

The Global Left and the Kurdish Question: In Solidarity with Whom?

written by Rezgar Akrawi | March 2, 2026

A critique of the Left's unconditional solidarity with ruling Kurdish parties, and a call for class-based solidarity that sides with workers and toiling classes for a democratic state that guarantees equal rights for all.



Kurdish-inhabited areas, from
[wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdistan#/media/File:Kurdish-inhabited_areas_\(orthographic_projection_with_inset\).svg](https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurdistan#/media/File:Kurdish-inhabited_areas_(orthographic_projection_with_inset).svg)

The global Left faces a complex challenge: how can it defend the legitimate rights of the Kurdish people in the context of existential conflicts, while maintaining consistent critical standards toward all ruling authorities without exception? This balance is a fundamental condition for the credibility of internationalist solidarity itself.

Solidarity with the oppressed Kurdish people, with other oppressed peoples, and with the toiling masses is a foundational principled position of the global Left. This position is grounded in internationalist values that reject national oppression, class exploitation, and all forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, language, or gender.

The Kurdish people have been subjected to historical and ongoing national oppression in several countries across the region, encompassing genocide, forced displacement, denial of cultural and linguistic rights, and political repression. This reality imposes on left and progressive forces a clear stance in support of their legitimate rights and just struggles.

Yet this position, which genuinely serves the cause over the long term, does not rest on unconditional alignment. It must be grounded in reliable sources and the reports of international

human rights organizations (See appendix). It also rests on a clear distinction between supporting the Kurdish people's rights to dignity, equality, cultural and linguistic rights, and the right to self-determination, and granting absolute endorsement to the practices of specific Kurdish nationalist parties that have been documented as complicit in serious human rights violations.

The essence of this solidarity must be directed toward supporting the project of a citizenship state, a state founded on full equality among all citizens regardless of nationality, religion, language, or gender. A state that guarantees social justice and individual and collective rights through accountable deliberative democratic institutions. Defending national rights does not mean transforming identity into a basis for power, but rather ensuring those rights within a just legal framework that encompasses everyone.

Some left currents around the world have at times treated certain Kurdish nationalist parties as the exclusive expression of an oppressed people's cause. They have extended unconditional solidarity without adequate accountability, despite these parties lacking genuine democratic representational legitimacy for the Kurdish people as a whole.

Despite the complexity of circumstances, these parties did not come to power through free, fair, and transparent elections open to independent international observers. They imposed their dominance through armed force, militias, money, security control, and military and political deals with regional governments or with regional and international powers.

Documents and sources from numerous credible human rights organizations indicate that some of these ruling Kurdish nationalist forces are implicated in serious human rights violations. Throughout their history, they have carried out political assassinations, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and torture against their opponents, many of whom came from the ranks of left forces. This conflation of solidarity with the people and support for party authority may harm the cause itself. It transforms solidarity from a principled humanitarian stance into a narrow ideological alignment that may undermine the Left's moral and political credibility.

This pattern of engagement with the causes of oppressed peoples is not new in the history of the global Left. In the early 1990s, when I arrived in Europe as a refugee, many left forces were rightly condemning the unjust economic blockade imposed on the Iraqi people following the First Gulf War.

Some of those same forces simultaneously refused to acknowledge or condemn the crimes of Saddam Hussein's nationalist regime (1968 to 2003), on the grounds that it was a progressive, anti-imperialist regime, or that the timing was not right and that focus should be exclusively on lifting the blockade.

This position is being repeated today with the Kurdish question in different forms. This is by no means a comparison between the savage crimes of the Ba'athist nationalist regime in Iraq and the human rights violations committed by ruling Kurdish nationalist parties.

The underlying logic is similar in both cases: reluctance to criticize documented violations under the pretext of exceptional circumstances, inappropriate timing, or other political priorities.

Documented Positive Aspects

According to reports from international human rights organizations and humanitarian bodies, there are positive aspects that must be noted objectively when assessing the situation in Kurdish-majority areas.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, international reports have documented the region's hosting of large

numbers of displaced persons and refugees from various Iraqi and Syrian communities, providing camps and humanitarian assistance under difficult economic conditions.

Reports have noted a relatively higher level of social, religious, and cultural freedoms compared to some surrounding areas, with a considerable degree of security and relative religious and ethnic diversity. The region played a documented role in protecting certain minorities, including Yazidis, Christians, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, and Sunni Arabs, from the threat of genocide during the rise of ISIS, providing a safe haven for thousands of displaced people.

In northern and eastern Syria, international reports documented the effective military role of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in fighting the terrorist organization ISIS, with American and Western support. They contributed to liberating vast areas from the organization's control and paid a heavy toll in lives.

There have been attempts to build an administrative model under exceptional wartime conditions and ongoing siege, with efforts to manage the region's ethnic and religious diversity.

Reports documented relative progress in women's participation, particularly in military and administrative spheres, something relatively rare in the regional context. Despite human rights violations, the administration of dozens of displacement camps housing tens of thousands of people under difficult and complex humanitarian conditions was noted, amid limited resources and international support.

Documented Violations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Despite these positive aspects, reports from international human rights organizations have documented serious violations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which is jointly governed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

In practice, the region is divided into two zones with separate party and security administrations, each with its own apparatus, forces, and sphere of influence. A hereditary family rule pattern is entrenched within both parties, with key decision-making positions passed within the Barzani and Talabani families, deepening the monopolization of power and undermining the institutional and democratic foundations of governance.

Reports have documented increasing restrictions on freedom of expression in the region, including the arrest, mistreatment, and in some cases torture of journalists and human rights defenders. Significant gaps exist in protecting women and girls from domestic violence and crimes committed against them. Widespread repressive practices continue against political opponents and civil society activists, including arbitrary detention, torture, and suppression of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Documented violations also include the suppression of peaceful demonstrations that emerged in protest against unemployment, corruption, and unpaid salaries. In many instances, security forces used live ammunition against protesters, resulting in deaths and injuries. Dozens of activists and journalists were arrested. Independent media outlets that covered the protests were targeted.

The security apparatus affiliated with both parties exercises broad surveillance over society. Direct criticism of the ruling families who control power through hereditary succession may expose the critic to security prosecution and worse.

Documented Violations in Northern and Eastern Syria

In northern and eastern Syria, reports from neutral international human rights organizations have documented widespread and systematic violations committed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These include restrictions on fundamental freedoms such as freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, suppression of political opponents and civil society activists, and the forced recruitment of children under the age of eighteen, a serious and documented violation of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as widespread arbitrary detentions without fair trials and systematic torture in detention centers.

In its report on the situation in Syria, Human Rights Watch clearly documented the SDF's continued recruitment of children, including boys and girls, and the detention of tens of thousands of people, including women and children, under difficult conditions in camps such as Al-Hol and Al-Roj and others, under American supervision.

The UN Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict contained official documentation of multiple cases of child recruitment by Kurdish People's Protection Forces in Syria, despite the forces' repeated and publicly declared commitments to end this practice.

International reports documented the suppression of peaceful demonstrations in several cities, protesting deteriorating services or security practices, through the use of force and arrests. They also documented cases of forced displacement of Arab residents from their villages after liberation from ISIS under security pretexts, raising concerns about demographic engineering.

Additionally, restrictions on press freedom and freedom of expression were noted, along with the closure of media offices and civil society organizations that criticized the Autonomous Administration's policies.

These violations are not isolated incidents. They reflect an authoritarian structure in need of fundamental reform. The war on terrorism and genuine security threats are used as justifications for suppressing opposition and restricting freedoms in ways that go beyond security necessity.

The Gap Between Progressive Discourse and Authoritarian Practice

It must be noted that a significant segment of the global Left is drawn to the concept of "Democratic Confederalism" and the theories of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, adopted by the "Autonomous Administration" in northern and eastern Syria as an alternative to the centralized nation-state. However, a critical reading of actual practice on the ground reveals a sharp paradox: while talk of "communes" and grassroots democracy abounds, real power and military and financial decision-making are concentrated in the hands of unelected Kurdish party cadres operating with rigid centralist logic.

When progressive concepts such as ecology, feminism, and statelessness are invoked in ways that appear more oriented toward projecting a progressive image before Western public opinion than toward serving as a systematic framework guiding political practice, they risk being reduced to a legitimizing narrative for an authority that has been significantly tied to American military and security support. We would argue that this does not ultimately strengthen left thought, and may indeed weaken its intellectual credibility and political coherence.

The documented role of the Syrian Democratic Forces in fighting ISIS should be acknowledged. Yet this military role, despite its importance, does not eliminate the need for a critical assessment of the military, political, and economic structures that took shape within the framework of international alliances. External support can create structural dependencies that, over time, may influence internal decision-making processes and organizational priorities, especially if it is not accompanied

by the preservation of the movement's independence and its popular base. This risk is not limited to support coming from the United States and its allies; historical experience shows that reliance on major external powers of any kind carries similar dangers for movements seeking emancipatory change.

As the center of gravity shifts from autonomous popular mobilization to external dependency, funding, and support, the movement transforms from a social force rooted in a popular base into a paid military force.

This transformation weakens the voluntary and revolutionary spirit and reorganizes the internal structure according to the logic of external dependency. Over time, the survival of these movements becomes tied to the continuation of international support rather than to the stability of their socio-popular base. When this support stops or its priorities shift, the structural fragility becomes evident, either through a rapid decline in political and military capacity, or through acceptance of the supporting party's conditions for the sake of survival.

This structural contradiction becomes clear when SDF leadership accepted, as a *fait accompli*, the role of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as the primary Kurdish national reference point, despite the family-tribal nature of its governance and its associated corruption, despotism, hereditary power, and the dominance of conservative patriarchal values. This positioning reveals the subordination of proclaimed progressive principles to narrow nationalist calculations.

We also witnessed the withdrawal of most non-Kurdish components from the SDF, the decline of popular support for the project, and the shift in international arrangements as the United States distanced itself and moved toward coordination with the Syrian government, all revealing signs of a deep crisis.

This contradiction is further confirmed by the recent agreement between the Syrian government and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with American support and the blessing of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq. While it is a positive step that reduces the likelihood of war and spares the region's populations of various nationalities further destruction, the agreement contained no clause concerning women's rights, state secularism, halting privatization, protecting the public sector, the rights of workers, or holding democratic elections to elect all officials, nor any other basic left demands. All of this reflects a clear gap between the progressive theoretical discourse and actual practice on the ground.

Accordingly, what is occurring cannot be characterized as a struggle between the Left and forces of authoritarianism, but is rather, in its essence, a struggle between competing national classes and elites over power, dominance, and spheres of influence.

Left Forces Must Clarify Their Position: Which Class of the Kurdish People Do They Stand With?

Despite the accumulated and independent international documentation of repression and human rights violations referenced briefly above, an influential segment of the global left discourse has continued to classify certain Kurdish nationalist forces within the category of the progressive Left or national liberation movements, without serious accountability for their practices. The historical national oppression suffered by the Kurdish people is treated as if it grants immunity from criticism to forces that claim to represent them, even when those forces engage in repression.

Here, the global and local Left must resolve its position from a clear class perspective. Peoples are not homogeneous blocs. They are class formations in which national contradictions intersect with

class contradictions, and no people or ethnicity is free of internal class struggle. It is not sufficient for the Left to declare abstract solidarity with “the Kurdish people” without clearly specifying exactly with whom it is standing in solidarity, and against whom. It must clearly resolve its position: with which class of the Kurdish people does it stand?

The Kurdish people are divided into classes with contradictory interests.

On one side: a rentier bourgeoisie that controls the governance of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, practicing corruption, despotism, and hereditary rule; and a ruling class in northern and eastern Syria that maintains centralized political and military dominance while allowing only a limited and tightly constrained degree of political pluralism within its formal structures and public sphere, operating under a progressive label.

The two coordinate fully to impose their class-national authority, integrated into the policies of global capitalism politically and militarily, particularly with the United States and its aggressive imperialist policies in the region, actively supporting the ruling regimes (the oppressive national bourgeoisies), and actively participating now in the nationalist Islamic system of governance in Iraq, and likewise in Syria following the recent agreement between the SDF and the “Syrian government.”

These two ruling classes have no fundamental class disagreement with these oppressive nationalist regimes regarding their policies that are hostile to the interests of the toiling classes. Rather, they share in impoverishing the masses, suppressing freedoms, and violating the economic, social, and political rights of the toiling masses regardless of their national or religious background.

On the other side: a broad class of Kurdish workers and intellectuals, and residents of those areas from other nationalities, who suffer from poverty, unemployment, marginalization, corruption, despotism, repression, rising costs of living, and the collapse of basic services in health, education, and infrastructure. Their rights to independent union and political organizing are restricted, and they face security repression at any attempt to protest or demand their rights.

This is the same class that is exploited to produce the wealth appropriated by the ruling classes, mobilized through nationalist fervor and sectarianism for wars in service of the interests and projects of the first class and its imperialist allies, while it alone pays the price of these conflicts in blood, lives, and the futures of its children, for nationalist wars that serve no real interests of their own.

Principled Solidarity: Defending the Cause by Also Criticizing Those Who Distort It

True left solidarity means standing beside the oppressed classes against all who exploit and oppress them, whether from the same nationality or another, and refusing to align with nationalist leaderships that deploy the discourse of national liberation to justify their authoritarian power, class privileges, and plundering of society’s wealth. The Left cannot justify hereditary rule, corruption, or the suppression of the toiling masses under any name.

Yet this reluctance persists in some left circles when confronting documented violations, under the pretext of protecting solidarity or not serving the enemies of the cause. This position departs from the internationalist values founded on rejecting injustice wherever it occurs and defending human dignity by consistent standards that do not shift with changing national identity or ideological background.

Beyond principled considerations, this position does not serve the interests of the Kurdish people themselves, and particularly the toiling masses who aspire to democracy, equality, and social justice,

and who need genuine democratic mass leaderships that are accountable and subject to real change.

In light of the documented reports of international human rights organizations, the Left must pose critical questions to itself:

- Do we reject hereditary rule and demand genuine democratic elections even in areas whose peoples we stand in solidarity with?
- Do we reject despotism and demand genuine political pluralism and full freedoms?
- Do we condemn arbitrary detentions and political assassinations and demand accountability for their perpetrators, even when they belong to forces we stand in solidarity with?
- Do we reject torture and repressive practices in detention centers and demand fair trials for detainees?
- Do we defend the rights of Kurdish workers and intellectuals?
- Do we condemn corruption and the pillaging of public funds?
- Do we defend the right of Kurdish journalists, activists, and human rights defenders to criticize Kurdish authorities without fear of repression?
- Do we defend the full equality rights of Arab, Turkmen, Syriac, and other citizens in Kurdish-majority areas?
- Do we reject child recruitment and demand its immediate cessation, even when practiced by forces we stand in solidarity with?
- Do we believe that detainees, including those accused of ISIS affiliation, deserve humane treatment under international law and fair trials, or should they be humiliated, tortured, and abused as America and the SDF have done in detention centers according to documented reports?
- Do we reject left and liberatory forces being supporters of or part of the American imperial military and security apparatus, or receiving funding from it?

If the Left's response to such questions repeatedly takes the form of "Yes, but the circumstances are exceptional," or "Yes, we reject these practices, but the timing is not right," or "Yes, these are our principles, but context must be considered," then a serious problem emerges. When it comes to documented and systematic violations committed by ruling political authorities, human rights and left principles should not be indefinitely deferred by appeals to exceptional circumstances or political timing.

Context may help us understand complex situations, but it should not become a permanent justification for suspending core principles. We are not assessing isolated individual actions shaped by personal histories; rather, we are holding accountable organized political forces that exercise institutional power and make deliberate policy decisions.

The global Left's position of solidarity with oppressed peoples is greatly appreciated and represents one of its most important historical contributions to the struggle for justice. This solidarity must evolve and deepen. At the same time, it requires frank critical review to ensure its consistency with the core values on which it is founded.

Solidarity is a principled position that must not be abandoned. It gains its credibility when coupled with frank criticism upon the emergence of documented violations. Reluctance under the pretext of exceptional circumstances may weaken left discourse and bring it closer to the logic of opportunism that it criticizes in capitalism and its institutions. What is required is deepening solidarity by linking it to the values of citizenship, freedom, equality, and accountability for all without discrimination.

Supporting the Kurdish people's struggle against the oppression practiced by authoritarian nationalist regimes in the region does not contradict criticizing the repressive practices of ruling Kurdish forces and authorities. Defending a just cause requires criticizing every practice that distorts it.

Democracy and human rights are left values enshrined in international human rights covenants. They must be applied by a single standard to all. Any double standard may hollow out the left project of its moral content. Credibility requires a clear understanding that true solidarity means defending the rights of all. Here lies the distinction between principled solidarity founded on left values, and uncritical solidarity that may transform into alignment at the expense of left and humanitarian principles.

The Alternative Project: The Citizenship State and Social Justice

Current local, regional, and global circumstances do not permit the formation of an independent Kurdish national state in the foreseeable future, nor does there appear to be any serious international support for this path.

Therefore, the more productive and realistic struggle is the joint struggle between the Kurdish people and the other peoples of the region for an alternative project that transcends the exclusionary nation-state model, guarantees the collective and individual rights of the Kurdish people and all other communities within democratic citizenship states, rather than calling the toiling masses to nationalist wars that serve no genuine interests of their own and produce nothing but further destruction, displacement, and victims.

The global and local Left must support a democratic citizenship state founded on full equality among all citizens regardless of their nationality, religion, language, or gender. A state built on a democratic constitution grounded in international human rights covenants, one that guarantees the national and cultural equality of all communities and rejects any form of national domination. And a democratic federal system founded on fair geographical and administrative principles, enabling broad self-governance under the umbrella of a unified state that guarantees equal rights and resources for all its components.

This state is founded on genuine democracy that ensures free and fair elections, political pluralism, separation of powers, judicial independence, press freedom, and independent union and political organization, and that breaks entirely with all forms of hereditary power and family rule. It is also

founded on the greatest possible degree of social justice, guaranteeing the rights of workers and intellectuals of all nationalities and religions, and rejecting the privatization and neoliberal policies that impoverish the masses and enrich ruling elites at their expense.

This is the project that deserves the solidarity of the global and local Left. A project that combines social justice, national justice, political democracy, and social emancipation, one that does not replace one form of national authoritarianism with another that differs only in the language of the ruler and the identity of the dominant elite.

The Kurdish cause is a just cause deserving genuine solidarity, solidarity that means supporting the struggle of the Kurdish people, all other peoples, and the toiling masses across the region for their human, national, and democratic rights within the framework of a just citizenship state and social justice, not alignment behind nationalist elites who exploit this cause to entrench their power and preserve their class privileges.

Appendix: Reports of International and Regional Human Rights Organizations on Human Rights Violations in Iraq, the Kurdistan Region, and Syria

This article's analysis draws on reports issued by international and regional human rights organizations, listed in this appendix for documentation and transparency.

Reports on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq:

- Freedom of Expression in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2021)
- Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Authorities Must End Protests-Related Repression (2021)
- Iraq: Kurdistan Region's Authorities Failing Survivors of Domestic Violence (2024)
- GCHR Periodic Report on Human Rights Violations in Iraqi Kurdistan (2025)
- Pushing for Reforms from Iraqi Kurdish Ruling Parties
- 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Iraq

Reports on Northern and Eastern Syria:

- World Report 2025: Human Rights Conditions in Syria
- World Report 2024: Syria
- "War of Annihilation": Devastating Toll on Civilians, Raqqa, Syria
- SNHR's 14th Annual Report on the State of Human Rights in Syria for the Year 2024
- Most Notable Human Rights Violations in Syria in February 2024
- Aftermath: Injustice, Torture and Death in Detention in North-East Syria (UN/OHCHR)
- Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General (2024)
- Syria 2024 Human Rights Report
- Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Ban on Child Soldiers
- Child Recruitment Practices Continue in Syria Before and After the Fall of Assad
- Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2025)