

Left Behind? The British Left, the Kurds, and the Revolution in Syria

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A review of anarchist, socialist and Labour Party positions on the Syrian Civil War, and the Kurdish Revolution, with proposals for a Corbyn-led Labour Party

The British left, united on Palestine, its ranks closed over Iraq, its outrage voluminous over Bahrain, its despair legion over Libya, has broken apart over the issue of Syria. The language of fissure is betrayal and sell-out – leftist groups have variously betrayed the Syrian revolutionaries with their silence or sold out their anti-imperialist credentials with their cries for action. A particular aspect of leftist response can be isolated – the reaction to the experiment in Syrian Kurdistan, in Rojava and Kobane, where the seemingly impossible has happened – amongst the imperialist intervention, a self-proclaimed social revolution has broken out. This article will consider the anarcho-syndicalist, revolutionary socialist and Labour Party responses to the Syrian crisis generally, and the Kurdish revolution specifically, and propose an application of the ‘Corbyn Doctrine’ to this issue.

Homage to Rojava: the Revolution and the Anarcho-syndicalist Left

There are trade unionists fighting in Syria, under the banner of the International Brigades, formed into the ‘Bob Crow Brigade’¹ But Syria is not Spain. Whilst Spain also saw fragmentation of traditional binaries, with anarchists, Trotskyists and Stalinists fighting amongst themselves, as well as jointly resisting the onslaught of fascism; whilst Spain also saw atrocities on both sides, of cynical foreign power involvement (and non-involvement); it is here that the comparisons end. Then, if only in retrospect, it was very clear which side the British left was on - from the meeting halls of the Labour Party and the massed ranks of the Communist Party - the cry resounded ‘Rally for Spain’ and ‘No Pasaran!’. Syria is not Spain. There is no question, as Auden urged in 1937, of leftists in Britain dropping their political meetings en masse for the struggle. No odes have been

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¹ Tommy O’Riordan, ‘Bob Crow in Rojava’, *Jacobin*, February 27, 2017, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/rojava-ypg-bob-crowe-volunteers-left-politics/>.

written by left-wing poets about the Syrian rebels, and the ‘fight for Aleppo that they made’, or in argument that Homs is a new Jarama. But equally nor, in 1936, were there leftists in Britain arguing that Franco was the lesser of the two-evils, or urging for his critical support as an anti-imperialist. In short, it is less that Syria is not Spain, but more, perhaps that the British left of the 2010s, demoralised, fragmented, fighting for survival, is not the confident left of the 1930s that was but a crisis away from power.²

It fell to David Graeber, LSE Professor of Anthropology, and anarchist theorist of debt, to be the Orwell to Rojava’s Barcelona. He launched a visceral attack for ignoring the gains of the Kurdish revolution, the emancipation of women, the creation of autonomous zones, the self-governing of communities. This ‘libertarian municipalism’, espoused by the once-Leninist leadership of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan and practiced in Rojava and Kobane, ‘meets any definition of a social revolution.’³ Accounts of anarchists who have travelled to the Kurdish communities speak in similar terms, as published in the collection *To Dare Imagining*.

The response of the largest anarchist grouping in the UK, the Anarchist Federation, has been more cautious. Unable to fully accept Öcalan’s self-described conversion from state-led communism to libertarian socialism, the Federation instead compares the constitution of Rojava to Gaddafi’s *Green Book* – in that it is more formal than effectual. Nevertheless, anarchists are urged to give critical and material humanitarian support to defend the gains of the revolution, whilst also urging the Kurds to break free of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)’s strictures.⁴

Campists and Dialecticians – the Revolutionary Socialists

If the support from federated anarchism has been less than fulsome, the Kurdish revolution has also received a mixed response from the revolutionary socialist left. In general, the Syrian Civil War has split the revolutionary left into myriad incompatible strands. Most infamous among these is the ‘two-camps’ theory, which posits an imperial camp formed of the United States and the NATO alliance, and the anti-imperialist camp, an interpretation which sees Bashar al-Assad heading up one of the last anti-imperialist bulwarks in the Middle East, fraternally defended by Russia. The Communist Party of Britain has taken a typically campist approach, insisting that the Syrian Arab Army, hailed for its ‘secularism’ was welcomed back as a liberating force into Homs. ‘Russia’s involvement in the region,’ reported the party executive, ‘is certainly to the benefit of

² Note: this article was written before the June 2016 UK General Election

³ David Graeber, ‘Why is the world ignoring the revolutionary Kurds in Syria?’ *The Guardian*, October 8, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/08/why-world-ignoringrevolutionary-kurds-syria-isis>.

⁴ Anarchist Federation Statement on Syria, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://afed.org.uk/anarchistfederation-statement-on-rojava/>.

peace and security in the region.’⁵ However, within the framework of general support for the Assad regime, the Party has also issued calls for ‘solidarity’ with ‘Kurdish fighters in their struggle against sectarian reaction’,⁶ even if it is not a call for alliance with the social aims of the Kurdish revolution.

The Socialist Workers’ Party has applied a more dialectical approach to the Syrian situation, denouncing Assad as a tyrant representing Syria’s bourgeoisie, who has used sectarian war to crush ‘a genuine popular revolution’.⁷ In response to the Kurdish experiment, as with the Syrian revolution as a whole, support and solidarity is urged; but western intervention is fiercely opposed. The Kurdish groups in northern Syria are seen as being victims of imperialist machinations – being built up as a force to beat Islamic State, but not one so strong that it could threaten Turkey’s integrity. Western intervention could only betray the Kurds once more, handing them over variously to the Turkish or Iraqi states. The hope for breaking the stalemate in Syria is through multinational, grassroots revolution, rather than an escalation of the war from without.

The Stop the War coalition has attempted to develop and refine an approach that seeks to condemn the atrocities of all sides without offering any positions that could be seen as support for Western intervention. This has led to accusations that the Coalition is intentionally ignoring, even apologising for, Russian or Assadist war crimes. However, the Coalition exists to reduce the British state’s application of violence abroad – in partnership with, or as part of the same alliance as – that applied by the US, France or Israel. When, in October 2016, it looked like the fledgling May administration was taking soundings for a more aggressive British stance in Syria, it is no surprise that the Stop the War Coalition refused to take part by adding to the condemnations of Russia.

Labour at War with Itself

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, then-Labour leader Clement Attlee initially supported the Republic, and had a British battalion of the International Brigades named for him, even if later the Labour leadership would defy its members by going on to accept the disastrous ‘Non-Intervention’ policy. The Labour Party is currently going through a similar struggle between membership and party grandes, even if the leader is playing a different role this time. There are calls from within the party for a recommitment

⁵ Martin Levy, ‘Political Report to Executive Committee’, January 9, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www communist-party.org.uk/britain/75-political-report/2214-martin-levy-political-report-toexecutive-committee-9-january-2016.html>.

⁶ Communist Party statement, ‘No to Imperialist War, Solidarity with Fighters Against Sectarian Terror’, September 28, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www communistparty.org.uk/communications/press/2000-no-to-imperialist-war-solidarity-with-fighters-against-sectarianterror-say-britain-s-communists.html>.

⁷ Editorial, *Socialist Worker* December 8, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/41838/Syria%20who+lit+the+fire%3F>.

to the use of military force,⁸ but to do so under the rubric of Robin Cook's 'ethical foreign policy'.⁹ Whereas 75% of Labour Party members opposed British air strikes on the country in 2015,¹⁰ and 70% of Labour MPs opposed Cameron's war motion in the Commons, notable rebels included the Shadow Defence Secretary.

The Labour Party has a history of standing with the Kurds, however the pro-Kurdistan Democratic Party faction have been historically unable to separate a principled stand for Kurdish autonomy from the Iraq War policy which Labour's foreign policy will always be tainted with. The Kurdish question was instrumentalised by some within Labour to favour war on Iraq, and the maintenance of the occupation long after 2003.

There has been a clear intervention into this discussion in 2017 by the right-wing of the party. Alison McGovern MP, Chair of New Labour pressure group Progress, partnered with Conservative MP Tom Tugendhat to complete a report named for the murdered Parliamentarian Jo Cox. This report openly forms itself in opposition to 'unthinking pacifism' and the alleged British 'retreat' after Iraq.¹¹ It cites as precedent Britain's 'surprisingly frequent' foreign interventions, and includes an appendix which lists Britain's foreign wars since Napoleon, excluding what it labels 'colonial wars' from humanitarian ones. This distinction is not only tendentious, and subjective – the Boer War out, but the Iraq War in – but its finer points may have been lost on the victims. The report is entirely based on these separations – the colonial from the humanitarian, from 'bad' interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, to 'good' interventions in Kosovo and Sierra Leone. Libya, in true Maoist fashion, was good and bad at the same time. There is also the attempt to rescue the reputation of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars – the wars with Iran and the Soviet Union respectively are blamed for the failures of these occupations.

It also bases itself on a highly selective view of the world. Britain's involvement in Yemen, in arming, equipping and guiding the Saudi-led coalition, is not mentioned; the name 'Bahrain', where British intervention was decisively on the ruler's side, does not appear in the report at all. There is not a single reference to Palestine, where Britain diplomatically and economically intervenes on the side of the occupier. The populations of these countries alone may wonder if, to paraphrase Gandhi, Britain's retreat from the world 'might be a good idea.' But only in repackaging history in this way, with the British

⁸ Mark Leonard, 'One nation in the world: what is the left's story on foreign policy?' *Fabian Review*, February 3, 2014, accessed March 3, 2017 <http://www.fabians.org.uk/what-is-the-lefts-story-on-foreign-policy/>.

⁹ Jo Cox, 'Joe Cox on progressive internationalism', *Fabian Review*, June 17, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.fabians.org.uk/archive-jo-cox-on-progressive-internationalism/>.

¹⁰ 'Syria: 75% of Labour Members Against Airstrikes' *Sky News*, November 30, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://news.sky.com/story/syria-75-of-labour-members-against-airstrikes-10337708>.

¹¹ Alison McGovern and Tom Tugendhat, (eds.) *The Cost of Doing Nothing: The price of inaction in the face of mass atrocities*, Policy Exchange, 2017, accessed March 3, 2017, https://policyexchange.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2017/01/Intervention-01-17_v8.pdf.

invasion of Egypt in 1882 recast as a defence of ‘legitimate’ government, and a brutal 70- year occupation dismissed with the phrase ‘forces left behind to ensure security’ – only in this way can future interventions be sold as humanitarian ‘one-off’s rather than the long-term strategy for domination they suggest.

It would be naïve, however, to suggest that this is simply a battle over the record, and that a better representation of the facts would assist the anti-war elements of the Labour Party. Rather this is a dynamic of power. The ‘Jo Cox Report’ received effusive reviews in the *Guardian*, not because of its intellectual rigour, but because of its political utility. Power, after all, is the ability to set the agenda. The agenda becomes ‘what shall we do’, rather than ‘what have we done, what are we already doing’.

The Labour Party, despite Corbyn’s leadership, contains key elements of what journalist Peter Oborne labelled the cross-bench ‘war party’. ¹² After attempting to defeat the government’s policy towards Saudi Arabia and Yemen, hardly a ‘humanitarian war’ as defined in the Cox report, Corbyn was nevertheless faced with 100 MPs refusing to support his motion. The centre-ground, cross-party support for the government that resulted can be said to represent Britain’s foreign policy consensus, and it is this that Corbyn must aim to disrupt.

The Corbyn Doctrine and Kurdistan

Corbyn has a clear vision for foreign policy, a discernible doctrine based upon three central pillars: support for human rights, tackling poverty and inequality, and confronting climate change. He has clearly and repeatedly stated his support for Kurdish autonomy, ‘across the region’. ¹³ However he has refused to support bombing, even in furtherance of these goals, both for pragmatic and procedural reasons. Not only would increased violence risk escalating the conflict and potential big power reaction to the Kurdish territories, but any force that is utilised in conflict must be there, believes Corbyn, by consensus of the warring parties, for example to police a ceasefire, and under UN control. The International Brigades of a Corbyn Ministry would be wearing blue helmets and be there with the consent of the international community, performing a strictly peacekeeping role.

There are further policies that a Corbyn-led Labour Party could argue for:

- Insisting on the primacy of Kurdish rights, both in Syria and in Turkey itself, in negotiations with Turkish government on military co-operation and trade,

¹² Peter Oborne, ‘How Britain’s War Party gave the green light to Saudi in Yemen’ *Middle East Eye*, October 28, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/reign-british-neo-cons-and-party-war-128790447>.

¹³ Charles B Antony, ‘Exclusive: Jeremy Corbyn talks foreign policy with MEE’, *Middle East Eye*, September 16, 2015, accessed March 3, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-jeremy-corbyn-talks-middleeast-eye-foreign-policy-1965151732>

with the UK acting as Turkey's second largest market.

- The call for immediate ceasefire in Syria, with the social gains of the Kurdish revolution to be defended in a post-war settlement.
- With few groups in the world – with the exception of the Palestinians – having suffered as much from British policy in the Middle East over the last century, a recognition of British responsibility for the Kurdish people's lack of statehood, and the possibility of reparations, even if symbolic, being agreed for the furthering of the Kurdish people's welfare.
- To begin this process, practical support from the British government or even directly from the Labour Party - for example to re-build Kobane - would not only be a humanitarian policy, but also symbolically significant, and create ties between the British and Kurdish societies.
- Self-determination for the Kurdish people being a recognised British foreign policy aim.

These policies not only would redress a previous series of wrongs towards the Kurdish people and give one of the few genuinely inspiring left-liberation struggles in the region a chance of support, but it would also help reset Britain's relations with the Middle East; and help 'decolonise' British foreign policy. By coupling Kurdish rights with Turkish arms deals, by recognising the rights of Kurds to compensation for past British actions, by declaring self-determination as a foreign policy aim, linkages could be made to the struggles of the Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian people in the region. This is the positive vision that the left could argue for, both outside and within, the Labour Party.