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The Missing Bond of Solidarity

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I despise all forms of nationalism and patriotism. To achieve genuine emancipation and self-determination, I believe that the oppressed should look for alternatives other than nation-states and closed borders.

If the history of national liberation struggles has taught us anything, it would be to never trust the national bourgeoisie. Once independence is achieved, the all-too familiar modes of exploitation, domination, and injustices will be reproduced by the new ruling elites under the guises of nationalism and protecting sovereignty.

Calls for social justice will be silenced in favor of, we will be told, more pressing, security related issues. We will be told that now is not the time to fight for public education, free healthcare, disability benefits, and affordable housing; that now is not the time to fight against gender discrimination, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and violence against women; that now is not the time to criticize the government, end militarization, or protest repression, police brutality, and attacks on our individual freedoms.

We will be told instead that now is the time to privatize everything, including the air we breathe, which will enrich a small elite.

We will be told that, to protect our new borders, we must buy arms, more arms, and even still, more arms.

Discrimination against ethnic minorities will be justified by a deep-seated clinging to past grievances and perpetual cycles of retaliation and oppression. Those “from below,” the poor, the unemployed, the misfits, the nobodies, and the outlaws will mostly remain below after independence, despite the fact that they were the actual—albeit invisible—leaders of the liberation struggle.

But none of this means that we should abandon the struggle or accept foreign occupation. What it does mean is that we should also be aware of the glaring limitations of any movement whose exclusive focus is on nationalism and statehood. We should resist the cooptation of the struggle by self-appointed, corrupt, authoritarian demagogues who mask their hunger for power with a populist, nationalist discourse, not without the necessary false promises of democracy and prosperity. And we should save ourselves the pain of disillusionment by preparing ourselves for a long, perhaps even more draining, post-independence battle.

Kurdistan will not be an exception. Neither will Palestine, Kashmir, or Western Sahara for that matter.

And yet, despite fully acknowledging that—despite strongly opposing the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP); despite realizing that its authoritarian leader Masoud Barzani is employing nationalist propaganda and exploiting collective grievances to serve personal and factional interests; and despite major reservations on his motives for declaring the referendum—I could only stand in solidarity with the Kurds who voted on 25 September in what was undoubtedly an historic occasion for them.

It was impossible not to shed a tear or two while listening to Kurdish women and men, some of them are survivors of the Anfal genocide, express their joy and demand that the world take notice and respect their choices. I could not contain my rage as anti-Kurdish statements and bigoted, arrogant rhetoric and threats poured from Ankara, Tehran, and Baghdad. The hypocrisy of Arab

nationalists who support Catalan independence but not Kurdish independence is appalling, but predictable. Notwithstanding their support of Kurdish fighters in the battle for Kobane, the lack of solidarity from most Arabs with the Kurdish cause cannot be overlooked.

Kurds feel betrayed and left alone. When they fight ISIS they are praised and backed by western powers, but when they peacefully call for self-determination, they are vilified and denounced. Their sectarian neighbors disagree on a host of issues, but appear united in demonizing Kurds and inciting against them.

You do not have to agree with the tactics, and you certainly do not have to support the dominant Kurdish parties in order to support Kurdish right to self-determination. You can be critical of the KDP in Iraq, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Rojava/Northern Syria, or the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, while still siding with Kurdish liberation and Kurdish rights. It is not complicated, really. As Palestinians, many of us are staunchly opposed to Fatah, Hamas, and the entire Palestinian political class while still insisting that the Palestinian cause should not be reduced to those powers.

One image I could not erase from mind, however, was the constant raising of the Israeli flag in Iraqi Kurdish capital, Erbil. While the extent of the relations between the State of Israel and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) can be debated, the existence of these relations is quite transparent. Israel's support for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan is not a secret, although the motives of this support have nothing to do with supporting self-determination for the oppressed. The possibility of normalized relations between Israel and an independent Kurdistan is very likely, too. And it hurts. But what hurts more is hearing Kurds say that "Palestine is an Arab issue, why should we care about it?" or "Israel is not our enemy, but rather the enemy of Arabs."

Some go as far as praising Israel as a beacon of democracy and pluralism in the Middle East, echoing Zionist propaganda, word

for word. It is not surprising to hear it come from politicians and elites because it perfectly fits their agenda, but to hear these arguments from the people of Kurdistan—to see the Israeli flag being carried by people who call for liberation—is incredibly disappointing, for the Palestinian cause is not merely an Arab issue; it is an anti-colonial struggle against an ethnocratic state that has one of the strongest militaries in the world and that enjoys the full and unconditional support of the United States.

This is not the place to discuss the myriad forms of oppression and subjugation that Israel perpetrates against Palestinians; nor do I intend to begin yet another tedious comparison between the brutalities of Israel and the brutalities of Arab regimes. Ideally, if you are committed to emancipation and liberation in your country, you are expected to support the liberation struggle of your fellow oppressed people from a settler-colonial state that has ruled over them for over 69 years. You cannot chant *azadi* while raising a flag that stands for ethnic cleansing, land theft, occupation, and white supremacy.

The position of many Palestinians, particularly of the Palestinian political elite, on the Kurdish issue has been shameful indeed. Any critique of Kurds who embrace Israel will be incomplete without first condemning the Palestinians who support regimes that strip Kurds (and Arabs) of their rights. Siding with oppressive, racist regimes is never justified even when done in the name of *realpolitik*. Palestinians who glorify Erdogan and gloss over Turkey's oppression of Kurds, or who previously supported the genocidal Saddam Hussein, make a massive moral mistake. And so do Kurds who support Israel and whitewash its crimes and occupation.

In a slightly less twisted reality, Palestinians and Kurds should be standing side-by-side against all the powers that try to crush them. What unites us as peoples in terms of history of struggle, aspirations and shared yearnings for freedom is much more than what divides us.

Is it possible to get over past grievances and prejudices, and forge a bond of solidarity between the Palestinian people and the Kurdish people? I believe that this will never happen as long as we are driven by nationalism and nationalist sentiments, rather than the universal commitment to justice and freedom.

Meanwhile, we can just take heart from the fact that in several pro-Palestine protests in Europe, some Kurdish activists participated; and that in some pro-Kurdish events, a few Palestinians participated, too. They are few and nowhere near as visible or promoted as the Kurds who are pictured raising the Israeli flags, but they give us hope. They give us hope that perhaps one day we can chant *azadi* and *hurriyeh* in one voice; that we can overcome the divisiveness of nationalism; and that we can learn to prioritize solidarity over ethnic grievances.