

Interview with the Kurdistan Anarchist Forum (KAF)

Bridget

March 28, 2012

There is no such thing as “Kurdish Anarchism”, no more than there is such a thing as Russian, Spanish or French Anarchism. However, what there can be is a free association of Anarchists people originating from the same region, like Kurdistan, and seeking to militate for their ideals among the population they originate from. That is what KAF is: a Federation of Anarchists who happen to be Kurds and militate for Anarchism among Kurds as well as humankind as a whole.

What does it mean to be a “Kurdish anarchist”? Are there any characteristics that you would say are different to the “classical” European anarchist approaches of the 19th century?

KAF: As far as we are aware, there is no such expression that can be taken as meaningful, if such an expression has ever been used, it would be by people who don’t understand Anarchism, or by enemies of Anarchism and its ideals. Anarchism is an internationalist ideal and creed that is incompatible with notions of national and regional identity or statehood. Any statement made using such an expression would certainly not have been made by Anarchists themselves. The soul and essence of Anarchism is the struggle against all forms of illegitimate authority, power, and control. Foremost amongst these are State authority and nationalism – Anarchism’s sworn enemies. Wherever these essential points are contradicted, then we cannot speak of Anarchists or Anarchism. There can therefore never be such a thing as a “Kurdish Anarchist” in so far as there is no such thing as “Kurdish Anarchism”, no more than there is such a thing as Russian, Spanish or French Anarchism. However, what there can be is a free association of Anarchists people originating from the same region, like Kurdistan, and seeking to militate for their ideals among the population they originate from. That is what KAF is: a Federation of Anarchists who happen to be Kurds and militate for Anarchism among Kurds as well as humankind as a whole.

It may be possible to achieve Anarchist aims through different plans, ways or tactics, based on different circumstances and situations, but the goals of Anarchism have always been the same and will always remain the same. It is from this point of view that we see the classical Anarchists of 19th century Europe. They struggled for the same aims as today’s Anarchist groups. Therefore, we believe that the same principles as above apply to them as well. Of course, they all had different opinions and methods for reaching these common aims. No doubt their different opinion and

views on Anarchism re-shaped their organisation and their methods of struggle. (Please see our response to your 2nd question for more on this subject).

If by “Kurdish Anarchist” you refer to natural and universal Anarchist ideas and practices that may exist in that part of the world that is called “Kurdistan”, as they indeed exist in all parts of the world, then of course, in Kurdistan, such ideas and practices have existed in one or another form, such as the desire for freedom and the struggle for social justice. But if you seek records or evidence for explicitly or implicitly anarchist struggles or movements, regrettably there are none at present, because such a record, in order to be compiled, requires much work and analysis which is yet to have been done.

If by “Kurdish Anarchist” you really mean a political movement that is fighting to resolve social problems outside of the framework of the political parties vying for state power, again this does not yet exist in Kurdistan. If such a group has ever, in fact existed, it would have inevitably been exploited or contained by statist leftist groups, because of the lack of popular understanding of Anarchism.

That being said, we can see the basic spirit and practices of Anarchism shining through in the Kurdish uprising of March 1991 and in the following period between 1992 and 1995, when different self-organised and more or less direct-democratic popular groups formed, and formulated demands separately and autonomously from the statist political groups and parties. However, because of the lack of experience and the lack of understanding of Anarchist ideas, these groups did not last very long or were co-opted by other political groups.

The anarchist scene is pretty heterogenic. Is there a kind of approach of anarchism that you are particularly inspired from? If yes, which one and why?

KAF: Without a doubt the different elements of the Anarchist movement today, much as the entire leftist movement, are not entirely united, nor are they isolated from each other. Thus Anarchists have organised themselves into different groups and under different names. We do not need to name any of these organisations or groups as you are surely familiar with them.

We believe all these groups are, at base, united in their principles at 3 levels: 1) all of them stand against the authorities or powers whether this power is at the top of society like the State, or whether it be the power of patriarchy or matriarchy within the family at the bottom; 2) all the anarchist/libertarian-left groups reject strategies that purportedly seek to achieve social justice and liberation through the state by seizing power within the state, such as advocated by the old and current Bolshevik and leftist parties, whether this be through reformist or forceful means, such as: parliamentary elections, coups d’Etat, or any sort of “revolution” that seeks to change society from the top down through the power of the state, and not from the bottom-up through the direct democratic power of the people; 3) all these groups believe in a classless society free from all forms of exploitation and prejudice. We believe that all the Anarchist groups agree with the ultimate aim of creating a society that is not and cannot be dominated by any individual, any specific or exclusive group of people, or any specific political party or coalition of parties. In short, Anarchists believe in a society in which individuals enjoys total freedom (limited only by the dignity and freedoms of others), a society that values human beings and that upholds and maintains the highest values of humanity.

Of course different Anarchist groups have had different views of how to achieve the above common aims, and have advocated or employed different forms for struggle, but we are not here to make judgements about who is right or who is wrong among them.

Now, to answer your question: we have been inspired by our own activities as individuals and as members of the various movements we have been part of in the past. We have also taken inspiration and lessons from the entire leftist movement. It is not just the individuals inside and outside these different organisations who failed to achieve what they had sought to achieve; it is also all the organisations of the left – whatever they may have called themselves, and whatever it is that they claimed – that have failed to achieve a single step towards a truly socialist or communist society. This experience has repeated itself in almost every country in the world where such movements have operated. We have witnessed and noted these failures, and so it appeared necessary for us to think of a different method of struggle, of a different set of ideas, by analysing the negative points, the methodological failings, and the structural failings of these organisations, whether they achieved power in any way or not.

All these experiences showed us the faults of the organisations that wanted to make a change in society. The statist and party based solution has provided nothing but surface changes – groups, parties and organisation transferring power but ending up working hand in hand for their own class interests – while the problems of social justice, the class issue, the class struggle, the national question, and issues of prejudice on the basis of race, religion, creed, and gender, have not only lingered on but even worsened. In addition, needless to say that not a single new statist movement, power, government, or State that has come about in the past, whether from the right or the left, has ever done anything else but protect the private ownership and control of the means of production by an exclusive elite. No statist or state power that will come in the future can be expected to ever do anything else either. Consequently, unemployment levels, wars, starvation, and homelessness have only increased. Such dire social conditions have also pushed a huge number of children & adults of both genders into prostitution, and forced children into child labour.

We have avoided, and we will avoid copying the failed forms of struggle of other leftist and Anarchist groups, we don't feel the need to look up to any of these organisations as an orthodox model. In the meantime we have benefited practically from some of the ideas, experiences and tactics of Anarchist groups of the last century, current European Anarchist groups, and South American Anarchist groups.

Are there any anarchist theorists that are particularly important to you? Or are there any Kurdish individuals that you as anarchists think are worth knowing about?

KAF: We recognise and hold in high regard the efforts, struggles and activities of the Anarchist theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries: Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Max Stirner, Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, Daniel Guérin and many more. However, this does not mean that we aren't critical of their ideas or activities.

We are against sanctifying and fetishising any theory or any thinker. In our mind this runs against the spirit of Anarchism.

For us, making any theory, theorist or figure sacred, as the orthodox Marxists and Communists did, and still do today, with their theoretical orthodoxies and personality cults, indicates nothing but narrow and rigid minds. This is no different from the narrow-minded dogmas and fetishisms of religion. We believe that such dogmas and fetishisms do nothing but restrict the progress of socialist movements, impeding renewal and progress. We therefore strive to examine and analyse everything critically before we make any judgment.

With regard to the 2nd part of your question, about individual Kurdish Anarchists: the short answer is 'No'. As far as we know there have been no genuinely Anarchist groups or individuals operating in Iraqi Kurdistan in the past.

In the last century there have been one or two very small movements or social experiments with socialist-libertarian characteristics operating in small areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. The people who took part in these movements led very simple and basic lives. They lived communally and pursued most of their activities collectively. Although some people like to call these social experiments 'Anarchist', we do not because we believe that Anarchism and the Anarchist movement is both deeper and entails many more specific traits and forms of practice than what was displayed by these communities. For us, Anarchism is not just about living communally and doing things collectively. It is much bigger and deeper than that.

How does a “Kurdish anarchist” analysis of the Kurdish struggle for independence/autonomy/national liberation look? Do you think, as an anarchist, one can have a positive relation to these aspirations or do you think that this is not really working?

KAF: it is unclear to us whether you are asking about our views as the KAF, or if you are asking about the views of individual Kurdish Anarchists? We cannot speak on behalf of individuals, but if you mean us as the KAF, we say that we generally support achievements in the realms of national liberation, freedom of religion, equality between the races & genders, or the abolition of racism. We believe these to be progressive steps forward generally. But if any of these processes, particularly that of 'national liberation', result in the power and domination of one class, race, nationality or religion over the rest, then we will oppose it and fight back. We do not see any difference between the foreign occupation of Kurdistan and the domination of a Kurdish bourgeoisie over the rest of the population.

We underline again that we are against all types of power and domination, as we listed above. We think it is very dangerous when we see a particular nationality, ethnicity, religion, race, or political ideology or movement that seeks to take exclusive power and to impose its ideas over everyone else. If that should happen as the result of the actions or inaction of an Anarchist group, including the KAF, then that would mean that whatever that Anarchist group tried to achieve, it has failed, because we think that that would be the end of the story and that the members of such a group would have to start again from the beginning.

It is very important to stress that while we declare our support for the above, at the same time we are dedicated to protecting and defending our ideas and our principles in order not to lose our vision as activists who militate against any type of domination.

We think it is our duty to explain and clarify for people that even if their movements achieve their stated goals, that will not automatically mean that they have attained true freedom, liberation or any of the demands for social justice that they expected to achieve...

Many Kurds have expressed a hope simply for an autonomous Kurdish region in each of the four major states in which Kurdistan lies, to be united under some kind of federation. Where do you stand on this? How does an anarchist vision for the future of the Kurdish issue look?

We hope that one day all villages, towns, cities, regions, and countries on all the continents will be united on the basis of federalism and the free desire and interests of all peoples in uniting. We would welcome this. Realistically, in the current political situation, given the different interests of the states involved (whether within the region or outside), and given the interests of the so called "international community", as well as the lack of understanding or consciousness about the ideals

of autonomy, federalism, separation and unity, the unification of Kurdistan is highly unlikely in the near future. But one can try and struggle to build some sort of federation of counter-powers within each country as alternatives to the current hierarchical system.

We must admit that the mainstream leftist solutions at present, and the solutions that the majority of people are attracted to, unfortunately are solutions that operate through the hierarchical system. Obviously, it is neither our duty nor in our interest to follow that wave of common opinion, to claim any adherence to such hierarchical solutions, nor to pursue any struggles in that direction.

We are acutely aware that any unity achieved through regional autonomy, national federation, or national unity, although it may resolve some of the national question, will fail to resolve all the other problems within Kurdish society, which will not only remain but deepen, just as they do in other societies.

The clearest case in point is the example of South Africa in the last century. Despite the political liberation and empowerment of Black South Africans from apartheid through a political-party and statist solution, the deeper social problems of equality have not been resolved and have often worsened: access to clean water, housing, access to basic public utilities, unemployment, poverty, crime, healthcare, access to education, and the high price of living, just to mention a few. The majority of people there are suffering from almost all of the above problems and continue to languish at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Many still live in makeshift shelters in shanty towns. By all accounts these people are marginalised and deprived from living decent lives. South Africa, of course, re-integrated the global Capitalist economy and became a lucrative market for large national and foreign corporations, and this, as usual, has been at the expense of the majority people there.

These problems are getting worse and are causing splits in the ANC, leading to massive national demonstrations and strikes. Thus, South Africa, like most other countries, is still in need of a revolution – a real revolution – but this will not happen for as long as the current parties and statist organisations remain untouchable sacred cows, with their sanctified leaders, cadres and membership cards. These organisations and their leaders continue to make big political capital out of their old glories, selling them again and again to their people, and especially their youths.

We do not believe that Kurdistan will fair any better than South Africa did under hierarchical solutions of so called ‘liberation’. We are very clear about this in our minds, and the historical record has proved again and again at different times and different places. We do not think that with the achievement of self-rule government by the Kurdish people in Iraqi Kurdistan everything will be okay and that we as Anarchist must support and sustain this situation. In other words, we will not suspend our principles and activities nor delay our struggle for the sake of national unity, based on the false assumption that our people are not yet ready or that they need more time to first establish national self-rule government. We will not suspend our struggle because we know that this statist solution will not bring any major changes in people’s lives. We know that taking the long path or a different route to achieve our aims does not serve our beliefs and will in fact subject us to a slow death by restricting our conscience and our acts.

Our stand and our struggle is double edged. On the one hand we express our support for national liberation or national independence, because for as long as there is exploitation of a nation by another, and discrimination against a specific religion, race and/or gender, no further social justice can be attained. We will stand on the side of national liberation and fight for social justice. On the other hand, our struggle goes beyond that. It is constant and we will insist on

fighting for what we believe. We will cooperate and unite with every group that agrees or shares our ideas. This is possible because there may be many other people or groups who through their own struggle may reach the same consciousness and ideas that we have through ours.

This cooperation can be achieved through common discussion, debate, and analysis of events which seeks to identify and understand both successes and failures, by listening to each other with an open mind while avoiding sectarian attitudes and prejudices.

Although we do not have any statistics or official figures at hand, we nevertheless feel confident in saying, from our observations, that Kurdish self-rule in Iraqi Kurdistan over the past 19 years has achieved very little for the welfare of the Kurdish people. The lack of positive progress achieved through our own government has diluted the Kurdish people's interest and enthusiasm for statist solutions, in spite of more than a half a century of struggles to achieve it.

How does an anarchist vision for the future of the Kurdish issue look?

KAF: We have partly answered this question in our previous responses. However, to further clarify, as regards the Kurdish issue, we as Anarchists adopt the same broad stance as we do concerning all other national and ethnic-minority issues in the region and beyond, such as the Palestinian question, the Tamil question, and the Baluchistan issue in Iran. We do support the national liberation of the Kurdish people in other countries, and the ideal of a united federation of the Kurdish people. At the same time, however, we want the same rights for the Turkish, Armenian, Arab and Persian people in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole as well as in Turkey and Iran (whether in Kurdistan or beyond). The question that comes about here is that, if on the one hand people gain some freedom through national independence, while on the other hand they also become aware that such nationalist-statist solutions are incapable of resolving the continuing daily issues of equality and social justice, will people still want to unite on the basis of being Kurdish, Turkish, Baluch, Armenian, Arab or Persian and thus separate themselves from each other on the basis of nationality?

Our duty as Anarchists here is to meet people, to discuss and debate, and to make people more aware of the roots of the social problems, about how to organise themselves, how to set up local groups, groups in factories, work places, schools, universities, hospitals, and offices, how to link and ally as many of these groups together as we can through those workplaces, villages, towns, and regions, in order to mobilise people to fight the common enemy in order to achieve our demands.

What role did and does socialism play in the Kurdish struggle for independence? Have there also been libertarian/anti-authoritarian approaches of socialism? Is there even a history of anarchism in the Kurdish regions of the Middle East that you can refer to?

KAF: to respond to this question we need to first highlight a fundamental fact: that Socialism and Socialist groups, parties and movements, not just in Kurdistan, but in the whole of the Middle East and Africa, were not born naturally, that is, they did not emerge out of the demands of the people or out of local necessity. They were in fact created and installed by the Soviet Union and their main function was to implement Soviet policies. Later, when China rose as a communist power and began competing with Russia, then the split between these two major powers was reflected in all the Communist parties and movements in the world, which all followed a parallel split, half of them representing Soviet policies and the other half representing Chinese policies

Thus, these Socialist parties and groups were clones of the Russian and Chinese Communist parties. In countries where China and Russia entertained good relations with the regime in power,

the Communist parties that were subordinate to these superpowers were obliged to lend support to the local regimes, and vice versa.

The clearest example of this is the relation between the Iraqi government and the Soviet Union between 1970 to 1975, when the Ba'athist Party was in power. At the time, Saddam Hussein was not yet president but he already dominated the party and government. The Iraqi Communist party maintained a pact of alliance with the Ba'athist party and its government. As a result, in 1974, both fought together against the Kurdish movement led by Mustafa Barzani. At the very same time, the regime was busy kidnapping, liquidating and assassinating the most militant and uncontrollable members of the communist party, especially those who complained and protested against their party's alliance with the Regime.

This goes to show that those parties and organisations never had any independence to pursue their own policies. This was the reason why they never struggled to achieve very much for the working class and ordinary people. With regards to the Kurdish issue in Iraq, the Communist party would not have supported the Kurdish national-liberation struggle unless they were given some sort of instruction to do so from the Soviet Union. Not only that, but at the time, the Communist Party was even working to destroy the Kurdish national-liberation struggle, and in doing so they damaged their own reputation.

In short we believe that wherever the socialist idea as defined by Soviet hegemony or by other authoritarian-socialist ideologies became dominant, it did not play a positive role. Authoritarian Socialist movements always tried to contain mass movements or popular demands in order to exploit them as tools and means of taking power, just as nationalist, liberal and religious parties manipulated and co-opted popular movements and their demands for the same purpose.

We also can add that there are two periods in which the Socialist ideology in Iraq had the effect of reducing nationalist sentiments. The first of these was in the 1950s as the consequence of the militancy of the Iraqi Communist party. The second was during the 1980s when a few small leftist and socialist organisations were established.

As soon as the Eastern block collapsed, the pro Bolshevik and Maoist groups collapsed with them, and the counter movement against Socialism and Socialist ideas prevailed, leading the old Socialist and Communist parties either to turn to fanatical nationalism, or effectively become right wing parties.

In response of the part of the question: as far as we are aware there has been no historical record of any specifically Anarchist movement active in Kurdistan or in the Middle East more generally.

What about today? Are there many Kurdish anarchists active within the Middle East or is it more a phenomenon of the Diaspora?

It is possible that individual Kurdish Anarchist activists may have existed in the past, but we are not aware of any. With regards to those Anarchist activists who were based abroad before the beginning of the 21st Century, none had any prominence as an Anarchist voice among the Kurdish people, none having been active in Kurdish communities or having developed any critical Anarchist analysis of Kurdish society or the Kurdish political scene.

We can with confidence say that we are the first political group composed of Kurdish members that identify Anarchist or Socialist Libertarians and focusing on Kurdish society. We began our activism in the beginning of the 2000s, when we started publishing a seasonal magazine called 'Dalian', meaning 'Rebels'. We published 12 copies until the spring of 2003.

This magazine was not widely known among the Kurdish people as an Anarchist magazine, but the majority of people who wrote for it were Anarchist, while the rest identified either as independents or libertarians of some stripe.

However, there is no doubt that KAF's *Sakurdistan* website is the first Anarchist site and platform maintained by Kurdish activists and targeted at a Kurdish audience. *Sakurdistan* publishes articles mainly in Kurdish, as well as in Arabic and Persian. The people who write for this platform are Kurdish, Arab and Persian and they are all Anarchists. The Kurdish people who formed KAF are the first to have translated classic Anarchist texts into the Kurdish language including the well known Anarchist FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions). These activist writers have tirelessly worked to introduce readers to the correct meanings of Anarchist words and concepts that have for so long been deliberately misused and distorted by Bolshevik and right wing organisations. Great efforts have been made to analyse Anarchist texts and we continue to do so today.

As far as we understand, last year saw the publishing of a new Anarchist magazine in Turkish Kurdistan issued under the name of 'Corvus' (Crow). We believe this magazine is still published today.

Nevertheless with the defeat of the armed guerrilla struggle in Turkish Kurdistan in recent years, there has been a growth of social movements in the region promoting Anarchist ideas and organising. This appears to us as a very good sign that people have now found an alternative to replace the failed armed struggle. Although the nascent Anarchist movement there is still small and weak, it is a very big step because it replaces political demands (slogans formulated by political parties) with social demands formulated by the people, including demands for social justice and the solutions to the daily problems that people face. This proves that people's level of consciousness has developed. People have lost their confidence in the ability of politicians and armed struggle to achieve their demands, as these have done nothing but bring them defeat after defeat.

It is sad sometimes to hear some European Anarchist groups giving credit and praise to Abdulla O'calan for the positive changes that the Kurdish people have obtained in Turkey. We believe the case to be exactly the opposite as O'calan and his people have come under the increasing democratic influence of the ordinary people and their grassroots movements, and more particularly of the ideas of Anarchists and Anarchism. Those members of European Anarchist groups that attended the Social Forum in Diyarbakir in 2009 and 2010 know the truth.

The consciousness of the Kurdish people in Turkey has changed and is undergoing real progress. We can now speak of a large number of people who support the Anarchist movement on the ground. During protests, demonstrations and during the Kurdish Festival of Nawroz (Kurdish New Year) can now be seen waving red and red-and-black anarchist flags without any fear of the authorities. Also the publishing of the magazine 'Corvus' is another sign of this major change in the character of the struggle.

It is a great pity that this change is not being seen in the other parts of Kurdistan across the borders, in Iran, Syria and Iraq. This is for a few different reasons that we will try to explain here very briefly. In Syria, until very recently, no independent popular groups, parties or mass movement could form due to severe state repression, in Kurdistan as much as in all other parts of the country. This, of course, has drastically changed with the current situation of the Arab Spring. In Syria, until the current uprising, the Kurdish people could not even talk about their own existence as Kurds, let alone about their rights and their land. But we can also say that wherever repression and oppression exist there will be resistance, though this resistance will

most likely be underground. Among this resistance movement there might have been individual Anarchists or even small groups of Anarchists...

In Iraqi Kurdistan, where many of us in KAF come from, Anarchist ideas, theories & principles have been deliberately misinterpreted and misrepresented by the enemies of anarchism on the right and the left. Also, the existing Kurdish movement from September 1961 to the spring of 1991 either dominated or controlled part of Kurdistan as a nationalist force, or was controlled by the Iraqi government, therefore there was little place in it for Anarchists or any other small leftist or Marxist groups.

The culture of armed struggle had become all pervasive, its methods used to resolve all political issues and even social issues. This climate pushed many socialists, communists and anarchists, including ourselves, to flee the country in fear for our lives and seek asylum in Europe or elsewhere.

Soon after the uprising in the spring of 1991, once again the parties that previously controlled the rural areas, including the mountainous zones, despite having become very weak after 1987, still managed to gain control of the towns and cities with the help of the US and allied forces. But within less than two years of establishing Kurdish self-rule in Iraq, what can be described as a civil war started between all the political parties, especially the PKK and the Islamist organisations. This civil war continued until 1998. Thus the uprising quickly failed and the little that had been achieved was rapidly lost: daily life became difficult, civil rights were trampled, and the Workers' Unions, the Unemployed Unions, The Student's Unions, the Women's independent organisations, and more groups were all dissolved. It is a sad truth that most of these organisations were entirely dependent upon hierarchical and authoritarian leftist parties or organisations.

With the internal war over and Saddam Husain's Regime defeated, Kurdish self-rule was given free rein and an open budget. This led to an increase in corruption, and in turn increased the gap between the rich and the poor. Meanwhile all the public services were either ignored or sold off to wealthy private interests. Kurdish self-rule has copied exactly what Saddam Husain had done when he was in power: the ruling elites have put their own people in positions of responsibility in the civil administration, in the health service, in the banks, even in the education department all the way down to the head teachers of primary schools and secondary schools. They handed out degrees and qualifications to their own people even though they were not qualified, sending them to Europe and the US with large stipends, at the expense of the ordinary people, for them to obtain higher degrees such as PhDs. This list can go on and on.

In fact this terrible situation caused a massive exodus of people from Kurdistan between 1992 and 2004 – in far greater numbers than those who emigrated during Saddam Hussein's Regime.

This dire situation has continued ever since, creating such a foul atmosphere that people have developed a deep hatred of the Kurdish regime of self-rule and the parties involved in it. People have organised themselves in groups big and small, but the main beneficiary groups have been the Islamist organisations and a movement called the "movement for Change" (we will come back to this further below).

Today the regime of Kurdish self-rule in Iraq is more vigilant than ever in repressing and oppressing any dissenting voices and any sign of protest, even though the ordinary people there have been very unhappy with the regime and tried their best to force the ruling elites to accept their demands. The recent uprisings in Middle East and North Africa have given them inspiration.

On the 17th of February 2011, Arab-Spring inspired protests kicked off. The rulers' answer: live bullets. Within half a day of protests 2 people were killed and 56 injured. For almost 3 months

thereafter protests continued in different towns and cities, but in the end the rulers managed to stop them. Of course there were other factors that caused the protests to fail. Mainly these were the leftist and Islamist organisations that sought to control and co-opt the movement. The mass protests were not organised as a mass grassroots movement, through local or workplace and university groups, thus repeating the same patterns as in the past. Also, the protests failed because, once again, the people's demands became political demands that sought changes from the top down.

In Southern Iraq, as far as we know, the situation was worse than in Kurdistan. There were no Anarchist groups involved.

In the Eastern part of Kurdistan controlled by the Iranian Regime, the situation is different from Iraqi Kurdistan, as the last 3 years has seen no armed struggle and people have found alternative ways to fight back against the regime. These have mainly taken the form of mass demonstrations and some successful strikes, which continue to regularly flare up.

Anarchist ideas in this part of Kurdistan, as well as elsewhere in Iran, played a significant role during the 1979 uprising and beyond. There were a few small Anarchist groups there, within a small movement that included Kurds, Persians and Baluchis. Many of them, however, now live in Europe, although they still continue their struggle from abroad.

With its powerful military and police force, the current Iranian regime's repression has made it difficult for Anarchist individuals and groups to develop as freely as in Turkish Kurdistan. Thus Iranian-Kurdish Anarchists have, to date, not been able to publish any magazines or newsletters.

What is your point of view regarding the PKK? What about PJAK?

PKK and PJAK are the same; they are the two faces of the same coin. PJAK is the PKK's wing that has spread over all parts of Kurdistan, in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria. They both are hierarchical and paramilitary organisations. They are both involved in nationalist propaganda and have no connection with Anarchism or Libertarian Socialism... From A to Z they are different to us. They are closer to the hierarchical Socialist parties because they want to take power.

We are aware that Ocalan's ideas have changed since he has been in prison. But we are not very optimistic about these changes. Also these changes have not, at least for the time being, been reflected in practice or organisationally in the PKK and PJAK. It is certainly true that the PKK has got many followers among the Kurdish people and have a big impact on Kurdish mass movements. They also talk about federalism. But none of this makes them in any way Anarchist organisations, nor does it make them compatible with Anarchism. They are, in fact, as far as one can get from Anarchists and Anarchism because Ocalan, first has not given up his authority and dominance over the mass movement, and second, they are still advocating nationalism and patriotism. As regards PJAK, they have demonstrated even less direct-democratic change and have had an even smaller influence on spontaneous mass movements than the PKK in Turkey.

We will only support the PKK when they give up the armed struggle completely, engage in organising popular grassroots mass movements for the sake of achieving the people's social demands, denounce and dismantle centralised and hierarchical modes of struggle and instead turn to federated autonomous local groups, end all relations and dealings with the states of the Middle East and the West, denounce charismatic power politics, and convert to anti-statism and anti-authoritarianism – only then will we be happy to cooperate with them fully.

These would require major changes and would entail a massive undertaking that we regretfully cannot foresee in the current situation and under the leadership of the PKK and PJAK.

What do you think about the US led war on Iraq in 2003? The Kurdish community in Iraq tended to support the invasion quite a lot, which contradicts the standpoint of anarchists in Europe or the US, who have been very active in the anti-war movement at that time. How do you see this contradiction?

KAF: Anarchism is a pacifist ideology. We were against the war then, and we are against it still now, just as we are against all wars wherever they may happen. We thus adopted the same stance as the rest of our Anarchist comrades throughout the world regarding the Iraq war, because the motives behind the invasion and occupation of Iraq by US, UK and allied forces were just as clear to us as they were to everyone else in the movement: it was to rob the wealth and natural assets of Iraq; to demonstrate the US's dominance in the region; to install military bases in the region; to put the other countries in the region under pressure to buy more US and allied weapons; to protect Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and other US allies in the Gulf, and to protect Israel in particular; to test their new weapons; and finally to expand the neo-liberal globalisation project to the Middle East, establishing Western multinational corporations in Iraq, where they pay almost no taxes. The US also has an open contract with the Iraqi government to stay there for at least 50 years. As soon as the war was over, the West started implementing its neoliberal economic program with the help of the World Bank and IMF. There are also many other imperialist motives for the war that we don't mention here and perhaps many that we don't yet know about.

As concerns the role of the Kurdish community in supporting the war, it is certainly easy to explain the main reasons for this. Saddam Hussein's regime ruled over the Iraqi people by brutally terrorising them for almost 35 years. The Kurdish people in the North and the Shiites in the middle and South of Iraq bore the lion's share of this brutal repression. This had rendered the Kurdish Community powerless to bring down the regime there, especially when they saw Saddam survive both the Iran-Iraq war and the First Gulf War and still remain powerful enough to repress them.

The second reason is that the Kurdish community realised that there was no way for the Kurdish political parties to bring down Saddam Hussein's Regime. The Kurdish people had lost all hope in the political parties' ability to reach this goal.

Thirdly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Block led the Kurdish people to believe that there were no other powers left for the Kurdish people to rely upon for support and defence.

Fourthly: the effects of the propaganda of the USA, Great Britain and their allies – echoed by the Kurdish political parties – about the “democratic system” that would be installed after Saddam, with its promises of freedom, jobs, services, security, decent education, civil rights, affordable goods. Some Kurdish political parties even extended these promises with that of the establishment of an independent Kurdish State.

Because of these and other factors, the Kurdish community was not aware of the true plans of the USA and its allies. Thus, many supported the war.

However, there are big differences in opinion between the larger Kurdish community and those Kurds who identify as Anarchists, so it is normal that views differed on this as on other issues. We therefore think that the second part of your question does not necessarily follow from the first part of the question: that because we are Kurds, but also against the war as Anarchists, this should imply any contradiction, given the mainstream support for the war in the Kurdish community.

We believe that the Kurdish community's attitude toward the war and the US and its allies has now changed, because the Kurds of today are not the same people as in 1992 or 2003. At the time

one could see them waiting in long queues to vote for the political parties. Nowadays they are disillusioned. Also they are not as widely sympathetic or single-mindedly focused as they used to be with regard to the demand for Kurdish independence or autonomy because, through the long experience of Kurdish self-rule, they have realised that kicking out the occupiers did not bring an end to their problems, nor did it put an end to injustice and exploitation.

The latest Arab-Spring inspired protests since February 2011 stand as proof of the growing chasm that separates the Kurdish people and their own ruling elite, and shows how the people have turned against the governing elites.

Are there or have there been any social movements, groups or individuals in the Kurdish community that you as anarchists were inspired by, even if they weren't explicitly anarchist?

We believe that our answer to this question is contained in our response to your previous questions. In order to avoid repeating ourselves we will answer this question succinctly by saying that there are no non-Anarchist Kurdish individuals or groups that have given us inspiration except for the lessons that we have learned from their failings. As we mentioned before, we developed our commitment to Anarchism and its ideals as a consequence of our struggles in mainstream political parties and movements, which lead to our disillusionment due to the failure of these organisations to achieve any real progress in terms of civil liberties and social justice.

It is important for us to stress that reaching the Anarchist ideal is, in our minds, the only way to achieve true freedom in a Libertarian-Socialist/Anarchist society. But reaching this ideal cannot come through just reading Anarchist texts. It requires, on the level of ideas and thought, the combination of both philosophical Anarchist theory and our direct experience and activities. This means that, before becoming self-identified Anarchists, although we hadn't yet read any Anarchist literature, many of our thoughts and principles were in practice unconsciously Anarchist. We were critical of all politicians, from the right to the left, including Communists. This led them to accuse us of being "Anarchists" in the misinformed and distorted derogatory sense of the term as it is often used in common discourse (hence our use of the term "accused"). Ironically, this accusation persuaded us to try to better understand the true meaning of the concept of Anarchism and Anarchist ideas in order to better inform (and defend) ourselves.

How do you see the recent mass protests in the KRG? Do you think it has potential to influence the political situation as it has in other parts of the Middle East?

KAF: After occupying Iraq, the USA, UK and their allies started pouring a lot of money into the country in order to win the people's support, especially after the "insurgency" emerged in the South and Centre of Iraq. This happened in Kurdistan as well. As we all know, the US and its allies had no plans for "nation building" in Iraq. Even with the advent of the "insurgency", when they decided to develop some sort of plan, these remained minimal. Their plans and efforts concentrated on how to make the "insurgency" ineffective and weak among the Iraqi people.

This plan benefited all the ruling elites of Iraq – the leaders of all the political parties, tribal leaders, and all those in high positions of responsibility in the military, in the government, and in big business. These benefits and privileges later on extended to all the members of parliament, and to whoever occupied a high position in the Iraqi administration or KRG (Kurdish Regional Government). At the same time there was no policy of safeguards or Laws to stop these people from robbing the country and its people, whether legally or illegally. Thus, corruption became a major and widespread phenomenon.

While they have been lining their pockets, the politicians and leaders of the Iraqi central government and KRG have ignored public services, the environment, the welfare and development of rural areas, and the industrialisation of the country. In addition to this, privileged elites have taken advantage of the situation, making fortunes importing everything except oil products from abroad and opening the Kurdish market to foreign corporations and interests by involving them as business partners or taking bribes from them. It is obvious that such a situation makes any social justice impossible.

One thing that cannot be forgotten is how many of the public services either have been privatised or been completely abandoned by the government, and how, at the same time, the policy of the Iraqi government and KRG encouraged rich people and the private sector to step in to establish service centres competing with public services, such as big clinics, private hospitals, private schools, private universities, telephone & telecommunication utilities and many more. All these privatisations have been funded by powerful oligarchs within the KRG, and for their private interests, often in concert with allied local plutocrats.

All of the above are some of the reasons for the recent demonstrations and protests demanding reforms and an end to corruption. These protests, from the beginning, were instigated by individuals and small groups spontaneously congregating outside the PDK (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic United Kurdistan) headquarters. There were also many participants belonging to the above political parties protesting from within their parties.

The KRG tried hard to carry out big reforms within its institutions, but in the end these were not enough. Consequently, a number of KRG and political party members demanding reforms left their Parties and the KRG. They gathered together with other grassroots activists to form a big protest movement standing outside of the political parties and KRG.

But from the very beginning there was a deep difference in the demands, aims, interests and strategies of the independent popular grassroots movement and those of the politicians who had defected from the political parties & KRG. From the beginning, the latter group of politicians had their own agenda, which was to contain and co-opt the demands and issues of the popular grassroots movement. Their aim was to exploit the popular grassroots movement in order to gain power. In the end they managed to exploit and co-opt a mass movement focused primarily on social demands and democratic reform and turn it into an issue of mundane, superficial politics, such as having earlier elections, or sharing power in the military and civilian administrations.

They named the movement “Goran”, “Movement for Change”. They started in a very canny manner by demanding the same reforms as those of the independent grassroots mass movement started by the ordinary people. They even named their movement after the one that emerged from the popular movement. But as soon as they gained strength and momentum they disclosed their hidden agendas. Their second step was to get close to the Islamist organisations, building links with them by abandoning some of their secular principles. This co-operation and co-ordination with the Islamists became more obvious with the arrival of the election of 2009. In these elections, the electoral list of the Movement For Change” managed to win 25 seats out of the total of 111 in the KRG Parliament.

It is important to emphasise that the so called “Movement for Change” and the popular grassroots movement are two completely different and separate movements, as rendered evident in the protests of February 2011. After an endless wait for reforms, the people became impatient and frustrated, so they began to demonstrate and protest in front of the headquarters of the KDP.

On that day, instead of lending their support, the leaders of the so called “Movement for Change” denounced the protesters through their media channels, including their TV channel, KNN.

In our opinion the the popular grassroots mass movement suffered from a number of weaknesses that led it to easily fall into the hands and under the influence of the power hungry politicians. These weaknesses were the following:

The first of these weaknesses spans from the three-decade-long history of armed struggle on the part of political parties and militias, as we mentioned previously, which had come to pervade the social and political culture of Kurdistan. During three decades, except for 4 years between 1970 and 1974, either Kurdistan was at war with the Iraqi government or was engaged in a state of civil war between the different political groups and factions. Oftentimes, the war with the Iraqi regime and the internal civil war overlapped. This left no space for the Kurdish people to think about establishing their own independent and non-political grassroots organisations, such as trade unions or civil associations. The people had become very much dependant on the political parties. This had either reduced people’s power to quasi non-existences, or to such a level of inexperience and naiveté that they always had to rely on the patronage of politicians or militia leaders.

The second weakness is that a significant number of the people involved in the grassroots movement were under the influences of the authoritarian Socialist groups, leading them to conceive of change in terms of top-down, statist and parliamentary methods. They were looking for support from outside of Kurdistan. So there is, in essence, no difference between the various fractions within the opposition in terms of how they conceive of reaching their aims.

Thirdly, because of all the above reasons, the ordinary people were not familiar with any other effective methods of struggle in daily life and against the power system. Thus the armed struggle and the parliamentary system have been major obstacles for the people’s realisation and awareness of how dangerous their gaining independence from the power structures is to the politicians and the political parties. The cultures of armed struggle and parliamentarism have stood in the way of the people’s becoming aware of more effective, direct-democratic grassroots modes of economic and social struggle, such as the formation of local, grassroots, direct-democratic counter-powers based on mutual aid, and engagement in collective direct-action against the system, for example wildcat general strikes.

Fourthly: the terrorism and brutality of the Iraqi governments led people to focus on political and nationalistic issues, such as the independence of Kurdistan, or gaining autonomous state power, rather than thinking of directly tackling the daily economic and social problems that they faced, in an autonomous, bottom-up way. In other words, the people have followed the politicians in giving priority to achieving sovereign statehood, assuming that this would of itself resolve the economic, social and other daily problems they faced. This has been a major factor in the lack of attention given to the building of autonomous local grassroots groups to achieve demands.

This situation has given the KRG the opportunity to copy the Iraqi Baathist Regime’s methods of setting up dependant trade unions and other front organisation under their control.

Fifthly: When the people are not familiar with alternative methods of struggle in the fields of the economy, social-solidarity, education, public services, etc., the only means of resistance they can envisage is through party politics and the parliamentary system.

The difference between us and the rest of the opposition including leftists, communists and social democrats is that we neither believe in armed struggle nor in elections & so called parliamentary “democracy” as effective or legitimate means of changing society. Yes these may allow

superficial changes of surface and face – an ineffectual cycling through parties and governments who all serve only the interests of one or another set of socio-political and economic elites – but not substantive changes to the unjust and illegitimate power system that we believe is at the root of the economic and social problems.

We believe that real changes can only emerge through the establishment of local groups in workplaces, communities, educational institutions, public-service spaces, and public spaces. These groups should communicate, coordinate and co-operate with each other, working together to make decisions, taking action collectively and regulating themselves autonomously and direct-democratically. In other words, they must function to reappropriate power in the name of the people, away from the government, the parliament, the courts, the local authorities, the political parties, the chief executives of corporations, the big companies & banks; putting power and empowerment back into the heart of communities and the hands of citizens. In short we believe in changes that should happen from the bottom-up, not from the top-down. We believe these groups must be independent and autonomous, and that their aims and strategies should not drive them to take power over others or in the name of others. The goal should be to establish a classless society free of injustice, exploitation, oppression and wars – a society in which individuals feel that their worth is not measured in terms of money, race, religion, appearance, or even capability and socially defined normative “talents”, but simply as human beings who deserve a decent life.

Finally we would like to say a few important points about the “Movement for Change”, also known as the “List of Goran”:

- Most of the candidates of the “Goran List” are ex-leaders and ex-cadres of powerful political parties. The majority of them come from the PUK. In reality they were corrupt and promoted corruption and injustice while they were inside their parties, but later on found new political opportunities in the popular grassroots movement for reform.
- This list has mainly won elections in only one area, the city of Sulaymaniyah and the small towns surrounding it, along with a tiny minority in Kirkuk. They have no members in parliament representing the other main cities and surrounding towns, Hewlêr and Dohuk. As you are probably aware, the PDK dominates that part of Kurdistan. They are very brutal, representing the old tribes, and do not allow any competing ideas, voices or groups to develop. This is perhaps the main reason for the lack of support for the Movement for Change on the part of the people there.
- This Movement for Change has not developed any major plans, policies or strategies for Kurdistan. They have built up their movement on the basis only of the populist reaction to “corruption”. As you know, there is corruption everywhere – even in Europe, and the US. This corruption is part and parcel of the state, the political-party system, and Capitalism. One cannot isolate corruption from class society and Capitalism because it is an essential and intrinsic dimension of private property, capitalist exploitation, and the inequality, deprivation and injustice that these cause. Corruption is at the very heart of the core Capitalist duty and motive that puts profit over everything else, including over human beings. In reality, the Movement for Changes offers no real alternative apart from changing the face of the political system, exchanging once again power from one group

of elites to another. We are certain that, while this movement (which claims to seek to implement social change) has made and will make an impact on the political situation, it will nevertheless have little impact on society, since experience shows that one does not automatically entail the other. In a few words, it may make surface changes to the government and its policies, but it will definitely not change society in any significant way.

- What they really want is to reorganise the economy and society in a way that ensures that they get the lion's share of everything. They have no plans to protect or improve public services; no plans to re-nationalise those sectors of the public services that have already been privatised; no plans to nationalise the private sector; no plans to impose proper border controls or taxation on foreign imports in order to protect local production and labour; no plans to properly tax businesses; no plans to improve the education system or put a stop to private schools and universities; no plans to improve the national health service; no plans to protect the environment; no plans for creating a decent, cheap and reliable public transportation system; no plans for building reasonably priced public housing to house homeless people; no plans to make improvements in working conditions, especially for the disabled; no plans whatsoever for hundreds of other important issues.
- They appear to be far more concerned with the interests of their media company, the Wosha Company ("Word" Company), and acquiring big shares of large companies such as Nocan, that belongs mainly to the PUK, and Korak that is controlled by the PDK.
- In term of politics, they have no qualms with maintaining the clientelistic dependency of Kurdistan and Iraq upon the US, Great Britain and their allies. They have no complaints about the occupation or the occupiers' Neoliberal and Imperialist economic, political and military plans in the region and beyond.
- With regards to education, they have mainly retained the old curriculum that we had under Saddam Hussein. They certainly would not want any new curriculum to be any better than the ones in Europe or North America, which as we all well know, promote Capitalism rather than any sense of human caring, mutual aid, or social needs and responsibilities.
- In managing the administrative system they insist on a liberal representative-democratic parliamentary system that would put technocrats in power rather than politicians. This is the only real difference between them and their colleagues who are in power.

If the Movement for Change list gains power or achieves a majority in power they may make small changes, such as reducing unemployment, reorganising whatever is left of the public services, controlling and reducing some of the minor corruption, nominating a few suitable and competent people to positions of responsibility, reducing the influence of the political parties in government and in the civil administrations, and widening civil liberties. So in some aspects, Kurdish society (if we are lucky enough) might become a "Civil Society" like those we see in Europe.

Again, as in Europe, the main social problems which effectively curtail the liberties and wellbeing of the majority will remain unresolved: social justice, true liberty, unemployment, homelessness, profits over people, problems of wealth distribution, environmental problems, and the big gap between the haves and have-nots, as well as many other grave problems will remain.

As regards the changes that have taken place in other countries of the Middle East, although we have been very supportive and have continuously sent messages of solidarity to them, we nevertheless believe that the changes achieved have only been superficial changes affecting only the top and face of the political power structures, and the surface of society – the infrastructure, with all its problems, remains the same. Whoever comes to power in the end probably won't be all that much better than the previous regimes, since, ultimately, Capitalist Liberal Parliamentary regimes are designed to ensure that those who accede to power will only ever be the best servants of the system, that is, the Capitalist system.

We can say a lot more about this point, and we certainly have plenty on our plate on this issue, but we believe that we have responded to your question and will leave it at that.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Bridget
Interview with the Kurdistan Anarchist Forum (KAF)
March 28, 2012

Retrieved on 6th March 2021 from www.anarkismo.net

theanarchistlibrary.org