

Revolution as the driving force of history in the Middle East

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I will begin my presentation by protesting the repression meted out to socialist academics in Turkey.¹ Thousands of academics have been dismissed, barred from serving public office of any sort in the future, prohibited from travelling abroad, and all this through Decree Laws promulgated by the Council of Ministers. All of this has occurred under the State of Emergency declared in the aftermath of the failed coup of 15th July 2016, in the manner of condemnation without trial. It was claimed that the State of Emergency would serve to bring the coup-plotters to justice, but it was in effect widely used and abused in an onslaught against the left and the Kurdish movement. It is for this reason that many an academic planning to come to Beirut to participate in this conference was barred from coming. In our case, the journal *Devrimci Marksizm*,² which we represent here, was to organise two panel discussions on the current problems facing Turkish society, in which eight panellists were

¹ This is the English translation, slightly amended, of an article by the same title in published, in the Turkish version of this journal, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 30-31, Spring-Summer 2017, which itself is a slightly expanded version of one of the presentations we made at the Historical Materialism-BICAR Conference held in Beirut on 10-12 March 2017.

² The original quarterly Turkish edition of *Revolutionary Marxism*.

to speak. Five of the eight were not able to come to Beirut due to the repression!

Before going into the main body of the presentation, I would like to thank the journal *Historical Materialism* and BICAR³ for having organised this conference. The fact that it brings together Marxists and critical thinkers, as well as political practitioners, from different countries in our region, long labelled the “Middle East” by imperialism, and in Northern Africa, and thus makes it possible to engage in an exchange of ideas makes this conference particularly valuable. This is all the more important in a period when the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) is being convulsed by war, revolution and barbarism. The ruling forces devise and execute their policies on the regional scale, which necessitates that we, as well, need to think, tie up, and organise at the regional level in full internationalist spirit.

We can now pass on to the topic of this presentation. In pointing to revolution as “the driving force of the modern history of the Middle East”, this presentation pursues very concrete aims. We have chosen to discuss this topic for this conference, where Middle Easterners and North Africans have come together, for very clear reasons.

First of all, we wish to put the proposition of Marxism to the effect that history does not move forward (and at times backward) on the basis of an uninterrupted process and through peaceful reforms, but through deep convulsions and leaps to the test for the particular historical development of our region. That this proposition, i.e. the idea that revolutions are the **locomotive of history**, is true for the Western world (i.e. the advanced capitalist countries), for Latin America, and for Asian countries such as Russia and China has long been demonstrated. But we have not seen similar studies on the MENA region in those languages we are familiar with. Our objective is to take an initial step into this long neglected domain, modest and somewhat schematic given the constraints of time.

Secondly, the concept of revolution is considered to be out of fashion on large sections of the left, to put it bluntly and without recourse to cosmetic touches. A majority of the left has turned its back on Marxism in disillusion, one that was created by the collapse of the experiments in socialist construction in the 20th century. Within this framework, revolution has suffered the same fate of being thrown away, in similar fashion to the centrality of class struggle or the importance of the revolutionary party. In our region as in the rest of the world, the agenda consists exclusively of the piecemeal and gradual progress to be attained in the areas of democracy and “civil society”. We wish to shake up these reformist illusions, by showing that in the modern history of the Middle East, all substantive gains, be it in the sphere of the interests of workers and toilers or that of fighting imperialism or the wresting of

³ The Beirut Institute for Critical Analysis and Research.

democratic rights from despotic regimes or of the rights of the oppressed categories, have been the product of revolutions.

Finally, we wish to challenge a deeply embedded prejudice on Middle Eastern society. This prejudice may very well concede that revolution can and does play a historic role in other parts of the planet, but holds that this is **excluded for Muslim societies for the simple reason that the resignation to God's will rampant in Islamic society shuns revolt and revolution in worldly affairs**. Muslims, it is held, bow to existing conditions rather than question an unjust or oppressive social and political order. We believe that this claim is **radically mistaken**. We think the sheer number and frequency of revolutions, revolts, rebellions in Middle Eastern and North African societies throughout the 20th century and in the present refute this Orientalist belief, paradoxically more often advanced by thinkers of the region than outsiders. Let us also stress the following: we will try to demonstrate that not only have revolutions dotted modern Middle Eastern history, but that **they have played a fundamental part in shaping the character of historical development**.

In what follows we will attempt to show the importance of revolutions in the MENA region in the 20th century and this beginning of the 21st on the basis of a summary exposition of five waves of revolution.

1. The constitutional revolutions

In the modern era, revolution came to Asia at the beginning of the 20th century. When it did, it assumed the character of a revolution that aspired to restrict the powers of the monarch of an absolutist state. Crammed, so to speak, into the first decade of the 20th century, revolutions erupted in four countries of Asia that had managed to remain independent (albeit under semi-colonial tutelage) despite the imperialist onslaught of the period: the 1905 Russian revolution; the constitutional revolution of Iran in 1906; the movement for the Second Constitutional Period in Turkey of 1908, which called itself the Revolution of Liberty; and the first Chinese revolution of 1911. A powerful revolution broke out in distant Mexico in 1910 as well. Similar conditions (despite all the differences) had generated similar consequences. To compare the Mexican revolution only with the events in the Ottoman Empire, the Revolution of Liberty flowed out of resistance against the 32-year uninterrupted absolutism of Sultan Abdulhamid II; the Mexican revolution, which started only two years later, targeted the 25-year despotism of a despotic president, Porfirio Díaz.

Two Middle Eastern states were involved in this enormous revolutionary wave of early 20th century. It would be tempting, yet wholly erroneous, to conclude that only two nations, in the modern sense of the term, went through processes similar to the classical bourgeois revolution against absolutism. It should be remembered

that the moribund Ottoman Empire still clung to almost the entire region that is now called the Middle East in addition moreover to a part of the Balkans. Hence, the Revolution of Liberty bore a fully **multinational character**, despite its widespread characterisation by the name of the leadership of the dominant Turkish component, the Young Turks. From the Balkan peoples that were still part of the empire (Macedonians, Albanians, the people of the urban hub that was Salonica etc.) through the ancient peoples of Anatolia (then called Asia Minor) such as Armenians, Greeks and Kurds, all the way to the Arab peoples of the Levant (today's Syria, Lebanon, Palestine), Mesopotamia (Iraq) and the Arabian peninsula (today's Gulf countries and Yemen) were all part of the revolutionary agitation, at different times and to differing degrees. Thus it has to be stressed that between themselves, the Iranian revolution of 1906 and the Ottoman revolution of 1908 threw **the entire gamut of Middle Eastern peoples** into the cauldron of revolutionary activity. This was the period when the whole territory of the Middle East, itself the historical breeding ground of Islam, was introduced to the age of bourgeois revolution.

North Africa, as distinct from the Middle East, had passed through a different historical trajectory. The fate of these two regions (with the notable exception of Iran) had been bound together for centuries due to their common bondage to the Ottoman state. However, with the rise of capitalism in Western Europe culminating in the first steps of colonialism, North Africa, almost a neighbour of Europe, separated from it as it is only by the Mediterranean, became early on a target of this colonialism. Algeria came under French rule in 1830 and Tunisia in 1881, both of them earlier Ottoman dominions. Egypt, the jewel amongst Ottoman possessions in North Africa since its conquest in the 16th century, practically became a British colony in that same year of 1881. Independent Morocco was coveted by the competing forces of Germany and France in late 19th century and finally became a protectorate of the latter country in 1912. As for Libya (Western Tripoli as it was then called), it fell to the lot of Italy after a war in 1911-1912 between this latter country and the Ottoman state. The impact of the revolutionary fervour that gripped the Middle East was not felt in this region, save in Morocco, which came under the pressure of a constitutional transition under the influence of the 1908 Revolution of Liberty in the Ottoman Empire. Thus, it must be underlined that the fate of the two regions of the Middle East and North Africa diverged considerably from the first half of the 19th century to mid-20th century.

The real exception is Egypt in this respect. Although a North African country in strict geographic terms, Egypt is sometimes also considered to be a part of the Middle East of which it is a neighbouring country. It was the first country among the possessions of the Ottoman Empire that was occupied by the forces of Western European capitalism: between 1798 and 1801 Napoleonic armies invaded it briefly.

This was followed by the great leap forward of the country under Mohammed Ali Pasha, as a result of which Egypt became virtually independent though nominally still under Ottoman jurisdiction. As indicated earlier, Egypt fell under first *de facto*, then *de jure* British domination, a fact that was of great importance for the subsequent development of the country.

The first wave of Middle Eastern revolution resulted in the emergence of the social forms and relations of the capitalist mode of production in the region. In the Ottoman state, parliament acquired, albeit in successive stages through a painful process, a central role. Even more important, local capitalism started to take root in the advanced regions of the empire, which created the basis for the subsequent bourgeois revolution of 1919-1923. The national awakening in the entire region, for its part, laid the groundwork for the anti-colonialist insurrection of the next period.

2. Revolution, rebellion, and war against Sykes-Picot colonialism

That World War One is a turning point in the partitioning of the Middle East amongst the imperialist states requires no explanation. After the agreements signed between Britain, France and Russia before the war, two major wartime documents, the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 that aimed to divide the Arab Middle East between Britain and France and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that promised the Zionist movement a “Jewish home” in Palestine are the major milestones here. The so-called “Arab Revolt”, which the Sharif Hussein of Mecca and his sons triggered in collaboration with British imperialism, resulted in the eviction of the Ottomans from all its former territories where the population was Arab in its majority. The end of the war saw the Ottomans out of the game in the region, with the British and the French jockeying for influence. Hussein and his sons were to be made king in different parts of the Arab Middle East. However, the Arab peoples, and, in effect, the peoples of the entire Middle East, would soon rise up against the new colonialist order in a tremendous revolutionary wave.

The first revolution started in Egypt in 1919. The people of Egypt rose up against colonialism in wide masses. A strike wave broke out within this revolution, particularly in the port city of Alexandria. The British retaliated with heavy violence in response to the wrath that expressed itself against colonialism. In effect, this was not the first uprising in Egypt against British colonialism. In 1882, just as Egypt was coming under the colonial domination of Britain, the people had risen under the leadership of Urabi Pasha. Whether the Urabi Pasha insurrection was a full-scale revolution or a revolt with more limited scope is a controversial issue. But whatever the answer to that question, the Urabi Pasha uprising bequeathed a solid heritage of anti-colonial struggle to the 1919 revolution. The revolution that started in 1919 was to be defeated by 1921 and Egypt was to remain a colony of Britain.

Yet, as we shall see shortly, this revolution itself handed down a legacy to the next round of struggle.

The revolution in Egypt was followed by developments in Afghanistan and Turkey. In Afghanistan, the newly crowned King Amanullah engaged in a military expedition against Britain to support the struggle of the Muslims of India. This proved to be the first step towards a more general anti-imperialist stance in Afghanistan's policy. In Turkey, on the other hand, the partitioning of even Anatolia, the heartland of the Ottoman state, where the Turkish and Muslim population were a majority and the occupation of Istanbul, the capital city, led, in 1919, to the rise of what was called the "National Struggle", which in time turned into a hotbed for bourgeois revolution against the Sultan and led to the establishment of a republic in 1923. So the period 1919-1923 is to be properly conceived as a bourgeois revolution accompanying a war for national independence in Turkey.

In 1920, revolution spread to other countries. In March, a revolutionary movement was set off in Syria against the French administration. In April, the Palestinian intelligentsia against British domination and the creeping settler-colonialism of the Zionist movement joined this Syrian movement with a declaration. But the real revolutionary insurrection came in Iraq. This is the country that was the most important prize for British colonialism in the Middle East proper (i.e. excluding Egypt). This country rose in its entire social and ethnic tissue, the Sunni as well as the Shia population, the Kurd and the Arab, the urban sectors as well as the nomadic tribes. Cynically orchestrated by the then Minister of War, Winston Churchill, the British quashed this revolution *manu militari*, not refraining even from the use of chemical weapons.

Parallel to this revolutionary wave, Suud, the leader of the Wahhabi sect, mounted a war against Hussein, the Sharif of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. Suud won this war and proceeded to lay the bases of today's Saudi Arabia. This war bears not an iota of anti-imperialist orientation, was waged under a wholly reactionary leadership, and the outcome, the Saudi state, later became one of the fundamental pillars of the imperialist order of the Middle East. But it is not without importance that it was fought against the man of confidence of the British in the Arab Middle East, Hussein, because this is emblematic of how imperialist colonialism was a clear target for all the peoples of the Middle East at that historical moment.

An echo to the Middle Eastern revolutionary wave of 1919-1920 was heard in an insurrection that broke out in a remote corner of Northern Africa. An insurgency using guerrilla techniques erupted in the Rif region of Morocco, a region populated by Berber tribes, under the leadership of Abdelkrim against the military penetration of French and Spanish influence. Having put the colonialists on their defence between 1923 and 1926, this movement also resulted in the establishment

of a short-lived Republic of Rif. If one remembers that to this day Morocco has remained a kingdom, one can assess better the historical cost of the ultimate defeat of Abdelkrim insurgency.

The context of the revolutionary wave of 1919-1920

One of the sources of the revolutionary wave that gripped the entire Middle East like wildfire was the October revolution, of which we are now celebrating the centenary. Its influence on the Middle Eastern revolution was transmitted through diverse channels. The most important of these channels was, no doubt, the policy adopted by the Bolsheviks vis-a-vis the peoples of the East and of Asia. Soon after coming to power, the Bolsheviks adopted a very clear political line that would bring the peoples of the East under the spell of the revolution. In the forefront of this policy was the principle of the “**right of nations to self-determination**” that Lenin had persistently (and in total independence from the ideas of the US president Wilson) fought to integrate into the Marxist programme since the very beginning of the 20th century. This naturally seemed to be a very significant support to the eyes of the nationalists of the Middle East, who were faced with the concrete prospect of colonial rule. There was then the drive to “**put an end to secret diplomacy**”, which was implemented directly by Leon Trotsky, the first Foreign Minister of the new Soviet state, who disclosed the secret agreements signed by the Tsarist state for the whole world to see. Thus the public of the Middle East had the chance to pry into many a secret document, from the plan to turn Istanbul (Constantinople) to the Tsar all the way to Sykes-Picot. As for the **proletarian internationalism** of the Bolsheviks, which, to the extent that it was implemented in a consistent manner, was transformed into a principle that challenged colonialism for those who were struggling against it.

The second channel through which the October revolution had an impact on the Middle Eastern revolution was the **Communist International** (Comintern), established in 1919. As opposed to the Second International, where powerful tendencies that supported colonialism on the basis of the spurious claim that it was a mechanism of transmission of “advanced” Western civilisation to “backward” peoples rubbed elbows with revolutionary tendencies, Comintern approached colonies and semi-colonies in a manner that was fully assuring. The most important initiative of Comintern in this respect was the convening of the **Baku Congress of Eastern Peoples** in September 1920. This meeting, attended by thousands of delegates in the name of Muslim peoples, along with others such as Georgians or Armenians, transmitted to the entire world a resolute appeal of insurgency against imperialism, in particular the hegemonic British imperialist power.

The emancipatory impact of the October revolution may also be seen in its en-

couragement of the formation of working class organisations and the leap forward witnessed in the establishment of the communist movement in the countries of the Middle East. The British High Commissioner in Egypt even talked about the “Bolshevik tendency” of the 1919-1921 revolution in that country.⁴ In Anatolia, the heartland of the emerging Turkish republic, one witnesses a serious level of organising on the part of both communists and the so-called Green Army, a home-bred variant of anti-colonialist politics influenced by communism (the name was manifestly inspired by the Red Army). Currents influenced by Bolshevism appeared as a force to be reckoned with until the bourgeois leadership of the National Struggle repressed them to silence in the wake of the massacre of Mustafa Suphi, chairman of the newly-founded Communist Party of Turkey, and his comrades (“the fifteen”) in January 1921.

Still another dimension was the support extended to anti-imperialist movements in various countries of the region. The war waged by the Red Army against the Whites even made possible the formation of a short-lived Socialist Republic of Gilan on the shores of the Caspian Sea in Iran. But the importance of Soviet policy gained its real flesh and blood in the support it provided to new administrations that confronted imperialism against British power, among which stand out Afghanistan under Amanullah, Iran under the new Shah, and the Turkey of the Grand National Assembly under Mustafa Kemal’s leadership. A striking product of this policy was the successive signing of treaties of peace and friendship between the Soviet state and each of these new administrations in the course of the first quarter of 1921.

This discussion may be summed up by saying that while the Soviet revolution has usually been taken up in its aspect of acting as a spur on revolution in Western Europe (Germany, Hungary, Finland, Italy, Scotland etc.), and rightly so, its impact on the emergence of a Middle Eastern revolution is no less important. The difference, of course, is that whereas in the West what was on the agenda was proletarian revolution, in the Middle East the major question on the agenda was national liberation against imperialist colonialism.

The legacy of the revolutionary wave of 1919-1920

We observe that, apart from the case of Turkey, the 1919-1920 revolutionary wave that erupted against French and, particularly, British colonial ambitions, was defeated. However, despite this defeat, this revolutionary wave made a serious imprint on subsequent historical development in the region. For one thing, the culmination of the National Struggle in Turkey in the victorious bourgeois revolution and the foundation of a republic in 1923 laid the ground, for the first time in the history

⁴ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace. The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989, p. 419.

of the Middle East, for the overcoming of pre-capitalist fetters in this country and opening the way to a rapid development of the capitalist mode of production proper: thanks to this leap forward, Turkey is today the most advanced capitalist country in the Middle East, with the notable exception of Israel, which, though, should be regarded an anomaly for the region. Due to the characteristics it developed through this process, Turkey is (or rather was, until recently) a showcase of Western imperialism in the Middle East that was pointed to as the embodiment of a good instance of capitalist “modernisation”.

Secondly, as part of this wave, three countries, i.e. Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, found the possibility of developing as relatively independent countries aloof to the impact of colonialism in the next period, thanks also to Soviet support. On the basis of its idiosyncratic historical circumstances and the competition between Russia and Britain, Afghanistan had always been able to protect its independence, but the Ottoman state and Iran had been downgraded to the status of semi-colonies around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. The eruption of the whole region in 1919 made possible the reversal of this well-entrenched trend and the subsequent development of these two countries as independent national states rather than semi-colonies or even fully-fledged colonies.

Thirdly, a legacy remained alive even in those countries where the revolutionary wave was defeated. In particular in Egypt, where the revolution had erupted with an especially powerful momentum, patriotic forces continued to struggle against British colonialism until the breaking out of a new revolution in the post-World War II environment. Iraq, where the revolution had been quite powerful as well, obtained its independence in 1936. More generally, the 1919-1920 revolutionary wave proved to imperialist forces that colonialism in the Middle East was bound to create serious headaches for them. Palestine is the exception here. We will briefly touch upon this exception below under the heading “two special cases” (the other special case predictably being Kurdistan).

3. The Arab national revolution

The post-World War II period saw the emergence of two diametrically opposed tendencies in the Middle East: while this period witnessed the unfettered integration of the two countries that had experienced a bourgeois revolution in the first quarter of the century, i.e. Turkey and Iran, with imperialism, in the Arab world an anti-colonial or “national” revolution would spread from country to country. The fountainhead for this revolution that may be labelled the “Arab national revolution” was the Egyptian revolution of 1952-1954.

We recall that Egypt was not only a very special geography in ancient history, but also a country that had played a very special role in the modern history of the

Arabs. The first revolt in the Arab world against Ottoman supremacy had come from Egypt, under the administration of Mohammed Ali Pasha. Following the penetration of British colonialism into the Arab world, Egypt had experienced two revolutionary upheavals: the Urabi Pasha insurrection of 1882 and the revolution that erupted in 1919 both attested to the fact that the people of Egypt were not going to settle down for long as a colonised people. 37 years had separated the Urabi Pasha insurrection and the 1919 revolution. Only 33 years separated the latter and the new revolution of 1952. The Egyptian people were rising in revolt for the third time in a matter of 70 years. With all due respect for the Coptic minority of Egypt, the Muslim masses accused by many of subservience to existing circumstances, deemed incapable of insurgency, was going out on the streets for the third time, despite the losses suffered in the first two instances! In the interwar period, the main contradiction of Egyptian society had been between the ruling classes of Egypt, who kowtowed to British colonialism, and their mouthpiece, the royal institution, and the working masses and the various intermediary class forces that were decidedly anti-colonialist.

The popular insurrection of 1952 resulted in the setting of Cairo on fire. For this reason this episode has gone down in history as the “Cairo fire”. The people’s uprising against the British would set in motion the intervention of the “Free Officers” movement that had been formed in the armed forces, leading to the taking of power jointly by General Naguib and Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser. Following a period of instability that lasted for two years, the radical wing of the Free Officers movement under Gamal Abdel Nasser took control. King Farouk was dethroned and British colonialism was evicted out of the country. But the real test for the Nasser administration was to come in 1956 in the form of the Suez crisis. When Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, under British control since 1869, the year of its construction, British and French armies attempted to occupy Egypt. A host of international factors, first and foremost Soviet support, but also the reluctance of the US, out to establish a different kind of hegemony after its rise to dominance in the wake of World War II, to support the British-French alliance resulted in the victory of Nasser over his foes, which naturally turned him overnight into a hero for the masses of the entire Arab world.

After this episode, Egypt was to become the site for an entirely new experiment, one that was wholeheartedly supported by the Soviet Union. Alongside the toppling of the royal family and the establishment of the republic and the eviction of the British colonisers, a radical agrarian reform, the nationalisation of whatever existed in terms of industry and extensive public investment in new industry, quotas for workers and peasants in the national assembly (with carefully engineered subservience to Nasser’s policies assured) and a regime secular to the extent possible in an Arab

country—all these measures were accompanied by the rise of Nasser to international prominence as a result of the anti-imperialist character of his foreign policy, a systematic effort towards the unity of the Arab nation and the inclusion of Nasser in the leadership of the so-called “non-aligned movement”, along with such figures as the Yugoslav leader Tito, the Indian Nehru, and the Indonesian Sukarno. After the Cuban revolution of 1958-1959, Nasser would also collaborate, during the decade of the 1960s, with revolutionary movements as well.⁵ This new orientation was to be dubbed the “non-capitalist path to development” in Soviet theoretical terminology and be labelled “Arab socialism” for purposes of propaganda.

Needless to say, despite the partial gains brought to the peasantry and the special treatment accorded to the workers, what was being built was anything but socialism. Nasser was trying to force the pace of capitalist development in Egypt, using the state, in Engels’ words, as the “collective ideal capitalist”, albeit in a pretty radical manner, just as Japan and Germany in the second half of the 19th century and many other late comers, among which Turkey, Brazil, Argentina and Mexico in the environment of the Great Depression of the 1930s, did before him. In effect, after Nasser’s death in 1970, Egypt would rapidly return to a “normal” capitalist path under Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mobarak. The debate on “socialism” aside, the excitement created by the anti-imperialism of the Egyptian revolution in the Arab countries of the Middle East, where the sway of colonialism had been the order of the day since early 20th century, if not even earlier, and in the countries of North Africa, where at least in some, colonialism went all the way back to the 19th century, was to result in the spread of this national revolution into other countries by leaps and bounds.

However, before passing on to this extension of the Egyptian revolution as an Arab national revolution, we should first look at another revolution, which had an independent dynamics from what happened in Egypt. The gigantic struggle of the people of Algeria against French colonialism between 1954 and 1962 has customarily been called the “Algerian war”, an appellation no doubt formulated from the French point of view. But just like the American revolution of late 18th century, this was not only a war against an overbearing colonial power, but at the same time a revolution. Algeria had been brought under the yoke of French colonialism in 1830. In this long period of servitude, capitalism had developed in agriculture in Algeria on the basis of the expropriation of the Algerian peasants by the white-settler colonialists of French and Italian origin, called “*pièdes noirs*”. The insurgency against French colonialism was thus also a rebellion against this type of class relations. Hence the so-called Algerian war, through the heroic struggle of the people of the

5 See Roger Faligot, *Tricontinentale. Quand Che Guevarai Ben Barka, Cabral, Castro et Hô Chi Minh préparaient la révolution mondiale (1964-1968)*, Paris: La Découverte, 2013, *passim*.

country against the cruel oppressor that was the French state, meant the accomplishment, at one and the same time, of a revolution that was anti-colonial, as well as one that totally recast production relations in agriculture. Algeria went farther than Egypt and partially put an end to private property in agricultural land through a cooperative movement and opened up new vistas of the conquest of power to the poor peasantry. Yet after the ouster of the leader of the revolution, Ben Bella, by the more conservative group led by Houari Boumedién, Algeria gradually returned to a “normal” capitalism. But for a period of time, Algeria also became prominent among those countries that were characterised, according to the official view, as “Arab socialism”.

The Algerian revolution was born to a great extent independently of the Egyptian revolution, although, no doubt, the two revolutions reinforced each other in a chain of mutual encouragement, providing a virtuous circle that represented the inbuilt permanence of revolution in the modern age. The Algerian revolution even had a historic precedent in 1945, when France had quashed the Sétif uprising by murdering thousands of rebels. In contrast to this kind of autonomy on the part the Algerian revolution, Egypt and Nasser definitely played the part of a source of inspiration in all the other countries that partook of the Arab national revolution. This is true for the Baath movements of Iraq and Syria. Although the history of the Baath Party goes back all the way to the immediate post-World War II period, the Iraq revolution of 1958, the first great leap forward of Baath, was so much influenced by its cousin the Egyptian revolution that it even borrowed the name “Free Officers” for its revolutionary junta within the military. This revolution was to bring down the Hashemite dynasty that was in complete collusion with US-British imperialism (along with the equally servile administrations of Turkey, Iran and Pakistan); in other words, it ousted King Faisal and his much-hated prime minister Nuri es Saïd (darling of the equally pro-American prime minister of Turkey at the time, Adnan Menderes, who himself was going to be brought down by a coup in 1960) and conquered power through a gradual process.

The Egyptian revolution had its impact on other Arab countries as well. In Libya, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi brought down King Idris and established a “socialist people’s republic” in 1969. Yemen was divided into two, with a Democratic People’s Republic (namesake for the pro-USSR regimes of Eastern Europe at the time) established in 1970. In Oman, on the other hand, the Dhofar rebellion that had broken out in 1962 was to radicalise after 1967 and fight as a guerrilla movement targeting the establishment of “socialism” until 1976.

The context of the Arab national revolution

The Arab national revolution, just as any other social and political incident of a certain magnitude, naturally saw the light of day under very definite concrete circumstances. Four different factors may be adduced that made the post-World War II environment propitious for an Arab revolution.

The first is the great worldwide prestige that the Soviet Union acquired through the resistance of its people and its armed forces to Nazi barbarism, defeating the brutal military machine of this regime and thus liberating Eastern and Central Europe all the way to Berlin. Thus, the USSR had become, in the aftermath of World War II, an alternative to the imperialist-capitalist system in the eyes of the whole world. This made it easy for colonies and semi-colonies to lean against the USSR in their struggle against imperialism. The close alliance of the Nasser regime, in particular, as well as of the Baath regimes in Iraq and Syria, with the Soviet Union should be interpreted precisely in the light of this more general trend.

The second important development was the triumph of revolutions in many other countries, the abolition of capitalism consequent to this, and the initiation of a process of socialist construction. In particular the experience of countries such as Yugoslavia (1944), Vietnam (1945), and China (1949) proved that victory against imperialism is possible and acted as examples to the rest of the colonies and semi-colonies.

Third, with the contribution of the first two factors, this period witnessed the disintegration of the colonial empires through a process called “decolonisation” around the globe. Britain, France, and Belgium, in particular, moved to recognise the independence of their former colonies, conserving as much as they could their previous prerogatives, through peaceful agreements in certain cases or capitulating to rebellions and revolutions in others. (Portugal, on the other hand, refused to abandon its African colonies until the 1970s and paid for its stubbornness in the form of fighting hopeless colonial wars in Africa in the 1960s and early 1970s and in the form of a radical revolution domestically in 1974, which brought down not only the colonial empire, but came to the verge of toppling the entire bourgeois state.) The decolonisation process met with great challenges in many regions or countries. For instance, the independence of India was finally recognised after three centuries of British yoke, but at the cost of the death of millions of people and the division of the country along religious lines (India and Pakistan, later itself to suffer the separation of Bangladesh). The independence of Cyprus was recognised, but at the cost of the sowing of seeds of hostility between the two communities, Greek and Turkish Cypriot, and in the process hiding from view and clinging to the British military bases. The independence of Congo was recognised but at the cost of having the leader of the movement of independence, Patrice Lumumba, killed by the

wing of the leadership sold out to imperialism, represented by the likes of Mobutu, Kasavutu, and Bomboko. In the case of some colonies, the imperialist powers never yielded until they were forcibly evicted. Algeria and Vietnam are the two most prominent examples. It is no coincidence that the two bloodiest wars of the second half of the 20th century visited these countries. Egypt, as well, is a colony that was hard to renounce, due to the importance, most of all, of the Suez Canal.

Fourth, the hegemonic power within the imperialist hierarchy changed hands in the post-World War II period. Having held the hegemony of imperialism from the 19th century on, Britain had to turn over the privilege to the United States. For a number of reasons, the latter country was an imperialist power that had developed primarily not as a colonial empire but on the basis of open markets and realised, once the war was over, that its own style of domination was inescapably the correct method in the age of “decolonisation”. It is for this reason that it did not support the British and the French during the Suez crisis.

It is clear that the Arab national revolution enjoyed the outcome of a series of factors outside its own purview. On the other hand, if the revolutions in Egypt or Algeria had not occurred (it should be remembered that both countries were considered as indispensable colonies by their colonial power), the whole physiognomy of the Arab world would have been different today.

The legacy of the Arab national revolution

Because the Arab national revolution created a series of regimes that later degenerated and decomposed from within, it is easy to be oblivious to the historic successes this revolution gave existence to originally. It cannot be denied, above all, that the most spectacular instances of this revolution made it possible for the Arab people of Egypt and Algeria to cast off colonial oppression, that the revolution put an end to royal regimes that acted almost as stooges of imperialism in Egypt, Iraq, and Libya, that in many countries it made it possible for the peasantry to partially improve their lot thanks to agrarian reform, that it introduced secularism into the Arab world, albeit marked with grave limitations, that it accorded women a status that was clearly an improvement (relatively speaking, of course) upon the kind of servitude under which they continue living in the Gulf countries (one need only remember the sexual apartheid in Saudi Arabia). A comparison between the Gulf countries, untouched by this revolution, and those countries which came under the control of Nasserism or Baath will make it clear as daylight what kind of gains the Arab national revolutions brought to these societies.

From the point of view of the overall theses of this article, it is simply undeniable that the Nasser revolution dictated the destiny of the entire Arab world for a full quarter of a century. Here the idea that **revolution is the locomotive of history**

finds its full confirmation.

4. The Iranian revolution

As a rule, revolutions come in international waves. This rule was confirmed in the case of the Middle East. We have seen that all three waves of revolution that we have looked into came either almost in synchronised manner in different countries (the first two waves) or in quick and contagious succession. However, there have existed in history “solitary revolutions” as well. The best-known such revolutions are the Paris Commune of 1871 and, more partially, the Spanish revolution of 1931-39.⁶ A more recent instance of a solitary revolution occurred in the Middle East: the Iranian revolution of 1979.

It is not correct to view the Iranian revolution as an “Islamic revolution” from its inception. The working class as an organised force also played an important part in that revolution. The role played by the diverse wings of the socialist movement was also non-negligible. The Iranian revolution is, at bottom, the overthrow of the Shah’s regime, a regime that had come to be the most powerful and loyal ally of imperialism in the Muslim Middle East in the post-World War II period, on the basis of an alliance *cum* competition between, on the one hand Islamist, and, on the other, socialist forces.⁷ Once the Shah was overthrown and the revolution triumphed politically, the nature of the new regime became the bone of contention between the two sides. The two years that followed 1979 saw the Islamist wing wage an all out war on the socialist movement. Due to the errors of the left, first and foremost those of the Stalinists of the Tudeh party, victory was almost offered to the mullahs of Khomeini on a golden platter. The Islamic Republic of Iran is the fruit of this second struggle, of a counter revolution, so to speak, on the very terrain of the revolution.

The fact that the Iranian revolution ultimately produced a regime run by mullahs, one that can in no way be considered to be progressive by any historical yardstick, led many to question whether this was a veritable revolution from the very beginning. In order to answer this question, we need to remember that nearly all revolutions in the Middle East have gone through the same kind of struggle with Islamist movements; in other words, this was not in any way peculiar to the Iranian revolution. In the 1952-1954 revolution in Egypt, the year 1953 in particular was spent in a struggle between the Free Officers movement and the Ikhwan (the Muslim Brotherhood), already a powerful movement then. Had it not been the Free Officers but Ikhwan who won this battle, the Egyptian revolution would have taken a

⁶ We have seen that the Urabi revolution represents a clear example of a solitary revolution in the Arab world.

⁷ On the Iranian revolution see Araz Bağban, “Bir Şah, Bir Devrim, Bir İmam: 1979 İran Devrimi”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 21-22, Winter 2015, pp. 58-92.

totally different turn. It therefore follows that we cannot determine whether a socio-political event is a revolution **solely on the basis of its outcome**. Obviously, exactly the same is true of the two Arab revolutions of 2011. Ikhwan in Egypt and its newly won sister party in Tunisia, Ennahda, were able to take control of the state born of the revolution into their hands. Even if this control had become durable, this would not have given us license to state that the Egyptian and Tunisian events of 2011 had not carried the characteristics of a revolution from the very beginning. Quite the contrary is, in fact, the case: more than any other revolution in the history of the Middle East, these two events bore all the hallmarks of a classic case of revolution. It is really very difficult to foresee where revolutions will end up for the simple reason that these are revolutions, in other words, all power relations are thrown up into the air and it is never easy to see beforehand how they will crystallize in the end.

The impact of the Iranian revolution

The impact of the Iranian revolution confirms the main thesis of this article in a devious manner. This revolution created **an immense impetus for the Islamist movement not only in the Middle East but throughout the Islamic world**. In precisely the same manner as Egypt under Nasser set off revolutions that provided for the relative development of anti-imperialism, republicanism, secularism, agrarian reform, women's rights etc. in other parts of the Arab world, the Iranian revolution, although it occurred in a Shia country, set off a mushrooming series of movements in countries all around the Islamic world, whether Shia or Sunni, that aimed at recasting state and society in line with the precepts of Islam. So here, too, historical development was fully marked by a revolution. Whether you consider the events of 1979-1981 in Iran as a revolution or a counter-revolution or as a complex synthesis of the two, as we are inclined to do, the upshot is that the history of the Middle East and North Africa in the three decades that followed has borne the imprint of this gigantic historic event.

Hence, at this stage, we can sum up the historic development in the following simple manner: Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was the guiding light with respect to the direction to be adopted in the Middle East in the interwar years, from the 1920s roughly to the 1950s. In the post-World War II environment, that is, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the standard bearer was Nasser's Egypt. From the 1980s to 2011, on the other hand, the rising trend was set by the Iran of Khomeini and his successors.

5. The Arab revolution – without qualifiers

The Tunisian revolution that erupted at the end of 2010 and triumphed with the ouster of Zin al Abidin ben Ali on 14 January 2011 and the Egyptian revolution

that started on 25 January only ten days after the overthrow of the Tunisian dictator and itself gained a first victory by bringing down Hosni Mubarak in a matter of 18 days heralded the opening of a new period, not only in the Middle East, but around the whole world. For the first time since 1979, that is, since the Iranian revolution and the victorious Nicaraguan revolution in Central America, the world witnessed revolutions that won. Like the first three revolutionary waves that the Middle East experienced in the 20th century, these revolutions also bore an international character. The revolution would quickly spread to other Arab countries: Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria (exclusively the first six months) were all shaken by popular insurgencies. The tremor created by the revolution would be felt in other countries as well (Jordan, Morocco, even the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia). Moreover, the impact of the Arab revolution did not remain confined to the Middle East and North Africa. Many countries, among them Spain and Greece in southern Europe (2011), Israel (Tel Aviv, summer 2011), the United States (Occupy Wall Street, autumn and winter 2011), Turkey (Gezi, summer 2013), Brazil (same period as Turkey), and a series of Balkan countries (most importantly the working class uprising of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014) became the scene of uprisings under the spell of this great revolutionary wave. This was the third wave of the world revolution, the first having been lived after the October revolution and the second during and immediately after the Second World War.

The 2011-2013 Arab revolution has been analyzed at length in the pages of the Turkish version of this journal, *Devrimci Marksizm*.⁸ We will only recall some major points. First, when we say that the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions were victorious, what we mean by this is that they were successful as **political revolutions**. (In Egypt, as is obvious, this success was reversed through the Bonapartist coup of General al Sisi in July 2013.) Both revolutions were able to overthrow the political regime they were fighting against. However, scrutinised more closely, they display the dynamics of **permanent revolution**. Both started from within the working class and on the basis of problems that were of an economic character and in both cases forms of struggle peculiar to the working class (strikes, priority of workers' organisations, unionisation etc.) were prominent aspects of the revolution. If that is the case, then it was possible for these revolutions to be **converted into social revolutions or, what is the same thing in this context, assume a socialist character**. But the working class was not able to rise to a hegemonic position within the revolution. The reason was, in the last analysis, the absence, in both cases, of a revolutionary proletarian party. It is because of this contradiction between the potential

8 Sungur Savran, "Arap Devriminin Vaadleri ve Zaafıları", *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 13-14, Summer 2011, pp. 133-185 and Sungur Savran, "Arap Devriminin Sorunları", *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 17-18, Winter-Spring 2013, pp. 105-146.

and the final limitations of these revolutions that, in opposition to appellations such as “constitutional revolutions”, “revolutions against colonialism”, “Arab national revolution” attributed to the successive waves of the revolution in the Middle East, we have contented ourselves with an ironic qualification for the fifth wave: “without qualifiers”.

Secondly the Egyptian revolution was one of the most powerful mass revolutionary upheavals witnessed in history. In its total life span (so far, it needs to be added) of two and a half years, it extended throughout the country, fought three different power structures (Mobarak, the Supreme Military Council, and the Ikhwan government of Mohammed Morsi), and, moreover, brought down each and every one of them. But in the end, in the absence of a true proletarian party, the stalemate between the Ikhwan camp and the revolution without a proper leadership led to the grabbing of power by al Sisi, the chief of staff of the armed forces, who adopted a Bonapartist stance between the two camps. After having consolidated his own power, al Sisi proceeded to juggernaut the gains of the revolution and return to the *ancien régime*. The release from prison of the former dictator, Hosni Mobarak, last March is but the bitter act of registration of the defeat of the revolution. However, it is still too early to reach the conclusion that the Egyptian revolution has exhausted all its possibilities. As the economic crisis deepens and the al Sisi administration capitulates to the IMF line, the class dynamics of the revolution may yet again be reawakened.

Third, because the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions have not reached what could be considered a stable outcome, the prospects for the near future have not yet been defined. The Arab revolution has incited, at one and the same time, the working class, Islamism and the military, though the latter not in a Nasserite direction but in a reactionary orientation. The future is uncertain. In other words, as opposed to the previous revolutionary waves in the history of the Middle East, the fifth wave does not yet possess a well-defined legacy.

Two special cases

Because two peoples among the nations of the Middle East have been confronted with very special types of oppression throughout the 20th century, their history has displayed a *sui generis* evolution, with their development diverging in general from the overall trajectory of the region at large. These two peoples are the Palestinians and the Kurds. The former, the Palestinians, lost their territory to the state of Israel in 1948, a product of an international alliance that included all the great powers of the world, including the Stalinist USSR. The part played by British imperialism in support of the Zionist movement, which based itself on a plan for Jews dispersed around the world to return to their supposed “historic homeland”, Palestine, and

establish their own state, was decisive here. The territory where the latter people, the Kurds, lived and had been living since time immemorial, on the other hand, was partitioned, in the immediate post-World War I period, between four regional states. The Kurds lived as an oppressed nation throughout the 20th centuries in all these four countries, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. In some of these countries (Turkey is the prime example here), even their existence was denied, while in others (Syria is the culprit here), they were even left without access to so much as an identity card that would have recognised them the right to proper legal citizenship of the country in which they were born.

These special circumstances, in other words, the fact that their homeland had been forcibly wrested from them, led the Palestinian and Kurdish peoples to sustain a ceaseless struggle for their national rights and freedoms throughout the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. In a certain sense, these two peoples are **unremittingly in revolt**. This state of permanent revolt has at times taken an armed form (guerrilla war) and at times great uprisings of the people at large.

The revolt agenda of these two peoples has not kept time with the revolutionary calendar of the other countries. Although it may safely be said that, for the Palestinians, Arab revolutions (in particular the Egyptian revolution led by Nasser) played a very stimulating role, the Palestinian people at times determined their own revolutionary agenda independently of the rest of the Arab world, as in 1936-39 during the great revolt, or engaged in serious revolutionary uprisings even though the Arab revolution at large was already suffering decomposition, such as the First and the Second Intifadas (respectively 1987-1993 and 2001-2005).⁹

The case of the Kurds is different. The Palestinian cause, however much betrayed, has the support, at least in lip service form, of the entire Arab nation. The Kurdish people, on the other hand, is oppressed under the yoke of states established by the three major national groups of the Middle East, the Arabs, the Farsi, and the Turks,. Hence even the revolutionary or, more generally left, movements of these countries have not supported the Kurdish cause consistently (although there are some notable exceptions such as the Communist Party of Iraq in the wake of the 1958 revolution or the Workers' Party of Turkey (TIP in its Turkish acronym) in the 1960s, as well as some revolutionary groups from the 1970s all the way to the present in the latter country). For this reason, the Kurdish movement for national emancipation has had to act independently even of movements for socialism or revolution. Inevitably, there has been a phase lag between the calendars of the Kurdish revolutionary movement and those of its Turkish, Arab or Farsi counterparts.¹⁰

⁹ See the article by Kutlu Dane in this issue.

¹⁰ See Şiar Rişvanoğlu, “‘Çar Hawar’: Kürdistan’da İsyân ve Özgürlük Geleneğinin/Politik örgütlenmelerin Kısa Tarihi”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 3, March 2007, pp. 27-71 and “‘Çar Hawar’

However, overall, the struggle of both peoples has frequently taken revolutionary forms. As in the case of the other peoples of the region, the fate of these two peoples has been determined by these revolutionary leaps as well. Hence the Palestinian and Kurdish cases should be studied apart because of their peculiar dynamics, but rather than refuting the main theses of this article, the Palestinian and Kurdish cases forcibly support them.

Conclusion

The picture depicted in this presentation must have brought out some points of extreme importance with incontrovertible clarity.

The following may comfortably be said about the first of the ideas advanced at the beginning of this presentation: the proposition of Marxism that revolution is the locomotive of history is confirmed for the MENA region, as it has been for Western Europe, Latin America, Russia, China etc. Bourgeois revolutions, anti-colonial revolutions, political revolutions etc. have indelibly marked the historical development of the region since the beginning of the 20th century.

Secondly, all the revolutionary waves that have been taken up have determined fully the period that followed them. We see this in the formation of a bourgeois state and society after the 1908 and 1923 revolutions experienced in Turkey (for the former, it is better to say almost the entire region). We see this in the fact that despite the defeat of the revolution in 1919-1920, the Arab world persisted in following the cause advocated by that revolutionary wave. We see this most clearly in the imprint left on the history of the entire Arab world for a full quarter of a century by the Egyptian revolution under the leadership of Nasser. The same may be said of the Iranian revolution despite its much more controversial character. If all this is true, then the “realism” argument of reformists proves to be totally unfounded. By abusing the appearance, in the eyes of the popular masses, of difficulty, or even impossibility, surrounding revolution in times of “normality”, this argument contends that gradual and piecemeal reform is much more “realistic” than the dream of revolutionary triumph. The history of the Middle East throughout the 20th and at this beginning of the 21st centuries demonstrates, on the contrary, that “realism” requires that we be revolutionaries. Whoever wants society to change **must** have recourse to revolution. Reforms can only be secured in the overall field defined by revolutions.

Third, we observe that ideas dismissing revolution and revolt as an alternative to the ills of social life in Muslim society are refuted. We simply ask: which other geography in the world has had as regular and frequent revolutionary upheavals

(2): “İşyan ve İmhanın Tarihi” by the same author in *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 10-11, Winter 2009-2010, pp. 138-165. See also the Editorial Board of *Devrimci Marksizm*, “Kürt Savaşının 30 yılı”, *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 21-22, Winter 2015, pp. 12-22.

as the Middle East and North Africa since the beginning of the 20th century? Each wave that we have taken up is separated from the previous one by at most a quarter of a century. It is but one hundred years that separate the constitutional revolutions of Iran and Turkey in 1906 and 1908 respectively from the Arab revolution of 2011. A full five revolutionary waves have dotted these one hundred years! When taken individually, many Middle Eastern countries can be attributed ordinal numbers for their revolutions, such as the “first, second etc.” revolutions of Russia and China. Egypt has so far experienced at least three (1919, 1952, 2011), perhaps even four (1882) revolutions. Iraq, Iran and Turkey at least two.

The Middle East has been part of all worldwide waves of revolution. For the post-October first wave, the Euro-centric view has stubbornly dwelled on the revolutions of Europe, at most including the second Chinese revolution of 1925-27 since that is of course too big to hide. Yet a revolutionary tempest took the Middle East in its grip in the two years of 1919-1920, exactly the same years in which the much debated *Biennio Rosso* was experienced in Italy! The second wave of world revolution emerged during World War II. The Middle East fully joined this wave through the revolutions of Egypt in 1952 and that of Algeria in 1954. What started the third wave of world revolution in 2011 was the Arab revolution itself! The Middle East joined what we would term the “quasi revolutionary” wave of social and political unrest witnessed in and around 1968 through the rise of a gigantic mass movement in Turkey, culminating in the unarmed insurrection of the working class in June 1970, and at least the rise of the Palestinian guerrilla movement in the Arab world. In addition, Egypt and Algeria contributed, at least logistically, to the Tricontinental movement established under the leadership of the Cuban revolution.¹¹

Another aspect of the question is that the international character of truly revolutionary movements can be observed in all the instances of revolution in the Middle East, excepting the case of the Iranian revolution.

Finally, although the revolutions in the MENA region always started out as bourgeois and/or anti-colonial revolutions, they have over time moved toward a synthesis of this first type of revolution and social revolution in favour of the working masses, acquiring a tinge of permanent revolution. The first two generations were exclusively focused on the solution of bourgeois transition and anti-colonialism. With the Nasser and Algerian revolutions, the social question became part of the agenda: agrarian reform, the challenge against private property in land, a special status for workers and peasants etc. We have already discussed the special role of the working class in the 2011 Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, leading to a logic of permanent revolution.

¹¹ See the source cited in footnote 5.

The 21st century will certainly show us that the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the rest of the world, will march forward with and through revolutions. The Arab revolution of 2011-2013, the popular rebellion in Turkey following the Gezi incident in 2013, Rojava in Western Kurdistan in its initial period and the Kurdish *serhildan* (Kurdish for intifada) in Turkey on the occasion of the defence of Kobani against ISIS in 2014 are only the beginning. The MENA region is no longer grappling with colonialism as it did in a good part of the 20th century. The problem for this geography now can be summed up as the trials and tribulations of the laboring masses of the region, who cannot enjoy the fruits of the natural resources that their countries wield because of the exploitation by imperialism and their domestic ruling classes in constant collusion with imperialism, who go unemployed and suffer miserable conditions. Then we can safely conclude that, whatever the level of consciousness of the masses at a given moment in these countries, in the future, when revolutions or revolts erupt, the class question will inevitably be at the heart of the conflict. The revolution in the Middle East will either conquer as a socialist revolution or be defeated.