**Why Palestine and Ferguson Are Linked**

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By Rania Khalek

Americans United for Palestinian Human Rights

http://www.auphr.org/index.php/55--sp-123/5397-why-palestine-and-ferguson-are-linked?showall=1

“As a person who supports Israel I was glad to see that there were no signs and conversation about [Gaza](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/gaza) at all,” [said St. Louis-area rabbi Ari Kaiman](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-features/.premium-1.620673) after participating in a clergy-led protest outside the [Ferguson](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/ferguson) Police Department on 13 October.

It was the final day of the “weekend of resistance” — four days of direct actions organized by Ferguson protesters who asked people of conscience from around the country to join them in [St. Louis](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/st-louis) to demand justice for [Michael Brown](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/michael-brown), the unarmed Black teenager gunned down by white Ferguson police officer [Darren Wilson](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/darren-wilson).

Kaiman was right to worry and he is not alone. [Israel’s apologists are desperate to neutralize](http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/rania-khalek/white-supremacy-and-zionism-converge-deleted-times-israel-post-ferguson) the growing bond between Palestinians and African Americans spurred by the uprising in the small Missouri town in the northern outskirts of St. Louis.

But they are failing miserably.

While Palestine advocacy has traditionally been excluded from progressive and social justice circles in the United States, incredible displays of mutual solidarity between Ferguson and Palestine have been featured regularly in the streets of St. Louis and beyond since Brown’s grisly slaying on 9 August. And the “weekend of resistance” was no exception.

Among the hundreds of people who answered Ferguson’s call that weekend were dozens of Palestine solidarity activists who came as part of the [Palestine Contingent](https://www.facebook.com/events/1543479229222822/).

**Progressive except for Palestine**

Delivering a statement of solidarity on behalf of the Palestine Contingent at a massive rally in downtown St. Louis on 11 October, Suhad Khatib of the [St. Louis Palestine Solidarity Committee](http://www.stl-psc.org/) said to the crowd, “We recognize that none of us is free until all of us are free. We know Black liberation in this country will lead to liberation for all.”

Ashley Yates, co-founder of [Millennial Activists United](http://millennialau.tumblr.com/), a social justice organization created after Brown’s killing, responded, “Palestinians were the first people to reach out in support while we were getting tear gassed. We stand with y’all.”

The crowd thundered with applause.

Powerful moments such as these place liberal and progressive Israel apologists who support Ferguson in the awkward position of having to reconcile their opposition to racist militarized policing in the US with their unbridled support for the Israeli [apartheid](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/apartheid) regime that rules over Palestinians.

 Susan Talve, described to me by several activists as “the most progressive rabbi in St. Louis,” embodies this dissonance.

In July, as the Israeli army reduced whole neighborhoods in Gaza to rubble, often with entire families underneath, [Talve visited Israel with a delegation](http://mondoweiss.net/2014/08/militarization-casualties-suffering) sponsored by the[American Israel Public Affairs Committee](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/aipac) (AIPAC), the premier arm of the Israel lobby in the US.

Echoing Israel’s right-wing supporters, Talve described all of [Jerusalem](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/jerusalem) as belonging to Israel during her trip. She also reserved her sympathies [exclusively for the Israeli soldiers](http://mondoweiss.net/2014/10/racial-justice-michael) killing civilians in Gaza.

Soon after Talve returned to St. Louis, Michael Brown was murdered and she transformed into a racial justice warrior regularly featured in local media agitating against racist policing.

To the dismay of some activists frustrated by her stance on Palestine, Talve was invited to address hundreds of people at an interfaith rally held inside St. Louis University’s Chaifetz Arena on Sunday, 12 October. She appeared alongside [Holocaust](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/holocaust) survivor and longtime Palestine solidarity activist [Hedy Epstein](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/hedy-epstein), as well as Princeton University professor [Cornel West](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/dr-cornel-west).

“St. Louis is one of the most racist cities in the country and that goes down through the ranks all the way down to the ordinary person in the street,” Epstein told me before the rally, noting that she sees her activism for Palestine as inseparable from the battle against segregation and racist policing in St. Louis.

Israel and the United States “are not only sharing values, they’re sharing procedures that the Israelis use on Palestinians with the local police in the United States,” she added.

Epstein opened her speech in the stadium with an anecdote about being singled out for discrimination as a Jewish child in Nazi Germany. This, she explained, is what motivates her activism for equality from St. Louis to Palestine. Her fierce condemnation of the Israeli military occupation in Palestine was met with roaring applause.

**Defending “horrible” Israel**

Cornel West elicited loud cheers as well when he denounced Israel’s treatment of Palestinians and the libelous smear of anti-Semitism routinely deployed against Israel’s critics.

When Talve took to the podium and declared, “Black and brown lives matter,” a voice from the stands bellowed back, “What about Palestine, Susan?”

After the event, I asked Talve what motivated her to speak out about Ferguson.

“This is personal,” she told me. “These are our children and they are being profiled, they are being harassed and they are being shot. And I’m a mother and I have children of color in my community and I don’t want to see any more of our people killed.”

Sadly, Talve’s uncompromising appeal to justice and equality for police brutality victims in St. Louis vanished when I shifted the subject to Palestine.

Though she conceded the occupation is wrong, rather than support the Palestinian call to [boycott, divest from and sanction](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/bds) (BDS) Israel until it complies with international law, Talve believes in maintaining a Jewish exclusivist state on the off-chance she may one day need a spare country.

“A lot of American Jews are very conflicted as I am about the occupation,” said Talve, but “they’re scared for Israel because we don’t feel safe in this country.”

“There’s a lot of anti-Semitism and as horrible as it is Israel’s really the only place that will take us without question,” she reasoned.

Talve was pressed for time and could not elaborate, but promised to continue the conversation later. However, she did not return subsequent calls.

**Oppressors work together**

The feelings of discomfort and fear expressed by progressives like Talve and Kaiman have had little impact on the growing bond between the African American and Palestinian liberation struggles, largely because it is increasingly apparent that their oppressors are working together.

Decades of testing methods of domination and control on a captive and disenfranchised Palestinian population has given rise to Israel’s booming “[homeland security industry](http://www.alternet.org/world/racist-policing-and-mass-incarceration-shared-values-america-and-israel),” which refashions occupation-style repression for use on marginalized populations in other parts of the world, especially the United States.

Under the cover of counterterrorism training nearly every major US law enforcement agency has traveled to Israel for lessons in occupation enforcement, including the St. Louis County and St. Louis Metropolitan police departments. Since Michael Brown’s death, both agencies have on several occasions [rampaged](http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/rania-khalek/israel-trained-police-occupy-missouri-after-killing-black-youth) through the streets of St. Louis in military-style combat gear with the intention of crushing the Ferguson demonstrations, to no avail.

As the spirit of Ferguson’s resistance spreads to other American cities, so too has awareness about Israel’s influence on American policing.

“This is a Zionist-free zone,” declared local activist Eugene Puryear at a 25 November Ferguson solidarity march in Washington, DC.

As he slammed Israel for training US police departments over the loudspeaker, Puryear told demonstrators that the DC police tactic of keeping the red and blue lights on the roof of their police cruisers flashing at all times is a practice [adopted directly from Israeli police](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/11/AR2005061100648_2.html) by former DC police chief Charles Ramsey after a 2003 training visit.

“It’s no accident that people who would kill an innocent person in one country would train people who would kill an innocent person in another country. If you think this is just about America, you in trouble,” said Puryear. “It’s not about our civil rights, it’s about our human rights. We are human beings. Our struggle does not have any borders. When we come together, we have power.”

Local community organizer Asantewaa Nkrumah-Ture was thrilled to see this connection being made.

“That’s something people like me have been working on for a long long time,” she told me. “We suffer from the same thing and that’s colonial occupation. Colonial occupation in terms of Africa. Colonial occupation of our communities here in the United States by police and their agencies. Certainly Palestine is occupied because the Zionists took the land from the Palestinians before 1948.”

**Invisible walls**

 “When the checkpoints went up and the tanks came in and the tear gas flew, I ain’t seen no difference from Palestine,” Bassem Masri told me, recalling the days in the immediate aftermath of Michael Brown’s killing.

Masri, a 27-year-old Palestinian American from St. Louis, has been on the front lines with his smartphone, livestreaming the Ferguson uprising since Brown was shot dead in broad daylight, his lifeless body left uncovered in the hot Missouri sun for four and a half hours.

Masri has been arrested twice since then, the first time during a protest and the second time for driving without a license — even though he was in the passenger’s seat. During the first arrest, St. Louis city police [pressured him to inform on his fellow protesters](http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/rania-khalek/st-louis-police-pressured-me-snitch-my-friends-says-palestinian-american), but he refused.

Masri’s mother is from [Ramallah](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/ramallah) and his father is from occupied [East Jerusalem](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/east-jerusalem), where he once lived for three years. This left him with a deeper understanding of life under brutal occupation and apartheid.

Masri said that the system in his home city is in some ways even more insidious than Israeli occupation. Unlike the concrete walls of apartheid in Palestine, he said, the walls of separation in St. Louis are amorphous and harder to tear down.

“There’s the invisible wall and the real one. The real one is easier to break,” he explained.

The less overt violence is economic in nature, largely in the form of traffic tickets. Part of the legacy of racial segregation, [traffic tickets are the bread and butter of small St. Louis-area police departments like Ferguson’s](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2014/11/26/how-segregation-led-to-speed-traps-traffic-tickets-and-distrust-outside-st-louis/).

“They just trying to squeeze the neighborhoods for everything they can get,” said Masri.

“I’m not a poor person but I’ve been caught in a cycle. It’s driven me to poverty … I ended up in jail for months for traffic tickets, usually for two to three weeks at a time,” he explained. “Each one of these tickets ends up being $300 or $400. I have 27 active warrants, mostly for driving on a revoked license and because I’m so behind I can’t pay this shit.”

“There’s been times where I went out of town for work and the night after I get back, the cops come to my house, intimidate my mother at the door and come get me out my bed at like six in the morning,” said Masri, describing a scene that sounded like a lighter version of an Israeli night raid in the occupied [West Bank](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/west-bank).

“If [St. Louis police] could barge into our houses right now, Israeli-style, and take pictures of our beds, they would do it. But as Americans, we have rights. That’s what we’re trying to enforce,” he said.

“St. Louis is segregated beyond anything you’ll see in America,” contended Masri, a statement repeated by almost every resident I spoke to. And they weren’t exaggerating.

**“Black lives matter”**

[Vonderrit Myers](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/vonderrit-myers), 18, was gunned down by a white off-duty St. Louis city police officer on 8 October. The next night, I attended a candlelight vigil just feet away from the site of his slaying.

Police claim that Myers was armed and fired first, [prompting the officer to fire seventeen bullets in return](http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/09/us/st-louis-officer-shooting/). Myers’ friends and family vehemently deny the police narrative, maintaining that the teen was armed with nothing more than a sandwich.

A private autopsy revealed that the officer’s bullets struck Myers in the back of the legs six times and in the face once, [suggesting](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/private-autopsy-suggests-vonderrit-myers-was-shot-while-fleeing-st/article_ab007919-9bf9-50e2-8dd2-8f5b45088440.html) he was shot while running away.

Later that night, dozens of mostly Black youth who had gathered at the vigil embarked on an impromptu protest march, demanding justice, dignity and an end to police violence in their neighborhoods.

Almost instantly, St. Louis city police rushed the scene with overwhelming force.

Squads of riot police backed by police cruisers surrounded and showered protesters with mace (hand-held aerosols of [tear gas](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/tear-gas)) and slammed people with riot shields.

One officer barreled back and forth across a riot police line, shouting at protesters, “Don’t get too close!”

A frustrated Black youth shouted back, “You don’t get too close. We built this land you fucking pigs. Have some respect for the niggers that built this!”

A young woman standing beside him interjected, “Don’t get too close, baby. Remember, you Black.”

Without hesitation, police launched a stun grenade in their direction, disorienting the crowd. As police mace once again permeated the air, the crowd erupted in more chants.

“Stop killing us, Stop killing us! We are human! Black lives matter! ” they implored. Like Palestinians, Black Americans still have to assert that their lives have value.

Masri was maced that night, and [described the police response](http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/rania-khalek/st-louis-police-pressured-me-snitch-my-friends-says-palestinian-american) as “straight out the West Bank.”

As I watched the scene unfold, it was hard to believe that just two hours earlier I was eating dinner at a nearby Mexican restaurant, watching a group of young, carefree white professionals enjoy their Thursday night over a round of Jägerbombs. Though the restaurant was just around the corner from the protest, it felt like a world away.

**Struggling for survival**

For Low Key, a 15-year-old Ferguson protester from the St. Louis County municipality of Wellston, the uprising against police violence boils down to a struggle for survival.

“Police always been killing our community, they always been trying to extinguish our race,” he told me. “Now it got to the point where they getting more brutal. They really just trying to kill off the ‘90s babies because it’s nobody ever over eighteen. That’s why I’m motivated. Because I’m gonna be next. I’m fifteen. I only got three years if that’s the case. I cannot live knowing I only got three years.”

“They say I’m a target. I told them I’m not an easy one. I’m gonna be the hardest target you can hit,” he added.

Low Key’s sentiments are strikingly similar to those expressed by Palestinian youths[struggling to survive under the suffocating boot](http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/rania-khalek/palestinians-struggling-survival-jerusalem) of Israeli police violence in East Jerusalem.

“Let them arrest us, let them shoot us, it doesn’t matter,” 21-year-old Hamada Abu Omar, an East Jerusalem resident, [recently told Reuters](http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/05/us-mideast-jerusalem-violence-insight-idUSKBN0IP23M20141105), echoing Low Key from St. Louis.

He continued: “At least we can frustrate them, slow them down and show them we will never give up.”

“There are no leaders and no weapons,” added another Palestinian youth named Ammar. “God willing, we’ll take this oppression and send it crashing on their own heads.”

But unlike the ruthless state violence wielded against them, the means by which Palestinians and Black Americans choose to resist is under constant scrutiny.

**“Riot-shaming”**

Servio Gomez, president of [Live, Inspire, Fight, Educate!](https://www.facebook.com/lifeorgric) at Rhode Island College, traveled to St. Louis during the Weekend of Resistance with several members of [End Police Brutality PVD](https://www.facebook.com/EndBrutalityPvd), an anti-police violence organization based in Providence.

“Occupation is a problem from Palestine to Providence to Ferguson to [New York](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/new-york-city) to everywhere. Within our organizing we aim to end occupation and end [Zionism](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/zionism) and all the things that come with it, such as militarism and extreme racist violence,” Gomez told me.

We talked as it poured rain at a protest outside the office of Robert McCulloch, the St. Louis County prosecutor, who had been tasked with convening a grand jury to decide whether or not to indict Darren Wilson for Michael Brown’s slaying.

Demonstrators were calling for McCulloch to recuse himself from the case in light of his failure to prosecute a single police officer for excessive force [throughout his decades-long career](http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/19/us/ferguson-prosecutor-mcculloch/). McCulloch’s father, a police officer, was killed by a Black man while on duty in 1964, raising additional concerns about bias.

Just as the community expected, the grand jury decided not to indict Darren Wilson, mainly because of McCulloch’s manipulative tactics. He acted [more like Wilson’s defense attorney](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marjorie-cohn/prosecutor-manipulates-grand-jury-to-shield-officer_b_6240578.html) than a prosecutor.

This decision and the militarized police violence which followed predictably incited a riot. As stores were looted and burned down in response, protesters, the vast majority of them peaceful, were lectured by pundits, commentators and even President [Barack Obama](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/barack-obama) for [reacting impolitely to murderous impunity](http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/25/politics/obama-holder-ferguson).

In stark contrast, the state violence directed at demonstrators managed to escape condemnation.

The Providence student delegation cringed at the incessant finger wagging directed at youth who sometimes engage in property destruction, looting and vandalism to vent their frustrations.

“It’s distracting, it’s riot-shaming and it doesn’t really take into consideration the very real anger and rage that people feel,” argued Gomez. “Why are people crying about manifestations of capital coming down?”

“We’re looted all the time, so it’s only fair,” added Monay Threats-McNeil, president of Harambee, the [RIC Black Student Union](https://www.facebook.com/lifeorgric).

St. Louis native Frankie Edwards agreed. “Us breaking something that you can replace? That’s not violent. Only thing that’s violent is when Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown. You can’t get your life back,” he said.

“The world wouldn’t have even paid attention to Mike Brown if the youth of Ferguson did not go burn shit down to get the attention of the people they been trying to get forever,” argued Rashad, another St. Louis protester.

Most of the property destruction in the aftermath of Brown’s killing was incited by police, who fired tear gas at protesters and into the yards of residential homes.

Arnita, a Ferguson resident and protester, told me that the air in her neighborhood was so saturated with tear gas at the time, the noxious substance eventually invaded her home through the air-conditioning vents. Arnita’s late father fought in the Second World War. As we spoke, she was holding her father’s flag upside down, the official signal of distress.

**Global revolution**

Larry Morris, 29, from University City, a St. Louis suburb a few miles from Ferguson, told me he was especially appreciative of the [advice offered on Twitter by Palestinians](http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201408141902-0024060) on how to deal with tear gas.

“I don’t deal with tear gas every day. So to have them tell us, ‘this is how you do it’ — that’s beautiful,” said Morris.

He continued: “We’re living in a globalized world. To loosely quote Malcolm X, you can’t have civil rights until you have human rights. Atrocity is atrocity regardless of if it’s in the Gaza Strip or in a North County suburb.”

“We need a worldwide revolution. You seein’ it in Palestine. You seein’ it here. We got to make sure it spreads all over,” Pittsburgh rapper and activist [Jasiri X](http://electronicintifada.net/tags/jasiri-x) told me.

After visiting Palestine with a delegation of Black American artists, activists, academics and writers in late 2013, Jasiri [released](http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/benjamin-doherty/watch-hip-hop-artist-jasiri-x-video-checkpoint) “Checkpoint,” a track based on the oppression he witnessed during his trip.

“I thought white supremacy [in America] was the worst that I’d seen, until I went to Palestine,” he said. “But what I saw was people that were dehumanized and treated as nothing simply because they were Palestinian. And here you see people that are criminalized and demonized and dehumanized simply because we’re Black and brown folks, and so we definitely should have that solidarity.”

“We should not only share how to deal with tear gas,” he added, “but also best practices and best strategies that work.”