

# Bringing Palestine Home: A Transnational History of Turkey's Radical Left and Palestine (1967-1972)

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If a Turkish reader had picked up a newspaper on the morning of October 6, 1979, he would have spotted on the first page a piece of political news: Prime minister Bülent Ecevit and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had met the day before in Ankara. The chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was in Turkey to inaugurate its diplomatic office in the capital. The two leaders had marked the occasion with speeches stressing amicable relationships and kinship. The prime minister had rhetorically linked Palestinian and Turkish historical trajectories through the idea of a shared fight against imperialist powers.

The atmosphere was overall friendly, yet even the presence of Arafat on Turkish soil would have been unthinkable just a few years before. Up to that point, Fatah and the Palestinian camp had occupied a remarkably different place in Turkey, taking up significant space in the political imagination of local leftist movements. In the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War, the leftist press in Turkey had started to present the Palestinian guerrilla organizations increasingly positively. Towards the end of the 1960s, a younger generation of Turkish leftists, critical of the mainstream socialist line advocated by the local Workers Party (*Türkiye İşçi Partisi*, TİP), was openly challenging its reliance on traditional political processes. Looking at the world through the lenses of anti-imperialist ideas, these radical actors embraced—first on an ideological level, and then with tangible consequences—the means of armed struggle. They were looking at the example set by Cuban revolutionaries, Vietnamese fighters, and like-minded leftist forces in the Middle East.

Palestinian *fedayeen* were well-positioned to take up a spot in the political imaginary of this younger leftist generation. Fatah had started to fashion itself as a group tied to revolutionaries in the Global South. The relative geographical proximity of the Palestinian refugee camps to Turkey contributed to their appeal. Young leftists advocated for a second national liberation struggle, considering the War of Independence unfinished business. Busy mobilizing in university campuses and the streets, they perceived the Palestinian guerrillas as a regional player with enough experience to teach how to start the revolution they were expecting.

The interest of Turkey's revolutionary youth in the Palestinian camp was not limited to the pages of the partisan press. Demonstrations in favor of the guerrillas went side by side with strong condemnation of the US and Israel. By the end of the 1960s, dozens of university students had left campuses in Turkey and crossed the border to train in the Palestinian camps. Their ultimate goal was to bring back the knowledge and means to wage an armed struggle of their own.

The Palestinian experience of the Turkish *fedais* is a recurring theme in the memoirs and recollections of political activists that lived through the 1960s and 1970s. Nonetheless, few scholarly works have looked at the topic in-depth. Those scholars that have reflected upon it have often done so by focusing on security concerns and the causality between Turkish-Palestinian ties and violent acts perpetrated by the armed parties established later on by leftist radicals. I adopt in my thesis a different angle, focusing on socio-political developments in Turkey and the region and linking them to changes happening in the same period on a global scale. By doing so, I try to understand how the linkages between Turkish leftist movements and Palestinian guerrillas came about and look more broadly at the meaning and peculiarities of these cross-national connections.

In delineating the history of this particular moment, I try to answer three main research questions: First, how did the Palestinians enter the worldview of the Turkish left? Second, why did the Turkish leftist milieu adopt the cause of Palestine? And ultimately, what convinced Turkey's radicals to travel to the Palestinian camps, how did they manage to do so, and to what extent the Palestine they had imagined and discussed at length matched or clashed with the reality they encountered in the camps?

To answer these questions, I begin my inquiry with the 1967 Six-Day War, which marked the rise of the Palestinian guerrillas on the global stage and the beginning of mass protests in Turkey. The period analyzed reaches the first years of the 1970s, covering the ousting of Palestinian guerrillas from Jordan after the 1970 Black September conflict and the immediate aftermath of the 1971 'coup by memorandum' in Turkey. The two events were, each in its way, game-changers for the actors under scrutiny.

Primary sources for the thesis include documents published by Turkish guerrilla groups, memoirs of activists who joined the Palestinian camps, and several periodicals distributed in the 1960s and 1970s by leftist factions in Turkey. The research focused on the digital collections of the Turkish Foundation for Social History Research (TÜSTAV), the archives of the International Institute for Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam, and additional materials collected during a semester abroad in Istanbul.

In the first chapter, I look at the globalization of the Palestinian question and how organizations such as Fatah created transnational ties with Third World states and non-state actors in the early 1960s. I elaborate on how Western imagination, often influenced by connections with the Global South, led the New Left to adopt the cause of Palestine. I touch upon how organizations advocating armed struggle used the established ties with the Palestinians to confront local authorities.

In the second chapter, I focus on the connected history of the Palestinian movement and the Turkish left. I tackle the construction of a shared narrative of the Palestinian struggle in the Turkish leftist milieu, arguing that the left *adopted* the cause of Palestine but also *adapted* it. The Palestinians fit comfortably in the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist framework of the left in Turkey. Yet, including them in a pantheon of global like-minded actors depended upon a translation of the reality of Palestine to local needs and circumstances.

Engaging with the radicalization of the left in Turkey, in the third chapter, I discuss the role of the established ties in the surge of political violence in the country and focus

on uncovering challenges inherent to the transnational experience of the young Turkish leftists. Many managed to train in Syria and Jordan. Yet, they had to re-evaluate in the process the contours of an imagined Palestine and face a reality that often challenged the assumption of a 'leftist Mecca' right across the border. The consequences of the 1971 coup d'état in Turkey gave a new meaning to the ever-evolving idea of the Palestinian camps. If those had been the places of like-minded individuals to train with or of an internationalist cause to fight for, they became instead a haven for Turkish radicals fleeing repression at home.

I propose in my thesis a contribution to the lines of scholarship concerned with the global history of the Palestinian struggle and relations between social movements in the Middle East and the Global South. On a wider frame, I am engaging dialogically with studies on the Global Cold War and the Long 1960s. I also aim to advance our understanding of leftist movements in Turkey. Icons, heroes, and 'martyrs' of the era under exam are still central to the worldview of the local left. On these radical histories and the Cold War decades more broadly, scholarship on Turkey has still much to say.