

Syria and the Problem of Left Solidarity

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As the tragedy in Afrin develops, North American and European leftist platforms have been disseminating calls by Kurdish armed groups for solidarity with victims of military violence in Syria's northern district of Afrin. Such solidarity is much needed and deserved, but so is international solidarity with civilians elsewhere in Syria. Instead, the Western Left has largely remained silent in the face of the unimpeded massacre in Eastern Ghouta. The striking hypocrisy forces us to re-examine how our concept of international solidarity applies to the unarmed victims of this war

Afrin, the Kurdish-held enclave along the Turkish border, has seen increased fighting since the Turkish military entered the area by force on 19 January this year. To date, the fighting has left an estimated 112 civilians dead. Meanwhile, in Eastern Ghouta, only a few hours' drive away from Afrin, the Syrian military is finishing off final pockets of resistance through a brutal extermination campaign in which civilians are systematically targeted. Decisively reinforced by Russian air and Iranian ground forces, the bloodshed is reminiscent of the assault on Aleppo just over a year ago, during which more than 30,000 Syrians were killed. The civilian death toll in Eastern Ghouta has risen to include 1,070 civilians over the past three months.

The problem with selective solidarity

Western observers across the political spectrum have long struggled to grasp the Syrian conflict's complicated history and relate to the country's shifting revolutionary landscape. The response by mainstream liberals in the U.K. and U.S. has been the cynical use of moments of public outrage over Assad's crimes for the perusal of the American geo-political goal of limiting Russian and Iranian regional control. In opposition to this, a significant part of the Western Left has eschewed all criticism of Syrian, Iranian, and Russian leadership in the name of resisting U.S. empire. This has drawn them into elaborate media campaigns to erase any signs of the revolution against Assad. We witness the concerning effects of this among Western Leftist activists, whose selective engagement with the crises in Syria result in almost exclusive expressions of solidarity with the Kurdish revolutionary movement.

Recent events have made the painful limitations of this selective approach particularly apparent. As we take up the rightful defense of Afrin against the Turkish military's assault on Syrian Kurds, the mass slaughter of civilians simultaneously occurs in other parts of Syria. The situation in Afrin is urgent, but in Idlib and Ghouta it has been urgent for years.

Before the outbreak of revolution in Syria, the Assad regime had cracked down on Kurdish protests, notably in Al Qamishli in 2004 and 2005, where extreme military force and mass arrests were used. And forty years of Baathist rule made consistent attempts to erode Kurdish identity through Arabization policies, to the point where the mere act of giving a child a Kurdish name would create risks of arrests and enforced disappearances.

But when popular protests spread across Syria during 2011, they re-activated revolutionary ideals

both in Kurdish areas and areas with primarily Sunni-Arab populations. This time, the Syrian regime's response to these revolutions was two-pronged: on the one hand Arab calls for reforms were quelled with brutal violence; on the other hand the Kurdish revolution was handled through co-optation. In this way, Assad pre-empted an Arab-Kurdish uprising that would threaten the regime's control, marking a tactical shift from the excessive violence that Kurdish uprisings had been met with in the past.

The contrast between this prior heavy-handed oppression and the relative space that the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" (or "Rojava") has more recently been granted must be understood as part of Assad's efforts to keep Kurdish armed resistance against his regime pacified, and isolate the Kurdish struggle from other movements within Syria. Far from being a break with the previous anti-Kurdish bigotry, this signals a continuation of Assad's long-running approach of maintaining power by pragmatically stoking sectarianism along ethnic and religious lines.

In earlier years of the revolution, Arab-Kurdish alliances were built in nascent forms. But during the armed conflict in northern Syria more recently, Turkey succeeded in rallying Arab opposition forces, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), to fight the Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This was despite both groups having resisted Daesh together before this turning point in 2016. In addition to Turkish involvement, various other parts of the armed rebellion continue to be kept afloat through direct support from certain Western powers and Gulf States. The increased dependence on foreign military support has exacerbated both the fragmentation of these groups and their divergence from the ideals and tactics of the pro-democratic, non-sectarian demonstrations that took place in 2011. It also continues to undermine the local initiatives that emerge, particularly in areas not under Assad or Daesh control.

Despite shared grievances against the Assad regime and a common interest in rising up against it, Kurdish and Arab revolutionary movements have been split by domestic and foreign state influences. To any supporter of anti-dictatorial popular movements, this situation must register as tragic. For those of us in Europe and North America interested in building left wing solidarity that engages with Syrian revolutionary struggles, the task is to do justice to this history. This means acknowledging the shared origins and destinies of Syria's multiple revolutions. Not least because the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria will not be guaranteed by any precarious, war-time alignment, but is inherently tied up in the dynamics of the Syrian people's revolution. Our solidarity must therefore be principled, avoiding preferential support that indirectly bolsters authoritarian divide-and-conquer tactics, one of the hallmarks of counter-revolutionary regimes in the region, especially Assad's.

Facing ourselves

Crude notions of anti-imperialism have for too long yielded dubious analyses of Syria and the Middle East. The contribution of the Left has often been dominated by an unsophisticated 'campism' wherein the enemy of our enemy should not be criticized. This has recently taken startling and contradictory forms: a recent petition calls for the leaders of Russia, Iran, and the U.S. to "ensure that the sovereignty of Syrian borders is not breached by Turkey." The petition was signed by, among others, Noam Chomsky, Michael Hardt and David Graeber. Staggeringly, the petition appeals to the key perpetrators of war crimes in Syria for help in the protection of Afrin.

There are a multitude of ways we might explain such a turn, among them a Euro/American-centrism wherein the Left's positions simply mirror and are dictated by those of their liberal opponents, the Western left's long-running ideological links to the PKK, Left sectarianism, refusal to update expired Cold War categories, incidental ignorance and laziness, and the relative sophistication of the YPG/J's communication networks and media branding with Western audiences. We end up engaging with Syria as no more than a distant war in which our task as the Left is merely to discuss and select the

correct armed faction to support. But this filters out the less spectacular but equally courageous initiatives for self-organization still going on in various parts of the country and among its refugee diaspora; compelling cases such as the recent women's campaign against forced disappearances. In ignoring these, we surrender our key principles of upholding the value of human lives in the face of militarism, state interests, and divisive borders.

Our internationalism must cultivate a willingness to grasp the complexity of Syrian polity, society, and culture as it unfolds in everyday life under the current circumstances of extraordinary duress. Rather than a lapse into apolitical humanitarianism, defending the lives of those brutalized by violence is based on an international solidarity that registers survival in this context as struggle. Similarly, our welcoming and hospitality to those who fled Syria in recent years must not smother them into politically pacified victimhood. We must seek out and listen to what a variety of Leftist Syrian political activists and intellectuals have to say about Syria. Their migration experiences and diasporic self-organization are part of the story of the Syrian revolution, an inexhaustibly rich resource for understanding and learning from the realities of this important contemporary struggle. It is a struggle that lives on in many of them and contains intimate knowledge of the notions of racial and ethnic discrimination, prison state, political disenfranchisement, and neoliberal policies we also fight against. The vast contextual differences make articulating the common ground all the more profound.

In short, let us stop approaching Syria in the way a colonial power approaches its subject's civil war, calculating which intervention(s) of force to back and then vehemently spreading the chosen party's war propaganda. Let us focus, instead, on building a socialism that modestly but consistently puts into practice the radical internationalist idea that we inhabit the same world as all those who struggle for a dignified human existence.

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