself with the Central Powers, and at the end of the war it was partitioned by the Allies. This gave rise to the Turkish War of Independence. In 1923, the central part of the six centuries-old empire was replaced by the country we now know as the Republic of Turkey.

The secret Sykes-Picot deal formed the basis of the agreements that were finalised at the end of the war. In June 1919 the League of Nations issued the mandates for Ottoman Mesopotamia and Ottoman Syria, involving Britain and France. The British Empire took control of what became modern day Iraq and Palestine; the regions of Syria and Lebanon became French protectorates.

From the vantage point of nearly a century later, what was wrong with the Sykes-Picot agreement?

The Arab allies of Britain and France were completely unaware of the content of the agreement. Since 1910 Britain had promised many Arab tribes that if they rebelled against Ottoman rule they would gain independence after the fall of the empire. Not only did they not achieve independence, but arrogant colonial interventions continued in the 1920s, '30s and '40s fuelling nationalist struggles in North Africa, Syria and Iraq.

When it comes to politics the problem is that straight lines draw arbitrary borders within nations and religious groups. Lebanon (carved out of Syria by the French in 1943) was supposed to be a land for Christian and Druze, while Shia were supposed to stay in the Bekaa Valley. Palestine was promised to the Arabs while remaining a home to a sizeable Jewish community.

The debates about Sharia law vs. secularism, traditions and customs vs. modernity started during the latter years of the Ottoman Empire, but were sharpened following the partition of the region. Both France and Britain did their best to use religious and national differences to divide and rule. In turbulent times, victims of constant colonial and later imperialist interventions, the numerous nationalities and religious groups formerly under Ottoman rule would revert to sectarian and regional politics.

Modernisation imposed from above in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere faced many challenges by religious forces, mainly because it never addressed the divisions between town and countryside, between wealth and poverty. Fundamentalist groups in rural areas were able to gain support amongst the dispossessed. In an ever changing world, at a time when competing economically with the West became impossible, many wanted continuity and security in what they knew best, religion and Sharia law.

British-French Rule after World War I

Egypt was a "khedivate" (autonomous tributary state) until 1882, when in effect it became part of the British empire. The country became a British protectorate in 1915 and finally gained formal independence in 1922 under Muhammad Ali.

U.S. president Woodrow Wilson had produced a 14 point plan to create a "changed political atmosphere." The idea was that rather than acting as colonial powers, Britain and France would teach and guide administrators and politicians in these territories, a policy whose "flower was

independence and democracy.”(3) The legal and moral duty of the mandate powers was to facilitate the path to Independence.

The French, however, faced major economic problems with their exports reduced to 20% of pre-war levels. Further expansion was not on the cards, but resisting any loss of more territory was the order of the day: “maintaining and strengthening ... presence in the area,” a point emphasized by the Army of the Levant’s growth to some 70,000 by 1921.

For their part, the British were driven by the ambition to control the oil-rich territory of Mosul, not least to secure fuel for the British navy. This brought them into conflict with the newly established Turkish Republic. In addition Britain needed control of trade routes between the Indian subcontinent and Europe, and this enhanced the importance of the Suez Canal especially as 9-14% of all British trade passed through it.

The strategic importance of the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz necessitated keeping air bases in Basra and Baghdad. Throughout the 1930s the Anglo-Iraq treaty and later the maintenance of garrisons in Egypt directed British policy in the region.

French and British attitudes towards their protectorates were also different, France considered its role as one of protecting Christians in the region, as well as propagation of French culture. In Lebanon this meant support for Christians through the promotion of pro-Maronite (Catholic) policies, whilst in Syria, a policy of supervising waqf (Muslim religious trust) land was aimed at reducing and thus weakening the power of the Muslim clergy.

The expansion of Franco-Muslim secondary schools was part of the aim to propagate French culture. I happened to go to one such school in Tehran with strong links to Lebanon, and by my second year I was so angered by constant comments about the superiority of French culture that — although born in a secular family — I became an Islamist for a short period.

Britain did not see the need to take on such cultural roles; contrary to some historical claims regarding British support for Zionist immigration as “an extension of Western Civilization,” it seems unlikely that British attitudes towards Jewish settlements in Palestine had anything to do with attempts to extend western culture.

Both European powers embarked on policies of economic development of their mandated territories, but mainly for their own financial gains. The British government owned a 51% share in the Anglo-Persian oil company and wanted a better deal in its mandated territory Iraq, for the oil fields of Mosul.

In Syria the French established what historian Stephen Longrigg calls an “enormous bureaucratic machine” which had at times over 400 French officials. French Mandate Syria was partitioned into five separate states; in contrast, British policy in Iraq or Palestine was to avoid partitioning. Although both France and Britain signed agreements with their protectorates about independence, none were honored, fuelling further resentment in the Arab countries of the region.

From Nationalism to Neoliberalism

In June 1940, soon after the establishment of the Vichy government (under German occupation in France), the French in Syria recognised the new government and ceased hostility towards Germany and Italy. By 1941 German aircrafts flying to the war zone in the Persian Gulf were allowed to refuel in Syria. To combat this, British and Free French army troops invaded Syria and stayed until 1946

when Syria gained independence under the auspices of the United Nations.

The country became a founder of the Arab League, but after a humiliating defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Syria looked inwards trying to maintain a stable division of power among the elites from different national and religious groups. However, the main division in the country remained between the wealthy urban owners of capital and the rural poor. The secular Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party recruited mainly from students, technocrats and army officers particularly amongst the Alawite and other minorities.

In Iraq under Nur? al-Sa'?d who had been prime minister since 1930, the initial reaction to the Second World War was to strengthen the Anglo-Iraqi alliance and declare war on Germany. However, ministers in his government were concerned that Iraq might end up allied to the losing side and the country declared itself neutral.

In the spring of 1941 British military reinforcement entered Iraq from the Habban?yyah air base. This was the start of the British-Iraq war of 1941. By the end of May the Iraqi military was defeated. The governments that followed were mainly dominated by Sunnis in a country where the majority population are Shia. Iraqi premier Salah Jabr signed a new deal with British foreign minister Ernest Bevin. The Iraqi-British agreement of 1948 promised equality between the two countries, stipulating that "each of the high contracting parties undertake not to adopt in foreign countries an attitude which is inconsistent with the alliance or which might create difficulties for the other party."

Nationalist and Ba'athist regimes subsequently gained prominence when they benefited from Cold War Soviet financial and political support. Pro-Soviet "official communist" parties, some with considerable working class support, were instructed by Moscow to dissolve and join the Ba'athists. After the collapse of the eastern bloc, nationalist bureaucrats at the head of these states slid easily back into the western fold, set themselves up as semi-dynastic dictators and became authoritarian supporters of the neoliberal economic agenda.

Contrary to what the defenders of the "free market economy" tell us, authoritarian regimes can not only embrace neoliberal economic policies, but also push forward such policies with little or no opposition, having already suppressed secular, leftwing forces and labour activists.

In fact Islamists, often associated with the bazaar and industry, also benefit from free-market economic liberalisation, whether in power or in opposition. Rulers such as Mubarak (Egypt), Ben Ali (Tunisia), Assad (Syria) and Gaddafi (Libya) survived by imposing repressive measures. They decimated the revolutionary left, but generally left the Islamists alone.

The Current Situation

Last year's fall from power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has contributed to the desperation that feeds "Islamic State" violence.

Every day, news of fresh atrocities by the Islamic State makes headlines. From the beheading of young journalists to the mass extermination of religious and national minorities in Iraq and Syria, there seems to be no end to the barbarism and brutality of this latest brand of Islamist jihadism. U.S. air strikes might have slowed down the IS's military progress — e.g. in September the two Shia cities of Amerli and Suleiman Beik were recaptured, the latter with the direct intervention of Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

It is clear that the IS is far from defeated. The left should not despair, however. The Arab working

class has not joined IS or other jihadists. It is ironic to think that only a year ago the debate was about U.S. military intervention on the side of Syrian opposition forces — even then dominated by the very jihadists who later chose the name “Daesh” (in Arabic), or ISIS. Today the United States is conducting an air war against the group, with Britain, France and Canada joining in.

This air war will no doubt bolster the regime of Bashar Assad. Over the last 12 months, Assad has consolidated his power with phoney elections; his army (supported by another “rogue state,” Iran) is as repressive as before. In short, what has changed is the priorities of the imperialist powers. There is now an urgent need to maintain control over the country they ruined in another “humanitarian” intervention in 2003: Iraq.

Shia Iran and its ally Syria are no longer the main enemy. On the contrary, Iran’s alliance and support is welcomed in Iraq where, in true colonial fashion, Washington dismisses the prime minister of the occupation government and gets Tehran’s approval to install a replacement. Nouri al-Maliki is ousted and in his place is Haider al-Abadi — and the first person to express support for Iraq’s new premier is none other than Iran’s supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.

Ten years after de-Ba’athification and “year zero,” when neoliberal economics was supposed to bring about a flourishing civil society, the country remains devastated. Contrary to the U.S. vision, it soon became obvious that the regional power benefiting from the political vacuum was Iran’s Islamic Republic. With a friendly, at times obedient Shia-led state in Baghdad, relative influence in Syria and growing links with Hezbollah in Lebanon, the clerics in Tehran and Qom could not believe their luck: the neoconservatives had handed them the Shia belt, stretching from Tehran (some would say Kabul) to the Mediterranean coast.

Yet Iran’s influence and at times direct interventions in Iraq and Syria, not to mention Hezbollah’s political success in Lebanon, has increased sectarian tension — which is also fuelled by Saudi and Qatari financial support for Sunni militias in Syria and Iraq, as well as political opponents of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

U.S. threats against Iran and the hysteria about Iran’s nuclear program since 2007, as well as subsequent crippling sanctions, were inevitable consequences of attempts by first Bush and then Obama to address the increasing geopolitical strength of Iran. The Arab spring in 2011 and 2012 only reinforced this position, as the United States now had to consider the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo.

Ironically, the defeat of the Arab spring and the rising power of fundamentalist jihadists, especially in Syria, changed U.S. foreign policy. Obama’s infamous statement that the administration had “no strategy” (yet) touched off a number of debates. Clearly there is a level of disorientation in Washington and, for all the claims of Israel’s supporters that Obama’s “strategy” is appeasement of nuclear Iran (according to Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, the biggest threat to world peace since Hitler), the reality is that last year’s enemies — the Iranian rulers, Assad and Hezbollah — are today’s tacit allies.

Avoiding Confusion for the Left

Even in the current mess of the Middle East, you can hold to the principled position of opposing foreign military intervention, while resisting the temptation to support one or the other reactionary state, one or the other hopeless, “moderate” Islamic group, simply because they oppose the local dictator.

Why should we do so? Because the origins of many of these jihadists go back to Saudi Arabia and other U.S. allies, and because it was colonialism that created the underlying problems of the region — arbitrary borders, deliberate imposition of ruling elites from religious minorities (Sunni rulers in Shia countries and vice versa).

This means that imperialism can play no part in the solution. If the United States were serious about stopping the massacres, why does it not impose sanctions on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states (and take action against the Arab billionaires who finance these dubious organizations)? Instead it continues to arm these states.

Because all imperialist “humanitarian interventions” are political, with the overriding aim of advancing the geopolitical hegemony of U.S. imperialism. Otherwise we would have witnessed, if not U.S. military action, at least forthright condemnation of Israel as it massacred over 2,000 Palestinians in Gaza.

Because, as Obama admitted, the United States has no clear strategy. A left that tails the latest “humanitarian” intervention ends up one year supporting the bombing of pro-Assad forces, including Iranian Revolutionary guards, and bombing of Assad’s opponents the next.

Because every military intervention, “humanitarian” or otherwise, brings new recruits into the ranks of the jihadists. Anyone in doubt should look at events in Afghanistan and how U.S. bombing increased support for the Taliban.

Short-sighted, opportunistic politics of falling behind this or that Arab/Middle Eastern state or Islamic opposition (“moderate” or jihadist, from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to Al Nusra in Syria) continue to discredit the international left in the Middle East, and play into the hands of the religious fundamentalists.

It is true to say that the destruction of Iraq started with the 2003 invasion. However, it is also true that Maliki’s sectarianism, his refusal to incorporate Sunni militias in the regular army, his intolerance of tribal leaders in northern Iraq all contributed to the ensuing chaos. Iraq’s political problems were compounded after the 2010 elections. When the more or less non-sectarian, mainly Sunni Iraqi coalition gained the largest number of parliamentary seats, Maliki used the courts to stop it from attempting to form a government. He followed this later with attacks on non-Shia ministers and officials.

Iraq, a country where religious and national minorities had lived in relative peace side by side for centuries, has become the scene of vicious battles between Sunni jihadists and Shia military sects. According to the most conservative estimates, currently there are three million internally displaced persons in Iraq.

And what about the “Islamic State” itself? Who has been financing it over the last few years? How did it gain the prominence it has? According to Charles Lister of the Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, “There is no publicly accessible proof that the government of a state has been involved in the creation or financing of Isis as an organisation.” [\[4\]](#)

However, the Iraqi government, Iran’s Islamic Republic and a number of independent observers have made accusations that the governments of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Persian states financed ISIS in 2013 and early 2014. There is credible information about wealthy members of ruling families from the Persian Gulf countries funding it over the last two years. For all the Saudi and Qatari denials, there can thus be little doubt that, before it gained access to oilfields in north Syria and later banks in Mosul, ISIS was the recipient of financial support from states in the Persian Gulf

region.

Michael Stephens, director of the Royal United Services Institute in Qatar, asks:

“So has Qatar funded the Islamic State? Directly, the answer is no. Indirectly, a combination of shoddy policy and naivety has led to Qatar-funded weapons and money making their way into the hands of IS. Saudi Arabia likewise is innocent of a direct state policy to fund the group, but, as with Qatar, its determination to remove Mr Assad has led to serious mistakes in its choice of allies ... many taking bags of cash to Turkey and simply handing over millions of dollars at a time.” [5]

Some of this money was originally destined for Al Nusra (Al Qa’eda’s wing in Syria). However, ISIS also benefited from the money smuggled via a Turkish border left deliberately unchecked. This has made the organisation one of the richest jihadist groups in the world, which now benefits from control of oilfields in Syria — indeed selling oil back to the Assad regime — and from conquering Iraqi cities: “During its conquest of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, ISIS fighters looted more than 500 billion Iraqi dinar, worth about \$420 million ... Iraqi officials estimate that the group now has about \$2 billion in its war chest.” [6]

ISIS leader Al Baghdadi has established a military command that includes officers from Saddam Hussein’s military. In the Middle East it is widely reported that former Iraqi officers like Fadel al-Hayali, who was one of the Ba’athist regime’s top military commanders, as well as Adnan al-Sweidawi, a colonel of the Saddam Hussein era, hold crucial positions in the military leadership of ISIS. These are men who fought the U.S. occupation in the mid-2000s.

Other Sunnis, linked to northern Iraqi tribes, groups which fought al Qa’eda in the 2007-8 “Sunni Awakening,” felt so isolated and betrayed by Baghdad that they sided with ISIS when the Iraqi government of Maliki broke its promise to integrate over 90,000 Sunnis who fought al Qa’eda into the military security system, thus providing them with a proper income. Instead, incompetent and corrupt Shias were promoted to the highest ranks of the army — and were among the first to run away and abandon their posts as ISIS advanced.

Contradictions of the Kurds

The British former Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown has encouraged the government to “arm Kurdish forces” and called on Britain and the United States to act as “handmaidens to Kurdish independence.” (The Guardian, August 15, 2014)

However, those who are familiar with the region will tell a different story. Fighters from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) have not been as brave as some reports suggest, nor were they in the forefront of recent battles. Survivors of the ISIS onslaught in Sinjar province last month claim that the Kurdish soldiers (peshmergas) and political parties of the Kurdish Regional Authority abandoned them.

Throughout the last few years, the KDP has recruited members and supporters from among Yazidis in the Sinjar province, promising them protection. (The Yazidis, whose religion is close to Zoroastrianism, have often been called “devil worshippers.”) In Sinjar province, the KDP assured the residents, both Christians and Yazidis, that they would be safe from Sunni and Shia extremists.

Sarbast Baiperi, head of the local KDP in Sinjar province, appeared on KDP radio and TV and on Facebook claiming: “Until the last drop of blood we will defend Sinjar.” [7] In return the KDP expected the population to vote for its deputies. Yet in the first test of this pact, the local population

claims that when ISIS advanced KDP peshmergas abandoned their posts and fled.

Certainly, other Kurdish fighters, mainly from the YPG (Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units), members of the Syrian wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), as well as Iranian peshmergas based in Iraqi Kurdistan, did fight. As the refugees approached a checkpoint where Kurdish Regional Government authorities were confiscating weapons, the Yazidis and the Christians sent word back down the convoy behind them: "Give your guns to the YPG!"

The western mass media might confuse the heroism of left-wing Kurdish fighters with the cowardice of KDP and PUK leaders Barzani, Talabani and their useless armies, but the peoples of the region know better.

Principles

It is inevitable that, faced with the horrors inflicted by the Islamic State, the left in the imperialist countries is suffering from some confusion. Marxists need to be clear about our principles.

For example, threats of war against Iran should not cause us to side with a reactionary religious state that intervenes in the affairs of other countries in the region. During the Arab Spring, while in Egypt the departure of Hosni Mubarak was a cause for celebration, in the absence of any viable left-wing alternative the Muslim Brotherhood's adherence to neoliberal economics, accompanied by the imposition of aspects of Sharia law, would be a recipe for disaster.

We on the Marxist left rejected claims about the allegedly progressive and anti-imperialist nature of the MB and warned against calling for a vote for it. We were also against the military coup in Egypt in the summer of 2013. And we opposed U.S. military intervention in Syria: Foreign interventions in that country — from Iran and Russia on the side of the Syrian dictator, and from Saudi Arabia and Qatar in support of Al Nusra, ISIS and the Free Syrian army — paved the way for subsequent disasters.

We can do no more than repeat the same warnings again. The Middle East has a complicated history, compounded by arbitrary borders drawn up by the colonial powers. It has been the scene of imperialist interventions throughout the last century. For the left there is only one position that has stood the test of time: we refuse to echo social-imperialist calls in support of "humanitarian" intervention. Nor do we offer "critical support" to this or that regional dictator (or Islamist group) under the guise of a false anti-imperialism.

Only by adhering to basic principles can we stand any chance of regaining support amongst the working class in the region. Do not be fooled: there are no short cuts, no easy solutions.

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P.S.

* « *Protesting Injustice* ». Against the Current (#173), November-December 2014.
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

- [1] The title of a book by James Barr.
- [2] http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/fourteenpoints_wilson2.htm.
- [3] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/oct/16.htm>
- [4] www.dw.de/who-finances-isis/a-17720149.
- [5] <http://commonsensewonder.blogspot.co.uk/2014/09/islamic-state-income-stream.html>
- [6] www.dw.de/who-finances-isis/a-17720149
- [7] www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/17/how-the-u-s-favored-kurds-abandoned-the-yazidis-when-isis-attacked.html