

Internationalism Beyond the Geopolitics of States and Principled Solidarity in “Complex” Situations: Kurdish and Palestinian Solidarity

The ongoing war in Gaza has overshadowed global awareness of the situation not just in Ukraine but in Kurdistan too. Under cover of the Gaza invasion by Israel, Turkey's President Erdogan has used the opportunity to attack the Kurdish liberated region in north and east Syria. There are complex interrelationships of international solidarity movements that are explored in the following article published in October 2023 from a US-based academic, which raises important issues about internationalism that is framed within the confines of the nation-state. ecosocialist.scot is publishing this article as part of a contribution to discussion on the issue of international solidarity and principled internationalism in Scotland.

By : Ozlem Goner

On 4 October Turkey started yet another series of attacks into the Kurdish-majority region of Rojava (North and East Syria) and [destroyed](#) 80% of the civilian infrastructure, including fifty schools and two hospitals. Dozens have died so far, and millions have been left without electricity and water. [Turkey's excuse](#) this time was a bombing undertaken by two members of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) against the General Security Forces of the Turkish state in Ankara, which injured two security officials. Turkey has long claimed

that the People's Protection Units in Rojava (YPG) is the same organization as the PKK and claimed [without proof](#) that the actual attackers have come from this region. As I am writing this, Turkey continues to wipe out the region with its airstrikes and the world once remains silent again.

Two days after the re-escalation of Turkey's ongoing attacks, the world was shaken by the killing of over a thousand Israeli citizens by Hamas and other organizations that have joined forces with Hamas despite their ideological and political differences from the former. Israel, like Turkey, produced a lot of [fake news](#) and used the attacks as an excuse to wipe down the entire Gaza strip, an open-air prison, created in the first place by Israeli settler colonialism. The attacks targeting Israeli citizens are a symptom of ongoing colonial violence, which has left colonized Palestine without any other means of self-defense. Instead of rethinking the context of the Hamas attack, Israel, assisted by Western politicians and the media, embarked on a full-scale genocidal project of further dehumanizing Palestinians through openly racist discourse and calls for torture.

The distancing of segments of Kurdish activists from Palestinian solidarity through a critique of Hamas at this moment is a symptom of a particular form of internationalism that is centered around states, an internationalism that seeks purity through politically correct actions from the colonized without due attention to the ongoing conditions of colonization and oppression.

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One such autocratic leader is the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has condemned Israel's violence against Palestine, and has been playing the peacemaker role promoted even by progressive networks like [Democracy Now](#), which gave extensive coverage of Erdoğan's speech on Palestine, ignoring completely that the same Erdoğan has been wiping down Rojava at the very same time. Turkey's hypocrisy, and the fact that some progressive circles have cherished this double-faced "peace-maker," have frustrated Kurdish activists, some of whom have distanced themselves from Palestinian solidarity at this crucial moment. For example, the progressive all women's Kurdish news outlet [Jinnews](#) published an article with the unfortunate title of "Are peoples confined to choosing either

Palestine or Israel?" Although this article and many other Kurdish progressive venues framed their distancing as having to do with Hamas and rightly argued that Palestine is much larger than Hamas, one should not forget that framing this particular context around a critique of Hamas has legitimized ongoing settler colonial violence as it enters a new stage of complete genocidal annihilation.

I suggest that the distancing of segments of Kurdish activists from Palestinian solidarity through a critique of Hamas at this moment is a symptom of a particular form of internationalism that is centered around states, an internationalism that seeks purity through politically correct actions from the colonized without due attention to the ongoing conditions of colonization and oppression. This type of internationalism has been prevalent among many progressive circles. I will focus here on Kurdish solidarity with Palestine, and US progressives' solidarity with broader Kurdistan, especially with Rojava, which is currently being wiped out by the Turkish state.

Problems with Geopolitical Internationalism

Certain segments of the Kurdish movement have rightly problematized Hamas from a geopolitical angle. Hamas has historically been close to Turkey. Khaled Mashal, former Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, once celebrated Turkey's settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing in Afrin of North and East Syria, [saying](#) "Turkey's success, especially in Afrin, sets a serious example. Hopefully, we will all be blessed with the victories of the Islamic Ummah in many parts of the world, as in Afrin." Moreover, around 14,000 people in Rojava died fighting against the Islamic State backed by Turkey, which makes Kurdish populations rightly wary of other religious fundamentalist organizations. Similarly, Hamas is

rhetorically, if not materially, supported not only by Turkey but also by the Islamic Regime of Iran, which, like Turkey, has been notoriously oppressive against the Kurdish populations and organizations, as the ongoing [Jina uprisings](#) have revealed. Finally, the Turkish state has even placed some Palestinian refugees in the region of Afrin as part of its population exchange campaigns to rid the area of its indigenous Kurdish populations, an act of ethnic cleansing. These realities on the ground create difficult emotions, which result in some segments of the Kurdish political movement distancing themselves from Palestinian solidarity.

I argue that even though it is easy to understand the feelings that lead to this distancing, it is politically damning to base organizational solidarity politics around feelings. Crucially, these are feelings of geopolitical internationalism centered around nation-states, where progressives relate to countries and groups based on how their “own” or “oppressor” (evil) states *feel* about a given conflict. For example, a dissident from Turkey feels the need to distance themselves from all states and groups that Turkey provides support to. This dynamic is especially prevalent in solidarity politics in the United States. Large segments of progressives in the US approach internationalism as necessitating solidarity with countries and groups the US seemingly opposes, and denying solidarity to countries and groups the US seemingly supports. Even though this stance might have proved useful, especially given historical and ongoing US imperial violence, it is based on a priori geopolitical demarcations, as well as a frequent valorization of other imperial and colonial states and dictators just because they seem to be in opposition to the United States. Although this stance *feels* like internationalism at first, especially given the violent imperial role of the United States throughout the globe, it actually prevents an analysis of the material realities of oppression and colonization on the ground and hinders the

development of potential alliances with oppressed populations and dissident organizations in places where the United States seems to be in support.

As an alternative, internationalism from the ground is based on a material analysis of relations of colonialism and oppression; it advocates for standing in solidarity with the colonized and the oppressed in all contexts and for developing alliances with actual grassroots organizations. If, for instance, one focuses on networks of global capitalism, then one sees that geopolitical demarcations and instrumental uses of solidarity by state actors are often a façade. For example, behind Erdoğan's rhetoric of solidarity, there are deep and ongoing business and military connections between Turkey and Israel. During the UN General Assembly of September 2023, Erdoğan [reported](#) that the two countries plan to raise their trade volume from \$9.5 billion to a minimum of \$15 billion and even to develop some shared ministries, to increase cooperation in energy, tourism, and technology. Even the Islamic Republic of Iran has historically [worked with Israel](#), purchasing much of the weaponry used during the Iran-Iraq War from a country they otherwise call the "evil."

Similarly, despite the fact that the United States has worked with Kurdish-majority security forces in North and East Syria to prevent the regrowth of ISIS activity, it has long [supported](#) Turkey's war against Kurdistan with material means such as military aid, sharing of intelligence, and the sale of weapons, including the war planes being used in broader Kurdistan at this moment. And the alliance with Kurdish security in the region cannot even come close to the depth of capitalist networks developed between Turkey and the United States since World War II. Hence, much of the emotional geopolitical stance, whether by certain dissidents in Turkey and Iran distancing themselves from Palestine, or by progressives in the US distancing themselves from the Kurdish-majority region of North and East Syria, is not based on the

actual material relationships between their oppressor states and other regions, countries, and groups.

Once we move beyond geopolitical internationalism and focus instead on material relationships of global capitalism between state actors, as well as on regional relationships of colonialism and oppression, internationalist solidarity with peoples and political organizations on the ground becomes much less “complicated.” This form of internationalism does not operate at the level of states, but from the ground created through solidarity networks with grassroots organizations. To achieve this form of internationalism, we need to be critical of expectations of purity from the oppressed, be it in a liberal sense of victimhood that “condemns” all “violent” action, or in a more progressive sense of political correctness, which demands a purity of political motivations and alliances without an attention to the simple needs of survival.

The Conundrum of Purity and Internationalism from the (Messy) Ground

The first form of purity discourse is a liberal one that expects only “victimhood” from the colonized and the oppressed. Any action of self-defense is easily “condemned,” without an attention to the ongoing structural violence of colonialism and the agency of the oppressed to self-defend, with whatever methods available to them. Even those who are more conscientious of political agency, and aware of the limited availability of means of self-defense, sometimes fall into this liberal trap. From the site of any so-called “violent” action emerges a false discourse of “two sides,” a condemnation of violence from “both sides,” which not only obscures the structural and systematic reality of colonial violence, but also the fact that the colonized have very

limited methods of self-defense available to them. In the case of Palestine, it is because the Palestinian opposition does not have a violent military force with airplanes and tanks to defend themselves against Israeli settler colonialism that they resort to actions like the killing of civilians. Somehow, the latter appears to be “more brutal” than decades of settler colonial violence at the hands of a gigantic military force funded by multiple states. This is not a defense of Hamas or its actions, but a call to realize that Hamas and the particular actions it undertakes are a product of Israeli settler colonialism, not vice versa.

Those who are aware of the problems with this false discourse of “two sides,” quickly separate Hamas from the Palestinian people and condemn the former, while showing some nominal solidarity with the latter. Of course, it would be a mistake to reduce Palestinian movements, let alone Palestinian people, to Hamas and its actions. The Israeli state was involved in the [creation of Hamas](#) and Israeli and Western media have used such reductionist discourses equating Hamas and Palestine to legitimize Israel’s settler-colonialism in Gaza and the rest of Palestine for decades now. However, one should not forget that many other organizations in Palestine acknowledge the latest action as an act of self-defense, and that a “condemnation” of Hamas in this particular context, as well as analyses based on the so-called “violence by two sides,” legitimizes the genocidal violence Israel uses on Palestine. These depictions feed into a [false liberal notion of “two sides”](#) that renders the colonial reality invisible and frames colonial violence as a “conflict.” Although the Palestinian opposition is much larger than Hamas, and support for Hamas is limited among the Palestinian people, these discussions should not be relevant to our solidarity with Palestine against Israeli settler colonialism.

A second form of purity discourse, prevalent among more progressive circles is an expectation of political purity in

the alliances formed by the geopolitical framework explained above. For example, in order to be in complete solidarity with Palestine at this moment, some Kurds might expect the Palestinian opposition to avoid alliances with Turkey. Similarly, large segments of progressives in the United States, such as the DSA International, distanced themselves from the revolution in Rojava and have remained mostly silent to Turkey's ongoing genocide and femicide in the region due to the United States' tactical military involvement in the region against the Islamic State.

In simplest terms, it is crucial to understand that the politics on the ground is messy given ongoing colonization and the very lack of internationalist solidarity itself. The colonized have a right to self-defend, to survive by whatever means available to them. And when international solidarity is not available to stop the actions of colonizer states, the colonized have a right to procure the means of self-defense from whomever makes it available to them. Those who believe in anti-colonial internationalism need to stand with the colonized and not make blanket condemnations of the pragmatic relationships they need to form for survival.

Moreover, it is not the responsibility of the colonized, but of those groups and organizations in relatively more privileged positions, to look for ways to procure and sustain the means of self-defense that would afford the colonized other options than sitting at the devil's table. An internationalism from the ground requires that we study the material context deeply to understand the relationship of coloniality and oppression, and that we side with the colonized and the oppressed irrespective of the purity of their actions and the political alliances they form to survive. All the while, we can develop actual internationalist alliances from the ground so that our movements can sustain each other and we can break free of relationships with and dependencies on oppressive states.

Kurds and Palestinians in this particular context have suffered various forms of colonial violence at the hands of Turkey and Israel respectively, and it is our alliance, together with all the other colonized and oppressed populations of the Middle East and beyond, that can bring justice and peace. From learning to self-defend together, to invaluable moments of solidarity, such as [Leyla Halid's](#) visit to [Leyla Güven](#), a hunger-striking Kurdish political activist kept hostage in Turkish colonial prisons, our history is full of lessons in solidarity against the same global system of capitalist and colonialist oppression. At this moment when Rojava and Palestine are going through ethnic cleansing, it is more urgent than ever to find a principled anti-colonial internationalism from the ground.

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