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ACTIVISM

## Resistance to colonialism, from Derry to Palestine

A delegation of Palestinian activists and movement leaders visited the north of Ireland to ground ourselves in its history of anti-imperialism. Derry was more than a city for us—it mirrored our shared history of colonial oppression and resistance.

BY [EMAN MOHAMMED](#) - NOVEMBER 15, 2024 - 4



A VISITOR IN A KEFFIYEH STANDS BEFORE THE “CIVIL RIGHTS ASSOCIATION” MURAL IN DERRY, NORTHERN IRELAND, DEPICTING A SCENE FROM BLOODY SUNDAY IN 1972. THE MURAL, PART OF DERRY’S BOGSIDE, HONORS THE IRISH CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND ITS RESONANCE WITH GLOBAL STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE, INCLUDING SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE. (PHOTO: EMAN MOHAMMED)

Imagine being welcomed into a space where the weight of your grief, anger, and exile is not only recognized but embraced. A space where the pain of Palestine, Lebanon, and Ireland converged—not as disparate wounds, but as a shared resistance. That’s what Derry gave us: a refuge, a collective embrace at a time when our hearts were raw from fire.

In September 2024, Palestinian activists and movement leaders joined a week-long immersive movement-building gathering grounded in anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism in the north of Ireland hosted by the [Bloody Sunday Trust](#). Ireland has a long history of surviving and resisting British colonialism and standing in solidarity with the Palestinian people and the people of Derry have an acute understanding of what happens when a state murders with impunity. Over the course of the week, we engaged in

political education, analysis of historical and current conditions, and shared strategies to strengthen the global movement against Zionism and the ongoing genocide in Palestine as central to organizing for collective liberation in all of our different communities and contexts. Delegates included leaders from the Adalah Justice Project, Arab Resource and Organizing Center, FIG NYC, Hospitality for Humanity, Healthcare Workers for Palestine, Honor the Earth, Community Movement Builders, Palestinian Youth Movement – both Britain and U.S. leaders, Palestinian Feminist Collective, Students for Justice in Palestine, and 18 Million Rising.

The irony, of course, was that as we stood in Derry, our hearts heavy with the haunting images of Gaza engulfed in flames and the relentless bombings in Lebanon by the Zionist entity, Derry became our sanctuary from the violence of occupation. But not just any occupation. The ongoing British occupation of Ireland. There is no “Northern Ireland”—the very phrase is a colonial invention, an attempt to fracture Ireland into something less than whole. But Ireland is whole. The land is whole. The people are whole. This island, from Derry to Dublin, belongs to the Irish people, despite the colonial borders imposed on it.

**Derry, for us, was more than a geographical stop on this delegation.**

**It was a moment to feel human again, to be understood in our struggle.**

Derry, for us, was more than a geographical stop on this delegation. It was a moment to feel human again, to be understood in our struggle, to be met with love while carrying the weight of collective grief. Because when you are Palestinian, Lebanese, Irish, African American, Indigenous, or Bangladeshi, your

entire existence becomes defined by colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and the constant fight for survival. Genocide from Gaza to Lebanon. From the river to the sea, our bodies and our lands are torn apart, our struggles made palatable by Western media, all in the name of neutrality.





THE ICONIC 'YOU ARE NOW ENTERING FREE DERRY' MURAL IN DERRY'S BOGSIDE NEIGHBORHOOD SHOWCASES MESSAGES OF SOLIDARITY, INCLUDING THE PHRASE 'SAOIRSE DON PHALAISTÍN' (IRISH FOR 'FREEDOM FOR PALESTINE'). IT FEATURES IMAGES OF A PALESTINIAN CHILD AND JOURNALIST MOTAZ AL AZAIZA ALONGSIDE PALESTINIAN AND IRISH FLAGS, UNDERSCORING THEMES OF RESISTANCE AND CROSS-BORDER UNITY. (PHOTO: EMAN MOHAMMED)

“Thats the border with the north of Ireland,” they said. The bus driver from Derry pointed to a speed sign reading, “Welcome to Northern Ireland.” That was it—Britain’s attempt to wash over decades of violent colonialism with a “soft” border. But nothing about it felt soft. The moment we crossed, it was as if a brick had been placed on my chest. The air thickened, the trees seemed to age before my eyes. For a Palestinian, it was an all-too-familiar sensation—entering occupied land. The delegates from Palestine, Lebanon, Bangladesh, and Indigenous Native Americans of Turtle Island weren’t fooled by the “invisibility” of that line.

None of us cheered. But unlike the eerie quiet of occupation, there was no fear. Instead, the sound of resistance was louder. Palestinian flags embraced every corner as we approached the Free Derry zone. As someone who had just divested from nine years of

forced exile in Washington, D.C., seeing those Palestinian flags brought my journey full circle. One step closer to home.

Derry's streets told the story of rebellion. Graffiti became sacred art—every wall bore witness to the enduring solidarity between Palestine and the Irish people. This solidarity isn't new, nor has it waned. It's as strong as steel, binding two nations ravaged by British colonial violence. And while American tourists rave about their Irish roots they rarely stop to understand the deeper reality—that Ireland's history of resistance hasn't changed. The fight is ongoing, and it mirrors ours in Palestine.



FREE DERRY (PHOTO: EMAN MOHAMMED)

We felt this even in the most unexpected spaces, like walking into local grocery stores or small shops. Each time, the locals would light up at the sight of our keffiyeh, identifying us immediately. They'd excitedly call out to their Palestinian friends within the Derry



community to introduce us, as though someone had told them we were homesick or in desperate need of being around our own. They didn't impose their opinions or feelings on us, though. They recognized our yearning for connection and genuinely sought to create a space for that reunion, Ahmad, from Khan Younis, has been living in Derry for three years. When he found out that most of us were coming from Turtle Island, he apologized furiously, knowing the complexities of exile.

This was more than just an episode of "Derry Girls" (although I do love the show). The continuous attempt by the so-called progressive society to belittle the catastrophic impact genocide has on humanity by reducing it to a "single issue" is infuriating. They sidestep the larger consequences that ripple across the globe. No arms embargo means unchecked erasure of an entire nation. Yet, progressives in the U.S. continue to elect genocide enablers or worshipers, presenting the "lesser evil" as an option. But the lesser evil is still evil—and it's a betrayal not just of Palestine but of justice for all oppressed people.

Passing through loyalist neighborhoods was jarring. Their signs, blaming the drop in their population on Irish citizens, reeked of gaslighting. Loyalist communities, aligned with British colonial powers, had long benefited from institutional privileges, while the Catholic, nationalist communities were systematically denied political power, employment, and basic rights. During the Troubles, it wasn't just a political disagreement. Catholics and nationalists faced horrific brutality—military invasions of their neighborhoods, imprisonment without trial, systematic torture, and indiscriminate violence. British soldiers, and the Protestant-dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary, terrorized Catholic neighborhoods, while nationalist resistance was branded as "terrorism."

The British state's use of military might, alongside their divide-and-rule strategy, empowered loyalists to uphold colonial domination. But when industries tied to British imperialism, like shipbuilding, collapsed, the same British government abandoned them. Meanwhile, nationalist communities endured centuries of land dispossession and violence, all while fighting for basic human dignity. The term "Troubles" diminishes the

brutality that Irish Catholics faced under British occupation. What the world calls “Troubles” was a war on colonized people.



FREE DERRY (PHOTO: EMAN MOHAMMED)

When we met with political prisoners, their testimonies echoed the stories of our imprisoned freedom fighters in Palestine. Martina Anderson’s words will stay with us. She recounted waking up in her prison cell, hemorrhaging from a forced hysterectomy. The British had sterilized her as part of their systemic weaponization of sexual violence—a barbaric tactic used across colonized lands, from Palestine to Turtle Island. This obsession with controlling and violating our bodies spans centuries, whether by forced sterilization of Indigenous and Black women in the U.S., or the dehumanization of Palestinian women and men in Israeli torture camps like Sde Teiman.

Derry was more than a city for us—it was a mirror reflecting our shared history of colonial oppression and resistance. We retraced the steps of the victims of Bloody Sunday, when British soldiers gunned down unarmed civilians during a peaceful protest in 1972. I stood in front of a glass frame containing two gigantic bullet holes. Bullets so large they tore through human bodies. It reminded me of Palestinian children, their faces blown apart by sniper fire. How many bullet-riddled frames would Gaza need to document its genocide?

We stood in silent reverence before that memorial—Kamau Franklin, a Black liberation organizer, and I, united in our grief. Though our struggles arose from different histories, we gazed upon the same painful truth, our shared humanity illuminating the profound connections between us. I couldn't fathom his thoughts in that moment, but I felt our collective trauma stirring, fully alert and ready to haunt us anew. It's not the echoes of past histories that keep us awake; it's the stark reality of our present—of being hunted, of being lynched—right here and now.

Our delegation spent a week in Derry. We spoke with scholars, lawyers, ex-loyalists, political prisoners, and community leaders. And every time we met with a family member of a Bloody Sunday victim, their voice broke in a way that felt so familiar. Their grief, like ours, was suffocating but unyielding. They understood that the British occupation wasn't just about borders; it was about erasure. They gaslit generations, just as they tried to wash away the blood of Bloody Sunday. The loyalists may claim grievances today, but those grievances are part of a colonial legacy that empowered them at the expense of the Irish people.

Though many delegates are still guests on Turtle Island, they carry the collective responsibility of resisting and dismantling the systems of occupation and colonialism that persist there. Just as the struggle for Ireland continues, Palestine is undergoing genocide. Resistance—from Derry to Gaza—is the only path to liberation. We will not bow to the blade; first comes justice, then everything else. Anything less is submission, a tactic often employed by colonizers who cloak their demands for compliance in the language of peace. Just like they call the fight for Irish liberation “the Troubles.” Troubles? The kind



A GLASS PANE COVERS A BULLET HOLE IN THE WALL OF A HOUSE IN DERRY. THE AREA, UNDER BRITISH OCCUPATION, WAS THE SITE OF SOME OF THE MOST BRUTAL VIOLENCE, INCLUDING BLOODY SUNDAY, WHEN 13 CIVILIANS WERE SHOT BY THE BRITISH ARMY. (PHOTO: EMAN MOHAMMED)

of troubles you have when you've lost your keys or run late to work? No. The "Troubles" were a struggle against British colonialism. Language matters. "Troubles" is the propaganda of the occupier, just like calling Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians a "conflict" or their bombing of southern Lebanon "self-defense." This colonial playbook is universal, erasing our histories of resistance while whitewashing the violence imposed on us.

How can you call a decades-long war for Irish freedom just "troubles"? Words are weaponized in every colonized land, but we see through this. The same way Israel's genocide is called a "conflict," the way resistance is called terrorism, the way our people are criminalized for demanding dignity. And as we stand on Irish soil, we know all too well that this struggle isn't abstract. Nationhood is not just a concept, not just a line on a map. It is survival. It is memory. It is the blood in the earth that refuses to be washed away by the hands of the occupier.

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### **Eman Mohammed**

Eman Mohammed is an award-winning Palestinian photojournalist from Gaza and a Senior TED fellow. Her photographs have been featured in renowned publications such as The Guardian, Le Monde, VICE, Geo International, Mother Jones, The Washington Post, Al Jazeera English, NPR, CNN, Marie Claire, and The Atlantic.

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