

# Israel's Support for Latin American Dictators: "Mothers of the Disappeared" Feel Gaza's Pain

By [Andrew Klein](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Women hold posters of hunger striking Palestinian prisoners outside the Red Cross offices in Jerusalem in June. ([Saeed Qaq](#) / [APA images](#))

This past summer, as Israeli weapons deindustrialized [Gaza](#) and decimated its civilians, leftist publications in Latin America began circulating [a 2012 essay](#) by the renowned Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano. Writing in the wake of Israel's November 2012 onslaught in Gaza, Galeano lamented the "erasing of Palestine from the map." Palestinians, he wrote, "cannot breathe without permission" and "when they vote for someone who they shouldn't, they are punished."

For Galeano, a historian of Latin America, the 2006 election in Gaza, won by  [Hamas](#), seemed a lot like the 1932 election in El Salvador. While El Salvador's military rulers conceded a place on the ballot for the long-marginalized Communist Party (just as [George W. Bush](#) did with Hamas in 2006), they swiftly annulled the results after a Communist triumph, and within days launched a genocidal campaign targeting the party's indigenous peasant base.

Similarly, after Bush's "democracy promotion" elicited the "wrong" result in Gaza, the United States and Israel [worked to undermine](#) the winner of the election using a variety of methods, including orchestrating an abortive [coup attempt](#) with the Ramallah-based [Palestinian Authority](#). Meanwhile, Israel has continued to impose a suffocating [blockade](#) on Gaza since 2007, which has the sadistic goal of keeping its people "[on a diet](#)" and its "[economy on the brink of collapse](#)."

## Linked plights

For Galeano and others, the respective plights of Latin Americans and Palestinians are not only linked in a fertile historical analogy — bridging the gulf of their separate oppressions is an unassailable fact.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Israel supplied repressive Latin American governments, from Guatemala to Argentina, with weapons, military transportation, intelligence equipment, counterinsurgency training and even public relations consulting.

Most notoriously, Israel kept close ties with Augusto Pinochet, the brutal Chilean general who took power during a bloody coup in 1973 with the help of the CIA. During his seventeen years of rule, Pinochet "disappeared" thousands of his citizens and committed countless human rights abuses. Throughout his reign, he benefitted from numerous [shipments](#) of Israeli weapons — and, of course, strong US backing as well.

## Fewer friends

In Latin America today, Israel has far fewer friends. This reality becomes pronounced whenever it escalates the war against the population it continues to occupy.

When this happened [this summer in Gaza](#), the now predictable pattern of destruction — the infrastructure callously destroyed, the staggering civilian casualty count — led many Latin American states [to take a firm position on the Israeli attacks](#). (Of course, countries with close economic and military dealings with the United States — such as Colombia and Panama, which have also received arms shipments from Israel in recent years — [were not among them](#).)

The procession of countries standing up for Palestinians was impressive. In late July, Bolivian President Evo Morales [declared](#) Israel “a terrorist state.”

[Brazil](#), Ecuador, Chile, Peru and El Salvador [withdrew their ambassadors](#) from Tel Aviv, and the president of Argentina joined the heads of state of Brazil, Venezuela and Uruguay in issuing a “[special communiqué](#)” condemning Israel’s “disproportionate use of force.”

Cuba, a country which ruptured diplomatic relations with Israel in 1973, is perhaps the most vocal critic of [Zionism](#) in the hemisphere. In 1959, iconic guerrilla leader Che Guevara led a Cuban solidarity envoy to Gaza soon after the triumph of the Cuban revolution. In August of this year, former Cuban President Fidel Castro [penned a column](#) in the country’s state newspaper titled “The Palestinian Holocaust in Gaza.” These are just a sampling of the latest pushes in Latin America to isolate Israel for its gross mistreatment of Palestinians.

## Assertive diplomacy

This assertive diplomacy has a counterpart in the region’s press. Depictions of Palestinian suffering by Latin American journalists are not diluted by the lurking Israel-slanted bias of many US outlets.

While this summer *The New York Times* published a rash of articles full of false equivalencies and talk of “both sides” (for example, “[Pause in the fighting gives civilians on both sides a moment to take stock](#)” and “[Neighborhood ravaged on deadliest day so far for both sides in Gaza](#)”), the most common headline accompanying Latin American TV and newspaper reportage of this topic was “[El Infierno de Gaza](#)” — “The Gaza Hell.”

Press accounts, free of cant, honestly illuminating the degradations of Palestinian life, have helped an array of pro-Palestinian social movements in Latin America galvanize members of civil society. When [coordinated protests](#) against Israeli massacres in Gaza erupted across six continents on 26 July, Latin American cities exhibited some of the largest among them.

## Heritage and history

Latin America as a whole hosts the largest population of diaspora Arabs in the world, a community dating back primarily to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This group has certainly played a prominent role in Palestinian solidarity efforts in the region. Chile, for instance, a country with half a million citizens with Palestinian lineage, has a [Chile-Palestine Inter-Parliamentary Group](#) comprising nearly 40 percent of parliament.

While commentators are right to point to the sizable Arab presence in Latin America when explaining the magnitude of its Palestinian solidarity, this element should not be overstated. Indeed, the links connecting the narratives of Latin American and Palestinian disenfranchisement transcend the particularities of a shared ethnicity.

One example of this link came in 2008 when Chilean President Michelle Bachelet granted 117 Palestinian refugees asylum in her country. During the welcoming ceremony, she [compared her own experience of exile](#) during the reign of Pinochet to the plights of displaced Palestinians. “I want to tell you that I know exactly how it feels to be a refugee in a strange country,” she said. “I know it because I lived that, I also was a refugee.”

This remark was no doubt intended to resonate with Chile’s Palestinians, whose participation in the country’s politics through elections and lobbying groups like the Palestine Federation of Chile is by no means negligible. Nevertheless, it also reflects a sense of solidarity that can be perceived across the region. One need only look at places like Bolivia, Cuba and Uruguay — countries with relatively small populations of Arab descendants — where support for Palestine is no less robust than in neighboring nations.

### **Nuisance to the powerful**

One of the most brutal of the US and Israel-backed dictatorships in Latin America was the military junta that ruled Argentina from the mid-1970s into the early 1980s.

Despite “disappearing” as many as 30,000 of its people, torturing many others and eradicating all political parties and independent media, the regime received a [green light](#) for its “dirty war” against opponents from US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Later, it enjoyed a [tight partnership with US President Ronald Reagan](#).

In Argentina, all dissent was repressed and a culture of fear prevailed. And yet, a protest movement based in the Plaza de Mayo — the historical epicenter of popular struggle in Argentina — eventually did take hold. It was led by a group of mothers whose daughters and sons were victims of the dictatorship. This group, named the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, staged weekly demonstrations beginning in the latter half of the regime’s tenure.

Every Thursday, the mothers marched somberly in the plaza, white handkerchiefs covering their heads, holding photos of their missing children. Through their highly visible actions, the mothers challenged and ultimately destroyed the dictatorship’s grip on power.

After the fall of military rule in Argentina, the mothers maintained their presence in the public sphere, continuing to demand official accountability for the state terrorism they personally endured, while also lending their support to a myriad of leftist causes. Today, they still gather each week in the Plaza de Mayo.

On a Thursday afternoon in mid-August, the mothers rallied together with Palestinian activists. The two groups began by forming a circle and took turns addressing the crowd on their overlapping causes. Both spoke of *los desaparecidos*, the disappeared. While this term is most commonly used by Latin Americans to describe a specific phenomenon — the victims of the violent regimes, plaguing their continent in the twentieth century — in this setting, the phrase was generalized.

Here, Palestinians were eulogized among the disappeared, their identities and voices beyond the bounds of state-sanctioned respectability, their very existence a nuisance to the

powerful. To be a Palestinian, they declared, is similar to being a leftist in Argentina in the 1970s and '80s. The women donning headscarves, clutching pictures of their long-deceased children, stood adjacent to the activists wearing *kuffiyehs* — Palestinian checkered scarves — hoisting signs with images of children killed in Gaza.

The moment of silence came at the end. Heads tilted downward with solemnity. The dead were mourned — all of them.

***Andrew Klein** is a freelance reporter currently filing for KPFA News from Buenos Aires. He has traveled extensively in Palestine and spent three months last year working in Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut.*

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