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The Kurds in movement: issues, organization, mobilization

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In the early seventies, when I began taking a serious interest in the Kurds, the Kurdish movement for autonomy or independence was usually not counted among the 'progressive' liberation movements worthy of solidarity from the European left. Insofar as it was known at all, it was perceived to be a form of tribal resistance against modernizing regimes, led by feudal or tribal elites exploiting poor peasants and unwilling to give up their privileges, and not really a social movement. In the late 1950s, under the populist regime of Abdulkarim Qassem that supported such actions, landless Kurdish peasants in Iraq had briefly occupied the land of big Kurdish landlords. Once fighting had broken out between the Iraqi military and Kurdish partisans (1961), however, little was heard of intra-Kurdish class conflict anymore and some of the landlords became prominent Kurdish nationalists. The official Iraqi view of the emergence of Kurdish nationalism as a counter-revolutionary reaction appeared convincing. It is worth noting, however, that another well-known Kurdish landlord whose land had been invaded, in region controlled by the government and not by the Kurdish movement, managed to hold on to his land by joining the Iraqi Communist Party.

The IISH did not hold any materials on the Kurds in those days, nor could one find much in any other library or archive in Western Europe. There existed a small solidarity committee in Amsterdam, the International Society Kurdistan (ISK), that maintained a newspaper clipping archive and library and published a newsletter. There were even smaller (in fact, one-person) similar committees in Paris and Berlin, and there existed a Kurdish student union with a few dozen members spread over various countries in Eastern and Western Europe. None of these individuals and groups was part of the 'progressive' solidarity movements. When they had political contacts at all, these tended to be with conservative circles. The Kurds of Iraq made alliances that did not endear them with European progressives either. The most prominent leader of the Iraqi Kurds, Mulla Mustafa Barzani, had come to depend heavily on

the support of the Iranian Shah regime and was from 1972 on to receive covert CIA support in his struggle against the Arab 'socialist' Ba`th regime. In March 1975, however, the Shah and Saddam Hussein reached an agreement, after which support to the Kurds was suddenly terminated, the Iraqi army could destroy much of the Kurdish resistance, and some 50,000 Iraqi Kurds fled to Iran. Having become an international humanitarian catastrophe, the Kurdish question began drawing more sympathetic attention. This was reinforced when revelations about the covert CIA operation and the way the US left the Kurds unprotected once the Shah cut his profitable deal with Iraq were leaked to the press. Hundreds of educated Iraqi Kurds — only a small fraction of all refugees in Iran — were granted political asylum in Western European countries. They worked hard to build up a Kurdish lobby in Europe, establishing contacts with journalists and politicians, and attempting to organize the much larger numbers of Kurdish immigrant workers from Turkey.

The ISK archive, which has been acquired by the IISH, documents especially the developments prior to 1975 (though continuing up to 1982) and remains an important source for that period although one's first impression is likely to be one of surprise at how little was published on the Kurdish movement during that period and how shallow most of the reporting was. Once the Kurdish diaspora begins organizing itself, there is a sharp rise in the volume of writing on the Kurds, reflecting also the increasing sophistication and broadening mass base of the various political movements in Kurdistan itself. But this is where the ISK collection breaks off. Silvio van Rooy, ISK's founder and president, died in 1982 and had since 1975 been somewhat alienated from his previous Kurdish contacts.

It is true that the Kurdish movement in Iraq of the 1960s and early 1970s was strongly dominated by the traditional elites and tended to be socially conservative. But within the same movement there have also been anti-establishment currents, and this has been true of all Kurdish associations and parties throughout the twentieth century. Until the 1970s, there was only a thin educated stratum in Kurdish society, and virtually all of its members belonged to families of tribal chieftains and religious leaders. Kurdish nationalist, populist and socialist intellectuals all shared more or less the same background, were educated in state institutions that also trained Arab, Turkish or Persian elites, and were in many cases employed in the civil service or the army. Such men (only in the 1980s do women begin to play a significant part) were at least theoretically opposed to the tribal and feudal authority relations of traditional

Kurdish society but always faced the dilemma that they could not mobilize significant masses of people unless they had recourse to precisely these relations.

In 1923, soon after the Turkish Republic was established and it had become obvious that this new state was to be based on Turkish nationalism instead of the common Muslim identity that had united Turks and Kurds during the preceding years, radical Kurdish officers and intellectuals established a clandestine party with a nationalist program. They initiated preparations for an uprising that should lead to an independent state but soon found that nationalist propaganda in itself was incapable of mobilizing people. Therefore they sought the co-operation of a charismatic religious leader, Shaykh Sa`id, who in turn won over many tribal chieftains. By the time the uprising broke out (1925), several of the planners had already been arrested and it was the shaykh and the chieftains who were in control. The uprising resembled a traditional tribal rebellion, though much larger in scope, and the Turkish army could easily suppress it.

In the Iraqi Kurdish uprising of 1961-1975, nationalist and leftist intellectuals faced the same dilemma. Both the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) had a considerable following among urban intellectuals, and the latter party developed its ideology in the course of debates with the ICP on such issues as self-determination of the nation and class analysis. By the early 1960s, the KDP was of a distinctly leftist persuasion and intent on breaking the hold of the tribal and feudal chieftains over much of Kurdistan. However, in order to win the support of the predominantly tribal and peasant population, the KDP's leaders made the charismatic Mulla Mustafa Barzani the party's president, intending this to be a purely symbolic position. Barzani himself was of a different conception of his position, however, and once actual fighting was underway he and his tribal allies succeeded in gradually marginalizing the urban intellectuals. More surprising than the victory of tribal elements over the educated urban stratum in the course of armed confrontation with the central government, perhaps, is the fact that the Kurdish wing of the ICP, which did not take part in the Kurdish rebellion, always maintained more cordial relations with Barzani than with the ideologically closer KDP intellectuals.

In Iran, which has a larger Kurdish population than Iraq, the aftermath of the Second World War had seen the short-lived appearance of a semi-independent Kurdish government in the town and region of Mahabad, under a certain degree of protection from the Soviet army that remained in control of the part of Iran directly

to its north. The ground for nationalist activity had been prepared by a group of young anti-establishment intellectuals and their association Kurdish Renaissance (*Zhianewey Kurd*) but the Russians persuaded them to ally themselves with more conservative urban notables and tribal chieftains. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (the precursor of the party of the same name in Iraq) was the embodiment of this coalition, its leader was a scion of a highly respected family of religious authorities, Qazi Mohammad. By the end of 1946 the Soviet troops retreated and the Iranian army re-established control of Mahabad, the tribes declared their loyalty to Iran, Qazi Mohammad was hanged, and what remained of the KDP was forced underground. As a clandestine party, the KDP adopted a radical left ideology and was repeatedly involved in (unsuccessful) peasant rebellions against feudal landlords and the state. One wing of the KDP was hardly distinguishable from Iran's communist *Tudeh* ('Mass') party (its leaders had dual membership), another wing after 1968 increasingly looked towards European social democracy for inspiration. The party programme of 1973, adopted in exile, spoke of autonomy, parliamentary democracy, equal rights of landlords and peasants and redistribution of land, equal rights of men and women, with equal pay for equal work. At the time of the Iranian revolution (1978-79), the population of the Kurdish cities rose up like that in other parts of the country, adding demands of linguistic rights and self-government to the common call for the Shah to go. The KDP attempted to bring this spontaneous movement under control and to put its programme into practice, but it had to compete with numerous radical left groups that called for a social revolution besides autonomy (and that chose as their common spokesman a popular religious figure!). The *Tudeh* wing of the KDP, though in principle opposed to religion, followed the *Tudeh* line of accommodation with Khomeini until it was too late; the KDP mainstream steered a course between left radicalism and accommodation, ran a more or less efficient administration and fought a guerrilla when the new regime sent its army to Kurdistan. In 1983 the leadership of the KDP and of various left factions were forced across the Iraqi border, and they has since then played only a marginal role in the affairs of Iran's Kurdish provinces.

In Turkey, where approximately half of all Kurds lived, a modern Kurdish movement emerged in the mid-1960s under the dual influence of the Iraqi Kurdish movement and, significantly, the emerging Turkish left. The Labour Party of Turkey (TIP), the country's first Marxist party to contest the elections, discovered almost to its surprise that it received many votes in some of the Kurdish provinces, apparently due to some Alevi Kurdish members with strong tribal and sectarian backing. The TIP became the first

party to openly discuss the problems of what was euphemistically called 'the East', i.e. the Kurdish provinces. These were defined as problems of regional underdevelopment, partly caused by the inequalities inherent in capitalist development but, as the party recognized, compounded by decades of deliberate neglect and withholding of investment.

Kurdish students, intellectuals and workers living in Istanbul and Ankara held a series of 'cultural evenings' where the first Kurdish demands were publicly voiced. Speakers called for economic development and protested the oppressive and violent ways in which the Turkish military policed the Kurdish countryside. The other demand, that rapidly became louder, was for recognition that the Kurds (whose name was even taboo) constitute a distinct people, with their own language. At the party congress in 1970, the TIP adopted a resolution asserting the existence of the Kurdish people in eastern Turkey and calling for an end to economic discrimination and national oppression. The next year a military coup followed. The TIP was banned because of this resolution; numerous Kurdish activists, of various political persuasions were sentenced to long prison terms. When civilian rule was restored and new parties could be established, the legal Turkish left remained cautious and refrained from adopting outspoken positions on the Kurdish issue. Kurdish nationalists henceforth organize themselves in separate unions and associations. By the end of the 1970s, there were almost a dozen different Kurdish political associations and parties, most of them combining nationalism with some form of Marxism. All had their major support among the educated urban stratum (which was rapidly expanding in those years) and several were gaining a following among the rural population of the Kurdish provinces as well.

The major demand of the seventies shifted from recognition to national self-determination, and much of the debate between the various Kurdish formations (and with the Turkish left) concerned questions of how to analyze Kurdistan in Marxist terms. Is the dominant mode of production feudal or capitalist? Which is the revolutionary class in Kurdistan? Does a proletariat exist in Kurdistan, and who make up this class? How to define the relationship between the Kurdish people and the Turkish state? Most of the Kurdish groups came to define Kurdistan as an internal colony of the Turkish, Arab and Persian bourgeois states. The national struggle was at the same time declared a class struggle, for it opposed the Kurdish radicals also to Kurdish 'collaborators', who were claimed to belong to the 'feudal' or bourgeois stratum. A major dividing line separated pro-Soviet from Maoist groups, and

among the latter further splits developed over China's shifting policies and the thought of Enver Hoxha. Several groups began arming themselves and became involved in the increasing political violence of those days.

The most radical of these various Kurdish movements was the PKK, which emerged in 1974 from a major Turkish left student movement (and whose founders included several non-Kurds). The PKK proclaimed as its aim the liberation of all parts of Kurdistan from colonial oppression and the establishment of an independent, united, socialist Kurdish state. It initially sought to recruit a following mainly among the poorer (and relatively uneducated) sections of society; and it became indeed the only Kurdish party that was not dominated by members of leading tribal families. (Abdullah Öcalan, the party chairman, prided himself on his humble origins, being born in a non-tribal poor peasant family.) Calling for an anti-colonial struggle, it directed its violence against 'collaborators' – notables and chieftains with a stake in the existing political system – and against rival organizations. Later, in the 1980s, it briefly also targeted schoolteachers and told young people to drop out of school in order to be free from ideological indoctrination.

Another military coup, in 1980, ushered in an era of severe repression, leading to the virtual elimination of most Kurdish and left organizations, whose leaders were killed, jailed or forced into exile. The PKK was the only organization that managed to survive and even grow in these circumstances. Establishing an extensive cross-border network — with guerrilla training by Palestinian and Syrian instructors and base camps in the mountains of northern Iraq and western Iran — it initiated an offensive guerrilla in 1984 with a series of attacks on military and police installations. While continuing to treat Kurdish 'collaborators' with excessive violence, it gradually won the grudging admiration of growing sections of the Kurdish population at large due to its daring challenging of the feared Turkish army. By the early 1990s, it had set up its own parallel administration in certain rural regions and urban neighbourhoods and endorsed a range of civil society initiatives by persons previously affiliated with other political currents. The PKK meanwhile indicated that it no longer strove for full independence and wished for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. After some promising indirect contacts under President Özal, the Turkish military adopted a radically different approach following the latter's sudden death. A 'dirty war', with death squads that killed several thousand community leaders and human rights activists, and with massive village evacuations upsetting the lives of hundreds of

thousands, succeeded in isolating the PKK from the civilian population and reducing it to guerrilla bands moving from one hideout in the mountains to another. By the end of the decade, increased international pressure on Syria resulted in Öcalan's expulsion from Syria and his ultimate capture and surrender to Turkey.

The events of the 1980s — the war between Iraq and Iran, and the coup and guerrilla war in Turkey — resulted in a dense stream of Kurdish refugees to Europe and the politicization of the second-generation labour migrants who were already there. By the mid-1980s, there was a fully mobilized Kurdish diaspora, which became increasingly involved and influential in the politics of the homeland. It also made the Kurds an indelible part of the European political landscape — as is, among other things, documented in the IISH's collection of Kurdish books, periodicals and memorabilia.