

Growing Palestine solidarity protests make silence on Israel's crimes difficult for politicians in The Netherlands

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Since Israel's onslaught on Gaza, thousands have protested Dutch complicity & silence. In the lead up to upcoming elections progressive parties are avoiding taking a position, but the solidarity movement is making this difficult, writes Alex de Jong.

On 15 October, thousands marched in the Dutch capital Amsterdam in solidarity with Palestine following Israel's assaults on [Gaza](#). It was the largest of a series of protests that recently spread across the country. In parliament however, the protesters found little support.

"We have not often seen that this conflict targets ordinary people", Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte [remarked](#) shortly after [Hamas'](#) surprise attack of 7 October. Rutte, leader of the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), seemingly ignored the thousands of Palestinian casualties in recent years - or at least, he did not consider them to be ordinary people.

However, around one week after the PM's remarks, a Palestine solidarity demonstration in Amsterdam drew some 20,000 people, making it one of the largest in recent years. Speeches in Dutch, English and Arab denounced Dutch complicity with the Israeli occupation. Despite the heavy rain, a young, diverse and determined crowd then marched through the city.

"With little support in the institutions, Dutch Palestine solidarity activists will need to rely on strengthening and building their protests and organisations. The past few weeks show a potential for this. Protest has not been limited to large demonstrations in cities like Amsterdam and The Hague. There have been many smaller rallies, marches and sit-ins sometimes taking place almost spontaneously, as well as other actions."

Since then, and amidst Israel's continued onslaught, other protests have taken place in The Hague, the seat of government, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Maastricht as well as other towns and cities.

The Netherlands remains a country in which support for Israel is strong among the major political parties and large parts of the population, but this position is no longer as uncontested as it once was. Younger generations especially are becoming increasingly critical of Israeli policies, which has been visible in the protests. And a large part of the Dutch population [disagrees](#) with Rutte's unconditional support for Israel.

But the feeling of solidarity with the Palestinian people is scarcely reflected in institutional politics or the large political parties. The marches are instead mostly organised by coalitions of smaller grassroots collectives such as BDS Netherlands, anti-war groups, and the Palestinian community in the Netherlands.

The Dutch government likes to style itself as a supporter of international law but makes exceptions

for Israel. In the words of The Rights Forum, an organisation campaigning 'for Dutch and European policies towards Israel based on international law', the government is willing to grant Israel a green light to commit human rights violations.

This was highlighted when the Netherlands [abstained](#) from voting on the UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. According to [Rutte](#), this was because the proposed resolution did not mention "Israel's right to self-defence" at a moment when it supposedly faced an existential threat. However, even a parliamentary motion recognising Israel's right to self-defence and condemning Hamas, but also rejecting violations of international law on all sides, was [rejected](#) by a majority that included most of the governing coalition.

Contradicting its own supposed guidelines, the Dutch government has also [strengthened ties](#) with the Israeli arms industry, notably with a treaty that could open the way for Dutch purchases from Israeli manufacturer [Elbit Systems](#). This is the very company that supplies weapons and munition that are used daily against the Palestinian people.

Meanwhile, the main progressive parties have been wavering and are absent from the Palestine solidarity protests, causing some criticism from their members and supporters. And, when the Dutch parliament voted on a resolution put forward by the Reformed Political Party (SGP), a small Christian far-right party, in support of Israel's right to self-defence, the motion was adopted by a large majority, including the Greens (GroenLinks) and the Labor Party (PvdA). This was criticised by from supporters of the progressive parties because the formulation of the text seemed to make excuses for Israeli violations of humanitarian law especially.

In the days that followed, the two parties expressed regret for having voted for the motion.

Greens MP [Kauthar Bouchallikht](#) also withdrew as a candidate in the upcoming elections in protest over the position of her party, declaring; "this "war" hasn't suddenly begun, it's been going on for 75 years".

This wavering attitude of the large progressive parties partly results from increasing contradictions between the younger and more progressive parts of their support-base, with traditional pro-Israeli policies, as well as from short term political calculations. The Labour Party in particular (a member of the Socialist International together with Meretz and the Israeli Labour Party), has a long history of support for Israel. Whilst the Greens originally started as a fusion of several far-left parties, including the Dutch Communist Party and historically took a more critical approach, it has moved steadily to the political centre, and with that its line on Israel and Palestine.

With the legislative elections taking place this month, the Labour Party and the Greens have formed a coalition, and after years of electoral disappointment, they hope that together they can become the largest parliamentary faction. In the lead up, they are therefore trying to avoid taking strong positions that would antagonise future coalition-partners in the political centre or alienate more centrist voters.

BREAKING: Activists from Anarcha Feminist Group Amsterdam spray red paint over Bagira Systems, who train the Israeli military to massacre Palestinians
pic.twitter.com/cmjyJs3V0L

— Palestine Action (@Pal_action) [November 1, 2023](#)

The left-wing Socialist Party has supported calls for a ceasefire but remains visibly absent from the

protests.

Support for the mobilisations from parliamentary parties remains limited to BIJ1, a small far-left party, and DENK, a rather centrist party with a largely Muslim base.

Whilst Palestine solidarity in the Netherlands is not facing a level of repression comparable to that in [Germany](#) or [France](#), attempts are still made to discredit the movement. For example, the police [declared](#) it will monitor marches for any expression of support for 'terrorism'. So far this has translated to a single Hamas flag being confiscated in Amsterdam. Furthermore, a parliamentary majority of right-wing parties supported a [motion](#) condemning the slogan 'from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' - one of the most popular chants used during marches - as a call to violence. Earlier, Amsterdam mayor, Femke Halsma, had already said the slogan was [unacceptable](#).

With little pushback in mainstream media, right-wing politicians have also been referring to the marches as 'pro-Hamas demonstrations'.

As Israel's war on Palestinians continues, Dutch politicians are rightly being put under increasing pressure. Cracks are already forming amongst the outgoing government coalition. D66, a centrist liberal party, has criticised its more conservative coalition-partners in the government for their refusal to support a ceasefire. And, the party's foreign affairs spokesperson called it [shameful](#) that the Netherlands abstained from the UN vote: "By now, there are thousands of dead, tens of thousands of wounded, hundreds of thousands of people are displaced. A total catastrophe is looming in Gaza if the violence does not stop". Though this means little when we consider that the arms deals with Israeli companies took shape under responsibility of a defence minister from their party.

With little support in the institutions, Dutch Palestine solidarity activists will need to rely on strengthening and building their protests and organisations. The past few weeks show a potential for this. Protest has not been limited to large demonstrations in cities like Amsterdam and The Hague. There have been many smaller rallies, marches and sit-ins sometimes taking place almost spontaneously, as well as other actions. Members of BIJ1 [projected](#) the slogan 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' on the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

In Amsterdam, [activists](#) sprayed red paint on the office of Bagira Systems, an Israeli company that trains Israeli soldiers and collaborates with the Dutch government. Such direct links between the Netherlands and Israeli colonialism can be the starting point of a broader solidarity movement targeting specific government policies. As it is unlikely the upcoming elections will lead to such a political shift on Israel, the challenge will be to build durable coalitions that can continue to put pressure on the government. The past few weeks have shown the potential for a much stronger Palestine solidarity movement.

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