

In the Rubble of US Imperialism

the PKK, YPG and the Islamic State

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This article highlights how the US state created the conditions in the Middle East in which a right-wing reactionary force like the Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) could emerge. Along with this – and central to the article – it discusses how the US state is refusing to back the only two effective forces that are fighting the Islamic State: the Kurdish Workers’ Party and the People’s Protection Units. Indeed, this article is also written to express solidarity with the People’s Protection Units that are currently fighting a key battle against the Islamic State to hold onto the city of Kobani in Syria.

The mainstream news has been filled with stories about the horrors being committed by the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, and how the United States (US) ruling class and their state supposedly want to stop this for humanitarian reasons. What has not been widely covered in the corporate and state controlled media, however, is why the IS came to exist; the real reasons for the US state’s new round of intervention in the Middle East; and how the US state wants to isolate and likely destroy the only two forces that have been effective in fighting against the IS: the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG).

How the Islamic State arose

The IS’s rise from an obscure group to a force within the Middle East can be traced back to the US military’s invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. During the invasion the US military killed 1.4 million people and as an occupying force it brutalised the population. This naturally fuelled anti-US sentiments throughout the country.

In fact, the US occupation of Iraq was based on the tactics of divide and rule. To weaken the possibility of united resistance to its occupation, the US state supported autonomy for sections of the Kurdish people in northern Iraq under the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which is headed by a corrupt pro-US ruling class. It also promoted sectarian violence in Iraq to make it hard for people to unify against the occupation. This included backing a puppet regime – despite the fact it came to be led by hard-line Shia politicians that were close to the Iranian regime – that suppressed large sections of the Sunni population.

It is in this context that the IS (formerly known by various other names including Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) began to grow as a force under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Many people, especially from the Sunni population, joined the IS because it looked like the only organisation that was capable of defending Sunni people and resisting the US’s occupation and its puppet regime. Thus, the IS gained a support base despite being a brutal authoritarian organisation.

Indeed, the IS is an anti-imperialist and anti-US organisation, but from the basis of an extremely reactionary right-wing stance. It has long had the goal of establishing a totalitarian state under its dictatorship that incorporates large parts of the Middle East. To further its political aims and ambitions throughout its history it has committed atrocities, such as mass murder against opponents, including Muslims and even members of rival jihadist groups. To be sure, anyone identified as an opponent has been harshly dealt with especially those identified as waivers or non-believers in terms of its extremist ideology. Central to its policies too has been the entrench-

ment of the systemic oppression of women. Such misogynistic views have even translated into the IS using captured women as sex-slaves.

Initially, when the IS was starting to become a force in Iraq, the US state deliberately turned a blind eye to it, even though it had already committed atrocities, because it wanted Iraq's population to remain divided. By the time the US withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the IS already controlled some parts of the country.

Intervention in Syria adds fuel to the fire

Not content with destabilising Iraq, in 2011 the US state used the mass protests and ensuing civil war in Syria to try and destabilise and weaken the al-Assad regime. It was, however, not supporting these protests, and subsequently sections fighting the al-Assad regime in the civil war, because it wanted to support those people calling for democracy in Syria, but rather the US state was doing it for its own imperialist interests. It was clear the US felt that the Syrian regime was too close to the Russian and Iranian states. In fact, the US did not want to destabilise the Syrian regime because it was brutal – which it was and is – but because the ruling class that controlled it were not fully compliant (for their own reasons) with the agenda of US imperialism in the region.

When mass popular protests erupted against the Syrian regime in 2011, which were part of the spread of the Arab Spring and based on the real desire to end the al-Assad dictatorship in order to create a better society in Syria, the US state moved to turn events to its benefit. As such the mass protests in Syria were not fermented by the US state, but it used the circumstances to try and further its own agenda and that is why it rhetorically supported them.

When the al-Assad regime brutally repressed the protests, a civil war ensued. Various armed groups emerged during the civil war. Some were jihadist, others were more secular. Some sections of the military, headed by corrupt generals, also split from the regime and as the civil war emerged they were also key in setting up the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The US state soon began supplying arms to the FSA.

The US state, however, also armed the various Islamic extremist and jihadist groups (despite their anti-US positions) who had entered the fight against the Syrian regime. Soon many members of these extremist groups began joining the IS (which at first was loosely affiliated to al-Qaeda, but later broke with it around political and tactical differences). Some of the most important fighting forces that joined IS were experienced jihadist fighters from Chechnya who were supplied arms by the US when they joined the war in Syria. As an outcome of this in parts of Syria the IS became one of the most potent military forces – capturing massive amounts of weapons including T-55 and T-72 main battle tanks and Scud missiles from the other forces it had been engaging along with gaining supplies and equipment of US origin from other jihadists who joined it – and by 2013 it had taken over parts of Syria, notably the city of Raqqa.

In Syrian cities and areas it controls, like Raqqa, the IS established its harsh dictatorship. Anyone seen as being an opponent was dealt with, which included mass executions. But the IS's control is not only based on fear, it is also based on providing welfare. IS has effectively nationalised some industries, including the banking sector, while allowing other industries to remain in private hands. Central to its policies it has also imposed higher taxes on the rich. Using such funds it has rolled out greater welfare. Despite, therefore, being an ultra-rightwing force,

through such welfare measures it has gained support amongst sections of the population in the areas it has come to control in Syria.

In 2014 the IS used the platform they have in Syria to launch new military operations in Iraq. During this new phase of its war in Iraq it routed the Iraqi military in parts of the country: capturing large amounts of the latest US weaponry that had been supplied to the Iraqi army. When the IS seized gas and oil-fields in Iraq that were important for the US ruling class, along with starting to militarily threaten key US allies in the form of the KRG and Iraqi state, the IS became a problem for the US state.

Backing the KRG and the Iraqi state

To ensure the gas and oil-fields captured by the IS are returned to its sphere and to try and stop the IS's territorial advance in Iraq, the US state has been supplying intelligence and weapons to the KRG and the Iraqi state to fight the IS. It has also conducted airstrikes against the IS in Iraq and recently in areas such as Raqqa in Syria. The reality though is that the Iraqi military and the KRG have been ineffective against the IS. This has led the US state to deploy special forces to Iraq, supposedly in support of the KRG and Iraqi military, but in reality they have been engaging the IS directly too. Indeed, if the Iraqi state and KRG continue to prove ineffective against the IS going forward, the US may be forced to commit far greater numbers of its own combat troops to try and stop the IS.

Progressive forces

There are, however, progressive forces – the PKK and YPG – in Iraq and Syria that have proved effective, despite being ill armed, in combating the IS. The US state, nonetheless, is refusing to back the PKK and YPG against the IS: based ultimately on the progressive politics of these two groups.

The PKK has a long history of fighting a national liberation struggle against the US's ally, Turkey, and is considered a terrorist organisation by the US. During this war, the PKK cadre gained vital military experience.

Recently, the PKK has been fighting the IS to stop it expanding into the northern parts of Iraq and committing atrocities against people in these areas. The PKK moved into Iraq from Turkey in August to stop the mass murder of Kurdish refugees by the IS. They have continued to hold key positions in northern Iraq

Despite initially being influenced by Maoism, the PKK, and especially its founder Abdullah Ocalan, have come to be heavily influenced by some of the ideas – although not all – of the libertarian socialist Murray Bookchin. Bookchin himself started out his political life as a Stalinist, but moved to anarchism before adopting a form of libertarian socialism based on communalism and libertarian municipalism. Hence, while the PKK was founded as a Marx-Leninist guerrilla outfit, by the early 2000s it was adopting left-leaning libertarian ideas inspired by key writings of Bookchin.

As part of its move towards a form of left-libertarianism, the PKK has become critical of the state as a structure, which it sees as oppressive, based on hierarchy, and as being the ultimate defender of minority class rule and capitalism. The aim of PKK, and the goal of its struggles,

is for a revolution in the Middle East, which is why the US state deeply mistrusts it. As part of this revolution, and in line with its left libertarian orientation, it has explicitly stated that it does not aim to create a state, but rather a system of direct democracy that would be defined by people setting up assemblies, councils and communes that are confederated together. It has called this “democratic confederalism”. Although it is anti-state and sees the state as a key barrier to freedom and equality, and has a vision of a system of self-governance based on direct democracy, it however remains tactically ambiguous on whether the state should be explicitly smashed as part of such a revolution (as advocated by anarchists) or whether the state could simply be rolled back as part of an expanding direct democracy without necessarily smashing it.

Along with a libertarian form of self-governance, the PKK is anti-capitalist and aims to try and build an economy that is run with the aim of meeting people’s needs. Hence it aims to create a more egalitarian economy, but it has not stated whether such an economy would be based on worker self-management and the socialisation of the means of production and wealth. Thus, while heavily influenced by left-libertarian ideas and being a progressive movement (and having a very strong feminist current) it can’t be seen as fully anarchist.

The US state and ruling class, however, obviously do not take kindly to the progressive politics of the PKK because if a revolution based on the ideas of the PKK did take hold and spread in the Middle East, the US’s imperialist interests in the region would be completely undermined.

Influenced by some of the PKK’s ideas, but seemingly not all, people in northern Syria – in an area known as Rojava – began setting up councils and assemblies in 2011 in the aftermath of the uprisings against the Syrian regime. The assemblies and councils – sometimes referred to as communes – are confederated together with the Kurdish Supreme Committee acting as a co-ordinating body. While these structures are based on direct democracy, it is unclear whether the economy has been transformed in a more egalitarian direction. Indeed it is not clear whether or not the direct democracy in the political sphere has been extended to the economic sphere. Along with this, it is unclear – and not mentioned in reports – whether there has been any move to socialise or collectivise the means of production and wealth in Rojava (although there has reportedly been land redistribution). Nonetheless, the experiments with councils and assemblies in Rojava have been progressive (although also it seems under threat internally from the leadership of parties that wish to set up a state structure). What has also been progressive is that the liberation of women too has been at the forefront of initiatives in Rojava.

To defend the territory of Rojava a militia-based structure, the YPG, was established in 2011. Within the militia, women play a leading role. It has been the YPG that has been the most effective force in terms of engaging the IS in Syria. Indeed, the YPG militia have become experienced fighters within a short space of time as prior to defending the territory against the IS the YPG was engaged in defending it against elements of the FSA (although it now is in an alliance with the FSA against the IS), other jihadist groups and the Syrian state.

Throughout 2013 and early 2014, the YPG rolled back the IS and extended the territory of Rojava. In late September 2014, however, the IS launched another major offensive against the Rojava region. During the offensive the IS has unleashed as many as 40 main battle tanks against the YPG, who do not have significant numbers of heavy weapons. Currently the YPG is fighting a major battle against the IS to hold onto one of the key cities, Kobani, that is part of Rojava. With the recent US airstrikes against the IS in Rojava, the IS has also shifted more of its forces to Kobani.

For the US state, however, the YPG along with the PKK are seen as much of a threat as the IS. The reason is that, despite some limitations, they demonstrate that society could be organised by people in a more democratic way and they show how it could be possible to end capitalism, the state, patriarchy and class rule through mass movements and struggle. Hence the US state has refused to supply assistance to the YPG and PKK. As a matter of fact, the US state and Turkey have been allowing IS fighters to freely cross the border from Turkey to engage the PKK and the YPG. Along with this, the Turkish state has forcefully blocked people, mainly Kurds, wanting to cross from Turkey to join the fight against IS, especially now that Kobani is threatened. Along with this the US state now appears to be beginning to push the KRG to launch a war against the PKK and possibly even the YPG, despite the threat of the IS.

Conclusion

It is clear that the IS is a reactionary force that holds little hope for a better future for the Middle East. It wants to establish a dictatorship and is completely intolerant to anyone that differs from its politics. From the actions of the US state, however, it is also clear that it cares little about democracy or the atrocities committed by the IS. It too is not interested in a peaceful, free and equal Middle East and the only thing it offers is more misery for the working class of the region. In fact, for the working class in the Middle East it is only the politics and initiatives taking place through the PKK and YPG that offers any prospect – for the moment – for a better future. Perversely, this is also why the US state wants to destroy them.

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