

# Puerto Rican Solidarities with Palestine

Sunday 17 March 2024, by [AWARTANI Sara](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2024).

**Since October 7, an unprecedented number of Puerto Ricans across the archipelago and the diaspora have taken to the streets to organize and march in solidarity with Palestinians.**

Whether calling for a ceasefire to halt Israel's siege on Gaza or demanding the liberation of Palestine, many Puerto Ricans describe being called to action because Puerto Rico, like Palestine, faces a similar struggle against colonialism.

"There is a situation of humanitarian crisis and genocide. There are clear intentions of racial extermination," explained Ricardo Santos Ortiz, the spokesman for Puerto Rico's Palestine Solidarity Network, to journalists from TelesUR. "Therefore, we see as urgent the solidarity from the people, the entire world, and Puerto Rico, which is also a colonized and intervened country." [1]

From *Axios* to *Al Jazeera*, journalists have clamored to explain this uptick in pro-Palestinian sentiment amongst Puerto Ricans; my own email inbox is filled with media requests. [2] Together, these reports paint Puerto Rico and Palestine as parallel struggles.

"At this juncture, it is imperative to address the self-determination of people in Palestine. If so, we must also speak about Puerto Rico, the world's oldest colony," writes Susanne Ramírez de Arellano of *Fierce*. "The similarities," she later goes on to explain, "are too many to ignore." [3]

Like the Palestinian struggle, these articles astutely observe, the struggle for Puerto Rican independence has been met with state-sanctioned criminalization and persecution. "Many of our revolutionaries have been murdered fighting for the liberation of Puerto Rico from the U.S.," said New-York based artist Danielle DeJesus in an interview with *Axios*. [4]

Yet Israel's genocidal violence against Gaza calls us to uncover not just historic parallels between Puerto Rico and Palestine, but to also uncover the long history of Puerto Rican solidarities with Palestine. Of course, this is not to say that the revolutionary politics of the 1970s — the peak of the decolonization era — can or should be replicated today.

Rather, such a retrospective on the relationships between these two anti-colonial movements reminds us of the rich histories of struggle and solidarity movements that precede us. These solidarities, much like that of the Black and Palestinian Left, were birthed in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and were rooted in a broader politics of anti-imperialism and Left internationalism.

Even more importantly, the most robust of these solidarities were rooted in the militant politics of the most radical — and controversial — sectors of the Puerto Rican Left: those committed to achieving Puerto Rican decolonization through any means necessary, including armed struggle. It is a story that invariably leads us to Puerto Rican Chicago. [5]

**Palestine and Puerto Rican Chicago**

To tell the history of Puerto Rican solidarities with Palestine is to tell a history of Puerto Rican Chicago. Take, as example, the story of former Puerto Rican political prisoner Edwin Cortés.

In the summer of 2014, as Israel was leading yet another brutal assault on Gaza, photographs of Cortés attending a rally in solidarity with Gaza surfaced online. In downtown Chicago, amid pro-thousands of Palestinian supporters, Cortés waved a Puerto Rican flag.

His shirt, meanwhile, featured Oscar López Rivera, arrested in 1981 for his participation in the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional*, and then still imprisoned on a number of charges, including conspiracy to overthrow the United States government.

Despite ostensibly attending a pro-Palestinian rally, the shirt and flag Cortés (and other Puerto Ricans in attendance) donned that day were neither careless nor accidental. As I've argued elsewhere, Cortés's presence at the protest, including his sartorial choices, actually reveals decades of Chicago's Puerto Rican community organizing alongside Palestinians and in defense of Palestine. [6]

Much of this history of solidarity can be traced back to the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* (FALN), a clandestine organization — largely based out of Chicago, though its members also stemmed from New York and the archipelago itself — committed to achieving Puerto Rican independence through armed struggle.

"To be truly revolutionary," argued the FALN, "a party must educate and organize the masses for the seizure of power by way of an organized and disciplined vehicle, a People's Revolutionary Army." So began the rearguard struggle in the development of Puerto Rican people's war: an operation the FALN believed must work in tandem with other forms of revolutionary organizing. [7]

Across their headline-grabbing and controversial lifespan, the FALN (1974-83) launched over one hundred attacks throughout the United States in an attempt to expose the colonization of Puerto Rico.

These roughly nine years of FALN-led "armed propaganda" deliberately targeted state apparatuses, the state itself, or state supporters, not the civilian population: a replication of the anarchist strategy, propaganda of the deed, which intended to wake up the masses to structural injustices. [8]

"Our main strength lies in our ability to carry on a rearguard struggle inside the very territory of the enemy, which can result in large economic and psychological losses for them and threaten to unleash the frustration of the American working people and the wrath of their minorities," explained the FALN." [9]

Among Puerto Rican and other New Left radicals who remained committed to a revolutionary politics, the FALN's actions constituted a legitimate national liberation movement fighting for self-determination against an imperial power.

They understood the fight against U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico as part of the global history of Third World liberation. It was in this global struggle that the FALN saw Puerto Rico and Palestine as linked together — part and parcel of the same revolutionary struggle. Puerto Ricans and Palestinians were bound together against imperialism.

Much like Robin D.G. Kelley writes of Black-Palestinian solidarities, what mattered most to Chicago's Puerto Rican radicals was less any precise parallels between Puerto Rico and Palestine than the insistence that "the struggles were linked, not only to each other, but to injustice and oppression around the world." [10]

After all, the demands of Puerto Rican citizens — even if, in the archipelago, second-class citizens — are different than the demands of stateless Palestinian refugees, Palestinians in the occupied territories, or Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Nor is Puerto Rico a militarily occupied nation — although, of course, Puerto Rico has served as an important military base for the United States, not to mention the decades-long use of Vieques for bombing target practices by the U.S. Marines. [11]

Nor have Puerto Ricans been historically usurped by a settler population that continues, to this day, in confiscating homes, businesses, and lands in the name of establishing an ethnic majority state, as is the case of Israel. Although, of course, many scholars and activists have begun to explain the migration of American citizens to Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and PROMESA as “speculating settlers comb[ing] the archipelago.” [12]

### **Vital Linkages**

We too see the notion of linkages rather than precise parallels reflected in the story of Edwin Cortés. Throughout his own 16 years of imprisonment — Cortés was arrested in 1983 and, like López Rivera, charged with seditious conspiracy — Cortés stayed abreast of political developments across Palestine.

For example, with the onset of the First Intifada (1987-93), Cortés found himself compelled to write — from behind bars — a defense of the Palestinian struggle. Published in *Libertad*, the official journal of the campaign to free the Puerto Rican political prisoners, Cortés wrote:

*“Within the past two months renewed resistance in the Middle East has once again captured world attention. This time it is not the tragic Iran-Iraq war but Palestine, a nation in struggle that represents a vital threat to the existence of Zionism, Arab reaction, and U.S. imperialism in the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.”*

He warned *Libertad*’s readers to refuse the U.S. and Israeli media’s attempts to cast the uprisings as “temporary civil unrest caused by outside agitators.” “Nothing could be further from the truth,” insisted Cortés. Rather, these “massive acts of resistance by a wide spectrum of Palestinians are led by genuine and experienced indigenous leadership.”

As such, Cortés called readers to listen, center and trust Palestinian voices in our movement work. “The task of progressive and freedom loving people, national liberation movements, and socialist countries is to concretely and materially support the Palestinian people’s uprising, their right to self-determination and the establishment of a Palestinian state,” he explained. [13]

But tracing this long (and partial) history through the story of Edwin Cortés can enrich the archive of Puerto Rican-Palestinian solidarities even further.

Indeed, as I’ve written elsewhere, Chicago’s Puerto Rican radicals stood in solidarity with Palestine not only out of an ideological commitment to shared revolutionary struggles and Third World liberation, but also — and perhaps more importantly for the intensifying political repression occurring today — out of *shared organizing histories in Chicago*.

In the 1970s, both Puerto Rican and Palestinian Chicago found themselves consistently monitored by local and federal authorities: the former as part of a broader federal investigation into the Puerto Rican independence movement, the latter in response to Palestinian “terrorism,” including the Nixon administration’s Operation Boulder, a federal program dedicated to monitoring, interrogating, and deporting Arab and Arab Americans deemed suspicious of terrorist activities. [14]

It was these mutual experiences of state surveillance and political repression that brought Puerto Ricans and Palestinians in Chicago together — especially among student activists at the University of Illinois at Chicago (then known as Chicago Circle), who would face additional repression from a university administration hostile to progressive movement building, especially toward Palestine solidarity movements. [15]

While this story of repression against student organizing is best told elsewhere, it remains a formidable, foundational moment in this long history of Puerto Rican-Palestinian solidarities — and a moment that echoes the political climates unfolding across university campuses today. [16]

As Edwin Cortés himself later reflected, organizing alongside Palestinian and other Third World student movements was critical to his own political trajectory:

*“It was at the University that I became aware and involved in other Third World peoples’ liberation struggles. I met and became personal friends with members of the Iranian Students Association, supports of the Organization of Iranian Peoples Fedayee Guerillas (OIPFG), the Organization of Arab Students, supporters of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Eritrean Students Association, supporters of the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF). These organizations uphold the necessity of armed struggle through a prolonged peoples’ war to liberate themselves from a common enemy.”* [17]

### **Honoring the Radical Protest Tradition**

To trace the long history of Puerto Rican solidarities with Palestine back to Puerto Rican Chicago may be controversial.

At the height of their political activity, not everyone viewed the FALN as a legitimate national liberation movement. Surely the United States government did not. Neither did the *Partido Nuevo Progresista*, the archipelago’s emerging conservative movement advocating for Puerto Rican statehood. To both, the FALN was a terrorist organization, and Chicago’s Puerto Rican community still struggles to distance itself from accusations of terrorism and anti-Americanism. [18]

But the FALN drew skepticism even among other factions of the Puerto Rican Left. The most well-known story of these divisions was the rumor that the FALN was a state-designed operative meant to destroy the Puerto Rican independence movement internally. [19]

Yet the most telling example of the controversy may lie in an unlikely place: the pages of the English-language journal of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the *PFLP Bulletin*. In June 1980, the *PFLP Bulletin* editorial board found itself issuing an apology to the Puerto Rican independence movement.

Four months earlier, the *PFLP Bulletin* had published an article by the *Liga Socialista Puertorriqueña*, an archipelago-based organization that supported the FALN’s armed activities. The essay traced the historical legacy of armed struggle in order to justify its use in the movement for Puerto Rican liberation. But its steadfast support for armed struggle drew condemnation from other factions of the independence movement, who apparently voiced their disapproval to the editorial board.

“In any case, some of the questions dealt with in this article are best resolved among the Puerto Rican left forces and the solidarity organizations supporting them, and not in the pages of our *Bulletin*,” wrote the board. [20]

The long history of Puerto Rican solidarities with Palestine cannot be divorced from these radical

protest traditions. The story of Puerto Rican solidarities with Palestine, much like the story of Puerto Rican Chicago, is also a story of the United States' unrelenting efforts to cast the independence movement as a terrorist — and therefore illegitimate — political menace. This is a story that Palestinians themselves know all too well.

But it is also a story — to once again draw from Robin D. G. Kelley's work on Black-Palestinian solidarities — that calls us to consider how Puerto Ricans have long generated new visions of “worldmaking” that bound Puerto Ricans and Palestinians as comrades in revolutionary struggle. [21]

Yes, a crucial part of this history lies in Puerto Rican Chicago. Yet as our current moment reveals, this history also lies in New York City, where Puerto Ricans and Palestinians have long lived alongside and organized with one another. [22] And it also lies in Puerto Rico itself, where a sizeable Palestinian diaspora community has existed since 1948. [23]

There are, then, far more than historic parallels. There are many long, rich histories of Puerto Rican solidarities with Palestine nurtured by the intertwining of Puerto Rican and Palestinian communities, whether in Chicago, New York, or Puerto Rico.

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## P.S.

Against the Current

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc229/puerto-rican-solidarities-with-palestine/>

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## Footnotes

[1] “Puerto Ricans Repudiate the Israeli Genocide in Gaza,” TeleSUR, November 12, 2023, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Puerto-Ricans-Repudiate-the-Israeli-Genocide-in-Gaza-2023112-0010.html> (accessed January 7, 2024)

[2] Mariah Espada, “Many Puerto Ricans see historic parallels with Palestinians,” November 7, 2023 <https://www.axios.com/2023/11/07/israel-hamas-war-puerto-rico-pro-palestine-protests> (accessed December 15, 2023); @AJPlus, “Since Israel’s assault on Gaza, Puerto Ricans have marched for Palestinians. But what are the historic parallels between Puerto and the occupied Palestinian territories?” X, January 16, 2024, 12:01 AM, <https://twitter.com/ajplus/status/1747121751694438465> (accessed January 17, 2024); “Puerto Ricans back Palestine in familiar fight against ‘colonialism,’” Al Mayadeen English, November 8, 2023 <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/puerto-ricans-back-palestine-in-familiar-fight-against-colon> (accessed January 5, 2024); Natalia Marques, “From within the US-occupied nation of Puerto Rico, solidarity with Palestine grows,” Peoples Dispatch, January 3, 2024 <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2024/01/03/from-within-the-us-occupied-nation-of-puerto-rico-solidarity-with-palestine-grows/> (accessed January 12, 2024).

[3] Susanne Ramírez de Arellano, "Parallel Struggles: Puerto Rican Journalist Explains The Uniting Struggles of Palestine and Puerto Rico," *FIERCE*, November 1, 2023 <https://fiercebymitu.com/news/puerto-rican-journalist-palestine-puerto-rico-colonization/> (accessed January 10, 2024)

[4] Espada, "Many Puerto Ricans see historic parallels with Palestinians."

[5] In addition to my previously published works, my manuscript in progress (and under advance contract with University of North Carolina Press), tentatively titled *Solidarities of Liberation, Visions of Empire: Puerto Rico, Palestine, and American Global Power* traces this history of Puerto Rican radicalism, Palestine liberation, and the United States' efforts to weaponize and police those freedom dreams.

[6] Sara Awartani, "In Solidarity: Palestine in the Puerto Rican Political Imaginary," *Radical History Review* 128 (May 2017), 199-221.

[7] FALN, "Communiqué No. 1," 2.

[8] An exception to this political position was the FALN's January 25, 1975 lunchtime bombing of Fraunces Tavern in New York City, which killed four and injured forty-four others. While this was the FALN's first—and only intentional—casualties, many viewed the action as indefensible, even leading to the Puerto Rican Socialist Party's withdrawal of any initial support expressed for the armed clandestine movement.

[9] FALN, "Political Position," 2, 6.

[10] Robin D. G. Kelley, "From the River to the Sea to Every Mountain Top: Solidarity as Worldmaking," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 48, no. 4 (2019): 72.

[11] On Vieques, see Amilcar Antonio Barreto, *Vieques, the Navy, and Puerto Rican Politics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002); Katherine McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protest: The U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

[12] Shellyne Rodriguez and Ruth Noelia Figueroa Couvertier, "The Shadow of Palestine in Puerto Rico," *Intervenxions*, November 2, 2023, <https://www.latinxproject.nyu.edu/intervenxions/the-shadow-of-palestine-in-puerto-rico> (accessed February 7, 2024).

[13] Edwin Cortés, "Palestine: The Struggle Continues," *Libertad* IX, no. III (March 1988), 7-8.

[14] On Operation Boulder and Palestine activism, see Pamela E. Penneck, *The Rise of the Arab American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s-1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Salim Yaqub, *Imperfect Strangers: Americans and Arabs in the 1970s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Loren D. Lybarger, *Palestinian Chicago: Identity in Exile* (University of California Press, 2020).

[15] Sara Awartani, "Puerto Rico, Palestine, and the Politics of Resistance and Surveillance at the University of Illinois Chicago Circle," *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A Reader*, ed. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas and Mérida Rúa (New York: New York University Press).



[16] See forthcoming book manuscript and also Awartani, "Puerto Rico, Palestine, and the Politics of Resistance and Surveillance at the University of Illinois Chicago Circle."

[17] *The Indispensables: The Struggle and the Ideals of Puerto Rican Prisoners of War* Edwin Cortes, Alejandrina Torres, and Alberto Rodríguez and of political prisoners Jose Luis Rodriguez (Chicago: Editorial El Coqui, 1983), 5, Collection: Puerto Rico Small Books and Monographs, Freedom Archives, San Francisco, CA.

[18] Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, "Delinquent Citizenship, National Performances: Racialization, Surveillance, and the Politics of 'Worthiness' in Puerto Rican Chicago," *Latino Studies* 2, no. 1 (2004): 24-44; Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *National Performances: The Politics of Class, Race, and Space in Puerto Rican Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[19] Meg Starr, "'Hit Them Harder': Leadership, Solidarity, and the Puerto Rican Independence Movement," in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, eds. Dan Berger (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 143-144.

[20] Liga Socialista Puertorriqueña, "Puerto Rico," *PFLP Bulletin*, February 1980; "Comments on Puerto Rico," *PFLP Bulletin*, June 1980.

[21] Robin D. G. Kelley, "From the River to the Sea to Every Mountain Top: Solidarity as Worldmaking," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 48, no. 4 (2019): 69.

[22] Rabab Abdulhadi has beautifully documented some of these histories. See as examples Rabab Abdulhadi, "The deep bonds of Palestinian-Puerto Rican solidarity were on display at this year's NYC Puerto Rican Day Parade," *Mondoweiss*, June 15, 2017 <https://mondoweiss.net/2017/06/palestinian-solidarity-display/> (accessed February 7, 2024); Rabab Abdulhadi, "Marching with Oscar López Rivera: a long history of Palestinian-Puerto Rican solidarity," *Mondoweiss*, June 19, 2017, <https://mondoweiss.net/2017/06/marching-palestinian-solidarity/> (accessed February 7, 2024).

[23] For example, Ken Chitwood's forthcoming book, *American Muslims: The Everyday Cosmopolitanism of Puerto Rican Converts to Islam*, explores how Puerto Rican Muslims have engaged Palestine solidarity.