

US Left Must Link With Progressive Forces in Middle East to Stop Regional War

Monday 19 February 2024, by [AFARY Frieda](#) (Date first published: 8 February 2024).

Progressives in Iran and the US must connect horizontally to resist militarism as our leaders escalate their threats.

There has been much talk of the possibility of a regional war in the Middle East ever since Hamas's brutal assault on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's genocidal invasion of Gaza, in the context of a U.S. administration not willing to call for an immediate ceasefire.

As an Iranian American socialist feminist activist with ties to activists in Iran, the U.S., Israel and Palestine, these developments have horrified me both because of the sheer brutality and loss of innocent human lives, and because of the stifling of the voices of genuine progressives.



A broader war may be upon us with the February 2 U.S. military strikes against Iranian forces and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria, which killed 39 including civilians, and the February 7 U.S. strikes in Baghdad, which killed a senior leader of an Iranian-backed militia and two of his escorts. The latest U.S. strikes are a response to a drone attack by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias on a U.S. base in Jordan that killed three U.S. soldiers and injured dozens. The Iranian government has in turn warned of a counterretaliation.

The U.S. and Britain have also launched a new round of strikes on Houthi militias in Yemen in response to Houthi attacks on commercial and military ships in the Red Sea. The Houthis in turn claim that they have launched their attacks in solidarity with the Palestinians.

Drone and missile strikes from Iran and its militias aimed at U.S. targets in the region have been continuing for several years, as part of the Iranian government's decades-long effort to prove itself as a regional power. The Iranian government provides military, logistical and other assistance to Hamas, Shia militias in Iraq, Houthi militias in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the government of Bashar Assad in Syria.

At the same time, the U.S. provides Israel with 3.8 billion in military aid each year, sells arms to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other Arab regimes, and has military bases in the region, including bases in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and in smaller outposts elsewhere. U.S. troops occupied Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. U.S. troops also occupied Iraq from

2003 to 2011. Russia is also a major arms provider for various states in the region, including Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It has a naval base and ground forces in Syria. It also supports Iran's production of missiles and drones — some of the weapons that Russia has used in its invasion of Ukraine.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has for over four decades used antisemitism and its opposition to U.S. imperialism and Israeli occupation as a means for promoting its own regional imperialist ambitions, which involve economic, ideological and strategic goals, and which have entailed exploitation of the working class and oppressed peoples of the region. In 2018, in a public speech, President Rouhani stated clearly that Iran's strategic borders are the Indian subcontinent on the East, the Caucasus in the North, the Red Sea in the South and the Mediterranean in the West.

Prior to the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, however, Israel's assault on the Palestinian people and its refusal to recognize the Palestinians' right to self-determination had created one of the festering wounds in the region. 56-year occupation of Palestinian lands has in turn provided an external enemy that authoritarian rulers in the region have used to cover over the internal contradictions of class exploitation, patriarchy, racism, and other forms of prejudice and domination that exist in each country.

The world began to see the popular masses of the Middle East and North Africa challenge some of those internal contradictions in the 2011 Arab Spring, the Syrian uprising of 2011, and the 2019 wave of protests in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran. However, those efforts were crushed by authoritarian regimes. The Assad regime — which brutally crushed the 2011 Syrian uprising and has over 100,000 people in its prisons, where industrial-scale torture has been documented to occur — continues to claim that it supports Palestinians when in fact it cracked down on the Palestinian population in Syria who defended the 2011 uprising. Various Arab, Iranian, Turkish rulers who also claim to defend Palestinian self-determination have brutally crushed the Kurdish populations in their countries because of the Kurdish demand for self-determination.

The Woman, Life, Freedom movement that emerged in Iran in the fall of 2022 was a beacon of hope for the region as a whole. The women and men who protested for months and were arrested, killed, blinded and raped were not only demanding an end to the compulsory hijab. They were demanding a woman's right to control her body, the right to education based on critical thinking, an end to the death penalty, rights for oppressed national minorities and labor rights. They opposed religious fundamentalism, gender/state violence, militarism and imperialism, calling for peaceful coexistence with other states in the region. Various statements by participants in this movement called for breaking through the ethnic, religious and gender divisions that the region's authoritarian regimes use.

The affirmative content of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement can also be seen in the tireless efforts of Narges Mohammadi, the Iranian feminist human rights activist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2023. With the exception of a petition by PEN America demanding her release, she has received relatively little coverage by Western media, and few English-language reports mentioned her statement from prison concerning Palestine and Israel, which condemned "assaults on homeless people, the slaughter of children, women and civilians, hostage taking, [and] the bombing of hospitals and schools and residential areas." Mohammadi called for "an immediate ceasefire, an end to war ... respect for human rights and the creation of conditions for peaceful coexistence of peoples."

Faced with the continuing resistance of feminists like Mohammadi, the resistance of youth in prisons, schools and in the streets, and the resistance of workers, teachers, nurses, national minorities, retirees and people with disabilities, the Iranian government has intensified its

crackdown. It has imposed a Hijab and Chastity Law that has severely increased the penalties on women without the “proper hijab.” It has executed more Kurdish, Baluch and Arab youth including youth arrested in the Woman, Life, Freedom protests. Iran has the second highest rate of executions after China.

Iranian dissidents in and out of prison are in turn going on hunger strike to oppose the death penalty. The hunger strikers, feminists, and other dissidents had written open letters to Nada al-Nashif, United Nations deputy high commissioner for human rights, demanding that she cancel her trip to Iran because she would not be allowed to meet with political prisoners and the families of those executed. She would also be forced to wear the hijab. The signatories of the open letters to al-Nashif wanted her to wait for the results of a UN fact-finding mission about the murders and rapes committed by the Iranian government against the Woman, Life, Freedom protesters. She instead went ahead with her trip and announced that the trip was not a fact-finding mission to visit prisoners and their families but a formal trip to meet with the officials of the Islamic Republic.

Progressive forces inside Iran are not calling for Western official visits to meet with government leaders or for U.S. military intervention. They are reaching out horizontally to progressive grassroots forces globally to gain both moral and material support in their struggle against militarism, authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism.

Given the current war moves and the intensified confrontation between the U.S. and Iran, it is extremely important for those who oppose U.S. imperialism and Israel’s war on Gaza to simultaneously oppose U.S. strikes in the region, demand a ceasefire in Gaza and defend the ongoing struggle for women’s rights and human rights in Iran.

Progressive activists in Iran are working hard to oppose the death penalty and mass incarceration, defend a woman’s right to control her body, and defend the rights of Kurds, Baluch and Arab national minorities as well as religious minorities such as the Baha’is and Afghan migrants in Iran. They are reaching out to Afghan women who are resisting the Taliban and resisting other religious fundamentalist forces in Afghanistan. Their work is essential for turning the tide in the Middle East away from authoritarianism and war.

U.S. progressives who agree with these aims can start by joining the call for the release of Narges Mohammadi and all political prisoners. But more broadly they can work to horizontally connect these struggles to the U.S.-based movement against gender and state violence, the prison abolitionist movement against mass incarceration, the movement for reproductive and abortion rights, and the ongoing struggle against militarism.

Frieda Afary

P.S.

- Socialist Feminism. Published February 8, 2024:
<https://socialistfeminism.org/us-left-must-link-with-progressive-forces-in-middle-east-to-stop-regional-war/>
- Originally published in TRUTHOUT:
<https://truthout.org/articles/us-left-must-link-with-progressive-forces-in-middle-east-to-stop-regional-war/>

[war/](#)