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Does Anarchist Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan, Bashur, exist?

Zaher Baher

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I was frequently asked this question in the meetings or interviews. I have always been frank and honest in my reply. I said there are not even an active anarchist group existing there let alone an anarchist movement. I would then be asked the second question 'why'?

While there have been authority/state committed brutal suppression and repressions, also there was anarchism as a natural rebellious force of human being, so it is illogical to say there was no individual anarchists or no groups existed. There is no doubt that there was always resistance against the state/authority. People considered authority/power as evil forces. People have never seen any common interests with the states/authorities or any benefit from them. In addition, in the history of Iraq and the Middle East under Abbasid Caliphate or before, there were a few rebellion movements: Zoroastrianism, Mazdeism, Babakism and revolutionary movements like Zanj revolts, Kharijites, Karmatians and many more. Although this

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movement did not label themselves anarchist or communist but in view of many people they were a kind of communitarian, anarchist movements.

If we look into the history of Iraqi Kurdistan, Bashur, after the First World War we can see many reasons of the lack for anarchism and anarchist movement. In my opinion the main factors are the following:

- Bashur was a part of Iraqi state, being dependent on the Soviet Union. The Iraqi regime since 1958 until 2003 was in Soviet bloc with the exception for a few years during 1960s.

Only the books, magazines and writings about Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, the entire communist and leftists' movements in the world and religions were available in Arabic. All those books and writings were published either in Damascus, Beirut or in Moscow. The Syrian Communist Party under its leader Khalid Bakdash has played a big role in translating some of the books and publishing them. In addition, the Syrian's regime was also in the Soviet Union bloc at least since Hafez Assad come to power.

In regards to the anarchism and anarchist movements in the world, they were described and introduced to us in a much distorted way. All publications about anarchism were written or translated to Arabic by the leftist communists and Russian agents, so they presented anarchism as anti-revolutionary and anti-humanist. They were the only available source showing anarchism as the opposite of what it really is. Anarchism was presented in a repulsive way, showing only it's anti-state and anti-authoritarian aspect. We were told anarchists are rejecting power/state and leave the society in absolute chaos and disorder. No administration, no law and order, no protection – as a result of that the society would be in danger. These publications explained and described anarchism in the view of Bolsheviks and communists; they wanted to make the idea unpleasant and uninviting.

top to get advice and order. This also applied to members of political parties, they had to listen to the leaders and carry out whatever they were told to do. Individuals are not independent, as they are supposed to be; they are not confident, they do not have enough trust and faith in themselves. This means everybody, every social group is restricted in thinking and making decisions. They have to obey and be loyal to their superiors and they lose their freedom of individual expression.

This is the cultural climate of Iraqi Kurdistan– Bashur, climate of many powerful tribes, many strong political parties, powerful religious faith and often “honour killings” of women. In such atmosphere individuals do not think, make decisions and sort their own problems out. They rather let others think for them, decide for them and resolve their problems whether they like it or not.

In a climate like this, while the individuals are not free, their thought and mind have been corrupted as well. Therefore, it is difficult for a new idea or thought to arrive, even harder to develop it any further.

While they rejected anarchism and attacked it, there was not a single anarchist book or magazine available, not even an article in order for the people to read them before reading the hateful propaganda against anarchism. “The Poverty of Philosophy” by Karl Marx was available, but not the original Proudhon’s work, “Philosophy of Poverty” which Marx criticized. Many writings and propaganda against anarchism existed this way – without access to the ideas they fought.

In such environment, there was no possibility to learn about anarchism or anarchist movement. Consequently people were deprived from the basic knowledge of anarchism.

- There were many political parties and people were very loyal to them

Towards the end of 1930s, Iraq and Kurdistan became the fertilized land that brought about many political parties: nationalist, patriotic, religious, liberal and communist. There was a fierce competition among them, struggling for power. They were using deception, propaganda and manipulation to bring people under their influence. Their best members and supporters were absolutely loyal to their parties and their leaders. The dependence of party members on their leaders was absolute. They were ideological fundamentalists. Killing political adversaries – members or supporters of an opposing party – was a legitimate method of ideological dispute. The war all fought against one another, during 1960s, 1980s and 1990s that we have seen is the best example. The loyalty of the party’s members became so serious, they never thought for a second of the integrity of the party polices and its leaders.

In an atmosphere like that, it is hard for new belief and thought to develop. The vast majority of people were divided over the political parties and became very tiny cogs in a very big machine of the political parties, so the parties could manipulate and to use them according to their need. They advised them to vote or not vote, to do this, not to do that, to fight one side, to be in peace with other side. In this situation

the members and supporters of them become slaves of the party, they were unable to think, to analyze the situation nor to decide on their own.

Anarchism is founded on the individual's right to free thinking and to make one's own decisions, continuous in development and change. Blind loyalty to the power, hierarchy and state makes anarchism impossible to emerge.

- Wars, killing and displacing people in Iraq and Kurdistan

Iraq and Kurdistan have not seen peace for over half of century. Iraq has gone through three major wars between 1980 and 2003: Iraq-Iran war, The Gulf War of 1991 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. All these wars have intensely affected Kurdistan and its people directly or indirectly. This is in addition to the civil war, between Kurdish movement and Iraqi government that launched on 11/09/1961. This war went on and off until March 1991 when the uprising happened in Kurdistan. And from October 1992 to 1997/98 there was fighting among the fraction of Kurdish political parties themselves.

This war brought disaster to Kurdish people from both sides: the Kurdish movement and the central government of Iraq. It killed many innocent people, displaced thousands, maimed many more, destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages. The campaign of Anfal launched by Saddam Hussein between 22/02/1988 to 06/09/1988 resulted in the disappearance over 182,000 Kurdish people and over 5,000 people killed by chemical weapons.

Kurdish people in Iraq experienced the most horrible disasters of war. The suffering and trauma stay in the memory of mine and my father's generation and cannot be forgotten.

Those of us who grew up in times of wars know how terrible the situation was. The only winners in the wars are the warlords, war traders, the big companies that make weapons and the other equipments of war and most of the time the states too. The outcome of wars to the rest of us is poverty, high prices of the daily necessity, unemployment, homelessness, and dis-

placement, separation, forcing to move out of our lands, and becoming refugees in foreign lands. War can bring more disasters. Where there is war, there is everything except peace, unity and happiness. No doubt in the situation like that, we can only have time to think about our security, safety and running after our daily needs. This is not the moment to develop new ideas, like anarchism; in fact, hard times create more feeling of nationalism, racism and more hatred among people.

In a place where there is war, anarchism is hard to emerge – let alone to gain shape as movement. In a place where there is war, there will be growing number of state lackeys, traitors, betraying its own people. The war also quells dialog between people and restricts their freedom. Because of that not only does anarchism not develop, in fact if there is any anarchists, the war drives them to underground.

- Kurdish society and its cultural dependence

Kurdish society in Iraq is rooted in a tradition, being a mixture of the religious and tribal hierarchy. These two elements are the base of the society and its culture. It reflects and preserves the economic structure.

We can see it in every cell of the society. Starting from the family, through nursery, school, university, company, factory, other places of work, administrations, the civil service, and the military to the very top of the society which is parliament and the leaders – all of it is based on hierarchy. In hierarchical organizations or hierarchical society, dependency is very strong. This dependency shapes the thought and mind of everyone. It is very difficult to break centralist approach, created by ever-present hierarchy. Reorganizing the society in horizontal way again is difficult; it needs educational, social, cultural and economic revolution.

In the hierarchical society with the help of its culture, culture of dependency, youngsters have to respect and obey the elders; the workers have to listen to the bosses, students to their teachers. In short the people in the bottom have to look to the