

# A brief history of Cypriot Activism for Palestine (Online Article)

## Historical Note

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## Content

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A colour photograph of a Celebration held by the Union of Cyprus Youth for the Wounded from the war on Lebanon while receiving treatment in Cyprus. The Palestinian Museum Digital Archive.

### Palestine and Cyprus - a brief history of Cypriot Activism for Palestine

by Ilaeira Agrotou Georgiou

It seems inconceivable to reconcile with the fact that we know so little about a country, and a conflict, less than 600 km away from us. Ask a Cypriot where Kolokotronis was on a random Thursday in 1821, or what kind of coffee Suleiman the Magnificent drinks, and we will readily know the answer, depending on our ethnolinguistic persuasion. But ask us about the Balfour Declaration, the Nakba, or the Intifada, and all most of us can give are vague answers, despite all these events having direct consequences to our own history in ways we cannot always perceive. Our understanding of our history has turned introspective, ethnocentric and Eurocentric. We systematically fail to consider ourselves as part of a wider region, interconnected through culture, geographical proximity, imperialism and conflict.

When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and France and Britain carved out the former eyalets, they created a different world order, whose consequences we still feel today. While Cyprus became a Crown colony, Egypt and Palestine were determined as mandates. These were the only three countries in the region to ruled under the British rather than the French. Palestine and Cyprus especially were often discussed in tandem in colonial offices. We shared governors, legal systems, and the specific interest of a certain author, Thomas Herzl, who wrote successive letters to the British government with dreams of a Jewish homeland in Cyprus and Palestine, Palestine being preferable. After the settlements of Jewish people escaping the Holocaust from Europe in Palestine, Palestine was declared a 'land without a people for a people without a land.' The Balfour Declaration, with its promises of a Jewish homeland and its implications of a Jewish ethnostate, treated the Palestinians as if they had secondary rights to their own homeland. At midnight on the 14th of May 1948, the British officially withdrew from Palestine, prompting a war whose consequences still reverberate. A war which saw the forcible expulsion of around 700,000 Palestinians from their homes and the destruction of 500 villages, referred to as the Nakba, which means 'Catastrophe' in Arabic.

In 1948, Cyprus had yet to see her most tumultuous period under British rule, but just seven years later, Lawrence Durrell wrote down the growing concern amongst the British government that Cyprus

would become 'another Palestine.' Our status as the only British colony left in the Eastern Mediterranean ended in 1960, and we found ourselves in a growing world of postcolonial consciousness. We became part of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, and President Makarios, in order to limit the influences of Greece and Türkiye on Cyprus, developed a strong pro-Arab foreign policy. Israel wanted to have Cyprus as a regional ally, since Cyprus was the only majority non-Arab state in the Middle East. But they were wary of the island's Non-Aligned stance and Greece's hostility to Israel. In reality, Makarios wanted some Israeli representation in Cyprus, but kept at a minimum level so as not to upset President Nasser, the most important ally in the Eastern Mediterranean political landscape. For example, while he accepted the opening of an Israeli embassy, he made the Israeli envoy wait several days, expecting the visitation of the United Arab Republic envoy first, thus demonstrating a clear Cypriot favouritism. The government also participated in a series of Non-Aligned meetings on Palestine. This stance on Palestine was also shaped due to tensions between America, NATO and Cyprus. During the intercommunal violence of 1963, many plans on Cyprus proposed by America involved significantly escalating American presence on the island, as well as the creation of a NATO base. While the Cypriot Government officially refused, right-wing elements in both communities were sympathetic to American designs. Anger towards America incensed a desire to pragmatically back a non-Western foreign policy. Activism in those years for Palestine was limited, but the government's stance was clear.

Cypriot activism for Palestine, at least on the south, exacerbated after 1974. I will be mainly focusing on Greek-speaking Cypriot activism due to having more information on it from the archives I could access, but it should be noted that there was significant Turkish-speaking Cypriot organization for Palestine. The left-wing on both communities has historically protested together for Palestine. The events of 74 brought a consensus amongst both the left and the right about the plight of the Palestinian people against occupation. Right-wing governments continued to organize events with the PLO. This was also due to the stance of Arabic countries towards Türkiye after 74. While the Islamic Cooperation Organisation had been sympathetic to Türkiye throughout the war, due to the plight of Turkish-speaking Cypriots, many Arab states, such as Syria and Algeria, ended up criticising Türkiye after the second stage of the invasion in August. This isolated the Turkish government regionally. The PLO also ended up condemning the actions of the Turkish army actions, strengthening Greek-speaking Cypriot sentiment towards Palestine. Both Palestinian and Israeli feminist groups were invited to the Women Walk Home protest of 1975, with Palestinian feminist groups centralised in depictions of the march on local news. Greek-speaking Cypriot refugee groups, especially in Anthoupoli, were active in the pro-Palestine movement during the Lebanese-Israel conflict of 1982. The Doros Loizos Youth Group and Edon, as well as their counterparts EDEK and AKEL, maintained ties with Palestinian organizations. Many Palestinians migrating to Cyprus joined EDEK and AKEL. Both groups also protested the 1980s conflict, with EDEK protesting outside the Israeli embassy, something we are not allowed to do today. AKEL held the symbolic funeral of Palestinian martyr Abu Jihad.

The successive right-wing governments also promoted close relations with Palestine, while still maintaining some diplomatic relationship with Israel. It is important to note though that the latter relationship was categorized as 'icy' on both sides until 2011. For example, the first state exhibition in 1976, hosted by a right-wing government, featured Palestine, with traditional artifacts donated by the PLO, as well as a map of historic Palestine. During the Lebanese-Israel conflict, one of the Non-Aligned meetings for Palestine was hosted in the Hilton Hotel in Cyprus. The government cooperated with AKEL to host wounded Palestinian freedom fighters, who would be housed and treated in the General Hospital of Nicosia. Many events were held for the freedom fighters' honour, such as traditional dances and songs by the Cypriot Youth Union. These were seen as an innate show of solidarity, even a duty, from one group suffering from war and occupation to another. Looking at the PIK archives it is emblematic that many things that are demonized in the news today, such as the keffiyeh, Palestinian slogans in Arabic, and even the Palestinian freedom fighters themselves, were then portrayed in a

heroic light. An Irish journalist, when asking Cypriots if they were afraid of PLO fighters coming to Cyprus, was answered with a resounding 'no.' During the 80s, many PLO members moved to Cyprus. After the PLO headquarters were attacked in Beirut, many PLO newspapers were moved to Nicosia. George Habash also gave a speech directed to Palestinians through a radio transmitter in Cyprus while he was in hiding abroad.

The change towards a pro-Israel policy intensified slowly during the presidency of Anastasiades, and has escalated to the point that Cyprus is now complicit towards the genocide happening in Gaza. This is a significant U-turn from long-standing Cypriot policy towards Palestine, shaped by changes in Israeli-Turkish relations, Israeli-Greek relations, and economic 'pragmatism.' This causes a different set of difficulties for us as organizers for Palestine today. While in the past Cypriots protesting for Palestine was the norm, today we are pushed to the fringes of political society.

You could ask why is it important to know the specific historic relationship between Palestine and Cyprus? Isn't advocating against genocide and occupation just the right thing to do? Is there anything more we need to say? History reminds us of what we owe to one another. It takes out the potential shallowness and artificial altruism in activism. It brings the burning shame of both personal and collective responsibility. It redefines the dimensions of why we organise, why we march, why we protest. We don't advocate for Palestine because it's a trend, because it's a left-wing badge of honour, because it gives us credibility. We advocate for Palestine because if we don't, how will we ever be able to look each other in the eye?

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