



PODCAST | POLITICS

# Ireland's Solidarity with Palestine, with Brendan Browne

By: Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · April, 2024

*The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.*

## **Brendan Browne 0:00**

It's easy to stand up on stage and be seen to be a vocal proponent and a vocal supporter of Palestine and to express your disgust, but it has to yield actual results. There has to be some kind of commitment to boycott divestment and sanctions. There has to be some kind of consequences with having Irish universities partner with Israeli institutions that are engaged in providing the apparatus that supports the war. There has to be some kind of wider consideration of Ireland's links to Israel.

## **Yara Hawari 0:35**

From Al Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari and this is Rethinking Palestine.

Last month the Irish government announced that it would intervene in the South African led genocide case against the Israeli regime at the International Court of Justice. The government alongside Spain, Belgium and others has also announced its readiness to recognize the state of Palestine. Irish Prime Minister elect Simon Harris delivered a strong speech at the beginning of April 2024 where he said, "Prime Minister Netanyahu, let me say this to you this evening. The Irish people



could not be clearer. We're repulsed by your actions. Cease fire now and let the aid flow safely."

This hasn't come out of nowhere. The Irish government has delivered consistent critique of the Israeli regime since the beginning of its assault on Gaza last October. However, many in the Irish solidarity movement have felt that the rhetoric hasn't been strong enough and is not reflected in action and policy.

Indeed, there are deep historic connections between the Palestinian struggle for liberation and the Irish struggle against British colonial domination. These connections have transformed into a vibrant solidarity movement, which includes trade unions, student groups, and political parties.

Joining me to discuss all of this today is Dr. Brendan Browne, Interdisciplinary Scholar at Trinity College, Dublin. Brendan has taught courses on international humanitarian law and transitional justice, and has for over a decade worked on various projects related to Palestine. Brendan, thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

## **Brendan Browne 2:10**

Thanks for having me on.

## **Yara Hawari 2:11**

I think that many people take this connection between Ireland and Palestine for granted. Could you tell us a bit about the history of the struggles and the affinity for one another?

## **Brendan Browne 2:22**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, you're right. People look at Ireland, certainly the most vocal European nation when it comes to standing in solidarity with Palestine.



And there are reasons for that. We in Ireland have our experience of resisting colonial violence. You know, we've had over 800 years of experience of British colonialism next door. We've engaged with various struggles over time. We have experience of issues that Palestinians are all too familiar with, like forcible transfer, forced displacement, being starved through the great hunger that we experienced mid 1800s, which was a colonial act of violence. So, we have that natural empathy then when it comes to standing in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, those Palestinians who have experienced, as I say, much the same in many ways.

And that solidarity has manifested itself in many ways, and throughout history, we've seen that resistance movements in both Palestine and Ireland have actually come together in the 60s, 70s, into the 80s and discussed tactics, discussed anti colonial resistance have actually broken bread together in Lebanon.

Although that is a really closely guarded secret. I mean if you want to try and get information on that, it's nearly impossible I've tried to do so.

And we also want one area that we also have very close connections is the prisoner movement, Irish republican prisoners have been in constant conversation with Palestinian prisoners and I know vice versa as well recently, for example, just to give you an example upon the death of Sheikh Khader Adnan there was a letter of condolence sent from the Bobby Sands Trust.

Bobby Sands being one of the most famous Irish Republican prisoners. And that letter of condolence was sent to Sheikh Khader Adnan's widow to express solidarity with the family and with the struggle. And actually, during time spent working at the Al Quds University in Palestine, I was invited to come into the Abu Jihad Museum on campus and I was invited to look through some of the prison archives and some of the communications that have been smuggled out of the prisons and during my sort of analysis of that archival material I did see the words Bobby Sands written amidst the Arabic. So, these connections are really strong.



They're really ingrained and they're really, really important. What I would say is that the Irish government back in the 80s was also one of the first governments to recognize the PLO.

It also was one of the first governments to call for a greater engagement with the PLO on an international stage as well. So there is precedent for Ireland taking a lead when it comes to high level diplomatic efforts. And I guess that's maybe why in the present moment there's a little bit of a false hope, I would say, when it comes to the role that the Irish government is currently playing, but not what it may play in the future. And I think that's also critically important.

## **Yara Hawari 5:36**

I think it's remarkable how many Palestinians of a certain age know Irish Revolutionary Songs, and you'll find these people in the unlikeliest of places. And I think for a lot of Palestinians, even if they don't know the full history between the two struggles, they know that affinity is inherent in them.

They know that the Irish people have supported historically and continue to support the Palestinian struggle. Whilst Ireland and Palestine share a lot of similarities, some of them you mentioned earlier in their experiences of colonialism, there are also a lot of differences. And I think there's one particular area where comparisons have actually been detrimental to the struggle for liberation in Palestine, and that's of peace and reconciliation.

Can you explain why that is?

## **Brendan Browne 6:26**

Absolutely. And maybe I think it's also worth saying at this stage that in my experience when Palestinian comrades and colleagues look at the Irish experience, it's almost like it's been a liberatory moment in Ireland. But what I would add to that is that it is a partial liberatory moment.



Ireland remains a physically divided Island. And I think that's important. The six counties in the North of Ireland remain part of the wider United Kingdom subject to British colonial oversight. And I do think that we need to really pay attention to that. But what I would say is that the North of Ireland, I mean, I grew up in the North of Ireland during a period of time known as the troubles, albeit in the middle of the troubles, but I did experience what that looked like growing up in a space of active conflict, but I also have been lucky enough to have transitioned out of that conflict and now live in a much more peaceful albeit segregated, I would say, peaceful existence in the North of Ireland. And it's our peacebuilding process that I think is important in our context, very significant, that has meant that we now don't see each other as enemies in terms of Catholics and Protestants.

We now enjoy the same rights. We now enjoy the same access to the labor market that was different in the sixties. We now enjoy the same access to education, the same ability to travel freely, all the things that were obviously restricted at the start of the trouble. So we have a peace-building process in the North of Ireland that whilst deeply flawed, I would say is in many ways successful at the same time, you know, it's a bit janus-faced in that regard. Whereas peacebuilding in the context of Palestine is everybody knows has been nothing but a ruse, has been about concession, has been about application and pouring tonic on any sort of sense of Palestinian rights and liberation.

So, that is one of the major differences when you view the Irish peace process and you view it alongside peacebuilding attempts that have been trialed in the context of Palestine. And actually, one of the areas that is particularly problematic is the exportation of a Northern Ireland peace process or a model into the context of Palestine.

It's a highly problematic thing that says this is the way that you are meant to bring about peace in your space. And it's very, very decontextualized. So I think that's some of the key differences when it comes to Ireland and Palestine that need to



be more fulsomely understood and interrogated.

## **Yara Hawari 9:08**

And what's remarkable is that we do see a lot of attempts that literally try and copy-paste the Irish experience of peace and reconciliation onto the Palestinian one. And as you've so articulately pointed out, it's just that doesn't work. They're two different contexts.

## **Brendan Browne 9:24**

Absolutely. And, you know, I think people long for, and rightly so, I believe people long for something that works, they want the model, they want to hold on to something.

And, you know, who in their right mind is going to say that peacebuilding is problematic, that you come across as some kind of lunatic if you say that, but actually you're weaponizing peacebuilding when you try and impose it upon people without addressing lots of the structural issues in the room.

And I mean in our own context in the North of Ireland as well. We have made great attempts at engaging in sort of people-to-people type projects on the ground in Belfast, you know, I was a product of these products, but whereas in the sort of eighties and nineties, they didn't really work as well because the wider political reality wasn't addressed. The wider structural problems weren't being addressed. We were just being brought together to sort of talk to each other and assume that that would be enough to trickle down and build peace.

Well, what's happening, and we have, as you've pointed to what's happening is people are bringing that model of contact theory, people-to-people processes, as you've written about yourself, Yara, in the past and bringing them into the Palestine context and saying, look, if you only talk to each other, things like this will get better in the future without actually saying, well, no, we need to radically



look at the way society is structured here.

We need to look at the militarized nature of Israeli society. We need to look at the rights that you enjoy and that I don't enjoy. So I do think it's really important. And the last point I would make on that, and maybe this is a bit cynical is that it's become quite a big business. It's big industry, you know, exporting the peace process from Northern Ireland has seen a proliferation of NGOs who've made this their modus operandi and exported it to other conflict zones, not just Palestine, by the way, but to other spaces.

And I think when you do that, you kind of flatten power dynamics in a way that is deeply deeply problematic and I really wish people would stop doing it.

## **Yara Hawari 11:39**

Oh yeah, if I wanted to start a project or an NGO on peace building and dialogue in Palestine Between Palestinians and Israelis I would get a ton of money. And yeah, I mean, peace building has become such, or peace itself has become such a dirty word in Palestine, because from our experience, it's been used as this mechanism to obscure the reality between Palestinians and Israelis as occupied and occupier.

And aside from that, it's also been shown time and time again that these dialogue projects in Palestine don't work.

## **Brendan Browne 12:11**

And I would, I don't want to come across as dismissive as well, because in my context, in the North of Ireland, there is space for these projects to be successful now, because we have parity of esteem, because we have a situation where I'm no longer a second-class citizen, because we have a political road map that says we can all reach what we want through consensus collectively.



And therefore I'm able to engage in these type of people-to-people projects on a level, whereas that, as you said, isn't the case in Palestine. And there are a lot of these people-to-people projects in the North of Ireland that are happening sort of under the radar that do incredible work.

And so I think that's important when we look at the Irish context, but again, it just shows you how sometimes when you compare two spaces, you can lose the nuance in the middle, let's say.

## **Yara Hawari 13:08**

Brendan, I want us to focus a little bit now on the solidarity movement. As you've already said, the historic solidarities resulted in what is today a vast and diverse Irish Palestinian solidarity network that transcends the border that divides Ireland.

Can you describe to us what this network does looks like and the kind of work it does?

## **Brendan Browne 13:31**

Yeah, I absolutely can and you know I'll start as it seems everybody is at the moment. I'll say sort of pre October 7th let's say and the solidarity movement in Ireland was already vibrant, your introduction talked about trade unions talked about academic links and whatever else we also in the past would have had like some really incredible individuals who came over to Palestine.

People I know who were on the flotilla back in 2007, 2009, I think other people who've been engaged in NGOs and help set up partnerships between Irish universities and Palestinian NGOs and Palestinian universities. And there was an Ireland Palestine solidarity campaign that exists that was set up to sort of coordinate all of our advocacy for Palestine pre October 7th. Post October 7th, the advocacy and the activist community in Ireland has exploded.





You have a whole range of different groups that have been set up to advocate for various aspects of Palestinian liberation. Now, they focus on certain areas specifically. For example, you will have Health Care Workers for Palestine is an organization that was set up, and you have a group called Mothers Against Genocide that was set up in Belfast.

You have a group called Gales for Palestine, which is the Gaelic Athletic Association, showing their support for Palestine. So again, mostly done in coordination or under the sort of banner of coordination of the Irish Palestine Solidarity Campaign. So I would say it's extremely active. It's very vibrant.

At its height, I think we had I mean I can't remember if this is December, but the dates are all a bit of a blur, but I think we had almost 200,000 people on the streets in Dublin protesting on a Saturday and demanding an end to what was going on in Gaza and demanding that our government really pushed forward with tangible tactics to hold the Israeli government to account.

So I would say it's a really vibrant community. I would say that their intentions are excellent and really, really good. I would also say at times like any activist solidarity collective, you have disagreements over tactics, you have disagreements over language, you have disagreements over what to do next.

And I think at times that that leads to a little bit of fragmentation, but I suspect that happens everywhere in the world, but by and large, the solidarity movement in Ireland is there. It's growing, it's really vibrant, and it's really impressive.

## **Yara Hawari 16:18**

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Brendan, you recently wrote a piece entitled, Reading Irish Solidarity with



Palestine through Ireland's Unfinished Revolution, for the journal Palestine Studies. And in it, you talk about how this grassroots organizing and that you just mentioned, the sentiment is not reflected at a policy level in Ireland.

And we have seen comments from the Irish government condemning Israeli actions in Gaza, but it's not been as radical as, as many would like. Can you talk us through this disconnect between the grassroots and the policy level?

## **Brendan Browne 17:03**

Yeah, absolutely. I was speaking to Palestinian friends recently who were getting really quite excited about the language that the new Irish Taoiseach Simon Harris came out and used the other day when he said, Netanyahu, we are repulsed by your actions and demanding that it'd be led into Gaza.

I mean, it is very strong as a rebuke, right? It's very strong language and it's very strong rhetoric, but it's just exactly that. It's rhetoric and actually Francesca Albanese the special rapporteur who spoke at the university of Galway recently said the Irish government have a strong reputation of standing in solidarity with Palestine. However, it is very clear that that is rhetorical or that is a rhetorical stance.

So she actually called it directly as well and she called it out. She said these are just words if they are not met with concrete actions. And at the same, at the same moment when he was using that language his party voted down a bill that would have prohibited a settlement produce from being sold in Ireland. So you can see the disconnect there. It's easy to stand up on stage and be seen to be a vocal proponent and a vocal supporter of Palestine and you know to express your disgust, but it has to yield actual results.

There has to be some kind of commitment to boycott, divestment and sanctions. There has to be some kind of consequences with having Irish universities partner



with Israeli institutions that are engaged in providing the apparatus that supports the war. There has to be some kind of wider consideration of Ireland's links to Israel if you are actually that repulsed. So words are just words if they're not matched by actions as we all know. And I mean, he's not the only one, Micheál Martin the Irish foreign minister may be saying some strong things at the moment, maybe saying things along the lines of, we want to not push forward to recognize a Palestinian state, but it wasn't too long ago that Micheál Martin was in Israel pointing at a hole in the sky on that Israeli Hasbara mission post October 7th, when everybody was saying, can you not see that what this is the pretext for?

So when it comes to the activist community where we take a lot of the rhetoric with a pinch of salt and when it comes to the government, now, the Irish government is one thing, but you know, the Irish political spectrum itself is broad, it is diverse, you have other political parties in Ireland that have also been very vocal when it comes to holding Israel to account when it comes to standing with Palestine, one of the largest republican group in the island, Sinn Féin, has a long and proud history of standing in support of the Palestinian people. But even they have been challenged by the activist community as well to say they're not doing enough they were asked very clearly recently to not send political representatives to the white house on st. Patrick's day, which is a tradition in Ireland, and we asked them we demanded that they don't go over and inoculate genocide joe and unfortunately, they didn't pay heed to us on the ground and that has caused a fissure that has caused disconnect between a lot of the activist community and shin fién.

And also, the Israeli ambassador still resides in Ireland, is still giving airtime on our national radio stations, on our national TV programs to spout off some of the most ludicrous stuff as well. So, there is that disconnect, you can see that. Talk is cheap, we need to see actions.

**Yara Hawari 21:00**



So the Irish government has committed to one particular action and that's intervening in the in South Africa's case at the ICJ. Do you think that that might be a signal of more bold action to come?

## **Brendan Browne 21:13**

Well, I'm trying to find the balance between being a complete cynic. I don't want to be that person all the time. But okay, on the one hand, that's a good move, that's a symbolically important good move. And we have called for that. We've been demanding that the Irish government joins the South African case way at the beginning, right?

Way at the beginning when it became clear that South Africa was going to bring this case to the ICJ. We were calling on the Irish government to support it and do all it can materially to support it. It seems now that when the case has been presented, when the evidence is there, when it's very clear when most of the legal commentators in the world and some of the most learned scholars on this area of genocide and international law have said, look, this is a pretty clear cut example.

I mean, it's a pretty safe bet. I think then to join the case as well. And again, listen, I'm pretty sure that Ireland, somebody may correct me if I'm wrong here, but Ireland is joining the case as a conglomerate of states. It's not just Ireland on its own. I believe it's Ireland, Spain, Belgium, maybe Malta, as well as sort of as a block within the European union are going to join.

I think I may be wrong on that. So to find that balance of cynicism, I'll say, yes, that's a positive thing, but that type of case needs to be mapped by other concrete actions on the ground. Those that I've mentioned before, I would love the Irish government to fundamentally look at all of its partnerships with Israeli institutions, with Israeli commercial deals that it has in much the same way that it did when Russia invaded Ukraine because it shouldn't be the case that you apply double standards here if you're going to apply something you apply it with large,



right? If you're going to come across this if this is your line in the sand apply your line in the sand equally and fairly and equitably.

So yes, on the one hand it's a good move, but let's see more.

## **Yara Hawari 23:25**

And really important to point out that as you've done, that Ireland does have these various leverages that it can use to create more pressure, commercial and trade relations, diplomatic relations.

But unfortunately, we're not seeing that kind of action, just as we're not seeing that action from other European states and actually from very few states around the world. So it's really about sort of creating that level of pressure that will translate into action. And I think it feels like the global political climate is seriously deteriorating, and that's probably the understatement of the century.

But how do you see these solidarity movement adapting to this climate?

## **Brendan Browne 24:08**

You've actually pointed out something really important there that I've missed that I would just like to add, is that Ireland also has a history of being very vocal when it came to the anti apartheid movement. So it's not like we have to dig too far in our historical past to look for precedent as to what to do.

You know what I mean? Ireland has experiences of cutting ties with an apartheid state and it has experience of not trading with an apartheid state of not handling apartheid goods of not engaging in sporting activities or platforming cultural events or you know, looking fundamentally at university links with us, with South Africa.

So the blueprint is there, right. All you have to do is to move along with it and to say look how can we use that in the present moment because as you know like the



language of apartheid has become extremely normalized when it comes to discussing the reality on the ground in Palestine, so we have that framework, we have that language, I would just like the Irish government to use it again more fulsomely.

## **Yara Hawari 25:13**

And Brendan just to interject there. Why do you think that's not happening?

## **Brendan Browne 25:18**

That's a really good question Yara. Why is it not happening? Because, I mean, I think Palestine is an exception. We know that in the global sphere, we know that there is exceptionalism when it comes to the Palestine case.

We know that Israel does get a softer ride at times for a variety of reasons, but I do think that tide is changing, Yara. I do, I am hopeful and optimistic and I do think that this Irish government won't be able to ignore the demands of the activist movement because one thing I would, give everybody hope here, we're not going away, we haven't shrunk as a collective. Our marches are still there, okay. The ebb and flow in terms of their size over time, as you expect, but I tell you this very clearly, our advocacy doesn't. We have a day of action next week across the island of Ireland in the university sector where people are coming together to walk out of the universities and do other direct actions, to hold teach ins, to platform Palestinian voices, to talk strategy. So our advocacy grows, even if the optics of being on the street ebbs and flows at times. So I don't know why the Irish government isn't doing this.

I suspect it's because of this exceptionalism that that does seem to happen in lots of different places. But can you imagine how powerful it would be if Ireland was that country in Europe? Because I think the domino effect that would happen would actually be quite significant. And, you know, as I said, Ireland is part of a



smaller group of European nations that are having these conversations around strategy and what to do and how to come together. Nobody likes to predict things in the future, it makes fools out of wise men.

## **Yara Hawari 27:07**

I think Ireland is well placed to play that role in Europe to create the domino effect, not just because of the historic solidarity, but because of its current vibrant Palestine solidarity movements. We can only hope that that might happen. And as you said, that the tide is shifting. It's just how far it will go. And I think that's something yet to be seen.

## **Brendan Browne**

I would say sometimes we need to look at Ireland less through the romantic, wistful, you know, rose tinted glasses. There are issues in Ireland when it comes to a sort of rising sense of far right presence. Ireland has an awful record when it comes to asylum, and people who come to Ireland seeking asylum, fleeing other theatres of conflict, and they end up in a thing called direct provision.

I mean, Ireland itself is not the easiest place to live comfortably and well if you don't earn above a certain amount of money. It is not a Socialist utopia by any stretch of the imagination. And we have one of the highest cost of living in Europe. I mean, trying to get a house in Ireland is really, really difficult.

I have students of mine who talk about sleeping in their cars because they can't afford student accommodation. So I wouldn't want Ireland to be viewed as a utopia of post coloniality and if anything, there's a lot of work to be done in Ireland. And actually that is where we have a lot to learn from our other struggles around the world and certainly from Palestine can teach us that and we can come together and find out ways that we are transnationally vulnerable. There are ways that we are connected that we should maybe be more sensitive to when it comes



to growing our movement, which is the question you asked me, how do we grow this movement?

I think we need to find ways that we are vulnerable together, how we are all interconnected, how empire impacts us, how neoliberal development impacts us, how the global north and the global south divide, how that is becoming much more stark and how we want to combat that because I don't think that serves any of us in the movement, it obviously serves other people very well, but it doesn't serve us as activists in the movement to have that sort of level of divide. So in Ireland, we will continue to grow, we will continue to do our advocacy work, we will continue to learn and and hopefully grow alongside our comrades in Palestine and work towards what will be inevitable Palestinian liberation.

## **Yara Hawari 29:49**

I think that's a nice thing to end on. So Brendan, thank you so much for coming on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

## **Brendan Browne 29:55**

Thanks for having me.

## **Yara Hawari 29: 59**

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With:





Brendan Browne

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