

The Palestinian Community and Support Organizations in Scotland

Reflection, Critique, and Hope



By Wael
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Scotland has a small, well-established Palestinian community. Like everywhere else in the diaspora, our community reflects the social and political fabric of our people in Palestine. In years past, the community was more socially cohesive and strongly united behind the Palestinian political leadership. Whether by design or by coincidence, the Oslo peace process

and the disappearance of our united leadership and focal point have caused dissolution and despair among our community members. Collectively, people feel tired and disenfranchised. Individually, people are just as committed as ever to Palestine. This leads to the conclusion that the lack of leadership and vision are the cause of collective paralysis. This sociopolitical ailment is furthermore detrimentally affected by factionalism, as each political faction often endeavors to use the community not for any tangible benefit but rather to be perceived as being in control. Now that the rant is over, here are some positive reflections.

In the past, there were individuals who managed to bypass any obstacles that emerged and who moved on steadfastly to support our people in Palestine and the refugees in the diaspora. These local independent leaders frequently rallied

the community behind them, both socially and in their commitment to taking practical steps to highlight our plight as an oppressed people. I can mention a couple of legendary individuals from the past whose legacies live on even today, decades after their passing. Mrs. Nasra Afara (Um Nabil) was considered the mother of the community in Scotland. She worked hard through her church as a starting point and engaged relentlessly to communicate our people's plight to communities and politicians throughout the city of Edinburgh, where she lived, and well beyond the boundaries of her city in later years. Nasra became a strong supporter of Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) when the charity was first established in the early 1980s, and through her, many Scottish medical professionals joined the MAP medical teams who helped Palestinians in Lebanon and Palestine. She established an annual MAP fundraising day that continues today, more than 25 years after her passing. The flame was first passed on to her close friend, Dr. Runa MacKay, and then to Nasra's daughter.

Another legend was the late Dr. Youssef Allan. He was very passionate about Palestine and, despite his political affiliation, one of the few people who managed to keep that political affiliation at bay as he worked with the community in a brilliant effort to harness the support of the politically influential trade union movement in Scotland. Youssef managed to become the voice of Palestine in every professional and labor union in the country. He was known and highly regarded by almost every union official, and he continued to be honored and referred to by officials

Palestine and the Palestinian people enjoy a relatively strong level of support in Scotland, compared to support harnessed anywhere else in the Western world. But it has not been smooth sailing. We have had our ups and downs, jublations, and disappointments. But the hard work and commitment of even a few dedicated individuals can make a huge difference in how our host nations view our plight. We are, of course, in the enviable position of being in a country where almost half the population considers their struggle for independence to be comparable with ours.



long after his premature passing. People like Nasra and Youssef have always existed and continue to exist today, and they are able to win the trust and respect of our community and of Scottish activists alike. The bonus point is that some politically affiliated individuals have started to see the futility of trying to factionally control the community and the political engagement on the Scottish scene, and slowly but surely, they are adjusting their mode of engagement and activism for the good of the community and our cause.

The community, through its elected body, the Scottish Palestinian Society (SPS), provides support to all Palestinians in Scotland through services such as advice to newcomers and students and by acting as a link between community members who wish to help each other in business wherever possible. While maintaining its complete independence from any political affiliation, SPS has managed to strike a deal with the Palestinian Mission to the United Kingdom (our embassy) to act as an identity verifier whenever one of the community members needs a document produced or signed by the embassy, such as powers of attorney or birth or marriage certificates. This agreement saves our members from having to travel to London – a round trip of 1,000 to 1,200 kilometers – every time they need to have a document signed.

Scotland has a number of organizations that have adopted the Palestinian cause and work diligently in areas such as advocacy and direct activism. The oldest organization is Scottish Friends of Palestine (SFoP), established in 1982 by the late Bill Spiers who at the time was the

assistant secretary of the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC). This came about as a result of seeing the horrors of Israel's invasion of Lebanon. SFoP initially focused on building ties between trade unions in Scotland and Palestine with very successful outcomes. Along with the issue of the boycott of South Africa, the issue of Palestine moved to the forefront of STUC's links with the global labor movements. The group has since diversified its scope of work to include advocacy in the Scottish parliament and has successfully helped establish a Cross Party Group within the parliamentary system. It has also helped establish links between Scottish and Palestinian cities, such as the twinning between the Scottish city of Glasgow and Bethlehem, following in the footsteps of the city of Dundee twinning with Nablus. When construction of the apartheid wall started, SFoP quickly established a link between the Scottish town of Falkirk and the village of Jayyous in Palestine, with both being affected by separation walls, albeit 2,000 years apart. The idea of this link was to demonstrate the futility of

building walls. The Antonine wall that cuts through Scotland from the eastern to the western shores was built by the Romans to stop the Scots (who were then called the Caledonians) from attacking the armies of the occupying Roman Empire. This wall is now in ruins and never stopped the Caledonians from attacking the Roman armies, forcing them to abandon their northern frontier. This symbolism was thought to be very appropriate and inspired the use of the slogan "the wall will fall" in the context of the apartheid wall in Palestine. SFoP has also erected and maintained a number of memorials in Scottish cities, such as the Deir Yasin Memorial in Glasgow and the Al-Dawayma Memorial in Edinburgh. A current project is underway in Dundee that aims to erect a stone to honor the legacy of the former mayor of

Nablus, the late Bassam Shaka, who signed the twinning agreement between Dundee and Nablus. SFoP has also been instrumental in helping the Palestinian community in its fight to have the history of Palestine taught at Scottish schools in a balanced and factual manner without Zionist fact-twisting and history revisionism.

Another major player in the advocacy and direct activism fields is the Scottish Palestine Solidarity Campaign (SPSC). Over 20 years ago, a few of us who were politically leaning to the left partnered with a small political party, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), to establish what was then named the Campaign for Palestinian Rights. We always accepted that political parties have a vested interest in supporting international causes. Unfortunately, we realized soon after that the price we Palestinians had to pay for this partnership had topped what we thought was acceptable. Within a couple years, we felt the need to put a stop to our partner's attempts at manipulation. Luckily, a number of the party members who worked



with us became so committed to Palestine that they left the party to form what is now the SPSC. Their work includes direct action against financial establishments that are complicit in investing their money in Israel and in arms-manufacturing companies that sell to Israel weapons or components that can be used in the manufacturing of arms or surveillance equipment. The work also focuses on the boycott of Israeli goods and on advocacy work, providing a platform for influential speakers to reach Scottish audiences.

As believers in the need to reach out to all sectors of Scottish society, we have supported the setting up of the Scottish Palestinian Forum. This group, initially led by church-linked individuals to help reach the religious establishments in Scotland, has been very successful in influencing the stance of churches on the issue of Palestinian rights. The group has since diversified and is inclusive of all sorts of groups that agree to work collectively on advocating for Palestine. Its membership includes Sabeel-Kairos, Christian

Peacemaker Teams, Embrace the Middle East, ICAD-UK, and The Church of Scotland, amongst others.

One very small group that deserves our admiration and respect is the Glasgow Campaign for Palestinian Human Rights. Its heroic members run an advocacy stall in the middle of the commercial part of Glasgow city center, distribute printed material on a vast number of issues relating to Palestine, and talk to shoppers who inquire about what goes on in Palestine. Come rain or shine, every Saturday, the stall is there all day. We also have a branch of Friends of Al-Aqsa, a group of great, mainly young Muslims who advocate for Palestine in mosques and within the large Muslim community in Scotland.

And of course, we have the Celtic football supporters who would never miss a chance to show their support for Palestine on the terraces of their stadium – even though they are fined by the Scottish Football Association every time the Palestinian flags are raised on the terraces, citing rules that ban political symbolism on the field. Ironically, and hypocritically, this is the same football-governing body that encourages clubs and players to show support for the people of Ukraine.

One may ask, why so many groups? Why won't all groups work together as one? I think the answer can become clear if one looks at the target audience of each of the groups. To be able to reach as wide an audience as possible, there are advantages in having different groups to work on their specific links. There are the elements of familiarity and the trust that are associated with such work. There is also the matter of expertise, as activists need special skills and a more intimate knowledge of their

audience. Yes, of course, the old saying that there is “strength in unity” is correct, but equally correct is “Jack of all trades, master of none.” That being said, there have been many attempts to work under umbrella arrangements, but all have failed for various reasons. The issue of dominance of the powerful, or at least the perception thereof, and the lack of focus on what unites the various groups within the umbrella group have proven detrimental. I think we have managed only this year to find a workable model that has delivered a brilliant week-long program of 25 events to commemorate the *Nakba*. This success has the promise of becoming an annual *Nakba* commemoration program. I am hopeful.

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