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The Periphery Has No Time for Binaries

We must focus on building more organic bonds in our
lands and between our diasporas

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As we're witnessing Palestinians in Al-Aqsa chanting for the downfall of the regime, I was reminded of a conversation I had on the Istanbul-based podcast Mangal Media following the explosion at the port of Beirut last August 2020.

In our conversation, we both used the term "the periphery," a term I myself adopted from Mangal Media and used in subsequent essays. It is a term I have found convenient to use to describe places as different as Bosnia and Hong Kong, Palestine and Colombia, Kurdistan to Xinjiang, Kashmir to Western Sahara. To me, it works better than "the global south" as that term includes the regimes crushing us. These are places that do not fit neatly in preconceived notions that were largely developed during the Cold War, when US/USSR binaries dominated left-wing circles, a habit that continues to this day. We are as peripheral to the "global south" regimes crushing us as they are perceived to be by the Western thinktanks and foreign ministers who view their imagined space as the cen-

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ter of the world. China and Russia and Iran are peripheral to “the West,” and any and all activists in China and Russia and Iran are peripheral to their governments.

Not everyone has time for the Cold War binaries. The “Milk Tea Alliance” organic links being built between Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and Myanmar—and potentially other countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, maybe even Iran—do not fit these binaries. The Arab Spring inherently rejected it because some of our regimes were “pro-West” and others were “anti-West.” The Sisi and Al-Khalifa regimes are “pro-West,” the Assad regime is “anti-West,” and they all must fall. Russia is using Israeli drones to kill Syrians on behalf of the anti-Israel Syrian regime, and Chinese cops are learning from American and Israeli ones to crush the Uighurs. Border regimes from China to the US are committing genocide through forced sterilization and other extreme forms of gendered violence.

Chileans and Lebanese learning from Hongkongers do not have time for these binaries. Protesters in Myanmar being repressed with Russian or Chinese weapons do not have time to debate whether these are anti-imperialist weapons or not, anymore than we in Lebanon had time to wonder whether the French government was on our side given that the teargas used against us were French. Shia protesters in Iraq don’t have time to listen to the Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese Shia sectarians violently demanding their silence in the name of the “revolutionary” *velayat-e faqih*.

I’m pointing this out to make a very simple argument, and one which I’ve been repeating for nearly a decade now. What tankies, sectarians and other authoritarians say about Palestine and our region has very little to do with what Palestinians in Palestine say about Palestine and our region. The Syrian revolution flag is flown by Palestinians in Palestine, from Gaza to Jerusalem, and Palestinian flags are flown in sites of resistance against Assad in Syria and sectarianism in Lebanon. Palestinians in Ramallah and Jerusalem sing the same song as Syrians in Homs, and Palestinians in Haifa sing the same song as protesters in Beirut.

Protests for Palestine will never be allowed in Assad-controlled Syria anymore than they'll be allowed in Sisi's Egypt. Large gatherings are dangerous to these regimes because, unlike their western apologists on the "left" and the "right," they understand the threat that is democracy.

Syria's foreign minister will warmly hug his Bahraini counterpart after the Bahraini regime crushed protesters with the help of Saudi tanks, and the same Bahraini regime can then go to Israel two years later and celebrate their newfound love. The Russian government can fake outrage over murdered Palestinians a month after concluding an agreement with the Israeli government on "internal security matters"—if you're not fluent in doublespeak, "internal security matters" means "crushing Palestinians"—but all the Russians need to do is put a camera where Palestinians are being crushed and many "pro-Palestine" activists will think Russia is on our side. The Saudi intelligence chief met with his Syrian counterpart as well as Bashar a few months after meeting with the Israelis, just as Putin will regularly host Bashar and Netanyahu, just not at the same time. Henry Kissinger will praise the CCP, and the CCP will praise Henry Kissinger; then, "leftists" will call Kissinger a monster, which he is, while ignoring, whitewashing, or even praising the CCP.

I can go on. The Assad regime invaded Lebanon to crush the Left-Nationalist Lebanese-Palestinian resistance with US-Israeli approval, and it crushed its communist movement in Syria. Syria and its allies assassinated Kamal Jumblat, Mehdi Amel, Hussein Mroue, Samir Kassir, Gebran Tueni and Lokman Slim. It left groups devoid of any real power in Syria to maintain the much-needed facade, and that still works with a lot of leftists.

Assadist Arabs and their Western allies can post photos of Palestinian mothers mourning and compare them to the Virgin Mary, and then proceed to compare Syrian mothers using the same kind of language that the Israeli far right uses against Palestinian mothers. Israel and Assad cut up Lebanon between them and to this day

there are Lebanese who believe that militias fighting for either side were “the resistance.”

People forget that Hezbollah isn’t the only group calling itself “the resistance.” The Lebanese Forces also call themselves that. They were both resisting different states, and they are now both “resisting” any calls for meaningful reforms in Lebanon, and they are both right-wing, xenophobic and patriarchal forces. The only difference is that one of these right-wing forces calls itself “anti-imperialist” and “anti-Israel” which apparently upgrades it to a left-wing party to many leftists. Who needs materialist analysis when you got cool slogans?

In the past decade, Western tankies and other “leftists” have joined up with Arab/Iranian pro-regime supporters to help in the ongoing counter-revolution that followed the Arab Spring. They are fully complicit in the erasure of millions throughout our region and beyond. For that simple reason, I make no difference between regressive forces from Egypt to Iran to Israel to Turkey to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, regardless of whether they call themselves “leftists.” I do not have the time to entertain the minor differences between them.

So to all of my friends who are very frustrated by leftists ignoring our lived experiences and largely only speaking with one another, I repeat: You don’t have to ignore them altogether, but manage your time better. Focus on building more organic bonds in our lands and between our diasporas. They will continue to invite Roger Waters to cry over murdered Palestinians while he continues to openly whitewash the murder of Syrians because white men continue to hold disproportionate influence on our imaginaries. They will continue to treat our dead the same way they treat us while alive, as pawns in an imagined global chessboard where forces of evil battle the forces of good. Our lives do not have meaning beyond such constructs in these circles.

So how does that change in the periphery? Efe Levent said it best in our conversation on Mangal Media. When anti-

authoritarian Turks see Hong Kong or Lebanon, they know that they could be next. When French or American leftists see Hong Kong or Lebanon, they do not have to imagine what it would be like if it happened in France or the US, because they are deeply convinced that it never can. Whether or not that is actually true is not as relevant. They just need to believe it.

Promise Li, a US-based Hong Kong & Chinese activist, said something along those lines on The Fire These Times as well. He mentioned how frustrating it’s been to explain the scale of the violence in Hong Kong to American leftists. Both Shui-yin Sharon Yam and JP have said the same about Hong Kong, with both struggling with Western leftists erasing their lived experiences. Laura Vidal from Venezuela said something similar, and so did Aida Hozic on Bosnia, and so did Rayhan Asat on Xinjiang, and so did Mohammed Suleiman and Sumaya Awad and Shireen Akram-Boshar on Palestine, and so did Sabrina Azad on Iraqi Kurdistan. And of course, every Syrian that I’ve invited on the podcast have expressed similar discomforts. I can guarantee you from now that the Ukrainians, Belarusians, Iraqis, Iranians, Bosnians, Tibetans, Nicaraguans, Indians and others that I will invite will have similar grievances.

It says a lot that the collective weight of such voices have yet to influence “the discourse” significantly. It’s almost like “the discourse” has nothing to do with reality.