

Chile Halts Trade Agreement with Israel

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

by Ronan Burtenshaw

This week the Chilean government suspended free trade agreement negotiations with Israel over its continuing massacres in Gaza. [Ronan Burtenshaw](#) has a look behind the headline and finds historic and ethnic ties between Chile and Palestine.

It isn't the first Latin American state to take a strong stance on the issue. In 2009, Venezuela severed diplomatic ties with Israel altogether and [Bolivia](#) limited them in the wake of Operation Cast Lead. In 2010, [Nicaragua](#) suspended ties and [Ecuador](#) recalled its ambassador after the raid on the Freedom Flotilla to Gaza. [Cuba](#) broke diplomatic ties in 1973 - and also contributed directly to the Palestinian liberation struggle by training PLO and PFLP fighters. By stark contrast to the European Union, firm responses to Israeli violence are commonplace in Latin America, particularly among its left-wing states.

Many have good reason - [Israel sold arms](#) to the military juntas and right-wing contras that repressed popular uprisings in the region throughout the 1970s and '80s.

But Chile is a special case. It is home to the largest Palestinian population outside the Middle East, a little-known and rarely discussed fact. Around half-a-million Chileans claim Palestinian roots following waves of emigration which began in the nineteenth century but accelerated rapidly in the twentieth as Palestinians were ethnically-cleansed from their homeland.

The majority of Chile's Palestinian community are of Christian descent, many originating from the towns around Jerusalem. With the exception of Taybeh and Beit Jala few of these survived the [Nakba](#) and decades of colonisation since. Today, according to [Bernard Sabella](#) of Bethlehem University, there are more Palestinian Christians in exile than in the region itself.

Those in Chile have their traditional home in Patronato, Santiago's Palestinian quarter, with its Orthodox Cathedral of San Jorge, Arab kebab skewers and nargila. They also have a football club called Club Deportivo Palestino - whose ultras call themselves Intifada. Twice champions of the Chilean Primera División they currently lie fifth with half the season remaining. Earlier this year Palestino released a jersey which used a map of historic Palestine as the number one on the back of the shirt, and [kept this map](#) on their latest jersey despite league censure.

Chile continues to take refugees from the Palestinian diaspora which Israel refuses to grant a right to return home. In [2008](#) it received over 100 refugees from Iraq who had been

displaced by America's occupation.

Against this backdrop a cross-party delegation from the Chilean parliament met with their Foreign Minister on Monday to demand action against Israel. They included the Communist Party's Camila Vallejo, famed for leading mass student demonstrations in recent years, as well as Palestinian-Chileans such as Fuad Chahin of the Christian Democrats.

Michele Bachelet's centre-left government condemned Israel's aggression against the Gaza Strip last week but after Monday's negotiations congressman Patricio Vallespin confirmed that the government had also frozen its free trade agreement. The Vice-President of the Senate Eugenio Tuma added that there was a commitment to take objections to the UN and to state "in the strongest possible terms" that Israel "must halt the killing of civilians that is happening in the Palestinian territories." There were also talks about the future of the Chilean embassy in Tel-Aviv.

Meanwhile, the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs [sided with Israel](#) in the Irish parliament yesterday and Tánaiste Joan Burton today refused attempts by Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil and the Socialist Party to have the issue debated - brushing it off to committee and went on holidays for two months.

This marks a considerable deterioration in the position of the Irish state in relation to Israel's occupation. When Micheál Martin served as Minister for Foreign Affairs he showed strong support for Gaza, calling its blockade a "medieval siege", condemning Israel's intervention on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, twice visiting the Gaza Strip and [penning op-eds](#) in the New York Times about the hardship Israel's policies were causing there.

Across the European Union, [Israel's biggest trading partner](#), the response to the latest massacre in Gaza is much the same as Ireland's Fine Gael-Labour government. Yesterday EU leaders said Israel should kill Palestinians "[proportionately](#)" and repeated the propaganda that this latest operation was an act of self-defence. [Sweet-heart trading deals](#) remain in place, as do [multi-billion euro military partnerships](#).

While South African leaders are repeating calls for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel's modern Apartheid, Latin America shows the way.

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