

The following text is a transcript of an interview given to Peace in Kurdistan by Steve Sweeney, International Editor for the *Morning Star* newspaper, entitled “Reporting on the War in South Kurdistan – An Interview with Steve Sweeney”. The interview was originally published on 08 July 2021, and can be viewed here: <https://www.peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/video-reporting-on-the-war-in-south-kurdistan-an-interview-with-steve-sweeney/>.

Transcript

Hello, and thank you for joining us. Today we will be speaking with Steve Sweeney.

Steve Sweeney is a multimedia journalist, writer and political activist. He is a member of the National Union of Journalists and the International Editor for the Morning Star newspaper, writing on labour and progressive issues with an interest in Turkey, Kurdistan and the Middle East, along with Latin America and global liberation movements. Steve has traveled extensively in Turkey and Kurdistan, including to observe political trials of journalists and politicians, particularly those from the People's Democratic Party (HDP). He is the co-editor of the Kurdistan media project along with Marcel Cartier, and in 2019, he founded the Journalists for Democracy in Turkey and Kurdistan with the award-winning Kurdish artist Zehra Dogan.

Steve, thank you very much for joining us.

Thank you.

So you have recently spent time in South Kurdistan reporting on the war between the PKK and the Turkish state. Can you tell us a bit about your experience there, your travels there, and give us an overview and update about what's been happening on the ground during the invasion?

Sure, so I've spent quite a lot of time actually in that part of Kurdistan, which, for viewers that aren't aware of where South Kurdistan is, that is Bashur, which is what we would call Iraqi Kurdistan; perhaps in the Western media we know it as Iraqi Kurdistan.

So, I've probably been there on and off since October last year. And I witnessed not only Turkey's war on Kurdistan, but the build-up to it. The genesis of this goes back a very, very long way. But things really intensified around November/December last year when the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the KDP, under Masoud Barzani really started beating the drums for a war on the Kurdistan Workers Party, the PKK, wanting to drive it out of its bases in the Qandil mountains. Now, this was something at the time that was met with opposition from all opposition political parties in the Kurdistan region. So that meant the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which controls the region I was based in Silemani, but also the Gorran movement and some of the smaller parties including the Kurdistan Communist Party-Iraq. They supported peace in the region and I attended a number of demonstrations that were held in Silemani. It's easier to hold

them there than in Erbil, which is under the control of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, where it's much harder to do so because government critics are under intense pressure.

You will probably know, but if you do not, there were six journalists and activists, known as the Bahdinan journalists, who were very recently sentenced to lengthy prison terms. One of them for example, Sherwan Sherani, is a government critic, a journalist, and he was jailed and made allegations that he was tortured and had confessions extracted under torture while he was in detention. And this has been widely condemned by human rights organizations, by journalist organisations, but unsurprisingly perhaps met with silence from governments. Jeremy Corbyn, the former Labour Party leader, did write to Barzani expressing his concern over Sherwan Sherani and for him to be freed.

So, it's very hard to mount any kind of opposition to the war because it's met with oppression from the state, which is the Barzani. So, this was kind of building up then, in December and in November, and you know, for the mothers of Peshmerga forces who'd been killed in Kurdistan, which has a long history of intra-Kurdish war and outside forces invading as well, these mothers of the people who lost their lives were also saying, 'look, we don't want a war between brothers,' and they were doing everything they could to reel back the KDP from what would be a deadly war.

Now, as we know the Turkish state on April the 23rd and 24th launched another operation, its latest operation, Operation Claw Lightning, which started with missiles attacks via helicopter but also this time had troops on the ground. Now this came after a very costly military defeat at the hands of the PKK about a month prior to the invasion, where I think something like 13 political prisoners, hostages, were killed in an attack that at the time the PKK forces said that this was what we call a 'friendly fire' incident, that the Turkish military killed their own political hostages, and used chemical weapons in doing so. So, this was a humiliation for Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, and, you know, he's having to save face because he's facing, you know, quite a difficult time on the domestic front; the Turkish economy is in freefall, and there's a lot of kind of anger growing around his handling of the economy. And that usually means one thing, that he hits out and starts a military operation either in Rojava, in northern Syria, and this time he's targeted the PKK forces in Kurdistan.

So, we saw this air and ground attack, so missiles were being launched against Kurdish villages. They claimed to be targeting the PKK, so they've been largely in the Zap, Metina, and Avashin mountains region in Duhok province, which shares a border with Turkey. But the results of this have seen something like - the Christian monitoring group said that something about one and a half thousand Kurdish villagers have been forced to flee their homes. Now, I've reported on this, and I've spoken to many of those people that were forced to flee their homes, and they were saying, "Look, you know, we have nothing, we have nowhere to go. Some of us have family in some of the bigger cities and towns but others, you know, we have to stay because we have nowhere to go and we're just farmers." And they were killing cattle, they were destroying churches, I reported that thousands of acres of land, forest land and green land, has also been destroyed.

Now Turkey's doing this again with reportedly thousands of jihadists. These are the same people that Turkey has mobilized in Libya in the fight against Haftar's forces there, the same forces that were mobilized in Nagorno Karabakh in support of Azerbaijan, the same jihadist forces that they've used in Syria, and they've committed atrocities and war crimes that have been documented, even the United Nations has agreed that these groups are committing war crimes. Now these same troops are now in Iraqi Kurdistan. And there is evidence to back this, I mean again, I've spent my time in the region speaking to people and they said that they could hear Arabic being spoken amongst the invading forces, which is a sign that these were jihadis from Syria. And you know, they're carrying out what is generally seen as an ethnic cleansing operation against the Kurdish people.

Now, this isn't simply a war against the PKK, we need to destroy this myth, because it's not the PKK that are the targets, it is not the PKK that are the ones that are being forced out of their homes. This is an attack on the Kurdish people as a whole. And we have to say that since that war has been ongoing, - you know it's more than two months now we're coming into the third month of that invasion and occupation - Turkey has sent its foreign minister to visit the area, and has boasted about establishing military bases there. Now however you view it, legally this is sovereign territory. They have no right to build military bases there, and the Iraqi Government has said that they have no right to build military bases. A number of MPs have been brave enough to speak out about this, but there's something like 70 military outposts across the region now. So, this isn't just an invasion, this is an occupation. And this is an illegal act against a sovereign nation.

While this has been going on, allegations again have been made of chemical attacks, which I've reported on for the *Morning Star*. And I saw evidence of the chemical attacks on the bodies that were dragged out of tunnels used by the guerrilla fighters, and also canisters marked with ammonium nitrate in the most recent attack now. You know these are very serious allegations, when we see chemical attacks, or the accusation of chemical attack, say, for example, in Syria, with very little evidence actually to support or corroborate the facts and without any investigations, the imperialist powers - Britain, the US and France - have launched military strikes. If you look back at the example of Douma, when the alleged chemical attack took place there, which, again, there's no guarantee that that actually happened, or if it did, certainly not in the way that the imperialist forces are making it out to be, but it was used as a pretext for attacks. But in the case of the use of chemical weapons against Kurdish people, again, this is being ignored by all of the international bodies that should be commenting or taking action; the United Nations has been silent, NATO has been silent, Britain and the US, again, have been silent. And it's not like they don't know that this is happening, because they do. But just like in the alleged chemical attacks on Kurds in Syria, we saw in Serekaniye the alleged use of white phosphorus, and again in Afrin we saw in I think March 2019 the alleged use of Sarin or a chemical substance there, which I reported on again for the *Morning Star*.

The White House at the time said, "Well, they probably didn't do it," and just dismissed it. So it seems that there's one rule when chemicals are used against the Kurdish people, and another when they're used against governments where the imperialist powers want regime change. So we're seeing how war is deeply, deeply politicized. But since the war has been ongoing, the Turkish army have been met with fierce resistance by the guerrilla fighters. And this is

something I think that they probably underestimated, they probably expected that they were going to be able to clear the area very, very quickly. But as we know, and has been well documented, a conventional army cannot beat a guerrilla army; guerrilla armies rely on the support of the people, which the PKK has. But also, if you read the seminal work *The War of the Flea*, it goes into detail about why this is the case. But the war is not going very well. So, they're meeting stubborn resistance. But at the same time this is happening, there's been abject silence from the imperialist powers, from Britain, from the US, from NATO, from the United Nations, and we have to say from the western press, as well. So, this is the current situation, as we stand.

That's great. Thank you. I wanted to ask a little bit more about the issue of chemical weapons that you mentioned. As you mentioned, there have been allegations, or potential usages of chemical weapons across Syria, and in different instances in the history of Turkey. In this particular case, during this past invasion, you reported on the use of chemical weapons in a number of different instances. And these claims have since been taken up by the HDP, who have petitioned the Turkish Parliament for a formal inquiry. Can you tell us a little bit more about the evidence for these claims, what's known and what isn't, and what the inquiry hopes to establish?

Well, I think the important thing to note is that there has been some evidence. I have the footage, video footage, of dead bodies being pulled out of tunnels in Avashin, in the mountainous region, Duhok, that are clearly identifiable as the victims of what appears to be a chemical attack. So, we have that as a fairly strong piece of evidence, dead bodies, that's a fairly strong piece of evidence. Also, the canisters that are marked with ammonium nitrate that have been used in the attack are again another piece of evidence. There are also anecdotal reports which suggest that chemical weapons may have been used. Now, of course, these are very serious charges, very serious allegations. And we are in fact talking about a member of NATO; this is NATO's second largest army, which has probably been supplied most of the weapons that is used by Britain, by the US, by Germany and other member states. But the fact that these reports do appear to have some credibility warrants an investigation, and the Kurdish forces have been very open and said, "Yes, we're quite happy for you to come and carry out investigations on the ground, find out whether chemicals have been used," but it seems that nobody wants to take that step.

There's a number of bodies that are allocated with this task; the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the OPCW, is one of those, and it was that organization that has carried out a lot of the investigations in Syria, it carried out the investigation in Douma. But it rolled back, interestingly, if we look at the white phosphorus attack in Serekaniye, the OPCW was planning to carry out investigations, but then it suddenly rolled back and it said, "Well, white phosphorus isn't a chemical, so we're not going to investigate," even though there was very, very strong evidence for that, in fact stronger evidence for that attack than many others in Syria, including, I'm sure viewers will remember the horrific picture of the young boy that was covered in burns, screaming for his father, that was, I think, taken to France for treatment. But the announcement from the OPCW coincided with a donation by Turkey to that body of something like 30,000 euros as I understand it. Now both Turkey and the OPCW said there was no link between these two issues, that it just merely happened to be coincidence. And, you know, we can take them at face value for that if they want, but when you see a pattern emerging that Turkey is

accused of using chemical weapons, and the global bodies continue to ignore those claims, the suspicions start to be raised.

So, the HDP, the People's Democratic Party, which is, I always say that they're the only opposition party inside Turkey, I don't count the CHP, the Republican People's Party, as they seem to tail all of Erdogan's wars and whatever, but they have kind of been leading the charge against Erdogan's invasions in Syria and in northern Iraq as well. And they raised in Parliament, based on the *Morning Star's* report, actually, of the chemical weapons, they called for the establishment of a parliamentary commission of inquiry to look into that. Now that seems quite a reasonable avenue to pursue, and I would imagine that any democracy would want to be open and transparent, and if they haven't used chemical weapons, of course, they would welcome the establishment of such a body because it would show that they haven't used them. The fact that this was rejected, and described as 'insulting' and 'vulgar', again only adds fuel to the accusations that they have used chemical weapons in Iraqi Kurdistan, and they want to cover it up.

This is important because we're talking about a NATO member, a member of the United Nations. And it seems to be able to continue to act with impunity, and nobody is holding Turkey to account which again raises suspicions further that if it's not being held to account and it continues to carry out these acts, on whose behalf is Turkey acting, because we can say what we like about Tayyip Erdogan but I don't believe certainly the Turkey is acting as an independent force, just like Masoud Barzani is not acting as an independent force. Masoud Barzani's power relies on Tayyip Erdogan. He and the West require Masoud Barzani and the KDP to act as their policemen in Kurdistan, to stop any kind of dissent from erupting there, because it would threaten their interest. Just like the Western powers, the imperialist powers and NATO require Tayyip Erdogan to do two things, one is to crush internal dissent, this is why the HDP is threatened with closure and around 10,000 of its members and elected officials and politicians are imprisoned with barely a murmur from those that constantly claim that they stand for freedom and democracy and peace around the world. Yet, when they come to a progressive force standing up against a brutal dictatorship, they're quite happy to let them rot in prison. And the reason is, because the HDP unlocks the key to democracy in Turkey, and it is the only force standing in the way of Erdogan's wars.

So there again, the victims of this war - this war is not just a war in Iraqi Kurdistan, this is a war against the whole of the Kurdish people and it's a war against democracy, and it has to really be seen in those terms as part of the global situation; it's not really just boiled down to this one small part of the world, this is a war that's being waged by NATO, by the United Nations, by the US, by Britain, by all of the forces of imperialism that are backing Turkey to the hilt, both politically and militarily. So, like I said, Erdogan is not as powerful as people may think he is, because I can tell you something, if the Western powers want rid of a leader they don't particularly like, they're very brutal and very good at doing it. So as soon as Erdogan served his purpose, he will be gone, make no mistake of that.

But yes, I think this is a crucial point, the use of chemical weapons is a war crime. This is really, really important. And there is a very, very strong case for Tayyip Erdogan to be in The Hague facing charges of war crimes, not just for the use of chemical weapons, by the way, there are

many, many other aspects of his war on the Kurdish people that would fit the bill. But at the moment, he's backed by Western imperialism, so he will stay where he is.

Yeah, absolutely. And so, as you've mentioned a bit already and alluded to, there is both historically, and in this most recent period, a very complicated relationship and many tensions between the KDP, the PUK and the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan, and the way that the Turkish state figures into all of this, with their relations with Barzani, and so on. Can you talk a bit about these dynamics in this most recent period during the invasion?

Well, I think the most important thing to note is that there is mass opposition to Turkey's war. I kind of think well, the KDP are supporting Turkey's war, the KDP, their Peshmerga forces have launched raids on PKK guerrilla bases, and unfortunately, they've lost some of their soldiers in those attacks, they've been martyred in those incidents, which is a terrible consequence of this, but they've launched attacks that have preceded Turkey's bombing. So, they attacked a PKK guerrilla camp, and then maybe one hour later, Turkey starts bombing it. So, these are obviously joint military actions between the KDP Peshmerga and the Turkish forces.

I would imagine that there are maybe some kind of internal disputes within the KDP, because I don't imagine that this is supported entirely by the whole of the party, I think this is really led by Barzani; there are one or two individuals that are the driving force behind this. But then, of course, the dynamics are incredibly complex. So, we have the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the PUK, which operates in Silemani, which is where I was based, they are opponents of the war, but again, they are facing external pressure from the KDP, because the KDP controls the KRG government.

For example, I can't remember which month it was, it must have been soon after the invasion, in April/May, there was an anti-war demonstration in Silemani - I arrived and I've never seen so many people turn up at a peace rally before. And I counted more than 50 vehicles, hundreds of Peshmerga forces, security forces Asayish, and they were up and down Salomon Street, which is the main drag, the main street in Silemani, and they were hunting people down. More than 50 people that were attending that protest ended up in prison for three or four days. And they were told - I was lucky, I managed to escape arrest, I had my photographs deleted by the Asayish, I think they assumed that I was just there as a tourist, although they did pull a Russian tourist in amongst the protesters. But they were told very clearly that the PUK forces were apologetic to them while they were in custody, and said that they had been ordered to arrest them by Barzani, by the KDP. And they were told if they didn't arrest them, that they would suffer the withholding of money from the central KRG government, which, again, is something that - they said they couldn't afford to lose that money because at the moment, public sector salaries aren't being paid, and when they are they're being cut by 21%. So, there's unrest around that at the moment; there's been strike actions in hospitals and in schools across the region because people are struggling to pay to put food on the table, you know, and the situation is desperate; when I was there, we had regular cup electricity cuts, and things were pretty grim.

But there is this drive against the war, and, you know, it doesn't have the support not only of the political parties, but the people, the people oppose the war. And my experience was that generally, people support the PKK and the guerrilla. And I'm not talking about the people from

the movement, I'm talking about ordinary people on the street. I can remember conversations in cafes where people would sidle up to me and say, "We love the guerilla, the guerilla fighters are the only people that are standing between us and a massacre by the Turkish forces." They're talking about a genocide, the people are really, really clear about that actually. This happened, a shopkeeper told me, he asked me, I was going up to Qandil, and he asked me, he said to me, "If you see the guerilla, please give them a hug from me, because I love them. I love them." And these are people, many of them are associated with other parties, actually; some are supporters of PUK and even one from KDP. So, people are very aware of the role that the PKK and the guerrilla fighters are playing in the mountains, and they don't only speak about them in terms of a defensive force, but as a force that has given them back their Kurdish identity. People were saying that, "I owe my identity to the PKK."

Now, this doesn't mean that they support necessarily the ideology of the movement, but they certainly don't support attempts to flush them out of the Qandil mountains or their bases. They see them as inherently part of the Kurdish people. And the language that Barzani used I thought was very, very dangerous when he was talking about that the PKK should 'go back to their land,' and he was talking about going back to Turkey, as though Kurdistan is not their land. How can you expel Kurdish people from Kurdistan? And it gave me a bit of an insight really into how the KDP views Kurdistan and what Kurdistan is to them. To them is only there, the region that they have control of, and they care very little about Rojava, they care very little about Bakur in Turkey, and they care very little about what's happening in Iran. But the dynamics are very complex, and what the danger is, as before, is that they don't want to see another intra-Kurdish war. And this was in the mid-90s, there were - the figures vary, but there's around 85,000 I think is the number of people that were killed when the KDP and PUK forces fought each other. And in that particular conflict, the KDP played an even more pernicious role by inviting Saddam Hussein's forces into Kurdistan to drive the PUK out. And this is what many people are saying now, is that Tayyip Erdogan is the new Saddam Hussein. And I was very privileged to meet the survivors of the Anfal genocide, which for those of you that don't know the Anfal genocide was a massacre of Kurdish people, 185,000 men, women and children were killed simply for being Kurdish, they were dumped in mass graves across the country, as Saddam Hussein's forces launched this assault that went on for years. Many will be familiar with the gas attack on Halabja. And I visited Halabja, and you know, they're still saying 31-32 years later that they still haven't had justice, and they're still continuing that struggle. But they recognized, and I was very honored to be able to come and speak at the national memorial for the Anfal in a city called Kalar in the south of the Kurdistan Region, it was broadcast on state television, but these are people, many of them were children when they saw their parents massacred and their families massacred in front of them. And I mean, the stories that I heard were absolutely horrific, beyond horrific. This was a human tragedy beyond anything.

But what they said very clearly was Britain and the imperialist forces either haven't learned the lessons of history or they don't care about the lessons from history, because the Anfal could never have happened without the political and military support of Britain and the US. I mean, Britain was supplying arms to Saddam after the Halabja massacre; this was something that shocked the world, and Britain carried on trading arms to Saddam Hussein after that, and they said, "Look, this couldn't have happened without the political and military support of the West." And they're saying that Tayyip Erdogan is the new Saddam Hussein, and of course being backed

to the hilt politically and militarily by those exact same forces. And they said that he wants to carry out the genocide and continue the genocide that Saddam Hussein started. And they very much, again, oppose the war, the survivors of the Anfal oppose the war, and supported the right of the PKK to be in the mountains as a legitimate resistance force. And that's how they should be seen instead of this kind of picture that has been painted of them in the propaganda war, which we'll probably talk about in more detail a little bit later, but, you know, they've been classified as a terrorist organization. And this is something that I think poses a big challenge and something that needs to be confronted. This was, again, a political decision that has been challenged in the court, and the Belgian court, which ruled that actually the PKK are not a terrorist organization, but are part of an armed struggle inside Turkey, so they can't be classified as a terrorist organization. That's how people see them, they're seen as a resistance force. And I think that they have a legitimate right to do so. The biggest terrorist, of course, is the one in Ankara. He's the one that is carrying out a genocide not just in Iraqi Kurdistan, and at the behest of the imperialist powers. So yes, the dynamics are very complex, but despite the complexity, there is 99% unity against Turkey's invasion, with the exception of the KDP.

Yes, I would very much like to come back to the issue of propaganda and the war on terror a bit later, but I wanted to ask you to follow up on this last point; you said that in your view, or from what you've seen, the support in KDP is primarily from the leading Barzani family. And I'm wondering what you think their interest is in collaborating with Turkey?

Well, their interest is maintaining power. That's all their interest is. Their power rests on a lack of democracy inside the Kurdistan Region. If there was genuine democracy - and this is what people are calling for. So, we saw the protests that I was mentioning earlier that started - I was involved in them in the beginning, and, you know, the first day that we went, we took to the streets, these are teachers, nurses, civil servants, for a peaceful demonstration that was fired upon with tear gas, an MP from Gorran movement was knocked unconscious by a gas canister. There was a brutal put down of these demonstrations in the region; I think something like 13 people, I can't remember the exact number, were shot dead, were killed. Children were shot dead. And for simply demanding that they were paid their salary, that they had good investment in infrastructure, that they had job opportunities, that they were able to have a basic standard of living, that was all that they were they were calling for initially. But then this kind of broadened out into demands for political change.

Now this is what frightens the KDP, because political change would mean that they would have to - there's a broken political system, which means that the region is essentially run by two families, the Barzani's and the Talabanis, from the KDP and PUK. And they control every aspect of life in the region. That means they control the media, they control the government, they control all of the public institutions. So, they determine whether you get a job or whether you don't get a job; not just in the public sector, but in the private sector, because nearly every business is owned by either the Talabani or the Barzani or their acolytes. So, in order to be able to survive in the region, you have to pledge unity to one of those forces, so it becomes very, very difficult for people to have freedom of expression.

And as we saw during those protests, not only were people being killed, but media organizations that were reporting on the demonstrations were being closed down. Now I saw the journalists

from Rudaw, which is the Barzani owned media organization, they were booed, and they were chased out of the demonstration with chants of, “oil station, oil station, oil station,” which means that people knew that there that they were there to put a spin on events, which they did. And at the time, they were trying to blame the protests on the PKK. Now I was in the region, and I'm very close to people that are supporters of the movement, of the PKK, in Silemani, and I can tell you, 100%, they were not there the first day of the demonstration. I wish they were, and they would have been very welcome, but my friends from the movement were not there on the first day of the demonstration. So, they were trying to blame the PKK for whipping up hostilities, when in fact, they were not doing anything of the sort. And throughout all of this the PKK has maintained a line calling for peace, calling for negotiations and discussions. There's only one force that turned up to those demonstrations ready for war, and it was the same forces that have turned up to a peaceful demonstration with machine guns and attacked the people. And it's the same people that are now mobilizing thousands of soldiers in the Qandil mountains, in the Metina and Zap mountains. They haven't come for a friendly chat, they've come armed for war. So, that's kind of the driving force behind that.

But democracy threatens Barzani's power base, because if you have free and fair elections, they're not going to win. I can guarantee you that as well. They wouldn't be voted in, because everybody knows that Kurdistan is not a poor region. You know, just up the road from where I live, there's Kirkuk oilfield, which is the second biggest oil field in the world. Kurdistan is a region rich with resources, it's a region of bounty, a region of plenty. But those resources are being stolen by the imperialist forces, but also by Barzani as well who, as we know, has signed this very shady 50-year oil deal with Turkey, which ships much of the oil out of the region, who knows where the revenues go, but while the people are living like paupers, like, hand to mouth, he's living in palatial grandeur. And that's not lost on the people, they know, people see this, which is why there's a lot of anger.

So, this is why they want to crush internal dissent, this is why there is no democracy in the Kurdistan region. And Erbil in particular is incredibly unsafe for democracy activists, it's incredibly unsafe for journalists. Now we're even starting to see some of the human rights organizations and the press freedom organizations, which, have not really said too much about the region, now they're coming out in criticism of the oppression of journalism from the KRG. But they need to keep a lid on that. because once people start finding out the truth of what's happening in the region, then the mask slips, and it's a threat to their power. Which is exactly the same reason why Turkey and the imperialist powers want to keep Barzani in power, because if there's democracy in the Kurdistan Region, it threatens their interest as well. And the same with Tayyip Erdogan, they need to keep him in power, because a democratic Turkey would threaten their interest in Syria, in Iraq, in Iran and the other countries that Turkey shares a border with. All of these things are inherently interlinked. So, this is not just the people that are crushing democracy in the region, it isn't just Barzani, but this is the entire forces of imperialism.

Absolutely, thank you. And to transition slightly, you also spent time in this most recent period in Makhmour camp. Can you tell us a little bit about your experiences there and how you view the significance of the Makhmour refugee camp?

The Makhmour refugee camp - for those that don't know where the Makhmour refugee camp is, it's situated in one of the contested parts of the region, they call it the article 140 regions. So this means it's contested between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. And there's supposed to be negotiations around where these contested regions lie. So Makhmour sits I think just on the edge of what are the article 140 contested regions. Now I spent about two weeks there. This camp is home to around 12,000 people, most of them fled from Turkey, from Kurdistan, in southeast Turkey, during the 1990s, when Turkey launched assimilation operations, which saw the burning down of more than 3000 villages; thousands and thousands of Kurdish people were massacred during those operations, and again, many buried in mass graves. But a lot of them fled across the border, and they came into Iraqi Kurdistan, in that time it was northern Iraq, under the control of Saddam Hussein. So, they moved a number of times before they were settled in Makhmour.

And this is a camp where life is very, very difficult for the residents there. During my time there, I saw, what you call 'democratic confederalism' in action. This is the philosophy of Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish movement, and I saw how it operated in terms of health, education, political education, with women placed at the center of everything, really. And this was a fully functioning society running along those lines. But also, at the same time, it was subjected to a blockade from the Kurdistan Regional Government, which I'll talk a little bit about that in a minute. But this was imposed - it's been in place for two years now, and it was a response to the murder of a Turkish intelligence agent in Erbil, which has nothing to do with the people in the camp, by the way. And even if it was anybody inside the camp that carried out that assassination, the blockade of the camp would be illegal, in violation of international law as a collective punishment of the people inside the camp.

But it's been subjected to a blockade, which I witnessed firsthand. It's also regularly attacked by Turkish forces; when I was there, I think drones flew overhead every single night. And the people in the camp, myself included, believed that an attack from the Turkish forces was imminent, because - Tayyip Erdogan calls it an "incubator of terrorism", because some of the people within the camp, and I would say quite a lot, support the PKK. Now, there's a good reason for them to support the PKK, because in 2014, the camp was overrun by ISIS as ISIS swept across the region taking control of vast swathes of both Syria and Iraq, causing as we know massacres of the Yazidi people not too far away from Makhmour and extrajudicial executions and all sorts of horrors. I mean they're a death cult, you know, that has inflicted horror upon horror across the world. They took over the camp, the camp residents managed to flee, but the only forces, or the forces that saved them, they retaken control of the camp, were the PKK. And even Barzani recognized the PKK, because he came to the camp and thanked the PKK leaders for their efforts in defeating ISIS. And he called them 'my brothers' and said that, "we will work together to defeat Daesh in the region." So when he needed to, he recognized the PKK fighters.

So, obviously, there's a lot of support for the guerrilla fighters in the camp, which again still remains under threat by ISIS. People seem to think that ISIS have been defeated in the region, but they just reconfigured into like a smaller network of cells, small guerrilla cells, and I think there was about 80 of them in the mountains surrounding Makhmour, so I was told by camp officials. And we hear of these sporadic attacks that happen in Kirkuk and other areas as well, so

they haven't been flushed out. So, the people have their own kind of forces protecting the camp, the self-defense forces.

But I was there not long after the last chemical attack, which took place in – I'm going to get my years muddled up - in June 2020. And I went to the site of the alleged chemical attack and I saw it with my own eyes. I remember reporting on it before I'd been out there, I reported on the attack and I'd seen the video footage of it, which I forwarded to the UNHCR, which is the United Nations human rights body that is supposed to administer the camp. And for two weeks I pestered them for a comment on this alleged chemical attack and the embargo. And I was met - there was a spokesman for UNHCR called Firas Al-Khateeb who essentially gave me a really bizarre response, which was along the lines of - bear in mind, this was two weeks after the attack. I have it here actually, it said, "UNHCR has not received any reports of attacks on Makhmour camp." Now, this was astonishing; I mean, this wasn't a credible response, because at the time, the attack had been reported in the global press, not very thoroughly, and we reported it and a number of other organizations. It was also posted on the Turkish military website that they had conducted this attack. I mean, they weren't denying it, they said that they were attacking terrorists, and they believed that it was their legitimate right to launch an attack. So, the fact that the UNHCR hadn't received any reports of the attack just didn't stand up.

And also, when I was in Makhmour, I spoke to the camp official who has responsibility for liaison with UNHCR, and he said, "No, we sent them the reports, and here they are." He showed me the reports. I couldn't read them because they were in Arabic, but I did later get an English translation of the reports which detailed exactly what had happened, and how many people were killed. He also then said, "UNHCR is not involved in the management of Makhmour," which when I told the residents of the camp, they were really surprised to hear that because - I mean, the UNHCR was right about one thing, it abandoned the camp after ISIS took over, after it took a foothold, they fled, and they've haven't been back since; that was in 2014. But they still do have UNHCR buildings inside the camp, which I saw with my own eyes. It did very little to condemn Turkey's attack but this is what they said in return, I asked him about, "What action has the UNHCR taken to ensure the safety of residents, access to medicine, food and education in terms of the KRG-imposed blockade." They said, "The UNHCR is not aware of a KRG-imposed blockade, aside from the travel restrictions imposed in the context of COVID-19." Now, again, this lacked any credibility, because I then sent them pictures of demonstrations held outside their own offices, with huge banners protesting against the blockade. So, it doesn't stand up that they don't know about this.

Just recently, the camp was attacked again, in a missile strike. This was just I think a week after President Erdogan, had demanded that UN take action to what he said, "clean up the camp from terrorists." And that's astonishing language to use, because this is the language that you would associate with the Nazis, and Adolf Hitler; this is the kind of language that they deployed when they were talking about Jewish people that they subjected, of course, to the Holocaust. And he was talking about 'cleaning up' a refugee camp. Now he said as well, he appealed to the United Nations, and he used these words, he was very clear, and he said, "If you don't do it, I will, acting as a United Nations member." So, he's very clearly saying, we're a UN member state, and we're asking for you to take action, if you don't do it, I will. Then he launched a missile attack, which killed three people, and he's done that under the auspices of the United Nations.

So again, there has been not a word from the global forces about this attack. Can you imagine this happening in any other country, an attack on a refugee camp, a missile strike that has killed three people? Do Kurdish lives not matter the same as refugees in other parts of the world? Do they, because Tayyip Erdogan says that they're terrorists, does that mean that they can be attacked with impunity? I mean, of course not, this is an absolute absurdity. But when you piece together the jigsaw, you have to say 'what'? And I've spoken to friends of mine in the camp last week, and we're in agreement on this, that the imperialist forces, I mean, the global forces - NATO, the United Nations, Turkey, the United States - are in collusion against the camp.

The camp represents a threat in a number of ways; Barzani is threatened by the camp because it offers a glimpse of how a democratic society can function without the KDP's involvement. And the ideas that are prevalent within the camp, the ideas of democratic confederalism, could, he would suggest, be then imported into the Kurdistan region, and people will say, "Well, actually, we can do things a different way." It represents a threat to Turkey, because Turkey wants to break - and the KDP wants to do the same thing - to break the link between progressive Kurds in Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurds in Rojava. That's what this is about, the creation of what I think - in the article 140 zones that I mentioned earlier, these contested areas - is a Sunni corridor, the creation of this barrier that will separate progressive Kurds from one another in those organizations. Now, and we know of course - I think Osman Baydemir told me once that, "Erdogan would pursue Kurds to the moon, if they were on the moon." Wherever they are, he sees Kurdish people as a threat. But of course this unity amongst Kurds presents a threat to Erdogan's rule in Turkey. So there's this kind of collusion.

The most important areas at the moment I think, are Makhmour, Shingal, and Qandil. These are the centres of resistance to not only to Erdogan but to the KDP, and they're very, very important. And it's important that people defend those against attempts of what's happening, and against another genocide. But the fact that this is a refugee camp, this is again a war crime. This is attacking refugees. Refugees are protected under international law and the United Nations, under the Geneva Convention, under a whole raft of pieces of international law, and launching a missile strike on them is illegal. The blockade is illegal, it's a collective punishment. So we have to really press for these things, for the embargo to be lifted. This is during the time when there's a global pandemic as well, Coronavirus has hit the camp. I was in the hospital there, that is there to treat Coronavirus patients, and I wrote a report on this again for the *Morning Star*. I saw the supplies that they had, and when I say 'supplies,' for the 12,000 people they had four or five boxes, no ventilators, one or two oxygen cylinders. So a serious outbreak in the camp would have been absolutely devastating. And it was very, very difficult in terms of getting supplies into the camp.

So they were really worried about an outbreak there, and it did hit the camp, and I think they managed to sort of control it because, again, they have a very dedicated team of health workers there, and a lot of them are working as volunteers in the neighborhoods, but it's not an ideal situation. So that needs to be lifted instantly, as does the threat of attacks from Turkey, and they need to be held accountable for their actions. But again, we're seeing the global bodies stand by and allow this to happen, which implies to me that they are colluding against the camp.

And I'd like to ask you about this next, the global collusion of imperialist forces to create the situation and perpetuate it. So about NATO in particular, of which Turkey is a member, how do you evaluate the strategy of NATO with respect to Turkey's invasion of South Kurdistan - in particular, the United States, Germany and the UK, the main players - France as well. That is, how do you think that NATO is evaluating Turkey's actions and supporting Turkey's actions in the broader region? And what do you think that this says about NATO's own strategy for the region?

Well, we're just weeks after the recent NATO Summit, and if we really want an indication of what NATO really stands for. I think NATO tries to portray itself as a global peacekeeping body, which is absolutely absurd. We've seen the NATO expansion eastwards, the encirclement of China, the aggressive stance towards Russia, and NATO, of course, - there's no equality within NATO; it is made up of individual member states, but they don't all have equal weight when it comes to voting or to other rights within that organization. And it has historically played a role as a war machine.

Emerging out of the war against communism, of course.

Yeah, exactly. That was it. Yeah, that is what it was set up to do, and it's carried on that in a much more aggressive manner. And I have to say, under Joe Biden, the new president of the United States, it's adopted an even more aggressive stance than I think it had under Donald Trump, which I think says something, because the people that were looking to Joe Biden for hope of bringing some kind of global stability after the chaos of Donald Trump - and let's not beat around the bush, it was chaos under Trump; Trump was incredibly erratic, and his foreign policy was one of aggression and bringing the world to the brink of a huge global conflict on many occasions, but there's no sign of changes under Biden. We've seen that with his recent airstrikes in Iraq and in Syria, and the aggressive stance towards China as part of this new Cold War. And, of course, the region that we're talking about now was very much part of the old Cold War.

But I think Turkey is NATO's second largest army, it's not a small, insignificant force within that, but NATO's politics are driven by the US, and essentially what the US says is carried out by NATO. And we know that the US wants regional hegemony, it wants control of the resources, and of course if it manages to do that, it gives it another base which it can use to pressure China, and which it can use to pressure Russia. The US is in that dangerous kind of state where it's a declining imperialist power, and you know, declining empires are always the ones that seem to be most aggressive and hit out the most. And the reason that it's driving this cold war against China at the moment is because it's fearful of the dollar losing its status as the world currency, and if it loses its status as the world currency, US finance capital loses its ability to control and dominate world markets. And this is what's driving the current US aggression.

Now, I think as we've discussed, NATO isn't really saying anything negative that would lead us to think that NATO is unhappy about what Erdogan is doing. It's in full support of his actions. It's in full support in Iraqi Kurdistan, because of the reasons that we've discussed already, but also wants to make sure that it may maintain a dominant influence over the whole of Iraq as well, it wants to make sure that it controls the - you know, it didn't go to war for no reason in

2003; for whatever people may like to think, it certainly wasn't for the liberation of the Kurdish people, it was a war of imperialist plunder for oil. And of course it wants the ouster of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. So of course, it has a vested interest in Turkey's war. It is a bit of a contradiction in a way, because on the one hand, it's entered this kind of military alliance with Kurdish forces in Rojava, when it suits them, but it pulls out when it doesn't suit them, leaving again the Kurdish people there to the bloodbath that they've experienced at the hands of the Turkish forces and jihadist allies there. But the US military, as we know, doesn't act in an altruistic way, it doesn't care about the Kurdish people, it acts in the interest of US finance capital. Which the Kurdish forces are well aware of, by the way, despite what their detractors may say; this is a military alliance, not a political alliance, and there's a very big difference between the two.

But of course, sometimes interests do crossover. But even when NATO and the US claims to be wanting to defeat ISIS, or Daesh, or the jihadist groups, again I take that with a bit of a pinch of salt, considering that it was the US and the CIA's operation Timber Sycamore programme that was channeling millions in weapons and training to the very jihadist groups that it now claims to be fighting in Syria. So this is part of - NATO isn't separate from global imperialism, NATO is one of the instruments of imperialism, as is the United Nations, as is the European Union, as is the World Bank, as is the IMF, all of these bodies are a part of that system that keeps these imperialist in power, and makes sure that these things can happen with impunity, because it's the driving force behind them, and protecting its own interests. So we can't appeal to these powers to improve the situation; it's not like they don't know these things are happening, they do know, not only are they supporting it, they're the ones that are backing it, and these acts are being carried out in their interest. Which is why I always say it's up to us to build our own independent organizations that can challenge these global powers. And I think that's it. The Kurdish movement is attempting to do just that, as are other anti-imperialist forces across the world. But I think there's a big fight to be had.

Absolutely, the biggest really. I wanted to follow on from this last point that you made, about the necessity for developing alternative institutions that can issue some kind of challenge to these global institutions like NATO. And I'm wondering, then, if you could elaborate a bit more or share your thoughts on how social movements or political resistance, particularly in the context of, say, a place like the UK, which is an imperial bastion, and one of the centre points of NATO, how from a position like that one could formulate a political approach to challenge and resist NATO as a global imperialist force?

Well, this is one of the perennial difficulties faced by the anti-imperialist movement for decades, and is the biggest challenge that we have to overcome. Because there have been attempts to build - and I think this is the key to, it is international solidarity. We can't continue working in silos where people see their national liberation struggle, or their independence struggle, or their fight against capitalism or imperialism, as something that's separate; they are all, at some level, intertwined with one another. And it's the hardest, it's been the most difficult thing, I think, to get that kind of unity amongst those forces, and amongst that struggle.

In Britain, I think, people will lament the state of the trade union movement in the country at the moment, from its peak of about 12-13 million to around six and a half million members today.

But we also should remember, it's an incredibly, incredibly powerful force. And if you look at the history of our movement, it was the trade union movement, allied with social movements, allied with national liberation movements, that brought down apartheid South Africa, for example. This was something that was very powerful because we realized, as a movement of workers, that we are the ones that have power; power in society doesn't lie with these major institutions, as much as they might like to think that it does, they can't function without working class people, tacitly supporting them or remaining dormant. When we unite, when we take action, we're an absolutely unstoppable force.

I think that in terms of what's happening in Kurdistan, for me there are two key elements to this; obviously, one of them is supporting the resistance, and recognizing their democratic right to resist, and that means supporting the people who are at the forefront of that fight at the moment, and that's the PKK. Now, we spoke earlier about their designation as a terrorist organization, which was, again, a political decision that was kind of - during the war on terror, I think there was probably a trade-off, that the PKK would be designated a terrorist organization as long as Turkey allowed US forces to use the Incirlik airbase, where it has nuclear weapons by the way; this is another point that many people don't realize, that there are nuclear weapons in Turkey. And this is something used to de-legitimize resistance, and we've seen this with struggles across the world. We saw it very recently, when Israel was attacking Gaza. And you know, there was this, "All but Hamas". Hamas is a terrorist organization. And this was an excuse used to not support the resistance. And we're seeing the same now with PKK.

We see two things actually, with PKK; we see one group saying, "Well, they're a terrorist organization, so we can't possibly support them." But then another group is saying, "Well, they're in hock with US imperialists, so we can't support them." You get that from some of the leftists, and, as with everything, the situation is not as straightforward as they like to portray. It partly stems from a lack of understanding of what is an incredibly complex region. And, you know, it's not up to us to determine the forms of resistance. I think the PKK should be delisted as a terrorist organization, and the Belgian court case is a good benchmark on how that can happen.

The other two things, actually - I said two things, but there's three, but they're kind of interlinked. So the other is one is the imprisonment of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. For people that don't know, he's been in prison on Imrali Island, in the Sea of Marmara in Turkey; he was the only prisoner there for many, many years, held in solitary confinement. His freedom really is the key to unlocking democracy and solving the Kurdish question. Now, the Turkish state don't want to solve the Kurdish question, that's very, very clear. The conditions he has been held have been described by many human rights organizations and the Committee for the Prevention of Torture as exactly that, torture; he's been held in isolation, denied visits from family, denied access to his lawyers, and held in a tiny room without the basic rights that are allocated to any other prisoner.

So at the moment, there are hunger strikes of mainly Kurdish political prisoners in Turkish jails, I think they're on the 145th day of action, it will be longer by the time this goes out. And they're demanding, again, two things; one, they're not even demanding freedom for Abdullah Ocalan, actually, they're just demanding that he is allowed his basic rights as a prisoner. And they're asking for a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish question. So this is another campaign that should

be taken up in the British trade union movement, which I know it has some support, but that needs to be broadened out in the same way that the organizations, trade union branches, launched a mass campaign for the freedom of Nelson Mandela, who, as we know, spent decades behind bars, in very similar circumstances. The South African Communist Party and COSATU, too, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions, recognize the similarities between Mandela and Ocalan. So they launched earlier this year, I believe, I can't remember the exact date it was now, but they organized a campaign for his freedom with an open letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, which organisations can still sign I believe, and can be probably found on the Freedom for Ocalan website, which is the British trade union-led campaign.

So that's one aspect. The one thing that I always press is the People's Democratic Party, the HDP. Now the HDP is Turkey's only political opposition, or the only opposition in the Grand Assembly. And it is under a very, very serious threat at the moment; just a few weeks ago, the Constitutional Court now accepted a case file calling for it to be closed down. Historically Kurdish parties over 70/80 years have faced this, we've been through it many, many times before, with HADEP and other organizations that were shut down. But HDP was something slightly different, I would think, in that it broke through the 10% barrier threshold to get MPs elected into parliament. But it brought together many of the disparate groups inside Turkey; it brought together communists, socialists, trade unionists, environmentalists, the LGBT movement, and it brought those together with the Kurdish movement in a way that hadn't really happened before, and it represented a real step forward for democracy in Turkey. Now since then, since its inception, it's come under intense pressure from the Turkish state; 20,000 of its members have been detained since 2016, I believe 10,000 are still in prison, more than 200 elected officials, seven MPs. In December, one of the leading figures in the party, the former HDP MP Leyla Guven, was jailed for more than 23 years for the crime of being a Kurdish woman who stood up to Erdogan and was involved in lawful democratic politics inside Turkey.

So I say to people in Britain, this is the equivalent of Boris Johnson deciding to lock up the leaders of the Labour Party, throw them in Belmarsh prison, and round up the whole of Momentum and jail them, and hold them there without bringing them to trial. But the threats are very, very serious, and the HDP represents a very big threat to Tayyip Erdogan, and he recognizes this, because it's the only force that is standing in the way of Tayyip Erdogan's wars, is the only force that is standing up against femicide and in favor of the Istanbul Convention, it is the only force that is standing up for trade union rights and for workers in Turkey, it is the only force that is standing up for LGBT rights in what is an incredibly homophobic society, where homophobia is being driven by the government it has to be said, and is the only force really that is capable of unlocking democracy in the country, which makes it a very, very serious threat. But it also underlines why it's so important for us to stand in solidarity with the HDP. Now, there's a whole host of things that people can do, but the Labour Party in Britain really has to step up to the plate on this and it hasn't done. It's been - as you said in the introduction, I've been to many trials of HDP MPs and other officials, and there's been no presence from the Labour Party, there's been no statements from the Labour Party. I've had to pry them out of the party before in terms of the attempt to shut down HDP, so there's a lot more that we can do.

But we have to look at the positives; I mean, there's huge, huge hope, because we're seeing resistance forces inside Turkey, despite the oppression, despite the jailings and the arrests, of

whole layers of society, from public sector workers to people in my profession, journalists - it is the biggest jailer of journalists anywhere in the world, with a third of the global total - but that resistance has continued. So it's up to us really to stand in solidarity with those resistance forces, to campaign for the freedom of Abdullah Ocalan, to campaign for the freedom and in solidarity with HDP, and for the delisting of the PKK. I think that's the three-pronged approach.

The other thing that we need to do as well, I think, is to take this into the anti-war movement. Because we saw 200,000 people out on the streets very recently - I was really pleased to see this, I was I wasn't here I was in Beirut - but we saw the streets of London thronging with people with Palestinian flags, and in support of the Palestinian people, which was, I know because I was in Palestinian camps at the time, and they said that this gave them real hope, and they were really pleased to see that their voice was being taken to the streets of London. And of course it has an impact because we need that mass body of people on the streets because we know that governments won't act without it. We can't just appeal to the best of nature of those in the corridors of power, we have to build a mass movement, and mass movement on the streets, which is something we don't have at the moment, but we need to mainstream the Kurdish struggle in the same way that the Palestinian struggle has been mobilized and mainstreamed, in the same way that support for Venezuela and Cuba has manifested itself. We need the same kind of movement for the Kurdish people if we want to shift things.

Alongside that, and I think we might talk about this a bit later, but we also need to - propaganda is a very important part of any kind of struggle, and at the moment this is something that I think we are fighting a war against this, particularly, not just in the region, but outside the region as well. In Kurdistan, we're fighting against the Barzani-owned media in Kurdistan, which has been churning out during both the public sector strikes and the kind of anti-government protests in November and December, but also in terms of beating the drum for war, they've been playing a very pernicious role in doing that as well. And those organizations that have been brave enough to speak out, unfortunately, have had journalists arrested and they've been closed down.

But we also face another fight in Britain as well, because, again, the mainstream media - and I'm always loath to use that term, it's a bit cliché, but you know, organizations like *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, the BBC, all of these media organizations should be reporting on what's happening. This is a major global event involving a NATO power that's committing war crimes with jihadists, that ticks all of their kind of boxes really for things that they like, but they're not doing so. There's a reason I think they're not doing so, and that comes down to media ownership; for *The Guardian* and other newspapers that receive millions of pounds in advertising from Turkish Airlines, for example, and the Turkish state - and for people that don't think that advertising revenue drives editorial content, then you need to have a serious think about that - but they have an interest in not reporting on this.

But also, we have the the duplicitous role played by the UK's embassy in Erbil and the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Kurdistan. If you follow their social media accounts or listen to the issues that they raised in Parliament, you would have no idea that there's a war going on, you would have no idea that - for example, while people were being shot dead in the street, the day a 13 year old child was shot through the neck and killed, the members of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Kurdistan were holding up pictures of themselves with pomegranates

from Halabja, and they were saying, “Yeah, we need to diversify, look at this beautiful fruit.” So they're playing a very dangerous role, because they're actually playing a role that diverts attention away from the reality on the ground, and they're painting a picture that isn't truthful. And when you see that the All-Party Parliamentary Group - I showed this actually to the survivors of the Anfal and they were horrified, as were people in Silemani when I showed them. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Kurdistan, the secretarial support for that group is paid for, 60,000 pounds a year, by Keystone Oil, by an oil company that surprisingly is linked to Barzani. So unfortunately the APPG for Kurdistan acts as Barzani's mouthpiece in Parliament. If you look at the recent motions they've laid down, they're ridiculous; they're talking about I think sheep being killed or something, one of them was on about, without mentioning the fact that animals are being slaughtered because of the Turkish invasion, and that forestry and greenland and acres and acres have been destroyed, and that chemical weapons are falling.

And it's the same for the UK in Erbil; the ambassador there, he's just left now, James Thornton, I wrote an article calling him I think ‘a colonialist’, but after he launched an attack on the PKK last year. But I mean I stand by 100%, I think the embassy there does treat Kurdistan as a colonial outpost, and again, it's mentioned nothing about the war. It posts photographs, like holidays snaps, you know, pictures of him in the full Kurdish dress at various sites around the region. And the sites are beautiful, don't get me wrong, I've been to many of them myself, but the beautiful sites are also being destroyed, and that's something that's being glossed over. We are also fighting against that as well. So we have a big task on our hands. And we have a major battle, the propaganda war, as well as the war for peace, as they call it. That's the overriding message that has to be put across; while Turkey is waging war, the PKK is asking for peace. That's very, very important. And it's made every single effort possible to bring that about, and it's insisted it doesn't want war, it wants peace. And others are heeding the call, but we hope that the KDP does, we hope that NATO does, and we hope that the imperialist powers do.

Absolutely. And this issue of the propaganda war that you mentioned was the last point that I wanted to ask you about. And we've seen this role being played, as you mentioned, by media outlets in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by the Turkish state, as well as in the global media. And the war on terror, as you've been discussing, plays a very central role here in sort of banning discussion, or de-legitimizing at every turn any challenge to the international system of state and capital and their maintenance of the monopoly on legitimate violence. So can you share your perspective about this in terms of the role and impact you think that media and propaganda warfare is having on the situation on the ground, like how you view this role that, as you said, the propaganda war is another front in this battle? As well as how you view your work as a journalist in this context?

Well, just to start with my role as a journalist, there's kind of this myth that journalism is impartial, but journalism is never impartial. Even those that say they're impartial are taking a side. There's no such thing as impartial journalism. My journalism is objective, absolutely, and that's a different thing. But it's always on the side of the oppressed. So I see my role in all of my writing, whether I'm writing about Kurdistan, whether I'm writing about Latin America, or other parts of the world, as – it's a bit of a cliché, but you know, ‘telling truth to power’, ‘giving a voice to the voiceless’, ‘standing on the side of the oppressed people’. And while it might be a cliché, as a journalist, that has these kind of very noble values, it's not something that you see in

large parts of the Western press, as they tend to report things - now, journalism has changed quite a lot, even recently. But what you see quite often is that the mainstream media and the major news organizations have, essentially, become the mouthpieces of the various departments of state, the various departments of government, they just really regurgitate - they get their news from press releases from the Ministry of Defence or from government speeches, so they'll give voices to those that are already very powerful, and they will amplify those voices, rather than actually those people on the ground.

One of my journalistic heroes is – was, still is - Robert Fisk, who unfortunately died last year. And he says some very important things I think about journalism, but the most important thing is he says, “As journalists, our job is to report the truth. And you can't get to the truth if you're sitting in an office in London, you can't get to the truth if you're not on the ground, going out and meeting people and speaking to them. And then you can tell the truth as you see it, and as reality is on the ground.” And this is something that's missing. And the main thing that's missing is the people, the people that are the most affected by Turkey's wars. This was why when I went to Kurdistan, I went to those places; I went to those places that have been bombed, I met the victims of Turkish drone strikes, I met with farmers who have been driven out of their homes, because they are the people that can tell me what's happening. And then I can hear it with my own ears and see it with my own eyes. Now I think this is absolutely essential, and I will always report on things as I see them.

So, we do face a big, huge battle, because - I write for the *Morning Star*, I write for a number of other organizations as well, but in the sort of media pool, we're a very small pebble. And our ripples sometimes are big and sometimes are not so big. So it does have an impact, because whatever we think of the BBC, what it says matters, it is the state broadcaster, and people trust it to tell the truth. Now I don't, I take an entirely different view, because I know the history of the BBC, and we can look back, for example, at the miners' strike, where it swapped the footage around to show miners attacking police when it was police attacking miners. And they very famously, but 30 years later, they issued an apology and said, “Yes, we did it, and we're sorry,” but the damage is done 30 years later.

So they're very careful about what stories they choose to run and what they don't choose to run. These, again, are political decisions. So by choosing not to cover what's happening in Kurdistan, and I'm talking about Syria as well, I'm talking about in Iraq, I'm talking about in the southeast of Turkey, where war crimes are being committed by a NATO member state, it's taking a political decision not to cover that, for the same reason *The Guardian* is, and all of these other organizations.

So we do need to strengthen ourselves in the propaganda war. Every kind of movement in history, whether a national liberation movement, has recognized the importance of propaganda and of media. So these are the two things big things that are missing for me, actually, at the moment are, as we spoke earlier, the mass movement that we need to build, in terms of mass street mobilizations and a mass movement in working class organizations. But also, we need a more effective propaganda organization, which is partly why me and Marcel were founding the Kurdistan Media Project was to try and shift that balance a little bit.

And we have some organizations - I mean, I work as a journalist, I work very closely with ANF, which reports on the Kurdish movement, I work very closely, in fact, every day I'm in contact with the Mezopotamya Agency, mainly their offices in Ankara. And we do some really important collaborative work, which - this is essential again, because we can't get to every single part of Kurdistan, we can't be in more than one place at a time, so that collaborative work is absolutely vital, absolutely essential. And the three of us working together, I think, has produced some pretty good results in terms of - for example, it was the anniversary of the torture of I think around 50 Kurdish civilians that were hauled into prison, they were electrocuted. My reporting on that was based on talks with some of the people at the Mezopotamya Agency, and that was picked up by a Labour MP, who then raised it in Parliament. And I get regular phone calls from Labour MPs actually asking me about, for example, 'can you give me some details and information about Turkey's links with ISIS'? So the work that we do is important, it's important that we that we carry on doing that.

But people often think, "Well, we need to get into *The Guardian*, we need to get onto the BBC." As a strategy, I have my reservations about that, because I think it's not that these organizations don't know, they do know, but they're making a conscious decision not to report it. But also, with *The Guardian*, some liberal might read *The Guardian* and think, "Oh, poor Kurds," and then put it down and not take any action, which is why I always value the role of the *Morning Star* because whilst our circulation is obviously not as big as *The Guardian*, our newspaper is read by six and a half million people in the trade union movement, and when we write stuff and we can write in an agitational way, it calls those people to action. And these are the people that are in the constituency of the Labour Party, the Green Party, the SNP, or play leading roles in their trade union movement. So these are the most active layers of society, and these are the people that we need to appeal to actually, because these are the building blocks of the resistance.

So we need to think, you know, and use our resources wisely and think about how we can best build a movement. So at the moment, I think that's something that we're hoping to progress a little bit further, but it's getting there, we've seen the signs. I mean, I get invited to speak at quite a large number of trade union branch meetings, and once people know, and they hear what happens, then they're kind of pressed into doing something about it. And that's kind of what we need to do. So we have to have hope, and I think that hope is there, it lies in our organizations, but the two are essentially intertwined; the mass movement, and the propaganda, I think, are both essential components of the resistance.

Absolutely, full agreement. I think with that, unfortunately, we have run out of time. But Steve, thank you so much for speaking with us. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to leave us with in closing?

No, I think that's it, I would just like to say thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to speak to you, and for all of those listening to this and want to get involved in any kind of activism or support for the for the Kurdish community, I would say get involved with Peace in Kurdistan. Maybe the link to the website might be posted alongside this interview. If you want to find out what's happening in terms of Turkey's wars in Kurdistan and more generally, read the *Morning Star*. But also support other organizations, I would say ANF and Mezopotamya Agency, who are - particularly Mezopotamya Agency are under intense pressure from the

Turkish state and their journalists are the bravest people that I know; they continue to put themselves on the front line of the struggle, at great risk, to report on what's happening there. So you can read their reports on - their websites get regularly closed down, but if you go on Google - every kind of smartphone or computer or laptop or tablet has a translation app now, so you can read all of it there - they have an English language section as well, but you can read the stuff that they write in Kurdish and Turkish as well through a translation, as I do regularly. It will again keep you up to date with all the breaking news. And get involved with the Freedom for Ocalan campaign, get involved with the campaign to support the HDP as well. I think that's it.

Absolutely. Thank you so much for speaking with us again. And thank you for all of the work that you do and all of the work you have done in covering these issues, and from a global perspective, which is so important.

Likewise, Connor. Thank you.

Thank you. Bye.