

Iraq and the Idea of Freedom

WADOOD HAMAD IS CORRECT that many today are "stuck between two inadequate visions" – either apologizing for U.S. imperialist actions or "cheering any misguided 'apparent' resistance to imperialism." Avoiding these false alternatives is not only needed to develop a successful antiwar movement; it is needed to ensure that the idea of freedom is not forsaken by today's radicals.

The problem of narrowing one's political vision to supporting either imperialism or reactionary currents that (for now at least) may oppose it isn't a new one. It happened in 1979, when much of the left supported the leaders of the Iranian Revolution on the grounds that they "opposed imperialism" – only to see the same leaders slaughter one of the strongest radical movements in the Middle East. It happened in the 1990s, when many leftists failed to oppose Milosevic's regime on the grounds that it represented a bulwark against neoliberalism – only to see Serbia initiate the most far-reaching genocide since World War II. And it is happening today, when much of the left is willing to make excuses for the armed "resistance" in Iraq on the grounds that it is attacking U.S. soldiers – even though it has so far killed far more Iraqi workers, women, and Shiites.

Glenn Perusek denies there is a connection between the "armed resistance fighters who stubbornly defend themselves against" the United States and those who are attacking Iraqi civilians, but his defense of Moqtada al-Sadr undermines his own argument. Al-Sadr's militia has fought U.S. troops in the name of a reactionary, fundamentalist agenda that opposes women's rights, gay liberation, and workers' self-emancipation. In April 2004, when al-Sadr ordered workers in aluminum and sanitary supply plants in Nasariyeh to hand over their factories for use as bastions to fight the U.S. military, the workers refused to back down, even when

threatened with death by al-Sadr's forces. More recently, in March 2005, forces allied with al-Sadr attacked students at Basra University, where they tore off the cloths of women students. A male student trying to help one of them was shot dead. Perusek may think it is "simplistic" to equate the "armed resistance" with attacks on civilians, but those on the ground in Iraq tell a different tale. Indeed, al-Sadr's reactionary politics helps explain why most of the Iraqi labor movement (not only the FWCUI but also the Southern Oil Company Union and the dock workers at Um Qasr) has made it clear that it opposes both the U.S. occupation *and* the "armed resistance."

The biggest problem with making apologies for the ex-Baathists and fundamentalists who dominate the Iraqi resistance is the false claim that the absence of a secular alternative leaves us with no other choice. As Perusek puts it, "the historical origins of the weakness of the democratic, secular left within Iraq must be acknowledged." This overlooks the fact that Iraq had one of the most secular and multiethnic radical movements of any land in the Middle East. The first Marxist circle in Iraq was founded in the 1920s by Husain ar-Rahhal, a follower of Rosa Luxemburg. His journal *As-Sahifah* openly called for women's emancipation and even questioned Islam's foundations. According to Hanna Batatu, it was "in feminist clothing that 'Marxism' first entered into the mental world of Iraqis." [1] While ar-Rahhal's brand of politics was pushed aside by the subsequent rise of the Iraqi Communist Party, it did not mean the end of an independent Iraqi leftism. As Raya Dunayevskaya wrote of the 1958 Iraqi Revolution, "Here was a new form of revolution that wished to be truly independent, rather than confined into East/West, or Arab/Israel, or even Nasser/Saudi Arabia, as if these were absolute opposites. This revolution started out on a tone independent of any of these, extending even to the distinction between Sunni and Shi'a." [2]

It is true that Saddam Hussein destroyed much of the secular, democratic left. It should also be noted that some Iraqi leftists (like the Communist Party) initially supported Saddam because of his use of "anti-imperialist" and "anti-Zionist" rhetoric. Ironically, the very position that Perusek advocates – allying with "opponents" of imperialism even if they promote regressive positions – helped discredit the Iraqi secular left, which in turn opened the door to the Islamists. Why repeat the same blunder today, when people around the world are facing attacks by the forces of religious fundamentalism?

Surely, the secular, democratic left in Iraq today is weak and marginalized. That is all the more reason for us to extend an active hand of solidarity with it. Even if it were true that pro-democratic leftists in Iraq lack a "mass base," we should do what we can to strengthen these forces, hammered as they are by the two terrorisms of the U.S. occupation and the fundamentalists. Would Perusek advise others overseas not to extend support to the forces for radical change in the United States today simply because these forces also lack a "mass base"?

THE MOST DAMAGING ASPECT of the tendency to choose between lesser evils like the United States and the Iraqi "armed resistance" is that it leaves aside active solidarity with the mass of Iraqis on the basis of what we are for – *freedom*. As Marx made clear in his 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Program*, there can be no bargaining about principles when it comes to one's vision of a new, human society.[3] The more that radicals forsake such a vision for the sake of allying with anyone, no matter how reactionary, so long as they oppose the United States, the more the radical movement will find itself plunged into a crisis of thought from which it may never recover.

Footnotes

1. See *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, by Hanna Batatu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 396.
2. *The Myriad Global Crises of the 1980s and the Nuclear World Since World War II*, by Raya Dunayevskaya (Chicago: News and Letters, 1986), 21.
3. See "Marginal Notes on the Programme of the German Workers' Party, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 24 (New York: International Publishers, 1989, 81-99). Marx held to the same position when it came to his much-neglected writings on Islam. See "Marx Among the Muslims," by Peter Hudis, in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Vol. 15, No. 4, December 2004, 51-67.