Jewish-Kurdish Conference in London: Kurdish nationalism in the Türkiye-Israel rivalry

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On September 6-7, the Second International Jewish-Kurdish Conference convened in London under the title “Jewish-Kurdish Relations in a Changing Middle East: History, Identity and Future Cooperation.” The meeting was organized by the London-based Jewish-Kurdish Network (JKN), together with the Kurdish Studies Program of Tel Aviv University’s Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies and the London Centre for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism.

This was the continuation of the first congress, held in Berlin on September 7, 2025 in partnership with the Kurdish Community of Germany and the Jewish-German Values Initiative (WerteInitiative. jüdisch-deutsche Positionen). The participation in the Berlin congress of the parliamentary state secretary of the German Interior Ministry and of a representative of the Israeli Embassy demonstrated that the initiative was backed by imperialism and Zionism from the outset.

The appearance of “civil society” and “academic dialogue” given to the conference cannot conceal its political content. The regime of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is sponsoring this undertaking at the ministerial level. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa’ar sent a video message to the conference. Sa’ar stressed that the Kurds, as a people divided among four countries, have to this day been unable to achieve political independence, and declared that Israel attaches importance to the development of relations with the minorities of the region, and with the Kurds in particular. In his inaugural speech in November 2024, Sa’ar had also described the Kurds as Israel’s “natural allies.”

The moment of the conference most widely discussed in the Turkish press was the award presented to Prof. Ofra Bengio, the head of the Moshe Dayan Center’s Kurdish Studies Program, and her proclamation on stage as “the mother of the Kurds.” Bengio is a Zionist academic who characterizes the Palestinian uprising of October 7, 2023 as a “pogrom” and who defends Israel’s genocidal war. The award was presented by Abdullah Demirba?, who was elected mayor of the Sur district of Diyarbak?r in 2009 for the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Society Party (DTP) and was later removed from office.

One of the seven panels was titled “Zionism and Kurdîyetî: National Movements, Identity and Survival.” Among the participants were Ali Ertan Toprak, the president of the Kurdish Community of Germany, the American academic David L. Phillips, the Israeli researcher Nir Boms and the Labour MP Feryal Clark from Britain.

The organizers stated that the aim of the conference was to transform historical affinity into “institutional political cooperation.” In reality, this conference is an expression of Israel’s efforts to forge a reactionary alliance with a section of the Kurdish nationalists as part of the US war aimed at bringing the Middle East under its complete domination. It also represents a counter-move to the steps taken by the regime of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an toward an accommodation with the imprisoned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan and, through him, with the Kurdish movement in Syria.

On February 28, 2026, the US and Israel launched their war of aggression against Iran. In the first strike, many top leaders were killed, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran’s civilian and commercial infrastructure was systematically targeted. Trump had hoped to achieve his objectives, including regime change, within a short time. At one point, bringing Iranian Kurdish nationalist groups into play as a proxy force was openly under consideration.

Only a week before the US-Israeli assault began, on February 22, five Iranian Kurdish parties announced the founding of the Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan. Issued under conditions of an imminent attack on Iran, the declaration, far from opposing US imperialism—the chief party responsible for the catastrophe in the Middle East—was aimed at an alliance with it in pursuit of a common goal. At the beginning of March, Reuters reported that thousands of Iranian Kurdish fighters were preparing for a cross-border operation and were holding talks with US and Israeli representatives. Trump said that he supported the prospect of the Kurds opening a front inside Iran. In the first days of the war, Israel carried out air strikes aimed at clearing the way for Kurdish militias in Iraq to cross the border into Iran.

However, as a result of Iran’s resistance and retaliation and its effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz, Washington’s calculations did not work out: The regime did not collapse despite its losses, key US munitions stocks were exhausted, and the surge in oil prices shook the world economy. Opposition to the mobilization of Iranian Kurdish forces from Ankara and from the authorities of Iraqi Kurdistan played a part in the Trump administration taking no step in this direction for the time being.

The overthrow of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 by Turkish- and US-backed Islamist forces, in the midst of the Gaza genocide, was seen as an opportunity to advance Israel’s regional calculations. Tel Aviv has since regularly bombed Syria; it has extended its occupation in the south of the country, imposed the demilitarization of Quneitra, Daraa and Sweida, and intervened on the pretext of “protecting” the Druze. In July 2025 it struck government buildings in Damascus, including the General Staff headquarters.

However much Israel’s interests align with those of the US, it does not favor an Ankara-backed central regime in Syria. Israeli officials have repeatedly voiced their support for the Syrian Kurds, and various reports have described the provision of intelligence and political support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This is a program that conflicts directly with Ankara’s line of a “unitary Syria” in which the SDF is subordinated to Damascus. In line with the demands of the US and Türkiye, and following Damascus’s bloody attacks, the SDF declared on August 25 at the People’s Palace in Damascus that it was dissolving itself “as an

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independent military force.”

Türkiye is responding to the prospect of a Kurdish state or Kurdish autonomy, and to Israel’s efforts in that direction, by turning its enemy of 40 years into an ally. Negotiations between Ankara and the PKK began in October 2024. Erdo?an justified this by declaring that the “internal front” had to be fortified under conditions of Israeli aggression in Palestine and Lebanon. It was a move against Israel’s growing influence in Syria through the PKK-linked SDF. At the same time, the concern that the approaching war against Iran could give rise to an Israeli-backed formation in Iranian Kurdistan was a further factor. Against all this, it was decided to make use of Öcalan’s influence over the PKK-linked Kurdish forces in Syria, Iraq and Iran as well as in Türkiye.

In February 2025, Öcalan called on the PKK to dissolve itself; in May 2025 the PKK took the decision to dissolve and subsequently staged a symbolic weapons-burning ceremony. On August 10, a “framework law” regulating the PKK’s disarmament was adopted with the overwhelming support of the establishment parties in parliament. The law does not grant a general political amnesty, excludes Öcalan and Selahattin Demirta?, and leaves its implementation entirely to the discretion of the National Security Council and the government.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, this agreement has nothing to do with the “democratization” or “peace” claimed for it. It is aimed essentially at advancing the alliance with US imperialism while competing with Israel in the Middle East, and at strengthening the hand of the Turkish state in the ongoing war of plunder. Domestically, it serves to place a mask of “democratization” over the government’s mounting attack on the working class and democratic rights.

Israel, for its part, does not discount the possibility that the extremely fragile Ankara-PKK agreement may collapse, as it last did in 2015, and that fighting may resume in Türkiye and Syria. It is precisely here that the London conference acquires its significance: Israel does not want to abandon the effort to forge an alliance with the Kurdish movement, both in the war against Iran and in its rivalry with Türkiye.

The possibility that the rivalry between Israel and Türkiye will develop into a military conflict is no longer a secret. On August 18, Israeli warplanes carried out eight strikes on the Abu al-Duhur military air base in Syria’s Idlib. Netanyahu’s office announced that the aim was to prevent the deployment of Turkish troops. The US ambassador to Ankara, Thomas Barrack, noted that Türkiye had not been informed in advance and described the attack as an “unnecessary escalation.” Washington, focused on the war against Iran and its allies, calculates that a possible conflict between its two critical allies in the region would damage its own imperialist interests.

Nevertheless, the rivalry between Türkiye and Israel is following the logic of the widening imperialist war and is giving rise to broader alliances.

On February 22, Netanyahu proclaimed a “hexagon of alliances” that would encompass India, Greece and Greek Cyprus, along with a number of Arab and African countries. In December 2025, Israel became the first country to recognize Somaliland as a state, confronting Ankara, which has been extending its influence in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa through Somalia. Under the €3 billion “Achilles Shield” agreement signed in Tel Aviv on August 31, Greece’s air defense is to be integrated into Israeli systems. The strengthening of military and commercial ties between Greece and Israel are regarded as a threat by Türkiye.

Ankara’s response was the Joint Defense Agreement signed in Mecca on August 7. This pact, established with Saudi Arabia and nuclear-armed Pakistan, treats an attack on any one member as an attack on all. Backed by Trump, this agreement of Sunni Muslim majority countries not only targets Iran but is also part of the rivalry with Israel.

Two reactionary allies of Washington are assembling rival military blocs against one another as a product of the US wars to reshape the region. This polarization carries the potential to turn at a certain point into a direct conflict. The workers of all countries must oppose these war preparations by uniting on an international scale, independently of and against their own ruling classes.

What is demanded of Kurdish workers, peasants and young people today is that they pay the price for the regional calculations of Washington, Tel Aviv and Ankara. Not only the regional powers and the imperialists, but also the Kurdish bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois nationalist leaderships are perpetually turning toward bargaining and alliances with imperialist and capitalist forces, because they fear an independent movement of the workers and laboring masses. This produces not liberation but a new subjugation. The participation in the al-Qaeda-linked regime in Syria and the alliance formed with the Erdo?an regime are the latest examples of the bankruptcy of the nationalist perspective. A possible alliance with Israel—which is subjecting the oppressed Palestinian people to genocide and has embarked on a war of aggression against the Iranian people together with US imperialism—is capable of producing a no less reactionary outcome.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his theory of Permanent Revolution, in the epoch of imperialism the bourgeoisie of countries of belated capitalist development are by their very nature incapable of resolving the basic democratic questions and of securing independence from imperialism. Securing the fundamental rights of the Kurdish people across the Middle East and establishing a regime based on social equality are possible only through the working class taking power as part of the struggle for the international socialist revolution.

This requires building the united and revolutionary mobilization of workers of all nationalities for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East against US imperialism, its accomplices in the region and all bourgeois leaderships without exception. This is the perspective for which the Sosyalist E?itlik Partisi (Socialist Equality Party), the Turkish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, fights.

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