



Palestinian Communities and Solidarity Groups in Europe



By Kamel
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Palestinians around the world and their supporters recently commemorated the 75th anniversary of the *Nakba* (Catastrophe), during which British Lord Balfour's promise materialized and a homeland was established for Jews in Palestine, albeit against the will of the Palestinian people. Israel came about through Jewish terrorism and Jewish migration to Palestine – not at the invitation of its original inhabitants.

Israel fought tooth and nail to dissuade the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the *Nakba* at the United Nations and to ensure that its allies, particularly in the West, voted against the resolution that adopted the commemoration and boycotted the *Nakba* event at the UN. While the Palestinians won and, for the first time in its history, the UN held events to commemorate the *Nakba*, the number of countries that voted against the commemoration was just over forty and included the usual suspects, Britain, the United States, and many European countries. Palestinians consider the denial of the *Nakba* an anti-Palestinian trope. How can countries that espouse respect for human rights deny that the *Nakba* happened or refuse to acknowledge the suffering it caused?

The *Nakba* was a horrible reality in which half the Palestinian people, 750,000, were driven from their homes into neighboring Arab countries and have been denied the right to return, even though the UN General Assembly affirmed this right through Resolution 194. To this day, Israel refuses to allow Palestinians to return, leaving over 5 million languishing in refugee camps in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Their desire

international law. The last significant resolution, Security Council Resolution 2334 that passed in the dying days of the Obama administration, failed to move the peace process forward.

Israel rejected this resolution, as it has refused to abide by any resolution passed by the UN body. In his speech to the UN during the *Nakba* commemoration, the Palestinian Authority president called



to return, however, is unshakeable, as I found out when I visited several refugee camps in Lebanon.

The United Nations Security Council and General Assembly have passed hundreds of resolutions that include demands on Israel to end its belligerent occupation of 1967 and to cease further construction of settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, considered illegal under

for Israel to be thrown out of the UN for its flagrant refusal to observe a single resolution, acting as if it were above the law yet facing no accountability.

In this context and following Israel's recent attack on Gaza, in which dozens of Palestinians were killed, including children, Palestinians look to the international community, solidarity groups, and the Palestinian communities



around the world, asking them to raise their voices and act to end Israeli impunity. In particular, they demand that Palestinians be enabled to tell their narrative in order to reach all people of conscience.

The international community has failed the Palestinian people. Although almost all Western politicians regurgitate the claim that the only feasible solution to the conflict is the two-state solution, they have done nothing to make this a possibility. In fact, Israel has buried this solution to the conflict through its illegal settlement building and the breach of the Fourth Geneva Convention by moving its citizens into illegally occupied territory. The number of settlers has reached over 700,000, and the latest extremist right-wing government has plans to take the numbers beyond a million, making it impossible to move settlers out of the West Bank settlements and into Israel's internationally defined borders established in 1967.

Palestinians have come to the realization that the international community, having allowed this to happen, sides with Israel. It accepts Israel's claims of acting in self-defense and, rather than imposing sanctions for violations of human rights and other

rights, extends its cooperation in trade and security. It is thus left to solidarity groups and the Palestinian communities to carry on in the countries where they can exert influence on the fight for Palestinians' inalienable rights.

It is important to state early on in this article that the Palestinian cause is not aided by its Ramallah leadership. The current group in power, including the Palestinian president, has long overstayed its term. What appears as failed leadership, suspicion of corruption, and the issue of security cooperation paints a regrettable background for the engagement and work of solidarity groups and Palestinian communities in the diaspora. Palestinian institutions are badly in need of democratic reform, but those who cling to power deny the Palestinians the right to choose a new leadership. This situation, together with the continued internal division, as Fatah rules in Ramallah and Hamas in Gaza, leaves international solidarity movements deprived of a unified voice and strategy. Unfortunately, the division has also found its way from Ramallah and Gaza to the Palestinian community in the diaspora. New Palestinian arrivals to a European country may need to choose which community group they join, depending on their background and possible affiliation: Fatah or Hamas.

As a result (and this is a generalization), communities in the United Kingdom and European countries affiliated or connected to the Palestinian missions tend to be mostly Fatah supporters, while non-Fatah supporters may be connected to Islamic factions. Although members of both affiliations are officially welcome, it is rather unusual that events organized by one community group be attended by members of the other. Moreover, it is not unusual that telephone calls from Ramallah or Gaza provide direction regarding whether members of "their" community group, especially its leadership, can attend events organized by the other. Such divergences regarding what a Palestinian diaspora community wishes to advocate for in its country of residence – say one state or two states – can render the community's voice ineffective, especially if we consider how small the Palestinian community is in many countries: generally reaching no more than a few tens of thousands, although it is larger in Germany, for example.

This weakness in the voice of the Palestinian community and the division that is transferred to Great Britain or

Europe also means that solidarity groups find themselves having to navigate between community groups and the Palestinian missions in a sensitive way, so as not to be counted as supporting Ramallah or Gaza instead of the Palestinian people as a whole.

The international solidarity groups, including the Palestine Solidarity Campaign in Great Britain, look to the Palestinian people for guidance on what campaigns they should champion or advocate. It has to be said that there is no clear strategy emerging from Palestine, except the PA's push for the recognition of Palestine as a state in important countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States. This may appear straightforward on the face of it. However, the question is: Which state does the PA wish to be recognized? A state within the pre-1967 borders – which Israel rejects? We as solidarity movements are asked what other form of a Palestinian state we support. The Conservative Party in the UK defers a consideration of recognition to an unknown date, at which time they hope it can help promote the peace process. The Labour Party is committed to recognition, which under Jeremy





When in Glasgow in August 2016, fans of the Celtic Football Club during a qualifying match with an Israeli team raised "a sea of Palestinian flags" to raise awareness of the occupation, the club was fined around £16,000. Supporters collected £200,000 to help pay the fine.

Corbyn's leadership would have been immediately after forming a government, but it is not as clear under the current leader, Sir Keir Starmer. The other request that comes from Palestine is to campaign to end the immoral siege on Gaza.

If not from the PA, from where do solidarity movements in Europe take their lead? The answer is quite simple: from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Ever since its launch in 2005, the BDS movement as "an inclusive, anti-racist human rights movement that is opposed on principle to all forms of discrimination, including anti-semitism and Islamophobia" has continued to develop into a very significant voice for the Palestinians and is well organized and strategic. Its three demands are clear: end the occupation, guarantee equality for all citizens in Israel, and promote the right of return. Each demand is legal and moral.

The BDS movement selects targets instead of following a scattergun approach. This means, for example, that following successes against Veolia, G4S, and Soda Stream, a current target is Puma for its complicity and sponsorship of the Israeli Football Association and its teams in the illegal settlements. Barclays Bank is targeted for its investments in arms companies. A consumer boycott of produce from Israeli settlements also

continues, though Israel's labelling of settlement goods as made in Israel drives many to boycott all Israeli goods. The specific targeting results in action being coordinated to take place on specific dates, raising the profile of the boycott and placing greater pressure on the boycotted companies until they end their complicity.

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) in Great Britain was established in 1982, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon. It has since grown into the largest organization campaigning for Palestine in Europe. Its primary aim is to support the Palestinian right to self-determination. It furthermore provides a voice for Palestinians and assesses ways of imposing pressure on the UK government to change its longstanding policy of blindly supporting Israel, shielding it from any accountability, which includes dismissing the referral of Israeli leaders to the International Criminal Court and, most recently, voting against the referral of the occupation to the International Court of Justice. The UK has also moved to vote against agenda item 7 at the UN Human Rights Council, which includes the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.

The PSC and its partners organize protests and rallies to commemorate the *Nakba* and to pressure the British

government during Israeli attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza; PSC organizes an annual lobby of Parliament and campaigns for the rights of Palestinian children. In 2021, it was instrumental in organizing 250,000 protestors to march in London following Israel's attack on Jerusalem and Gaza. The PSC has taken the British government to court and won when it tried to bar local authorities from boycotting companies complicit in the oppression of the Palestinians. It is currently in a coalition that is campaigning against the British government's introduction of an anti-boycott bill that, although driven by pro-Israel voices in the Conservative Party, will impact other campaigns, which many organizations reject as it will restrict their ability to call for boycotts in their respective areas of focus.

The PSC works with solidarity groups in the UK and beyond. It is a member of the European Coordinating Committee on Palestine (ECCP) that, as the name implies, works to coordinate action across Europe and on its website lists the member groups in Europe.

In the UK, the US, and Europe, Palestinian solidarity movements face attacks that are orchestrated by Israel and its coordinated lobby with the aim of silencing criticism of its policies and by labelling any person or organization that campaigns for Palestinian rights as antisemitic. This very serious accusation, however, empties this form of discrimination of its true meaning.

The PSC mission statement explicitly rejects any form of racism, including antisemitism and Islamophobia.

However, the creation of a new "working" definition of antisemitism, which has been developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)ⁱ and which attempts to paint criticism of Israel as antisemitic, has been rejected by critics. The issue is not in the definition itself, but in the illustrative examples which refer to Israel in 7 of the 11 examples included to expand on the definition. The definition has been challenged by those who campaign for Palestinian rights, and its use to silence critics of Israel has been criticized by its author Kenneth Stern.ⁱⁱ Its adoption by public bodies, including universities, has created a chilling effect on those who campaign for Palestinian rights, expose Israeli crimes, and bring the Palestinian narrative to Western audiences.

Palestinian communities and solidarity groups in Europe continue the fight to help Palestinians achieve their rights of freedom, justice, and equality like every other people. They will persevere until Palestinians attain freedom and return to their homeland.

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ⁱ "What is antisemitism?" International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, available at <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>.

ⁱⁱ Kenneth Stern, "I drafted the definition of antisemitism. Rightwing Jews are weaponizing it," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/antisemitism-executive-order-trump-chilling-effect>.