

By Yasmine Mezoury and Anika Prakash

The Middle East in Solidarity with Black Lives:

A look at BLM Protests in Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon

From the War on Terror to the Arab Spring, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been a hotspot for political and civil turmoil in the 21st century.¹ More recently, the Middle East became home to many of the international solidarity protests following the murder of George Floyd on May 25. From Palestine to Lebanon to Iraq, each MENA nation holds its own unique history of power imbalances and human rights infringements that fortify the bond between its citizens and the Black struggle in the United States (US). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the MENA region began almost immediately after those in the US and continue to this day.

Palestine

Black American activist Angela Davis once said, “For those everywhere struggling against racism and for freedom, the Palestinian people continue to serve as an inspiration because they have endured and remained steadfast for so long, refusing to give up and accept permanent subjugation and injustice.”²

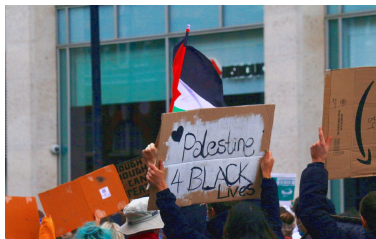
Many Palestinian activists see their struggle mirrored by the struggle of Black Americans, and vice versa, especially in the case of Afro-Palestinians. Now, with the widespread resurgence of the BLM movement, this tie persists. Protesters at BLM rallies across the world held up signs reading “Palestine for Black Lives,” and many community leaders have stressed this mutual support.

In *Al Jazeera*, Israeli American doctor Yoav Litvin connected the Palestinian struggle with BLM.

“Leaders of the current uprisings in the US can engage in a fruitful exchange of knowledge with the Palestinian resistance, in line with past efforts of groups such as the Black Panther Party,” he wrote. “Adhering to revolutionary principles while refraining from alliances with counter-revolutionaries can deliver a chance to abolish capitalist racist oppression.”³

Palestinians also organized BLM protests, where many raised flags with the words “Palestinian

Lives Matter.” One article in *Arab News* explained that “the BLM movement has become an indictment of all forms of racism, injustice and discrimination around the world. But, with Palestine, there is a special kinship.”



P.C. Lauren Lewis via Middle East Monitor

For example, “On May 30, Eyad Hallaq, a 32-year-old autistic Palestinian, was gunned down in cold blood by Israeli soldiers as he walked to his school in the Old City of Jerusalem.”

Black Americans dying at the hands of American police officers often mirrors the experience of many Palestinians who have seen friends and family murdered at the hands of Israeli forces.⁴

This is not the first time Palestinians and Black Americans have advocated for each other.

In 2014, after Michael Brown was shot and

killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, many Palestinian-Americans participated in protests, some marching with banners stating “Palestine Stands with Ferguson.”⁵

In 2015, over 1,100 Black activists, artists, scholars, students, and organizations, including prominent figures like Angela Davis and Cornel West, signed a statement of solidarity with Palestine: “Israel’s widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians evokes the mass incarceration of Black people in the US, including the political imprisonment of our own revolutionaries...US and Israeli officials and media criminalize our existence, portray violence against us as ‘isolated incidents,’ and call our resistance ‘illegitimate’ or ‘terrorism.’ These narratives ignore decades and centuries of anti-Palestinian and anti-Black violence that have always been at the core of Israel and the US.”⁶

In the same year, many leaders of the BLM movement took a trip to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories to strengthen solidarity and learn more about the struggle of their Palestinian counterparts.

“This is not to say there aren’t vast differences and nuances that need to always be named,” community organizer Cherrell Brown said. “But our oppressors are literally collaborating together, learning from one another—and as oppressed people we have to do the same.”⁷

Turkey

While donning masks and cardboard signs touting the phrase “I can’t breathe”—an internationally recognized plea for justice—protesters surrounded Istanbul’s Trump Towers in an appeal to the American BLM movement nearly ten days after Floyd’s murder.⁸

Istanbul, the primary location of Turkish protests, also houses the world’s largest population of Kurds—almost three million. There are over a quarter billion Kurds living in the Middle East, yet they remain stateless.⁹ In 1920, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Treaty of Sevres called for the creation of a Kurdish state. The Treaty of Lausanne, however, created the modern Turkish border without Kurdish input. Today, Kurds live across the region as a minority community.

Though the plight of Black Americans does not directly correspond with that of the Kurds in Turkey and surrounding regions, protesters and academics have drawn parallels between the two minority groups since the resurgence of the BLM movement. Historically, both groups have been persecuted; Kurds make up 15 to 20 percent of Turkey’s population, similar to the 13.4 percent of Black people in the US population.¹⁰

After uprisings from the 1920s to the 30s, the Turkish government passed a law to eliminate

Kurdish names, ban traditional dress, restrict native language, and classify Kurds as “Mountain Turks”—an attempt to erase Kurdish ethnic identity.¹¹

Similarly, The Tignon Law (1786) forced Black Creole women in Louisiana to retire their traditional hair beads, head wraps, and feather adornments to exhibit their role as the “slave class.”¹² This legislation persisted across the US, robbing Black women of their own culture.

Moreover, the longstanding effects of cultural restriction permeate present-day dress codes and professional standards. What was once codified by law remains as covert discrimination, through which many Black Americans are routinely reprimanded for braids, dreadlocks, and other cultural signifiers.¹³ Evidently, the consequences of slavery prevail in the US.



P.C. Murad Sezer via Reuters

Similarly, Asli Ceren Aslan, editor of the Turkish publication *Ozgur Gelecek*, reported on Turkish war crimes in Kurdish regions from 2015 and 2016.¹⁴ As a result, the journalist was jailed for seven years on charges of “terrorism” for openly criticizing the state.

The connection between Kurdish and Black oppression was made even clearer when, on June 8, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan informed President Donald Trump of a perceived affiliation between the violent looting during the BLM protests and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party).¹⁵ Erdogan made this claim shortly after Trump announced plans to designate Antifa as a terrorist organization in hopes to link the group to the PKK.

The general distaste for the widely classified terrorist organization, PKK, has also led to a greater distrust of Kurds in Turkey.

Kurdish oppression once came in the form of banning the language and the colors of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).¹⁶ Turkey now has Kurdology Institutes and specialized Kurdish news channels, such as *TRT Kurdi*, much like the US has Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Black news outlets.

Regardless of this progress, both nations must work to reverse centuries-old oppression and conflict.

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Syria

The remnants of a bombed building in opposition-held Idlib, Syria show the face of George Floyd—a face recognized worldwide as a symbol of the BLM movement.

Syrian artists Aziz Asmar and Anis Hamdoun painted this mural in a city ravaged by conflict as recognition of the plight Syrian civilians and Black Americans similarly face at the hands of their governments.¹⁷

According to *TIME Magazine*, “To Asmar, the handcuffed, unarmed Black man pleading that he couldn’t breathe as a white police officer knelt on his neck, resurfaced painful memories of what he and other Syrians witnessed three years ago after dictator Bashar al Assad attacked civilians with sarin gas in the suburb of Eastern Ghouta.”

Asmar himself said that “In those hospitals, the victims were crying and they were asking to breathe. I saw George Floyd pleading with the officer to let him breathe and it reminded me of the way they were killed.”¹⁸



P.C. Mohamad Jhamalo via Reuters

Activist Amina Shareef explained how the phrase “I Can’t Breathe” reminded her of the “Syrian living dead”—civilians who have not died but live in “social death” due to the conflict.

“The living dead live unemployed, uneducated, deprived, impoverished, dispersed, broken down,” Shareef wrote.¹⁹

In a similar vein, activist Frieda Afary connected BLM and the Syrian Lives Matter movements.

“Despite the differences in the historical experiences of African American freedom fighters and Syrian revolutionaries, both have something in common,” Afary said, “Being treated as the dehumanized ‘other,’ and suffering from the ways in which prejudice and discrimination have been used to impede their struggles for social justice.”

She also noted that “In Syria, the Assad regime has used not only military force but ethnic and religious divisions...to promote hatred and sectarianism among those who supported the 2011 revolution.”

Similarly, she continued, “In the US, racism has been used to sow hatred between the white working class and African Americans...this

slaveholder mentality is what Donald Trump uses to prevent whites, African Americans, and Latinos who suffer from the injustices of capitalism to come together in a multiracial alliance for social justice.”²⁰

This is not the first time the BLM movement has intersected with the Syrian cause. In 2017, following the American bombing of a Syrian air base, the BLM Facebook page posted a statement opposing the United States’ decision:

“The people of #Syria are carrying the weight of American fascism.”²¹

Iraq

The BLM movement resonated with many Iraqi citizens, especially African-Iraqis in a region plagued by anti-Black discrimination.

The African-Iraqi community consists of around 400,000 people, many of whom live in the Basra province; they are often subjected to prejudice and commonly referred to as “abd”—the Arabic word for a slave. Just as Black Americans suffer disproportionately from economic injustice, “The majority of African-Iraqis live in slums in the Al-Zubair area, in Basra, and most of their children are deprived of access to education.”

For African-Iraqi women, the situation is even worse.

Not only do African-Iraqis experience social discrimination, but they face political marginalization as well. In 2008, the Free Iraqis Movement was launched in order to represent Iraqis of African descent by “expressing [their] aspirations...defending their causes, and seeking to revive their identity;” however, they were never able to gain any official representation, even in the local council elections.²²

Furthermore, in 2013, a prominent African-Iraqi activist named Jalal Dhiyab Thijsel was assassinated because of his race, dashing the hopes of and scaring many other activists working alongside him.²³

However, support for the BLM movement was not limited to the African-Iraqi community; non-Black Iraqi citizens organized and participated in protests as well. Muntadhar Al-Zaidi, the Iraqi journalist famous for throwing his shoe at George W. Bush during a press conference, expressed support for BLM over social media and participated in one of the Iraqi protests.²⁴

Many Iraqi citizens expressed their solidarity because they too were subject to US violence and control during the Iraqi invasion of 2003. Iraqis have also called out the hypocrisy of the US government’s violent response to BLM protests by citing the Bush Administration’s ex-Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld.

“Lawlessness and looting is a natural consequence of the transition from dictatorship to a free country,” Rumsfeld said in response to a

journalist’s question on widespread looting and chaos in Baghdad following the 2003 US-led invasion.²⁵

During the 2019-2020 “October Revolution,” Iraqis protested against widespread corruption and other government failures. For those camped out in Tahrir Square, US police force retaliation against protesters was especially striking—Iraqis themselves “just months ago saw security forces fire tear gas and live bullets at demonstrators, who shot back with rocks or occasionally Molotov cocktails.”²⁶

Many Iraqi people, especially African-Iraqis, feel closely tied to the BLM movement, and as their struggles persist, so will their solidarity.

Lebanon

Frequent water shortages and economic crises escalated tension between the Lebanese public and its government, coming to a head with the announcement of new and unjust tax measures on October 17, 2019. Thousands of peaceful protesters across Lebanon gathered to protest against said tax measures; however, underlying pleas aimed to topple the detested regime.²⁷

After thirteen days of protests, Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned on January 21. Several months later, the US would face similar demonstrations. Though the two countries face different conflicts, both groups of civilian protesters advocate for change on a fundamental level.

According to Amnesty International, Lebanese protests called for “An end to government corruption, an end to the sectarian political system, the recovery of stolen funds and holding the corrupt accountable, and fair tax and financial procedures.”²⁷

The US BLM movement echoes a similar goal of fundamental change in elimination of systemic oppression by police brutality.

Sarah A | ساره
@saoun

We wrote a quick guide for US folks, combined by Lebanese activists, protesters, and revolutionaries (cc @amarsi). Contains info on protest safety, tear gas, + other hacks.

From #Lebanon to #Minneapolis, solidarity everywhere

Thread below, and guide:
github.com/frombeirutwith...



0:01 29.1M views
9:30 PM · May 29, 2020 · Twitter Web App

7.6K Retweets 13.1K Likes

During Lebanese protests, police forces committed human rights violations, as detailed by Amnesty International: “Failure to protect peaceful protesters, arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment, use of excessive force, forcibly dispersing protesters, and unblocking roads by force.”

The latter, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association commented, “The free flow of traffic should not automatically take precedence over freedom of peaceful assembly.”²⁷

American protesters faced similar obstacles. On June 5, authorities trapped Philadelphians on Interstate 676 with tear gas, mace, and no escape.²⁸ Lebanese allies created a guide with demonstration tips for BLM protesters, in the event of police-inflicted violence and media blackouts.²⁹

Among various tips and tricks, activists advised using soda and raw onions to reduce the effects of tear gas, and messaging through WhatsApp to ensure safe calling and texting. Furthermore, Lebanese supporters suggested turning off face and touch ID features, wearing unremarkable clothing, avoiding jewelry and lotion, and bringing helmets.

Though the first round of Lebanese protests began in October 2019, recent economic collapse fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a second wave of protests.³⁰ Lebanon’s experience with the October Revolution bolstered solidarity between the Lebanese people and Black Americans. Similarly, American demands for reform helped rekindle a similar revolutionary fervor in Lebanon, resuming the October demonstrations.

In solidarity, Lebanese influencers used the hashtag #امريكا تنتفض “America rises”—echoing the “Lebanon rises” hashtag from October.³¹ The exchange between Lebanon and the US demonstrates a need for solidarity to fuel demands for change.

Solidarity

The Black Lives Matter movement has taken the world by storm, especially in the Middle East where its message resonates with countries that are affected by war or in revolution against oppressive governments and external forces. The phrase “Black Lives Matter” has resonated with activists in Palestine, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon who co-opted this phrase to not only show solidarity with BLM, but also to fight injustice and empower the persecuted within their own nations.

Middle Eastern and American battles for change are not over; their mutual solidarity is helping strengthen their causes.