

Why a “rapprochement” or some sort of collaboration between islamist and leftist groups in Lebanon and Palestine?

My thesis will analyze the relationship between leftist and islamo-nationalist movements in Lebanon and Palestine. I will observe the way the relationship between both parties has evolved from one of being direct enemies in the middle of the eighties to a more convergent position and even collaborating together on different issues such as resistance against Israel or in some cases, during elections, since the middle of the nineties until now. The physical liquidation of leftist militants and thinkers in the beginning of the 1980s in Lebanon and in Palestine, notably by islamist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, actually marked at the same time the rise of Islamic movements in these countries.

In the same time, leftists groups did not take strongly condemn the exactions of Islamists political groups because as these latter were supporting and participating in the resistance against Israel, they should stay silent. In the name of unity, resistance or some forms of collaboration, some leftists groups did not criticize the actions of these groups going against their ideological principles.

On societal issues for example, the left also stepped back. A campaign, highly promoted by some Hamas sections, to target young unveiled girls in Gaza started in the eighties, with young boys throwing stones at them. Leftist parties as PFLP did not try anything to solve this situation, claiming that it was not their duty to oppose it and that in a traditional society such things are normal. PFLP cadres knew that Hamas was behind this trend, but for the sake of the Palestinian unity they did not intervene. Certain PFLP cadres even used this new trend or tradition to control women in their close entourage.

This showed the contradictory practices of the PFLP and allowed the historical foundation of Hamas expansion. Hamas bargained on the political scene but continued to spread their religious program. In 1995, the majority of women were veiled in Gaza, which is not a conservative or progressive feature just an observation. Hamas has been successful in consolidating some of its social norms by a pragmatic strategy. As Gramsci's theory stated it, Hamas has advocated as a particular class that provides the dominant culture: the Islamic culture.

In Iran, following the revolution, a similar situation occurred where we could observe a left less or not critical towards the growing Khomeini's growing influence and successful rise to power.

Khomeini 'was indeed able to split the left opposition completely. Khomeini used to declare that all problems arising in the factories, among women and among national minorities were due to US imperialism. It was therefore US imperialism that was fighting the government in Kurdistan, in Tabriz, in Torkamansahra and in Khuzistan. Women opposing Islamic laws were US and Zionist agents. Workers resisting shoras were imperialist agents.

The Tudeh party did not oppose Khomeini's argument and backed his line. The largest left organizations – the Fedayeen, the Mojahedin and the Paykar – also broke away from the struggle, abandoning the militant workers, the women and the national minorities, among whom they had some significant presence.'

The Tudeh Party and the majority of the Fedayeen continued to support Khomeini until he had fully consolidated his power in 1982, whereupon he turned on them.

Why therefore a "rapprochement" in the 90s?

We will speak of a rapprochement or some sort of collaboration from a Marxist perspective of the united front. The united front is a strategic approach, developed and theorised notably by Lenine and Trostky following the Revolution in Russia in 1917, which combines the existence of a minority core of organised revolutionaries with broader, bigger movements for social and political change. Revolutionaries unite with other campaigners, trade unionists, etc, who don't share all their ideas - and who typically subscribe to one variant or other of reformist ideology - in order to resist specific attacks by the ruling class, or to campaign for partial reforms.

The united front's concept answers the necessity in some periods and context of the critical question on how revolutionaries, in our case study leftist groups in Lebanon and Palestine, who formed a minority inside the workers' movement, could achieve wider social change despite the great majority of people accepting reformist ideas. And how could revolutionaries spread their ideas at the same time as working with non-revolutionary workers or groups in common struggle against particular aspects of the system?

This means that revolutionaries don't simply preach propaganda about the evils of capitalism and the desirability of socialism, though of course the battle of ideas and raising of a socialist vision are always essential. They don't live in isolation from the people, maintaining their 'purity' by avoiding political contact with reformists. The united front method offers an alternative to these dangers of abstract propagandism and sectarianism.

The united front opens up the possibility of revolutionaries, despite being a minority (often a tiny minority), playing a dynamic role in larger movements for change. This can apply to a

wide range of economic and political issues; it can be essentially defensive, e.g. resistance to the threat posed by fascists, or more offensive and pro-active.

It also means that revolutionaries can prove themselves the best, most consistent and unwavering, fighters for reforms. Often this will win them trust and respect, as reformist leaders often betray people's hopes and make compromises. It creates the context in which revolutionary socialists can achieve greater influence, win respect from many non-revolutionaries they march or strike alongside, and find an audience for socialist ideas.

Following the period of tension, a "rapprochement" or some kind of collaboration was operated between these two entities in the beginning of the nineties. This rapprochement took different forms.

In Palestine, following the Oslo Agreement in October 1993, elements opposed to Fatah and its policy, gathered in an "Alliance of Palestinian Forces" which was led by the Popular Front of Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), a leftist movement, and Hamas, an Islamic movement. During the Palestinian municipal elections in 2004 in Bnei Zayyaid and Bethlehem, alliances between the PFLP and Hamas allowed them to win their seat to counter the Fatah-dominated City Council, as well as in the West Bank administrative capital of Ramallah.

In Lebanon, in the beginning of the nineties, the Communist leadership made contact with Hezbollah to resume the party's role in the resistance who accepted their support. The role of the LCP in the resistance actually diminished before finally stopping entirely in 1993. This marked a new relationship based on the shared goal of resisting the Israeli occupier and the American "War on terror", which began in Afghanistan in 2001 and continued with the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Communists did not only participate in resisting the Israeli hostility in 2006 on account of the party's political principles but also out of solidarity with Hezbollah.

The framework for progressive discussions among leftists and islamists became also more present since the beginning of 1990s, as shown for example by the Al-Quds Foundation, and particularly by the nationalist and Islamic Conference launched in 1994 at the initiative of the Center for Studies for Arab Unity (CEUA) Khair ad-Din Hassib, located in Beirut, which meets every four years, aimed at finding points and tactical / strategic agreements, and even redefine the relationship in including a common ideological point of view between the left and Islamism. The CEUA has held conferences in March 2006 and January 2009, in Beirut, named the General Conferences of Arab support for the Resistance, where the main directions of leftist organization such as the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) or the PFLP and Islamists (including Hamas and Hezbollah) were strongly represented. Nearly 400

delegates from the world, leftist and anti-globalization movements were present at these conferences.

In terms of civil society, we also noted collaborations in various struggle such as the issue of women's right. In Lebanon and Palestine, women's groups from the left do not hesitate to work and demonstrate with their counterparts from Islamist organizations, including the issue of right to work and denunciation of violence against women.

Nevertheless criticism and clashes never stopped between both groups, as well as deep ideological contradiction, preventing any further collaboration or coalition. In Palestine, collaboration has been somewhat stopped at a political level, although not completely, following the takeover of Gaza by Hamas and the PFLP strong criticism against it for having undermined the Palestinian unity. Last August, Police and security forces in Gaza, under the authority of Hamas, attacked a demonstration called for by the PFLP in Gaza, resulting in the injury of 21 members and supporters of the Front. The LCP on its side always try to balance its relation with Hezbollah between criticism and support. Ryad Souma, LCP member, for example described political Islam, including Hezbollah, as an adversary, even if they share common interests and struggles on some issues.

Prior to the elections of 2009, Hezbollah and the Communist Party effected some negotiations but in the end Hezbollah decided not to see them through, and the Communist Party put forward independent candidates. In the opinion of Hezbollah, the Communist Party goes too far in its comprehensive program for political and socio-economic reform. This includes its claim for the elimination of the confessional regime in order to end sectarianism, which it believes is a threat to Lebanon's stability and sovereignty. Hezbollah does not have clear positions on these issues, meaning that ultimately they decided against closer cooperation with the Communists.

I mostly disagree with one school of thought, lead notably by French academics such as Olivier Roy, Nicolas Dot Pouillard and Olivier Carre, that claims that the rapprochement is due to the evolution of Political Islam, especially in the case of Hezbollah and Hamas, towards anti imperialism, as well as the weakening of leftists parties in search of powerful allies. This school of thought is many ways limited to the anti imperialist feature in their resistance against Israel and USA's foreign policy of the Islamist movements, while not putting enough elements forward on the non anti systemic nature of these latter in relation to the neo liberal system. Their anti imperialism is concentrated essentially on the struggle against Israel and the USA, while the struggle against neo liberal economic policies or the end of the sectarian system is not addressed.

A second school of thought is in this aspect more systemic, it acknowledges this rapprochement between these political movements but is less keen to speak about an evolution of Political Islam towards the left and the building of an anti imperialist front in relation to the left and islamist movement. In this trend we can find academics such as Asef Bayat, Gilbert Achkar, Sadik Jalal Azm, Aijaz Ahmad or activist such as Chris Harman. They mainly acknowledge the anti imperialist element of Islamic movement struggling against Israel, but in their opinion this is not enough to characterize them as anti imperialist as at the same time they are not implementing policies to emancipate the people or not opposing neo liberal policies in their respective country.

In conclusion, the left has learned from the mistakes of the past, notably in the case of Iran, and is now applying a strategic collaboration based on the concept of the united front with some Islamic political movements. The necessity of a large and inclusive movement, as we have seen in countries such as Egypt these past few weeks, to achieve change and enter a revolutionary process has proven to be the right path for success. Nevertheless the left has at all costs to preserve its own political independence, insisting on public criticism of such Islamic political movements, as well as liberals, both for their domestic policies and for their inevitable failings in the struggle with imperialism, while making it clear that leftist groups want imperialism to be defeated much more than they do.

A way to resume the relationship between leftist and islamo nationalist political movements is: we fight together but we march separately!