

The Unbreakable Bond of Ireland and Palestine

Among European nations, Ireland has been one of the most vocal in its support of the Palestinian national struggle

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In December, a wave of support for the recognition of a Palestinian state swept over Europe, culminating in the European Parliament's (EP) vote on a motion that expressed support for an independent Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and a continuation of stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

The motion, largely symbolic, passed with 498 EU parliamentarians voting in favour, 88 voting against, and 111 abstaining.

While it does not require any concrete action on the part of any European Union (EU) member state, certain EU member states, such as Sweden and Ireland, have taken steps towards formal recognition of Palestine.

Ireland in particular has been a vocal supporter of the Palestinian cause. The origins of this solidarity come down to both the similarities and differences between the Irish and Palestinian national struggles.

'Colonised people'

"The Irish people, as a colonised people living for centuries under British occupation, have instinctively identified with freedom struggles across the globe," Gerry Adams, Irish republican and president of Sinn Féin, the largest Irish nationalist party in both the Republic of Ireland and the six counties of Northern Ireland that still belong to the United Kingdom (UK), told Middle East Eye.

The entangled history of the UK and Ireland began in the 12th century, when Norman invaders reached the island. In 1541, the English parliament formally declared that English King Henry VIII was also the king of Ireland.

That was the beginning of several centuries of English and Scottish Protestants migrating to the majority Catholic island and taking power from the indigenous population. This set the stage for sectarian conflict that would flare up over the course of the following years.

In the second half of the 19th century, nationalist movements began picking up steam and by 1922, the Green Island was split into 26 counties that were to be ruled from Dublin as part of an independent Ireland, and six that would be ruled from Belfast, still part of the UK.

In the late 1960s, the conflict known as “The Troubles” began, with militants seeking the reunification of Ireland attacking military and civilian targets, and the British army and Protestant militants responding in kind. Adams himself recounted his own memories of political activism and protest for the reunification of Ireland, and against apartheid South Africa, in the 1960s.

Speaking critically of the current Israeli government, he said their “strategies and actions are aimed at imposing an apartheid system on Arab-Israeli citizens; extending the occupation through the building of settlements in the occupied territories, as well as the separation wall; and physically and politically dividing Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza and the refugee camps in other states.”

The current state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process also troubles him, he said. In December, Israel [denied Adams entry](#) to the besieged Gaza Strip, and upon his return to Ireland, he was “deeply worried”.

“I am particularly concerned at the approach of the international community,” he told MEE, “which fails to hold the Israeli government to account for its actions and its breaches of international law.”

The role of prisoners

In Ireland, prisoners jailed by the British played “an important role”, according to Adams, and Palestinian prisoners play an important role, too.

But Gavan Kelley, the advocacy unit coordinator of Ramallah-based [Addameer](#), a non-governmental human rights group that focuses on political and civil rights issues in the occupied Palestinian territory, especially those of prisoners, thinks that those imprisoned in Israeli jails can play an even greater role.

“Overall [Addameer] is in a very difficult situation. We want to get to a stage where prisoners are playing a role in ending the conflict,” he told MEE. “That’s the exact opposite of what’s happening now.”

As of October 2014, there were approximately 6,500 Palestinian prisoners, including roughly 500 [administrative detainees](#)—those who are held in Israeli prisons without charge. Their six-month sentences can be renewed indefinitely by judges on the basis of “secret” evidence.

Other than prominent Palestinian leaders, such as Ahmad Saadat of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine or Fatah’s Marwan Barghouti, most prisoners serve their sentences in silence.

Kelley says that prisoners “are being completely excluded and used as political bargaining chips” in negotiations between Israel and Hamas, as well as the Palestinian Authority.

The human rights of prisoners in Israeli jails are routinely violated, Kelley said, much like those of Irish prisoners during the conflict with the UK. “You have daily rights violations of the prisoners. Medical negligence, malnourishment, nightly raids by the Israeli forces,” he said.

Kelley echoed Sinn Féin's leader in saying that prisoners were instrumental in ending the conflict.

"If you look at Ireland and South Africa," Kelley said, "prisoners played a central role in ending those conflicts."

But looking at the current situation in the Holy Land,

"the political conditions that brought an end to the conflicts in Ireland and South Africa are nowhere near existing here in Palestine," Kelley concluded.

United Efforts

Meanwhile, many Palestinians are grateful for international solidarity, which some view as instrumental in their own struggle.

"International solidarity is vital for more than one reason," Najwan Berekdar, a Palestinian citizen of Israel and activist, told MEE.

"Not only that gives hope for the Palestinians to continue their struggle knowing they have support, but it also brings our struggles closer together, as we have been learning new tactics which were used by colonised people everywhere."

The popular techniques used by the Irish and South Africans serve to invigorate Palestinian efforts to resist Israeli occupation, have led to innovative and interesting protests, some of which, such as the "[Love in the Time of Apartheid](#)" campaign, Berekdar organised.

"This is what will affect the public opinion. And this is what will pressure Israel and its supporting governments to change their policies."

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