

Star Comment



Fatal flaws in Paris summit assumptions

RENEWED attention on the festering sore that is Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and siege of the Gaza Strip is welcome.

But, for all the diplomats' well-meaning words, the Paris summit is unlikely to improve the prospects for peace.

This is not for the various reasons put forward in the mainstream media, primarily that the Palestinians and Israelis are not present or that only direct talks will work.

For a start, the two sides' positions are clear and have been for many years, and the idea that oppressor and oppressed can be equal parties to negotiation is farcical given the imbalance of power.

The latter fact entirely undermines the premise that the two sides must make a "courageous choice for peace," in French President Francois Hollande's phrase.

Palestinians, through the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), made a "courageous choice for peace" decades ago.

Forty years ago this year, Saudi Arabia submitted a draft resolution to the UN security council proposing an Israeli withdrawal to the 1948 borders and a comprehensive Middle East peace agreement — the basis of what we know as the two-state solution.



Israel's then UN ambassador and later president Chaim Herzog admitted that not only did the PLO support the plan, it prepared it.

In the years and decades following the PLO made repeated statements that amounted to support for a peace deal on the basis of two states in mandatory Palestine — all the while accompanied by Israeli claims that there is "no partner for peace."

Even Islamist fundamentalist group Hamas, which holds sway in Gaza, has indicated it would accept a two-state solution in practice and repeatedly proposed long-term truces of a decade or more.

What happened to that 1976 draft resolution — supported by basically every country in the Middle East and north Africa — offers some insight into today's situation.

It was vetoed by the United States and has effectively disappeared from history. Israel refused to even show up to the security council session.

Since, Israel has vastly expanded its settlements — helped along by the calculated political stunts of Operations National Trauma '82 (withdrawal from Yamit in the Sinai) and '05 (Gaza) — while penning Palestinians into ever-smaller enclaves, abusing its Arab minority within its borders and repeatedly attacking its neighbours.



Unstinting throughout has been vast Western support — primarily from the United States but also from Britain. Not because of the supposed power of the "Israel lobby," with its tail-wags-dog logic, but because Israel has served US interests in the region ever since it crushed secular Arab nationalism half a century ago.

The US recently agreed to increase its military aid to Israel from \$30 billion to \$40bn over the 10 years from 2018.

It is this that makes a mockery of the idea that the US is an "honest broker" — a delusion shared by diplomats in Paris — and also claims of a rift between US President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Were the US ever serious about ending the oppression of the Palestinians it would just have to turn off the tap. While the money flows, and successive Israeli governments are able to colonise and oppress, there is little hope for peace.

Never mind liberal hand-wringing and calls for another Camp David this or Oslo that, those who want a just settlement must target both the Israeli state and the patrons who support its crimes.

ON A recent trip to Novorossiya, formerly eastern Ukraine, I was able to spend a day in Lugansk talking with communists there, as well as visiting positions of the Ghost Brigade — an organisation of anti-fascist revolutionaries now integrated with the regular armed forces of Novorossiya.

Dominant media narratives in Britain often frame the situation in Novorossiya in the language of Western liberalism — it's a case of "European values" against "Russia's puppets," democracy versus corruption.

When Gadaffi was "bombing his people" in Libya, Britain responded with gusto. Now when Poroshenko does the same in Lugansk, our politicians are awkwardly silent.

Our perspective is skewed, and while the wider geopolitical conflict between Russia and Nato is very relevant, it's inadequate without acknowledging the independent political tendencies within Novorossiya.

The initial mobilisation in Donbass against the Euromaidan coup two years ago opened up the revolutionary possibility of rebuilding a socialist society.

Legalistic demands for protection of the Russian language were accompanied by deeper structural calls to smash the power of the oligarchs.

Unfortunately as we can now see, the socialist ambitions were not fully realised, and major fissures still revolve around class politics today.

Class relations are also able to transcend the conflict.

One of the largest metal processing plants in Europe is located in Alchevsk, and it has remained curiously untouched by Ukrainian shelling. Despite the economic blockade of Novorossiya, Ukraine continues to receive rail cars full of coal and steel from there.

Alexey Markov, a commander in the Ghost Brigade, commented that the "Russian oligarchy will always deal with the Ukrainian oligarchy, we understand that they will never allow a people's state in Donbass."

Another commander, Piotr Biriukov, chimed in explaining that the war consumes huge amounts of resources, and the instability in Donbass is a very profitable opportunity for some sectors of the Ukrainian economy.

Many local people thought the conflict would be over in a few months, and although the ceasefire has dampened the cycle of violence, the war as a whole is far from finished. The reality is that a group of Ukrainian oligarchs are building their fortune off the back of this tragedy and they don't want it to end.

The Ukrainian army is mostly composed of conscripts who didn't sign up of their own volition.

They're not the main enemy and Biriukov recognises that "if the Ukrainian army turns their rifles towards Kiev, we will be with them." Markov gives a medical analogy: Ukraine suffers from the brown plague of fascism, and his task is to destroy the virus, not kill the patient.

In this respect the real threat comes from the National Guard and Right Sector, whose unshakeable political commitment to nazism means they can only be defeated militarily.

So what are the prospects for socialism in Novorossiya?

Markov is clear on this, first they

UKRAINE

What the rebels are really fighting for

PIERRE MARSHALL speaks to those on the front lines of the anti-fascist war in the east of Ukraine

have to deal with the external enemy — the junta — and after that they can deal with the internal enemy, the oligarchs.

The leader of the Lugansk communists, Maxim Chalenko agrees, pointing out that "the communists fighting for Novorossiya at the moment will be best placed to make reforms after the war is over." They're preparing for the good times when peace comes.

The people's republics are young, and they need time to consolidate their administration.

This is necessary because in the absence of a robust state infrastructure, their territory could easily become a playground for gangsters and criminal elements.

During the soviet period the Ukrainian city of Odessa suffered badly from mafia activity, which was generously funded by the CIA. The communists in nearby Novorossiya have not forgotten the lesson.

However, this doesn't mean the socialist project has been abandoned.

Even under difficult conditions there are small attempts to alleviate the hardships of war and poverty. Teacher Irina Shmatkova said that free breakfasts have been introduced in her school to stop children from going hungry.

REVOLUTIONARY COMMANDERS: Piotr Biriukov and (right) Alexey Markov



Textbooks are also free to take home from the school library for pupils who can't get to school regularly.

In the areas close to the front the Ghost Brigade also provides services for those unable or unwilling to evacuate. They distribute seeds for growing vegetables, they repair people's houses, their medical station is open to the public, and they transport locals in their vehicles around villages where bus services have disappeared.

Lastly, the soldiers themselves recycle their salaries into the local market by buying milk and groceries at favourable prices. It's a kind of informal social solidarity.

In urban areas the economic situation is no better. Some indus-

"The Russian oligarchy will always work with the Ukrainian oligarchy. We know they will not allow a people's state in the Donbass"

Donbass



GUARD DUTY: A soldier at her post in the Donbass

or

tries were completely dismantled, with machinery and specialists relocated to safer areas.

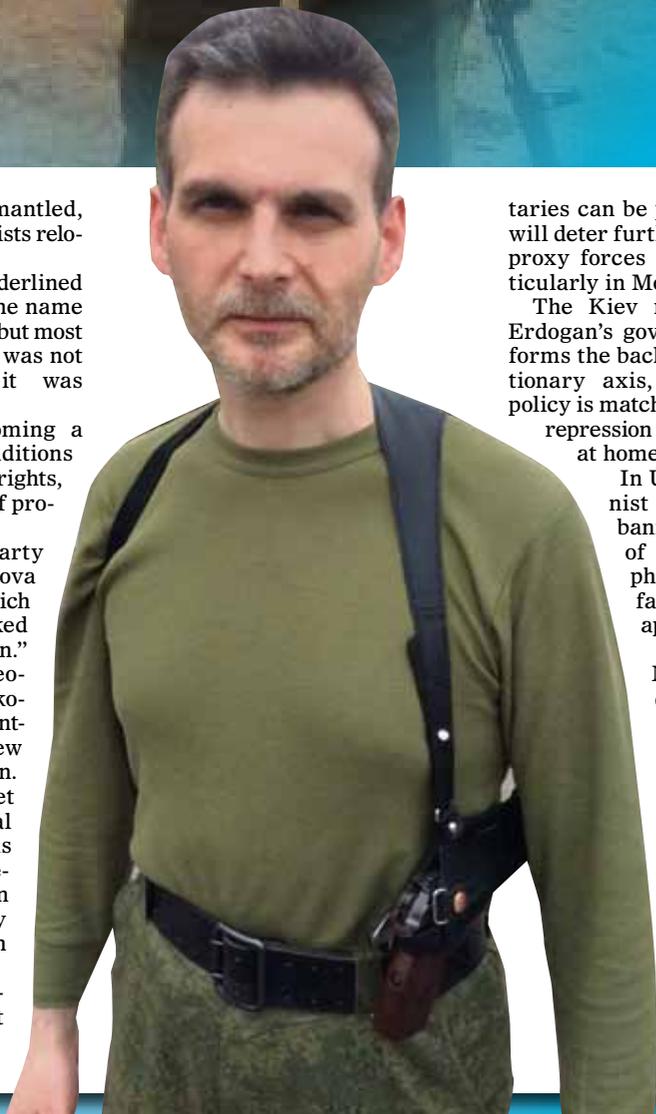
The effect of this was underlined by a fighter who goes by the name Nemo. "The shelling is bad, but most of the infrastructure here was not destroyed by bombs, it was destroyed by capitalists."

Unemployment is becoming a problem, and in those conditions it's hard to defend workers' rights, let alone workers' control of production.

Lugansk communist party secretary Ekaterina Popova noted that union activity which is too militant can be attacked by bosses as "pro-Ukrainian." The speaker of the DPR People's Council Vladimir Malkovich, was more positive, pointing to investments in new factories and food production. These are designed to meet the immediate material needs of the population, as well as creating jobs to alleviate unemployment. Also in Donetsk the gas, electricity and water utilities have been nationalised.

Above all this, the primacy of the anti-fascist struggle is crucial.

If the neonazi paramili-



taries can be pushed back here, it will deter further incursions by US proxy forces across Europe, particularly in Moldova and Poland.

The Kiev regime, along with Erdogan's government in Turkey, forms the backbone of a new reactionary axis, and their foreign policy is matched by extraordinary repression of progressive forces at home.

In Ukraine the Communist Party has been banned, and expressions of popular dissent are physically attacked by fascists with the tacit approval of police.

The defence of Novorossiia is not a defence of Putin, it's the defence of human rights against global fascism and imperialism. It's a fight which has a profound significance to people in Britain and elsewhere. Before leaving the base Markov turned to us: "Don't write that we're heroes here, we're just normal people."

POLITICS

In Switzerland, a very different referendum

The Swiss are voting on a universal basic income. Crazy – or an idea whose time has come, asks PAUL DONOVAN

THE EU referendum continues to dominate the media here but in Switzerland some would argue a much more interesting vote is taking place tomorrow, when the people decide whether the country will adopt a Universal Basic Income (UBI).

If citizens vote for the UBI in the referendum it would see an unconditional basic income of £20,000 a year given to every citizen, regardless of work or wealth.

The UBI is a radical idea that has drawn supporters on the left like John Kenneth Galbraith and Milton Friedman on the right.

The idea appealed on the left on the grounds of redistribution of wealth for the good of all, equality and egalitarianism. The appeal to the right is in cutting the power of the coercive state, reducing welfare and "promoting freedom."

The driving forces for the idea now come with the increasing levels of automation going on worldwide and the need to find solutions to welfare provision.

The idea resonates with the outlook in the 1970s, when it was predicted that in the future there would be shorter working weeks, more leisure time and earlier retirement ages. These predictions remember existed long before the internet came along.

Then came Margaret Thatcher with the neoliberal model, which promptly saw the opposite occur with longer working weeks, less pay and an ever more distant retirement age.

However, despite the damage caused over the past 30 years by the neoliberal model, the underlying motors of development foreseen in the 1970s have continued to grow.

Ironically, it has been some of the features of neoliberalism that have helped accelerate the demand for the UBI today.

So the neoliberal model has led to a very polarised society with "the 1 per cent" at the top, with fewer and fewer people coming to hold most of the wealth.

The wealthy don't spend money in the same way that the poor do, they often store it away or place it offshore – so demand in the economy falters.

This problem will be exacerbated in a world where there is a growing population but fewer jobs due to automation.

In the future, many ask where

will the money come from to create that demand to keep the wheels of market capitalism turning?

In Britain, the recognition of the crisis in capitalism has seen the tentative efforts to raise the minimum wage to a living level and extend personal tax allowances, taking many people out of tax.

Many questions remain of course. Such as what would be the motivation for people to work if they were receiving UBI?

The level would inevitably be low so many would want to work anyway. On this point there are concerns from unions that UBI could be set too low, thereby cutting welfare, while not providing adequate compensation via payment. (This is also a concern that has surfaced over the living wage.)

UBI though is gaining support.

The Finnish government is experimenting with the idea, making tax-free monthly payments of £300 to a random sample of 10,000 adults of working age, as part of a two-year experiment. Some 20 municipalities in the Netherlands are conducting similar experiments.

Ironically, it would seem the advance of capitalism in its present form seems likely to make UBI inevitable in the medium to long term. There simply will not be the jobs and subsequently demand for products.

The dilemma can be easily viewed at supermarket checkouts, which increasingly push customers toward the automated systems. This will save on labour but in the end where will that former labour find the money to buy products sold by the supermarket?

Funding for the UBI is likely in the main to come from general taxation, with the sums no doubt taking some balancing.

However, the idea is an exciting one, brought about in many ways by the ongoing contradictions of the capitalist market system model.

Indications are that the Swiss will reject the idea on Sunday but this referendum seems only the latest stage in the advance of an idea which if handled properly by the left could lead to a huge emancipation of society in terms of personal freedom and living life generally.

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