

How the Pro-War “Left” Fell for the Kurds in Syria

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The October decision by U.S. President Donald Trump to withdraw American troops from northeastern Syria did not only precipitate the Turkish offensive, codenamed ‘Operation Peace Spring’, into Kurdish-held territory which followed. It also sparked an outcry of hysteria from much of the so-called “left” that has been deeply divided during the 8-year long conflict over its Kurdish question.

Despite the fact that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were objectively a U.S. proxy army before they were “abandoned” by Washington to face an assault by its NATO ally, the ostensibly “progressive” politics of the mostly-Kurdish militants duped many self-identified people on the left into supporting them as the best option between terrorists and a “regime.” Apparently, everyone on earth except for the Kurds and their ‘humanitarian interventionist’ supporters saw this “betrayal” coming, which speaks to the essential naiveté of such amateurish politics. However, there is a historical basis to this political tendency that should be interrogated if a lesson is to be learned by those misguided by it.

Turkey initially went all-in with the West, Israel, and Gulf states in a joint effort to depose Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by stoking the flames of the country’s Arab Spring in 2011 into a full blown uprising. With Istanbul serving as the base for the opposition, Kurdish nationalists hoping to participate were not at all pleased that the alliance had based its government-in-exile in Turkey and naturally considered Ankara’s role to be detrimental to their own interests in establishing an autonomous ethnonationalist state. Likewise, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not bargain on the conflict facilitating such a scenario, with the forty year war with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey still ongoing. When the PKK-linked People’s Protection Units (YPG) militias took control of northern Syrian towns and established a self-governing territory after boycotting the opposition, it was done only after negotiations between Damascus and Kurdish leaders. The Syrian government willingly and peacefully ceded the territory to them, just as we were told that the Baathists were among their oppressors.

The Rojava front opened up when the Kurds came under attack from the most radical jihadist militants in the opposition, some of which would later merge with the Islamist insurgency in western Iraq to form ISIS. Yet we now know for a fact that the rise of Islamic State was something actually *desired* by the U.S.-led coalition in the hopes of bringing down Assad, as revealed in a declassified 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency [report](#). Shortly after clarifying that the opposition is “backed by the West, Gulf countries and Turkey”, the memo states:

“If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to

isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”

Meanwhile, it was the Kurds themselves who divulged Ankara’s support for Daesh, frequently retrieving Turkish-issued passports from captured ISIS fighters. Even Emmanuel Macron [said as much](#) at the recent NATO summit in London, prompting a row between France and Turkey that took a backseat to the more ‘newsworthy’ Trump tantrum over a hot mic exchange between the French President and his Canadian and British counterparts. Then there was the disclosure that the late Senator John McCain had crossed the border from Turkey into Syria in mid-2013 to meet with leaders of the short-lived Free Syrian Army (FSA), dubbed as “moderate rebels”, which just a short time later would decline after its members joined better armed, more radical groups and the ISIS caliphate was proclaimed. One of the rebel leaders pictured with McCain in his visit is widely suspected to be the eventual chosen leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was allegedly killed in a U.S. raid in Idlib this October. Ironically, many of the Turkish-backed FSA militias are now assisting Ankara in its assault on the Kurds while those who supported arming them feign outrage over the US troop removal.

Henry Kissinger reportedly once remarked, *“America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests.”*

Given that the U.S. was at the very least still using Daesh as a strategic asset, it seems inexplicable that the Kurdish leadership could trust Washington. The SDF had only a few skirmishes with the Syrian army during the entire war— if they wanted to defeat ISIS, why not partner with Damascus and Moscow? To say nothing of the U.S.’s long history of backing their oppression, from its support of Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s to the arming of Turkey’s brutal crackdown against the PKK which ended with the capture of its cultish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999. Did they really think after enlisting them for its cosmetic ‘fight’ against ISIS that the U.S. would continue to side with them against Ankara? Even so, Kurdish gains against Daesh would pale in comparison to those by the Syrian army with Russian air support. More perplexing is why anyone on the left would choose to back a group being used as a cat’s paw for imperialism, regardless of whatever ideals they claim to hold.

Perhaps the U.S. would not have reneged on its implicit pledge to help with the foundation of a Kurdish state had their “Assad must go” policy been successful, but the U.S. pullout appears to be the final nail in the coffin for both Washington’s regime change plans in Syria and an independent Kurdistan.

The YPG’s makeover as the SDF was done [at the behest of the U.S.](#) but this did nothing to diminish the objections of Ankara (or many ‘leftists’ from supporting them), who insisted the YPG was already an extension and rebranding of the PKK, a group Washington itself designates as a terrorist organization. Any effort to create a buffer state in the enclave was never going to be tolerated by Turkey but it nonetheless enabled the U.S. to illegally occupy northern Syria and facilitate the ongoing looting of its oil. Unfortunately for Washington, the consequence was that it eventually pushed Ankara closer toward the Kremlin, as Turkey went from shooting down Russian jets one year to purchasing the S-400 weapon system from Moscow the next. After backing a botched coup d’etat attempt against Erdoğan in 2016, any hope of Washington bringing Turkey back into its fold would be to discard the Kurds as soon as their usefulness ran out, if it wasn’t too late to repair the damage already.

Why would the U.S. risk losing its geo-strategic alliance with Turkey? To put it simply, it's 'special relationship' with Israel took greater precedent. Any way you slice it, Washington's foray into the region has been as much about Zionism as imperialism and its backing of the Kurds is no exception. Despite the blowback, the invasion of Iraq and destruction of Libya took two enormous sources of support for the Palestinian resistance off the chessboard. It may have strengthened Iran in the process, but that is all the more reason for the U.S. to sell a regime change attempt in Tehran in the future. Regrettably for Washington, when it tried to do the same in Syria, Russia intervened and emerged as the new peace broker in the Middle East. It comes as no surprise that following the Turkish invasion of northern Syria amid the U.S. withdrawal, the Kurds have finally struck a deal with Damascus and Moscow, a welcome and inevitable development that should have occurred years ago.

One of the main reasons for the Kurds joining the SDF so willingly has the same explanation as to why Washington was prepared to put its relationship with Ankara in jeopardy by supporting them: Israel. The cozy relationship between the Zionist state and the various Kurdish groups centered at the intersection of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria goes back as far as the 1960s, as Jerusalem has consistently used them to undermine its enemies. It is not by chance that their respective interests overlap to a near tee, between the founding of a Kurdish protectorate and the Zionist plan for a 'Greater Israel' in the Middle East which includes a balkanization of Syria. Mossad has openly provided the Kurds with [training](#) and they have learned much in the ways of the ethnic cleansing of Arabs from the Jewish state in order to carve out a Syrian Kurdistan. One can certainly have sympathy for the Kurds as the largest ethnic group in the world at 40 million people without a state, but the Israel connection runs much deeper than geopolitical interests to the very ideological basis of their militancy which calls all of their stated ideals into question.

The ties between the YPG and the PKK are undeniable, as both groups follow jailed leader Abdullah Öcalan's teachings which merge Kurdish nationalism with the theories of 'democratic confederalism' from the influential Jewish-American anarchist philosopher, Murray Bookchin. While the PKK may have been initially founded as a 'Marxist-Leninist' organization in the early 70s, a widespread misconception is that it still follows that aim when its ideology long-ago shifted to that of a self-professed and contradictory 'libertarian socialism' theorized by Bookchin who was actually a zealous anti-communist. Not coincidentally, the Western anarchist icon was also an [avowed Zionist](#) who often defended Israel's war crimes and genocide of Palestinians while demonizing its Arab state opponents as the aggressors, including Syria. Scratch an anarchist and a neo-conservative will bleed, every time.

Many on the pseudo-left who have pledged solidarity with the Kurds have attempted to base their reasoning on a historically inaccurate analogy comparing the Syrian conflict with the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. You would think ISIS would be the obvious first choice for the fascists in the Syrian war, but journalist Robert Mackey of popular "progressive" news site *The Intercept* even tried to cast the Syrian government as Francisco Franco's Nationalists in an [article](#) comparing the 1937 bombing of Guernica by the Condor Legion to the 2018 chemical attack in Douma which remains in dispute regarding its perpetrator. One wonders if Mackey will retract his absurd comparison now that dozens of inspectors from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) [have dissented](#) in emails published by WikiLeaks showing that the OPCW engaged in a cover-up with the Trump administration to pin blame for the attacks on the Syrian government instead of the opposition, but don't hold your breath.

In this retelling of the Spanish Civil War, the Kurds are generally seen in the role of the Trotskyite Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) and the anarchist trade union National Confederation of Labour (CNT). In the midst of the conflict between the Nazi-supported Nationalists and Soviet-backed Republicans that was a prelude to World War II, the mobilization effort of all anti-fascist forces into a unified Popular Front was obstructed by the ultra-left and intransigent POUM and CNT who were then expelled from the coalition for their sectarianism. While the government was still fighting the Francoists, the POUM and CNT then attacked the Republicans but were put down in a failed insurrection. Although this revolt did not directly cause the loyalist defeat, it nevertheless sapped the strength from the Popular Front and smoothed the path for the generalissimo's victory.

In the years since, Trotskyists have attempted to rewrite history by alleging that a primary historical text documenting the POUM's sabotage of the Republicans—a 1938 pamphlet by journalist Georges Soria, the Spanish correspondent for the French Communist Party newspaper *L'Humanite*—is a forgery. On the Marxists Internet Archive website, an 'editor's note' is provided as a preface to [the text](#) citing a single quote from Soria with the claim he admitted the work in its entirety was "*no more than a fabrication*", but his words are selectively cropped to give that impression. While the author did admit accusations that the POUM's leadership were literal agents of Franco were a sensationalized exaggeration, the [source of the full quote](#) states the following:

"On the one hand, the charge that the leaders of POUM, among them Andrés Nin, 'were agents of the Gestapo and Franco', was no more than a fabrication because it was impossible to adduce the slightest evidence. On the other hand, although the leaders of POUM were neither agents of Franco or agents of the Gestapo, it is true that their relentless struggle against the Popular Front played the game *nolens volens* (like it or not/willingly or unwillingly) of the Caudillo (General Franco)."

In other words, Soria did not say the whole work was counterfeit like the editor's note misleadingly suggests and reiterated that the POUM's subversion helped Franco. (The Marxists Internet Archive does not hide its pro-Trotsky bias in its [FAQ section](#).) Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm summarized the inherent contradictions of the Spanish Civil War and the role ultra-leftism played in the demise of the Republic in one of his [later essays](#):

"Of course, the posthumous polemics about the Spanish war are legitimate, and indeed essential — but only if we separate out debate on real issues from the *parti pris* of political sectarianism, cold-war propaganda and pure ignorance of a forgotten past. The major question at issue in the Spanish civil war was, and remains, how social revolution and war were related on the republican side. The Spanish civil war was, or began as, both. It was a war born of the resistance of a legitimate government, with the help of a popular mobilisation, against a partially successful military coup; and, in important parts of Spain, the spontaneous transformation of the mobilisation into a social revolution. A serious war conducted by a government requires structure, discipline and a degree of centralisation. What characterises social revolutions like that of 1936 is local initiative, spontaneity, independence of, or even resistance to, higher authority — this was especially so given the unique strength of anarchism in Spain."

Murray Bookchin also [wrote at length](#) about the Spanish Civil War but celebrated the decentralized anarchist tactics which incapacitated the Popular Front. The anarcho-syndicalist theorist championed the 'civil war within the civil war' as a successful example of

his antithetical vision of 'libertarian socialism', while his emphasis on the individualist aspects of the former half of his oxymoronic and anti-statist theory often bears a striking resemblance to neoliberal talking points about self-regulating free markets. This would explain why he actually regarded right-wing libertarians to be his natural allies over the the socialist left, whom he considered 'totalitarian' as he told the libertarian publication Reason magazine [in an interview](#) in 1979. His reactionary demonization of the Soviet Union and dismissal of the accomplishments of all other socialist revolutions was [recalled](#) by Michael Parenti in *Blackshirts and Reds*:

"Left anticommunists remained studiously unimpressed by the dramatic gains won by masses of previously impoverished people under communism. Some were even scornful of such accomplishments. I recall how in Burlington Vermont, in 1971, the noted anticommunist anarchist, Murray Bookchin, derisively referred to my concern for "the poor little children who got fed under communism" (his words)."

Like the International Brigades consisting of foreign volunteers to assist the Spanish Republic in the 1930s, there is an 'International Freedom Battalion' currently fighting with the Kurds in Syria. Unfortunately, its live-action role playing 'leftist' mercenaries missed the part about the original International Brigades having been backed by the Comintern, not the U.S. military. Meanwhile, Western media usually hostile to any semblance of radical politics have heavily promoted the Rojava federation as a feminist 'direct democracy' utopia, particularly giving excessive attention to the all-female Women's Protection Units (YPJ) militia while ignoring the female regiments fighting for the secular Syrian government. As a result of the media's exoticized portrayal of the Kurds and their endorsement by prominent misleaders on the left, from Slavoj Žižek to Noam Chomsky, many have been fooled into supporting them.

If the Spanish Civil War was a dress rehearsal for WWII, it remains to be seen if Syria proves to be a run-through for another global conflict. Then again, what has emerged from its climax is an increasingly multipolar world with the resurgence of Moscow as a deterrent to the mutually assured destruction between the U.S. and China.

Leftists today wishing to continue the legacy of those who fought for the Spanish Republic should have thrown their support behind the Syrian patriots bravely defending their country from terrorism *and* imperialism, not left opportunism.

Thankfully, this time the good guys have prevailed while the Kurds have paid the price for betraying their fellow countrymen. Liberals shedding crocodile tears about Rojava should take comfort in the fact that they can always play the latest *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* video game [featuring the YPG](#) fighting alongside the U.S. military if they need to fulfill their imperial fantasies. Yes, that's right, the latest installment of the popular first-person shooter franchise features a storyline inspired by the SDF. It's too bad for them that in real life all of Syria will be returned to where it rightfully belongs under the Syrian Arab Republic.

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