

## **"We don't get involved in the internal affairs of Palestinians": elisions and tensions in North-South solidarity practices**

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the tensions between international solidarity groups and those they are in solidarity with. Taking the case of the Palestine Solidarity Movement and in particular the Ireland Palestine Solidarity campaign, the article argues that solidarity groups take the position of 'not intervening in the internal affairs' of the Palestinian people for a variety of reasons. The stance is adopted because of activist awareness of the possibilities of Northern groups causing harm to the people they are in solidarity with (of particular importance for Palestine), as well as serving as a means of declaring a belief in the political autonomy of the Palestinian people. As such, this position is used to differentiate solidarity groups from humanitarian/aid organisations.*

*The article looks at the difficulties of putting this stance of 'non-involvement' into practice through examining solidarity groups' response to Palestinian infighting in 2007, and to the Palestinian statehood bid of 2011. The article concludes by examining the problems associated with a policy of non-involvement in internal affairs, arguing that such a policy may lead to a superficial understanding of solidarity and a lack of communication, something which in turn can block the transformative potential of solidarity movements.*

**Keywords:** International solidarity, Palestine solidarity, Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign, long-distance nationalism, North-South

The relation between the solidarity activist and those they are in solidarity with is often fraught. While tensions are customarily papered over with platitudes declaring mutual respect, these can quickly give way to expressions of anger, frustration and alienation – precisely, I would argue, because the necessary tensions in the relationship are not seen as an element of solidarity activism, but a problem for it. In this paper, I talk both of the tensions and the silences in solidarity activism, drawing upon my experience in Palestine solidarity in Ireland to discuss strategies of engagement and avoidance in solidarity practices.

The paper is the result of several conversations with fellow solidarity practitioners in Ireland. But it is more the result of conversations that have not been held, the result of perhaps necessary elisions and self-censorship that surrounds the practices of solidarity. I ask what we, as solidarity practitioners,

say when we ignore the complexities, divisions and internal problems of the people we are in solidarity with, and how these practices of avoidance affect our activism.

I argue that solidarity groups, in the case of Palestine deal with problems by 'hiding behind the flag' – that is, they support an uncomplicated Palestinian nationalism which sees 'the Palestinians' as unitary and which refuses to get involved in Palestinian politics. Groups do so for very good reasons. This refusal is a way of understanding Palestinians as autonomous political subjects with whom one is in solidarity rather than objects to be manipulated to serve the political aspirations of activists. It is also a means of avoiding internal splits and breaches with Palestinians. Although this non-engagement in Palestinian politics may be necessary, I argue that there are opportunity costs involved in this approach. This shying away from so-called 'internal politics' often results in a failure to honestly engage with Palestinians. Paradoxically, it can result in a failure to treat them as political subjects rather than distant objects of solidarity - something which can impinge on the solidarity organisation's credibility, motivation and effectiveness, and more long term on the possibility of engaging in politics with a transformative potential.

### **Introduction - 'do no harm'**

While Palestine solidarity is decades old, its current phase can be traced to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000. The aim of the Palestine solidarity movement has been to support the political and human rights of the Palestinian people, and oppose Israel's oppressive actions against them. The vagueness of these aims is a reflection the fractured nature of the Palestinian polity that people are in solidarity with. Although the movement has become the largest example of international solidarity over the last decade, comparable to the Anti-Apartheid Movement in its heyday, there is a key difference between the two. This difference is expressed by the oft-repeated complaint by solidarity activists that 'there is no Palestinian ANC'. That is, since the eclipsing of the PLO by the Palestinian Authority which is based in the occupied Palestinian territories (and thus excludes Palestinians in Israel and in exile) and because of the fighting among Palestinians over the last decade, there is no unitary representative Palestinian body to stand in solidarity with and take a lead from.

This has ensured that the tactics of the solidarity movement are more often directed against Israel, rather than in support of Palestinian actions. There are immediate reasons for this focus too in that the international movement regularly needs to respond to military crises, with much of its work consisting of mobilising against large scale Israeli attacks on Palestinians, such as Cast Lead in 2008-9 and Protective Edge in 2014. Outside these crises, the main strategy of the movement is to promote Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. Solidarity groups worldwide, while only loosely associated, have by and large taken a lead on this from the Palestine Boycott National Committee (BNC), an independent group promoting boycott. While the BNC is not a

representative body, this common strategy has afforded a certain amount of unity to the international solidarity movement. It should also be noted that in adopting the boycott strategy and framing Israel as an apartheid country, the movement has self-consciously followed the lead of the anti-Apartheid movement.

Despite the movement's unique features, it shares similar issues with other transnational movements. While Palestine solidarity is truly a global movement, I look at it particularly in terms of issues surrounding North-South solidarity.

A while ago I heard a veteran of the Nicaraguan solidarity movement in Ireland, Molly O'Duffy, talking of what she had learnt from her experiences in a North-South solidarity group. She argued that the first rule for solidarity activists intervening in a foreign country is to 'do no harm'. It seems like a sensible rule which most people involved in such solidarity would agree with; solidarity practitioners in the North are often reacting to their own governments' harmful intervention in the countries concerned and are well aware of their crashing ability to do harm. The damaging effect of development workers on the destination country has been well documented; this is especially the case for those going for short term visits, bringing their colonial baggage with them and reproducing colonial relations through their actions (Baaz 2005; Simpson 2004). Nor are solidarity activists free from such baggage, their actions are often shot through with casual racism and unexamined colonialism – the white saviour complex is alive and well in solidarity practices (Goudge 2003). As Elaine Bradley (2013) has pointed out, such traces of colonial attitudes should not simply be seen as some kind of moral failing among solidarity activists, more importantly it serves to strengthen discursive colonial control over the target population.

This power imbalance in terms of media access, resources and so on between Northern activists and Southern 'recipients' of solidarity increases the likelihood that an unreflective Northern activist will cause harm in any delicate local situations they intrude into. The danger of doing harm is especially relevant in the case of Palestine. The recent history of the Palestinian people is one unending series of destructive international involvement in their affairs. It is not simply the Israeli government and international Zionism that is currently doing harm, there is a growing body of literature describing the (often deliberate) detrimental political effect of aid on Palestinians, and how aid organisations and charities have twisted Palestinian society into an tortured state of dependency, treating Palestinians as mere objects to be helped, rather than political subjects in their own right (Bornstein 2009; Calis 2013; Jad 2007; Merz 2012).

In this context, the dictum of doing no harm has been interpreted as meaning not getting involved in internal Palestinian affairs. There are several reasons for this. Maintaining that there is some inviolability to Palestinian affairs is a way of declaring belief in Palestinian agency – seeing them as the proper subjects of political action, rather than victims and dependent objects. 'Not getting involved in the internal affairs of the Palestinian people' has become a means for solidarity organisations to distinguish themselves from aid and development

organisations. This has meant that this declaration of non-involvement has become a central part of the identity of solidarity groups.

This is not unique to Palestine; a customary distinction between solidarity and humanitarian aid is that solidarity involves a deeper recognition of the political autonomy of the object of solidarity, and an understanding that the role of the solidarity activist is not to serve as guide or even partner, but rather as auxiliary to the central political struggle which the group they are in solidarity with is undertaking. We can speak here of different discursive strategies by Northern groups which constructs different ways of understanding and relating to the global South. If humanitarian groups adopt a discourse which treats Southerners more generally and Palestinians in particular as victims and objects, the solidarity discourse seeks to construct and relate to them not as inert *objects* of solidarity, but rather as creative *subjects* in their own right. They are people whose subjectivity, in particular, whose political subjectivity one stands in solidarity with. At least this is the ideal; as I discuss later, merely declaring a belief in Palestinian political subjectivity does not mean that a group necessarily acts in such a way as to forward that subjectivity – in practice such relations are trickier to maintain.

Returning to the importance of not getting involved, this has a special urgency in the case of Palestine, owing to the deep divisions in Palestinian politics which has led to a situation of near civil war between the two main factions in Palestinian politics – the previously dominant nationalist Fatah party and the conservative religious Hamas party. In this context, it is considered especially important to skirt around internal divisions and not get sucked into the morass of Palestinian infighting. Non-involvement has been something which every Palestinian faction, and especially those not involved in factions, has at least formally requested of Northern solidarity groups.

### **Involvement in the Fatah coup**

However the problem remains: what are the internal politics of a people so interpenetrated by the bureaucratic and violent control of Israel? Where do these 'internal politics' end and 'external politics' begin? Israel is after all, more than happy to leave the 'internal politics' of West Bank Palestinians to the Palestinian Authority (PA), the body set up under the Oslo Accords to administer the autonomous Palestinian areas in the occupied Palestinian territories. Is this injunction about internal politics then reduced to not interfering in bin collections? Or is it expanded so that it encompasses all aspects of Palestinian political life and all strategies of resistance?

Below I discuss one instance when the group I am involved with, the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC) felt compelled to intervene and what the results of this intervention were. I then examine the strategies of non-intervention that solidarity groups adopt, again drawing on the experiences of the IPSC.

A word first about the IPSC, which is the main Palestine solidarity organisation in Ireland. It was founded in 2001 as a reaction to the second intifada by a group of people previously involved in the East Timor Solidarity Campaign. It is an independently funded organisation reliant on volunteers to keep going. While small, it is very active and has successfully drawn on two of the three traditional wellsprings of international solidarity in Ireland – left-liberals and republicans – to have an impact beyond its modest size.<sup>1</sup> This is especially evident in its success in organising mass mobilisations during times of crisis, such as the recent (9 August 2014) 10,000-strong march in Dublin against Operation Protective Edge. Outside such times, it focuses on awareness-raising and boycott actions, similar to other solidarity groups internationally. While it has good relations with trade unions, its relationship to the Irish state has been increasingly antagonistic, as the state has strengthened its economic and diplomatic ties with Israel over the last decade.

The particular incident I discuss took place in June 2007, during one of the more serious crises in Palestine. This crisis was occasioned by the faction fighting between Hamas and Fatah, which had reached a new height. The background to this fighting was that Hamas won the January 2006 legislative elections of the PA. After a period of refusing to cooperate with the new government in the expectation it would collapse, Fatah had joined a unity government that the US and Israel were doing their best to unravel by promoting a coup against the government (Rose 2008). They were successful in their attempt and in mid-June 2007, Hamas suppressed an attempted Fatah coup in Gaza, following which Fatah, with the aid of Israel, suppressed Hamas in the West Bank. The fighting claimed the lives of over 100 Palestinians. The EU was also complicit in the overthrow of the elected Hamas government by offering financial supports to Fatah, fully supporting its actions against Hamas and offering recognition to it as the legitimate representative of the PA.

At this time, the IPSC was still very loosely organised through informal ties, and the main method of internal communication was an email list among active members. In these email discussions, members struggled with what they should do, or whether they should do or say anything about the situation. On one hand, we were very aware of the injunction not to take sides, and were certainly not motivated by any great feelings of support for either side, Hamas or Fatah. Nevertheless, we strongly felt that we could not remain silent about such important events – that we had to give guidance to members and supporters, as well as offering an alternative view to the dominant media narrative which unquestionably portrayed Hamas as the 'bad extremists' and Fatah as the 'good moderates'.

The consensus view emerged that what was occurring was a US and Israel supported coup against a democratically elected government. Several members

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<sup>1</sup> It has however been less successful at mobilising the third main source of international solidarity in Ireland – the church. The aid and development group, Trócaire, which has a strong focus on Palestine, has however managed to engage this constituency.

had been involved in Nicaraguan solidarity in the 1980s and the conflict between the democratically elected Nicaraguan Sandinista government and the US supported Contras in the 1980s helped frame members' understanding of the situation in Palestine and their own role in it. Key here was that Nicaraguan solidarity activists didn't feel solidarity meant neutrality in the conflict between Contras and Sandinistas.

While this analogy was important, and indicates the centrality of previous experiences of solidarity for movement members, it was understood that – as with all analogies - it was imperfect. Of greater significance in determining that we take a position was the argument that the coup was establishing a politically impotent regime in Ramallah devoid of popular support and dependent on Israel and the US, as well as enabling Israel – through its demonization of Hamas – to deepen the siege of Gaza. In making this fundamentally correct argument, the group was influenced by a variety of Palestinian criticisms of what Fatah was doing, particularly coming from the influential online magazine, *The Electronic Intifada*.

These factors led to the IPSC issuing a press release on the matter. It was framed as a response to the EU and US actions and headlined: *IPSC alarm at EU and US attitude to recent events in Palestine* (IPSC 2007). In this way, we sought to make a case that we were not really interfering with the internal politics of the Palestinians but rather arguing against external interference. This unconvincing sleight of hand did not go down well with the official Palestinian Delegation in Ireland, representatives of Fatah, who were furious about this statement.

Although no media outlet (bar indymedia) carried this press release, it achieved two things. Firstly, it was a key step in the distancing of the IPSC from the Palestinian Delegation, nurturing bad feelings which lasted for years. Secondly, this distancing which led to mounting criticisms on both sides, was a primary cause of a split within the IPSC a couple of years later, as the Delegation successfully hived away several members from the group and were instrumental in the formation of a more compliant solidarity group among these members.<sup>2</sup>

Other Palestine solidarity groups around the world can record similar bruising experiences with getting involved in internal Palestinian politics, particularly over the Hamas-Fatah fighting, a time when both factions sought to mobilise international support behind them. This indicates that there is an additional reason for solidarity groups to avoid involvement in internal politics: when undertaken, it has led to a reflection within solidarity groups of the infighting and subsequent disillusionment that has characterised Palestinian politics over the past few years. Yet the incident also shows how difficult it is to be engaged by the Palestinian struggle yet avoid the taint of internal involvement. I would

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<sup>2</sup> It is instructive to note that despite their origins, this group, Sadaka has also made the claim of non-involvement – indicating how necessary it is for solidarity groups to do so - declaring that 'We maintain an independent position on internal politics within Palestine, favouring neither Fatah, Hamas nor any other Palestinian political organisation.'

contend that solidarity activists solve this conundrum through focusing on another key issue for Palestinians – the promotion of a unitary Palestinian identity, and the declaration that Palestinians exist not as isolated victims but rather as a people with a common history and identity – in other words, as a nation.

### **Nationalism and the statehood bid**

There is an important reason to promote the collective identity of the Palestinian people, namely that their main struggle has been a fight against disappearance and dismemberment. In this struggle it is essential to use any vehicle that allows the Palestinians to express themselves as unitary and having agency - that they are more than isolated victims of Israeli practices. While Israel has abandoned its earlier attempts – most famously expressed in the slogan that Palestine was a land without a people – to deny the collective existence of Palestinians, they have largely succeeded in their denial of any political personhood to these people. In most international forums Palestinians are disaggregated and treated as either 'Gazans', 'Palestinians in Israel', or 'refugees' – humanitarian cases and voiceless victims who are largely ignored. Only those living in the West Bank are accorded any form of political agency, however limited it is.

Nationalism provides an effective vehicle to counter this process of erasure and division. A nationalism which valorises an elemental unity of all Palestinians is imperative for Palestinians furthering their collective political aims, and is equally important for those in solidarity with these political aims of self-determination and return home. Promoting this Palestinian nationalism can then be seen as a necessary component of solidarity work; in addition, it provides a means to ignore internal Palestinian divisions by talking instead of this ineffable body – 'the Palestinian people'.

Thus we can talk of a process whereby solidarity groups 'hide behind the flag', or rather that we hide Palestinians and their complexities and divisions which we feel unable to approach behind the Palestinian flag. This would help explain the omnipresence of national flags at solidarity demonstrations. It also explains the prevalence of markers of national rather than political identity to be found at Palestine solidarity stalls – the Palestinian colours, the map of Palestine in various forms, the kuffiyah, as well as the increasingly popular Palestinian football shirt which allows sympathisers to literally drape themselves in the colours of the Palestinian flag.

While it is odd to see left and liberal solidarity activists, ordinarily suspicious of nationalism, waving flags with such abandon and dedicating ourselves to the promotion of an unproblematic unitary nation, this is done – I repeat – for good reason. This unproblematised nationalism provides a vehicle through which positive collective representations of Palestine and Palestinians can be carried forward and is an absolutely necessary way of countering their atomisation and demonization in mainstream media and political arenas. In addition, this

nationalism fulfils its traditional role of enabling its promoter to elide over any internal divisions in the imagined nation.

While this elision over internal politics and differences may well be necessary as well as positive, it sets limits to what solidarity groups can say or do and encourages a process of disengagement. A clear example of this disengagement from 'internal' political developments in Palestine can be seen in the IPSC attitude to the PA's statehood bid, which stood in sharp contrast from our attitude to the Fatah-Hamas fighting of four years previously. In September 2011, the PA (controlled by Fatah) went to the General Assembly of the UN and applied for statehood. In response the IPSC issued a statement which said that we were not commenting on the bid (IPSC 2011).

At first glance this refusal to take sides on a major Palestinian attempt to seek legitimacy for their own nation state seems to undercut my contention about the ubiquity of nationalism in solidarity groups. However, there were several good reasons for this refusal to engage. Firstly, there were serious criticisms of the statehood bid – mainly that the PA was replacing the PLO as the official representatives of the Palestinian people and thus 'Palestinians' were being redefined to include only those people under PA control (that is those in the Occupied Territories and in reality, only those in the West Bank) (Abunimah 2011). Secondly, some of these criticisms were being made by our Palestinian partners, with diaspora groups such as the US Palestinian Community Network vehemently opposing what they saw as their potential political dispossession (USPCN 2011). Thirdly, the broad lack of credibility of the PA among Palestine solidarity activists in many countries - owing to complaints about its corruption and collaboration with Israel - meant there was virtually automatic distrust by solidarity groups of anything the PA did.

This explains why the majority of solidarity groups internationally refused to engage with the statehood bid, although there were some outliers who supported and others who opposed the bid.<sup>3</sup> This broad consensus among solidarity groups internationally that it was best not to get involved also influenced the IPSC. Thus while there was certainly internal discussion about the statehood bid, there was very little debate over whether the group should publicly take a position or not. In the IPSC's statement on the bid, we noted that the Palestinians were divided on this issue and so we were continuing to concentrate on boycotting Israel, because the IPSC 'does not see our role as intervening in internal Palestinian discussions on statehood' (IPSC 2011).

It may seem intellectually tortuous to reduce the statehood bid to the status of an 'internal Palestinian discussion'. Nevertheless, it was necessary to issue such a statement. This was not in order to gain press coverage, but rather to explain to our supporters in Ireland why we were not throwing parties for the

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, in Ireland, Sadaka hosted an independence party for Palestinian statehood, while on the other hand, in Holland, the Netherlands Palestine Committee issued a strong statement condemning the bid.



achievement of Palestinian statehood, and why we took this non-position.<sup>4</sup> We had learned from our honest engaged statement on the Fatah coup not to make the same mistake, and the statement proved successful. There were no splits or angry recriminations, no interruption in our main activities of supporting the boycott of Israel, our relations with the various Palestinian factions did not deteriorate. Indeed we were contacted by the Palestine Boycott National Committee subsequent to this and congratulated for a 'brilliant' statement, for managing to avoid involvement.

### **Effect of this discourse**

However, what does it mean when success is seen as avoiding involvement in the politics of the people we are in solidarity with? How does this affect the solidarity group and their practice of solidarity? While this question needs a lot more discussion, there are three associated problems which this approach can potentially tend to create. The tentativeness of the previous sentence is deliberate. I am unsure whether the first two problems I discuss – superficial solidarity and lack of communication are in fact created by this refusal to get involved, however the last problem – limiting political imaginations – does seem to be a real danger.

#### **1. The problem of superficial solidarity**

There is a certain amount of self-censorship involved in 'non-involvement', since virtually the whole of Palestinian politics is made off-bounds for public discussion by solidarity groups. This approach may stifle internal discussion and create a culture of nods-and-winks; that people who have been involved in solidarity for a while know full well about the corruption of Fatah or the intolerance of Hamas but don't talk about such issues to the non-initiated.

Furthermore if solidarity involves no more than a superficial level of understanding and a shying away from complexities, then those who argue that solidarity groups serve no function except as Israel haters or as mindless 'Go Palestine' cheerleaders would be fundamentally correct. This is not to undermine the importance of taking sides in this situation of grotesque injustice, but if solidarity groups appear to the public as offering simplistic ranty solutions, or not even offering any solutions, just hating on Israel – this undermines their efficacy and message.

As opposed to this argument, it is perhaps inevitable that groups talking of far-away issues simplify these issues when talking to domestic publics – some propaganda, some simplification is always necessary in order to interest and engage people.<sup>5</sup> I would also argue that even though solidarity groups aren't and

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<sup>4</sup> Unsurprisingly there were no press reports on our statement, along the lines of 'Small solidarity group says nothing on Palestinian statehood bid'.

<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that one of the main things Zionists say, in order to deter people from getting involved in Israel/Palestine, is to repeat the slogan 'It's complicated'.

shouldn't be talking shops, I would stand over much of the material produced by say, the IPSC as being nuanced and informative, more than just shouty propaganda (examples available at [www.ipsc.ie](http://www.ipsc.ie)).

At the same time, the long term results of this non-involvement need to be teased out. It may be that this lack of engagement ensures people don't engage with solidarity on anything more than a superficial level. In addition, by avoiding 'internal politics' and seeking to step around current political transformations, solidarity groups may be putting blinkers on themselves and failing to truly understand the situation in Israel/Palestine, so successfully are they disengaging. That is, the non-discussion of problematic issues would lead to those in solidarity groups becoming ignorant of what is actually happening in Palestine through not honestly facing the issues faced by those we are in solidarity with – by their request, it should be added.

In response to this criticism, while there is always a problem with foreign solidarity groups having an idealised and over-simplified understanding of the complexities of the country or people they are in solidarity with, this may not be due simply to the culture of disengagement. In addition the culture of disengagement may not lead to ignorance - for instance, in the case of the statehood bid discussed above, the IPSC's non-position did not deter members from undertaking extensive internal discussions and readings on the issue. Nor did this position deter us from having a public meeting seeking to tease out the complexities of the statehood bid. Thus, the possibility of non-engagement leading to ignorance is only at most a tendency within solidarity groups, rather than an inevitability.

## **2. Lack of communication serving to objectify Palestinians.**

Nevertheless, even if there is no problem with solidarity practitioners not publicly talking about internal Palestinian politics; more crucial is the fact that we don't talk about them with Palestinians. This means that the principle of non-involvement in internal Palestinian politics often leads to a lack of honest communication and discussion with Palestinians. Such communication can – it is true - all too easily slide into to a neo-imperialistic conversation whereby the solidarity practitioner feels empowered to tell Palestinians how to conduct their struggle (on this: Alsaafin 2012).

However, turning a blind eye to internal Palestinian problems and politics is a poor response. While this may be done for the best of reasons it has, as an effect, a re-placing of Palestinians into the space of the 'other' - as special people who can't really be criticised. There is a certain charade of self-abnegation going on in solidarity, whereby the solidarity activist is enjoined to play the role of the mindless mute accessory to those they stand in solidarity with to ensure that they don't dominate this fragile object. It is a charade which in other words, appears to recapitulate the colonial attitudes that it purportedly challenges.

The objectifying process here bears highlighting. If, as I earlier argued, the aim of not interfering in internal politics is to declare a belief in the political

subjectivity of Palestinians, the actual practice of non-interference - by leading to a lack of open, honest communication and contact - can serve in fact to turn Palestinians into distant objects of solidarity and no more. By rising above Palestinian politics and being in solidarity with this semi-mystical concept - 'the Palestinian people' this tendency freezes Palestinians' identities and enables solidarity practitioners to dispense with actual existing Palestinians in their practices.

As opposed to this criticism, the question must be asked whether Palestinians have time for this wearisome exchange and communication, never mind how it would be conducted. In addition, the absence or attenuation of such communication may occur, but may be due to a number of other factors such as cultural differences, distance and so on, and not just the practice of avoiding internal Palestinian politics. However with all these caveats, and accepting that it is difficult to measure its effects, the lack of such honest open discussion between solidarity practitioners and Palestinians is problematic. While solidarity can't simply be about the solidarity activist feeling good about themselves, it is hardly selfish for solidarity activists to say that they want to get something out of this solidarity - a sense of meaningful communication and common purpose.

### **3. Avoidance of transformative politics**

This leads to my third discussion point - this lack of exchange and discussion may limit more than the strategic or tactical efficacy of solidarity work. By limiting what solidarity can talk about, by limiting its horizons, this may limit its transformative possibilities. Solidarity's basic premise is less that of shared identity, and more of shared resistance to exploitation. That is: your struggle is mine and through what we learn from participating in each other's struggles helps us advance, in some way, our mutual emancipation. Such a principle of mutuality is fairly attenuated when talking about Northern support for the Palestinian struggle, but the mantra of non-involvement seems to have the effect of eliminating it altogether.

Rather than widening the scope of our politics, this approach has the effect of teaching solidarity practitioners to park our politics - for instance distrust of nationalism, opposition to neoliberalism, belief in universalism - at the door of Palestinian solidarity. Whether it results in an inability to criticise suicide bombs in Israel/Palestine or in allying ourselves with conservative forces at home and abroad (so long as they are critical of Israel) this tendency is deeply problematic. Rather than transforming ones understanding of the world, it leads to a position of compromises and alliances with powers and ideas which we would have no intention of allying with otherwise. The political effect of such work, both domestically and internationally is likely to be of, at best, equivocal value.

The worry is that this notion of solidarity which seeks to avoid its necessary tensions, leads to a suppression of our political imaginations and activities,

rather than to their expansion. This may be the greatest casualty of the doctrine of non-involvement – that we may find that in undertaking such blinkered political work we are not engaged in action that is meaningful either for Palestinians, ourselves or our mutual world.

There are no easy answers on how to avoid or at least to minimise these tendencies. Or rather, such answers are to be found in the local politics of each solidarity group and their ongoing decisions on how they relate to those they stand in solidarity with. It is useful – if also dangerous - for solidarity groups to at least acknowledge tensions in this relationship, and the problems as well as the advantages of 'non-involvement', rather than sweeping them under the carpet. For in the end, no simple practice, even one that makes as much sense as 'non-involvement' can ever encompass the messiness and promise of genuine mutual relationships.

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