

Canada's pseudo-left Socialist Project propagandizes for US imperialism in Iraq

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Canada's Socialist Project, led by the pseudo-left academics Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, is promoting an article on US imperialist policy towards its Kurdish allies in the Mideast war that was co-authored by a former US State Department official under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidencies.

Entitled "A critical turning point in Washington's partnership with Iraqi Kurds: the Kurdish peshmerga 'our boots on the ground,'" the article was prominently republished on Socialist Project's website on August 15 and remains there. In the intervening three-and-a-half weeks, the article has apparently provoked no adverse comment, let alone protest, from anyone within this ostensibly "Marxist" group, although the article forthrightly argues from the standpoint of the US "national interest" in Iraq and the Mideast—a region that for decades has been a focus of Washington's intrigues and wars because of its abundant oil resources.

Authors David Phillips, a former senior advisor to the State Department long implicated in developing the imperialist "human rights" propaganda Washington has used to justify one war of aggression after another, and Stan Salett, the head of the Philanthropy Network, argue that Washington can best achieve its goals by strengthening its military support for the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq and lending its backing to a separate Kurdish state.

The promotion of such an article makes clear the true character of Socialist Project. Like pseudo-left groups internationally, it is oriented to and rooted in privileged sections of the middle class that have been integrated into pro-war imperialist politics over recent years and are now open advocates for the intensification of militarist violence.

Rather than seeking to expose the propaganda used to legitimize such imperialist outrages as the invasion of Iraq, the bombardment of Libya and the fomenting of a civil war in Syria, as any genuine socialist should, Socialist Project and its co-thinkers around the world have become key conduits for "human rights" imperialism.

Nothing in the article's content would have prevented Phillips from submitting it as a briefing note to his former State Department superiors. After pointing to stepped-up meetings and a memorandum of understanding between Washington and the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government), Phillips and Salett write, "The U.S. must urgently clarify the nature and extent of military aid. Moreover, the broader US-KRG relationship needs clarification."

Later, the authors conclude, "Partnership must go beyond military measures. The KRG needs money and political support, as conditions in Iraq deteriorate. Supporting the Kurds is in America's national interest. It also provides an opportunity to right the wrongs of history."

Imperialism and the Middle East

To suggest, as Socialist Project clearly does, that US imperialism can in any way assist in advancing the democratic and social aspirations of the Kurds or any of the peoples of the Middle East is absurd on its face. This is, after all, the world's greatest and most rapacious imperialist power—a state that over the past quarter-century has waged a series of wars in the region that have claimed the lives of millions and destroyed entire societies. In pursuit of its reckless bid to secure hegemony over the Middle East, the United States has fanned the flames of sectarian division, backing ethnic-based and Islamic extremist groups in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere.

To advance "America's national interest," Phillips and Salett would only expand the bloodbath. The ethnic partition of the Middle East, which would be the inevitable outcome of a US drive to carve out an independent capitalist Kurdistan, would, at a minimum, result in a regional war or wars and entail the forcible resettlement of millions of people, resulting in a catastrophic loss of life.

An inkling of what this would mean was provided by the US- and German-sponsored breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Eager to assert their dominance over Yugoslavia in the post-Cold War era and speed up the dismantling of its largely state-owned economy, US and German imperialism backed Slovenian and Croatian separatist forces, blowing apart Yugoslavia's complex federal structure. This triggered a decade of ethnic civil wars and "cleansing" that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and terminated in NATO's 1999 war of aggression against Serbia.

Phillips and Salett are far from alone in Washington circles in advocating an ethnic partition of Iraq and the Middle East. This scenario has been actively debated by various US military-strategic websites for at least a decade. That it is increasingly finding favor in the Pentagon and State Department was indicated by a lengthy piece that recently appeared in the *New York Times*, a newspaper that has long served as a conduit for the US national security apparatus (see: "The New York Times whitewashes US imperialism in Middle East and contemplates ethnic cleansing").

Socialist Project postured as an opponent of the US's illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. But thirteen years on, they are promoting another US scheme to reorder the Middle East, this time by using the Kurds as their proxies, and one with no less incendiary consequences.

Socialist Project's orientation to Washington's Kurdish allies, not insignificantly, corresponds to a large degree with the orientation of Canada's Liberal government and its Conservative predecessor. Ottawa has focused much of its Iraq "reconstruction" efforts on its predominantly Kurdish northern region, and has developed close diplomatic and trading relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), including through the establishment of a consulate in its capital, Irbil. Canada's military intervention in Iraq has also focused on the KRG, with Canadian Special Forces providing advice and frontline "training" to the Peshmerga.

Socialist Project's indifference and contempt towards the lessons of the

past struggles of the oppressed peoples against imperialism is staggering. The past century has shown time and again the disastrous consequences for the peoples of the Middle East, and the Kurds in particular, of adhering to the national bourgeoisie's strategy of seeking "liberation" under imperialist patronage.

After more than a century of imperialist dominance, the vast majority of the peoples of the Middle East, whether Arab, Kurdish or Jewish, continue to live in abject poverty. The imperialist Allies used promises of a Kurdish state to rally support during World War I, only to abandon their pledge in the carve-up of the region that they organized in its aftermath. Instead, Britain and France drew national borders best suited to impose their colonial dominance over the region.

When Washington emerged as the preeminent imperialist power in the Middle East following World War II, it quickly showed its utter contempt for the democratic rights and aspirations of the region's peoples. The list of crimes is virtually endless and ongoing, but even in the decades that preceded the past quarter-century of regime-change wars, the US supported the dispossession of the Palestinians; schemed against various bourgeois nationalist regimes, including through CIA-sponsored coups and the promotion of Islamist reaction; and armed and sponsored a series of ruthless repressive regimes, such as the Shah in Iran and the Saudi monarchy, which brutally suppressed religious and national minorities, including the Kurds.

In the early 1970s, Washington and its ally the Shah actively encouraged Kurdish separatist tendencies in Iraq to weaken the Baghdad government; then, that object having been realized, the US stood by as the Iranian government brutally suppressed them. When US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was reproached in 1975 for Washington's indifference to the slaughter of its erstwhile Kurdish allies, with consummate cynicism he reputedly replied, "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work."

These bitter experiences provide powerful confirmation of the correctness of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Trotsky insisted that in countries oppressed by imperialism the democratic tasks historically associated with the bourgeois-democratic revolution could only be achieved by means of a socialist revolution under the leadership of the working class.

Panitch and Gindin could not be further removed from such a strategy. Their republication of the article by Phillips and Salett and the fact that it has aroused no opposition among their followers is merely the latest indication of Socialist Project's integration into establishment politics and the bourgeoisie's pro-war consensus.

Socialist Project and the surge in imperialist violence

Socialist Project has said practically nothing about the major intensification of aggressive militarism that has taken place in Canada under the Liberal government that came to power last November. During their first ten months in office, the Liberals have dramatically expanded Canada's involvement in the Mideast war by tripling the number of special forces troops and vastly increasing the number of soldiers deployed to the region; supported a dramatic escalation in NATO's preparations for war with Russia in Eastern Europe and the Baltic by agreeing to lead one of the 1,000-strong battalions that will be stationed on Russia's borders; and stepped up its backing for Washington's anti-China "Pivot to Asia" by pledging to deepen security cooperation with Japan and parroting the US line on the South China Sea dispute.

The Liberal government is also set to unveil in the coming days the final details of a major deployment of up to 600 troops to Africa. This is

publicly being presented as a "peacekeeping" mission, although its true purpose is to assert a Canadian strategic presence in a continent where Canadian big business has mining investments worth more than \$25 billion.

Socialist Project is silent on the surge in imperialist violence, the growing threat of war between the major powers, and, most importantly of all, the urgency of building a global, working class-led movement against war that roots the struggle against imperialist war in the fight for socialism.

This is in keeping with the position taken by pseudo-left groups internationally as apologists for imperialist violence in Libya, Syria and beyond. Beginning with NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, pseudo-left groups around the world have increasingly come forward to propagandize on behalf of the imperialist powers with claims that they are intervening to uphold human rights. They have further assisted imperialist regime-change operations by dressing up Islamist and pro-western movements from Syria to Ukraine as "revolutionary" or "democratic."

This pseudo-left constituency for imperialism is rooted in sections of the upper middle class, whose incomes have swelled during the past decades of stock market booms and the never-ending big-business assault on the social position of the working class. It is tied by a thousand threads, including via academia, the trade unions, NGOs, and identity politics, to the capitalist profit system, and is hostile to the working class, especially when it begins to assert its independent class interests.

This is how Panitch and Gindin, the longtime leaders of Socialist Project, find common ground with the likes of the ex-State Department official Phillips. Now a professor at Columbia University, Phillips is an expert in the propaganda of human rights imperialism, serving as the director of the "Peacebuilding and Human Rights Program" at the university's Institute for the Study of Human Rights, and is a past president of the Congressional Human Rights Foundation. Phillips, it need be added, served as an advisor to the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs from 2002 to 2003, directly implicating him in the preparations for the Iraq war.

The embrace by Panitch and Gindin, and the pseudo-left milieu as a whole, of human rights imperialism goes hand in hand with their endorsement of vicious attacks on the working class. In 2015, Socialist Project's leaders spent much of the summer in Greece as advisors to the Syriza government as it prepared to betray the working-class upsurge against the austerity measures of the EU and IMF that had carried it to power. Panitch and Gindin provided political cover and legitimized Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras's rotten capitulation to unprecedented austerity demands by the European Union just days after Greek workers had voted overwhelmingly to reject the dictates of Berlin and Brussels.

Putting an end to the ravages of war in the Middle East, and the attacks on democratic and social rights imposed by capitalist governments, requires the construction of a global antiwar movement on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. Such a movement must of necessity be based on the working class and completely and unequivocally independent of, and hostile to, all the political representatives and organizations of the bourgeoisie. This is why the building of such an antiwar movement requires a relentless exposure of pseudo-left forces like Socialist Project whose radical phrase-mongering masks a right-wing, pro-imperialist and pro-war agenda.



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