

BUILDING UNITY, WRECKING WALLS: PALESTINIANS COME TO FERGUSON

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Students from the Right to Education Campaign pose with activists from Freedom Fighters and Tribe X.

After months of [expressing solidarity and support](#) over social media, activists from Ferguson, St. Louis and Palestine have connected in person.

Ten Palestinian students from the [Right to Education Campaign \(R2E\)](#) the West Bank visited with local organizers in the movements for VonDerrit Myers, Jr. and Mike Brown in St. Louis last weekend.

The students, who are from Birzeit University in Palestine, met with members of the [Don't Shoot Coalition](#), [Tribe X](#), [Freedom Fighters STL](#), in addition to [VonDerrit's parents](#) and other community supporters at the one-month vigil and demonstration against his killing.

For many of the students, the messages of the community members and the issues they described facing were reminiscent of Palestine.

"We at Palestinian protests against Israel get faced by tear gas, bombs, and bullets," said Emad Nazzal, a junior studying mechatronics. "[When] black people do that, when they ask for justice, they face the same oppression we face—they face the same injustice that we face."

Mahmoud Daghlis, a senior in electrical engineering commented on the immense amount of love he witnessed in the community.

“The most touching experience we had [was] the vigil in St. Louis and the demonstration we participated in and all the love on the streets that we experienced from all of these freedom fighters—I would call them that, yes,” he started. “It was really great and that touched us all. That was the experience of a lifetime. Most Americans won’t get the chance to do it and we are really honored by that.”

For Shatha Hammad, a third year English Literature student, the unity of the St. Louis community in the face of violence and oppression was inspiring.

“It was an experience that renewed something inside me,” Hammad said. As a Palestinian I see people every day getting killed and all my rights are violated. I don’t have any rights basically. For a moment there I got used to it. But at the vigil when I saw everything and heard the people talk, something woke up inside me and said “You suffer from that and these people suffer from that, so you better stand next to each other and do something.”

In addition to marching and chanting, the students were able to interact more personally with community activists after the vigil ended.

“We tried to connect the dots between the struggles between the African American society and the Palestinians and we found this major solid ground that we share together – it’s that we are not allowed to narrate our own history,” Daghlis said.

Jonathan Pulphus is an African American studies major at Saint Louis University and member of Tribe X, a group that seeks to counteract global injustices and systemic racism through issues organizing, education, empowerment, and building strong alliances. Pulphus said he felt solidarity as a black American meeting the students from Palestine.

“Members in Tribe X know what it means to be a target of oppression yet soldiers for unity, so too did my Palestinian friends.”

For Pulphus, meeting Palestinians was an eye-opening experience about the Israeli occupation of Palestine and its connections to issues facing black people in the U.S.

“Shatha told us how, to this day, Israel receives billions of dollars from the U.S. to illegally occupy Palestinian land,” he said. “Meanwhile, the majority black spaces in the U.S. such as St. Louis City and Ferguson face poverty and disinvestment, neglect.”

Larry Fellows III, a member of the Don’t Shoot Coalition, said that systematic oppression is what connects both communities.

"We're being told by force that we aren't supposed to question or challenge what we know isn't legal treatment. The companies that are spending billions of dollars to suppress Palestinians are doing the same thing in the states, the tear gas and bullets used in Palestine is used in Ferguson. It's all relative," Fellows said.

The 10 students, who are in the United States for two weeks as part of the first Palestinian [Right to Education US Tour](#), began their speaking tour with an orientation to connect them with grassroots organizers in Ferguson and St. Louis fighting racism, police brutality, and militarized repression in the US.

By the end of next week, they will have visited over 40 college campuses under the theme "Building Unity, Wrecking Walls."

R2E interim coordinator Ahmad Shweiki, a first year law master's student, said the tour's theme has two meanings.

"The first part is "Building Unity" because we believe that our struggle as Palestinian and as students is not something isolated. It's something that people everywhere around the world suffer from."

Shweiki continued: "'Wrecking Walls' also has to do with wrecking walls that people sometimes try to build to isolate us from our rights because we know that since the struggle is one, this struggle is against walls that prevent us from accessing our rights including our right to education."

Shatha Hammad said she's bringing these other struggles with her during the tour.

"I'm not only fighting for the right to education for Palestinians, but the right to education for all human beings that don't have that education."

Ahmad Abuznaid is the legal and policy director of [Dream Defenders](#), which promoted the R2E event at Florida International University and other universities across the state. Abuznaid also recognized connections across borders.

"We are all youth who are disenfranchised by systems that we did not elect, enact or embrace," he said. "We are all being dehumanized simply because others are uncomfortable with our righteous desire for freedom and justice. The Right to Education tour is made up of youth resisting the oppression and pressing forward, we can identify with that, we will support that and we love that."

The students will continue to meet with black and other grassroots organizers throughout the country, spending time in Detroit, Philadelphia and speaking at campuses [including Spelman College](#), which just formed a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter along with Morehouse and Clark Atlanta.

Looking forward, organizers from Ferguson and Palestine saw a bit of themselves in the other.

“Thinking about their resilience, reflecting on their history, and thinking about the road ahead, I agreed and said they are ‘black’ and I am ‘Palestinian.’ Tribe agreed to this: their struggle is our own,” Jonathan Pulphus said.

“Our liberation—Palestinian liberation—only starts with black people’s liberation, so we must stand together and fight for justice,” said Emad Nazzal. “No justice, no peace—that’s the saying right?”

Kristian Davis Bailey is the US coordinator of the Right to Education tour. He has previously written for Ebony.com about the connections between Ferguson and Palestine and on Black-Palestinian solidarity.