Iraqi resistance speaks in Europe

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Simon Hardy reports from the “With the resistance for a just peace in the Middle East” conference that took place in Tuscany, Italy between the 24th and 25th March. The conference brought together a number of anti-imperialist resistance movements from across the Middle East including representatives from the Iraqi resistance. It has been a failing of the mass anti-war movements in the west that they have not attempted to build similar conferences and hence the conference provided a real insight into the politics of the Middle Eastern resistance movements but it also revealed real tensions and divisions.

During the 4-25th March in Tuscany, Italy, a historic conference gathered together leaders and representatives of resistance movements from across the Middle East that are leading the fight against the imperialist occupation of their countries.

The speakers were varied, from well-known representatives of the nationalist Iraqi Resistance like Abdul Jabbar al Kubaysi to Ali Fayyad, one of leading theoreticians of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Maoists in the Left Radicals of Afghanistan, anti-collaborationist factions of the old Iraqi Communist Party, Islamist professors, anti war activists, academics, and journalists. One speaker who was invited but could not make it was the Ayatollah Al Sayeed Ahmedi Al Baghdadi, a kind of liberation theologian of the Islamic world, widely nicknamed ?the Red Ayatollah?. Samir Amin, the noted author and a key figure on the left wing of the World Social Forum was unable to come but sent a eight-page letter, which was briefly summarised by the chair.

The aim of the organisers of the conference was to build a “anti-imperialist front uniting the above mentioned resistance forces in the Middle East and forces in “the West” willing to declare their solidarity with them. The conference organisers the Campo Anti-Imperialista (based in Italy but with supporters in Austria, Germany, and Scandinavia), hoped to reconcile differences between the resistance movements and adopt a common declaration.

Naturally the Iraqi speakers were given pride of place, especially as their wing of the resistance movement, the Iraqi Patriotic alliance (IPA), had co-sponsored the conference. This organisation has existed in one form or another since 1992, and is currently waging an armed struggle against the occupation forces. It is a broad organisation which has joined an even larger group in Iraq called the Patriotic National Islamic Front, a large organisation that unites a sizeable part of the Sunni resistance movement. They described the horrors of the US occupation, the courageous fight back and the coming defeat of the imperialist forces.

They called on the anti war movement in Europe and the USA to put pressure on their governments to recognise the resistance movement as the legitimate voice of the Iraqi people. The timing of this conference only a few days after the UK Stop the War Coalition passed a disgraceful resolution which only called for troops out of Iraq not now but by October 2007 (sic!), shows the importance of a consistent anti imperialism. Simple pacifist slogans or abstract agitation ?against all war? cannot replace a clear and principled position of support for actual resistance to the invasion. As communists we stand for the defeat...
of imperialism and the right to self-determination for all oppressed nationalities, no matter what our differences with the political leadership of these struggles.

**Problems of the Antiwar Movement**

Italian participants bore witness to the fact that the mass Italian anti-war movement, which stood in the forefront of the great mobilisations of 2003-04 had withered to forces which could only mobilise 10,000 - 30,000 this March. This was because the reformist left around the Democrats of the Left (DS), Rifondazione Comunista and the unions they influenced were now supporting the Prodi government, which was continuing the pro-war policies as Berlusconi. An important exception to this is the Vicenza mobilisations against enlargement of the already huge US base there. It was interesting to hear speakers from this campaign, including the only woman speaker at the entire event. They indicated the broad mass character of their mobilisations, including pacifists, ecologists, trade unionists, member of many parties and none.

Larry Holmes - the speaker from the US antiwar coalition International Action Centre - spoke of the importance of solidarity with the resistance and the danger of illusions in the Democratic Party in the USA, which won control of Congress, because masses of electors (mistakenly) saw them as the anti-war party. It was a real shame that given the presence of the Iraqi speaker there were no leaders of equivalent prominence from the European antiwar movement to explain the political problems of supporting Liberal Democrats as ?anti war? members of parliament.

**Problems of the Resistance**

However there was a virulent streak of anti-Iranian chauvinism that ran through a number of the speeches from the Iraqi resistance, probably because its representatives, apart from the Ayatollah, came exclusively from the so-called Sunni section. One of them claimed that Iranian forces had taken part in the attack on Fallujah in co-operation with US forces (alongside the Kurds, apparently) and that Iran had sent 75,000 militia fighters plus 40,000 intelligence officers to Iraq to work with the occupation forces. They pointed to the Badr brigades of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) which is backed by Iran and the Mehdi army of Moqtader al Sadr and the fact that the government in Tehran was one of the first to recognise the occupation puppet regimes imposed on Iraq post 2003.

Of course it is true that Iran has carried out an unprincipled policy with regard to the occupation, helping the US out of the tight spot it found itself in 2003-04 and now facilitating the negotiations between the US and the Iraqis and the neighbouring states. Certainly, despite the Iranian President?s rhetoric, Iran has not pursued an anti-imperialist policy. Iraqi resistance fighters very understandably resent its influence. But to go on as some of them did to say that it was equally or more of an enemy than the US, that Iran/Persia was a historic enemy of Iraq showed the limits of bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism, plus the influence, even if unacknowledged, of religious sectarianism or communalism. On the other side the unofficial representative of Hezbollah who attended would tolerate no open criticism of Iran.

The attempt to reconcile these nationalisms in a classless ?anti-imperialism?, to organise them in a front which ducked the issue of opposition to a US attack on Iran as well as the occupation of Iraq, was a hopeless one. The only speaker to address the issue of class ? of the incapacity of the bourgeois states of the region to resist imperialism, or to even mention socialism was a speaker from Jordan, Hisham Bhustani, who called for a new socialist and secular forces across the middle east. Bhustani also correctly identified the project of the Iranian regime in terms of expanding its sphere of influence over southern Iraq and that this would lead to conflict with the USA, despite the ostensibly pro occupation talk of the Tehran government.
During the conference there was also precious little talk of the strategic ideas of how to defeat imperialisms military and economic offensives in the region. Instead claims that the imperialists would be kicked out of Iraq within the first 6 months of 2008 and countless calls for support for the armed struggle were made. Whilst the tremendous self-sacrifice of the resistance is not in doubt, much of the conference had a feeling of preaching to the converted. When Bhustani proposed a strategy which was part revolutionary, part Arab liberationist he was rounded on and attacked for some of his critical comments concerning the future direction of the resistance. Another speaker from Lebanon, Samah Idriss, who raised the necessity for secularism and the transcendence of religious sectarianism was studiously ignored by the other speakers.

**False Premises of an ?Anti-Imperialist Front?**

The political error of the Campo Anti-imperialista?s concept of an anti imperialist front is that it does not take as its starting point a tactical agreement between working class and other mass popular class forces to fight imperialism. Such an ?anti-imperialist united front?, as envisaged by the Communist International at its Fourth Congress (1922), is only a means to an end. That end is - (a) to maximise the possibility of defeating and driving out imperialism and its armed forces and multinational corporations but also - (b) to demonstrate that the working class forces are the only effective leadership of the movement. On this basis the working class can rally around it all the exploited classes, nationalities, plus women and youth fighting their oppression, to join it in the struggle for socialism.

However the starting point for most of the speakers was not the centrality of the struggle of the working class, but of how to unite totally disparate and, at times, hostile forces - including appeals to other imperialisms. The sectarian divisions of religion, coupled with the history of national conflicts in the Middle East means that a coalition or broad front organisation is impossible to found. The only organisations that can believe it is possible or desirable are forces influenced by Stalinism, like the Workers World Party (an organisation that was slavishly in its defence of the regimes of Saddam Hussein and Slobadan Milosevic) and guerrilarist movements in the Philippines and Turkey who argue for a permanent bloc between the working class and middle class forces.

The chimera of an anti imperialist front seemed to dissolve in front of the organisers eyes as the sectarian divisions of the Shia and Sunni and decades of Ba?athist hatred of the ?Persians? exposed the disunity of the resistance forces of the middle east. It is clear that any kind of project which seeks to unite these different forces on the basis simply of their anti imperialism and not on a class strategy will not go far in the present political climate. Calls for a return to the ideology of secularism by one of the speakers rang hollow in the very real religious divisions which cut across borders and struggles across the region - secularism on its own cannot provide the basis on which to move forward, divorced from a revolutionary cross borders struggle of the exploited against imperialism.

The political problem with the anti imperialist front became obvious as the conference came to the final session and the delegates could reach no agreement. The declaration read out at the end represented the view of the organising committee alone.

**A United Front for Action**

Michael Pröbsting from Vienna spoke on behalf of the League for the Fifth International towards the very end of the conference and explained our perspective of working within the mass movements and social forums, fighting their right-wing leaderships, to win serious forces to anti imperialist positions. The size of the conference, with only 200 participants, provided negative confirmation of the need to fight to win large forces to anti-imperialist politics, rather than establish small initiatives on the fringes of these movements. Pröbsting also cut against the anti-Iran grain of many of the speakers and made it clear that we should
support Iran in the event of an attack and be totally in favour of a victory for Iran - despite the terrible reactionary nature of the regime. He got a round of applause for his intervention, especially the call for working class unity against imperialist attack. He appealed to all the forces there to build a powerful anti-imperialist current in mobilisations against the G8 this June.

In summing up the main leader of the Campo Anti-Imperialist Moreno Pasquinelli took a principled position of opposition to the projected US attack on Iran and criticised the Iraqi resistance?s attitude on this issue. But the weakness of the Campo-Anti-Imperialista was plain in the pessimistic denunciation of the mass antiwar movements and insistence that nothing short of an open identification with the resistance was worth anything. The League for the Fifth International says without the slightest hesitation that we are for the defeat of British and American forces in Iraq ? as we have done throughout our political history. The Campo Anti-Imperialist believe that a necessarily small number of forces in the west will support the anti-imperialist struggles in the south and must accept the leadership of those forces fighting - such as the Iraqi Resistance are today. Of course, at any moment in the struggle certain anti-imperialist forces are thrown into the advanced guard but this is no way replaces the need to fight for a strategy that can actually bring the imperialist system crashing down.

No isolated national resistance - let alone one with nationalist or sectarian politics - can provide this. It is only the working class, organised in a revolutionary party around a Marxist programme and fighting for the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggles across the globe, that can truly bring down capitalism.

In Conclusion

Certainly the organisers put in an enormous amount of work getting the Iraqi resistance to come to a European country and speak. On the fringes of the conference it was possible to have interesting discussions with comrades from the Middle East, Europe and the USA. For that we owe the Italian comrades thanks. But the speakers from the Middle East deserved a much, much bigger audience and we hope this can in some measure be found in Rostock this June. Above all it showed the need to fight for mass action across the globe - strikes, blockades, occupations - to force the US/UK to withdraw the troops and unite all forces around this key goal. It is only in this way, through mobilising masses of workers and youth in action against war, that we will be able to convince them of anti-imperialist and revolutionary politics.

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