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Factories In Scotland Will Keep Arming Israel Until We Stop Them

Tuesday 24 October 2023, by [AMMORI Huda](#), [AMMORI Huda](#), [Scottish Left Review](#) (Date first published: 15 October 2023).

[Palestine Action](#) is a direct action network targeting British complicity in Israeli apartheid. We spoke to its co-founder Huda Ammori in September 2023. On 14th October, a day of Palestine solidarity demonstrations across the world, PA activists [sprayed the BBC's London HQ in red paint](#), 'symbolising their complicity in Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people'. PA is calling for people to [mobilise](#) against companies complicit in Israeli carnage.

Editor: What are Palestine Action's main targets in Scotland or with Scottish connections?

Huda Ammori: Our main targets in Scotland are Thales, which has a factory in Govan, and Leonardo in Edinburgh. Palestine Action started out in England and Wales, where our main target is Elbit Systems, Israel's largest weapons manufacturer. They supply 85% of Israel's military drone fleet and 85% of their land-based equipment. They provide the ammunition, the bullets used to massacre Palestinians, and they supply tear gas, parts for aircraft, parts for tanks. A lot of Elbit's work is done in England, and they work closely with companies like Thales, which is one of the world's biggest weapons manufacturers and a target in its own right.

There is a factory in Leicester called UAV tactile systems. This factory is part-owned by Thales and part-owned by Elbit. We have seen licences from this factory which are evidence that UAV are sending drone equipment directly to the Israeli state. These are used to constantly surveil the population of Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas on Earth. The majority of the population in Gaza are children of families displaced from other parts of Palestine. Because Israel has put Gaza under a brutal air and sea blockade for over a decade now, it has basically turned Gaza into one of the world's largest open-air prisons. Every time Israel bombs or strikes Gaza, they are massacring Palestinians who live there. Elbit use these attacks as opportunities to market their weapons as 'battle-tested'.

Our other key Scottish target, Leonardo, is an Italian weapons company with a huge site in Edinburgh employing 2000 workers. These workers are building laser targeting systems for F35 fighter jets. Israel is the main buyer of these jets, which are used to constantly attack the people in Palestine, as Leonardo admitted after one of our actions at their site this year.

These are our key targets, but there are numerous other companies and operations in Scotland that are complicit in what is happening in Palestine, despite pro-Palestine sentiment amongst Scottish people, and supposedly even within the Scottish Government.

Ed: What has the response to your actions been like in Scotland compared with across the rest of the UK? How does Scottish politics connect with your objectives?

HA: One surprise has been that media outlets in Scotland actually cover our actions, which is very different from media in England. We've also seen huge amounts of community support in Scotland. When activists targeted Leonardo, there were hundreds of comments from people in the area about the fact that this company is going into schools recruiting workers, and bombarding communities and children with propaganda. When PA took its action, you could see how unhappy people were with the factory being there, despite the propaganda about the jobs it provides, and so on.

In the past, Humza Yousaf has supported the [Stop Arming Israel](#) campaign and called for a two-way arms embargo. His wife Nadia El-Nakla has family who've had to live through assaults on Gaza. Yousaf should be helping people to understand that these companies are producing components in Scotland for weapons to go to Israel. He should at the very least acknowledge that activists should not be going on trial and facing prison for disrupting the production of weapons.

In Scotland, we've got a case coming up in November of three activists who occupied the Thales factory in Govan and caused some damage to the building, forcing the workers to evacuate, so they had to shut down the whole building and put down the tools they were using to make weapons. That was an incredible action, and I think Thales are arguing that it cost them over £1.5 million on one day, which is a good day's work.

Ed: And when you take this action, when you shut down weapons factories, the courts take their course. What is your core defence when you are facing 'justice'?

HA: Overall we are quite clear that all of these actions are justified. When you compare dismantling a weapons factory to the lives taken by that weapons factory, then it is an easy calculation to choose which one is right. What we do is necessary to prevent greater crimes and to save lives. Sometimes we have made this argument in terms of proportionality, which is a Human Rights Act defence, on the grounds that our actions are proportionate to what we are fighting against. Now, we don't always get to use that defence. In England, in the first year or so after Palestine Action started, we won nearly every single court case, a lot of which were in the magistrates' court. Then we won our first Crown Court case, which involved us throwing paint over the headquarters of Elbit Systems in London. It is worth saying that through this and other actions, we shut down one of Elbit's factories in Ordham for good. They were forced to abandon their London headquarters, and were kicked out of very lucrative contracts.

But recently what's come out through FOI requests is that the Israeli Embassy has been trying to interfere in Palestine Action court cases. They've been talking with the Attorney General about reducing the scope of our defences, and about introducing protest bills, and about other matters, which is clearly disturbing, because the judicial system is supposed to be completely independent from any political interference. But we're seeing more and more that in some cases judges are not allowing people to argue their defences, and activists are being silenced when they argue why they did what they did, and why they believe it is lawful and justified. And it's quite obvious that they're doing it because they understand that most of the population would acquit activists who stop weapons factories from being able to make weapons to massacre people in Palestine. I think it's a basic human instinct to understand that it's the right thing to do, and what these weapons factories are doing is the wrong thing to do. So they're taking more steps now to stop jurors from even being able to hear those arguments in the first place.

We haven't had a court case yet in Scotland, but activists are being told that there is a high chance that they will not be able to make 'defences of necessity', even though historically Scotland has been better when it comes to these types of cases. Activists like Angie Zelter [a founder of the [Trident Ploughshares](#) campaign group], who have taken action numerous times against weapons companies in Scotland, have always been allowed the necessity defence. We have been warned not to expect

these defences to stand, which obviously means that jurors will not be able to see as much of the evidence about these companies' crimes, and to hear how they are involved in war crimes. These are the people who, in a democratic society, are supposed to decide if you're guilty or not guilty and they'll be given very partial evidence which points them towards finding activists guilty.

Ed: What is your tactical response to these defences not being allowed?

HA: The majority of people in Palestine Action continue to plead not guilty, and continue to stand to say we've not committed a crime even if they rule out our defences. And many people are prepared to self-represent in court, to make sure that the politics of the situation comes across. We never stand as the accused. We always stand as the accusers, and no matter what it takes, we will make sure that we continue our action throughout the trial. There is still a significant precedent that even if they tell you you've got no defence, juries can still acquit. So what we're seeing now is groups like [Defend Our Juries](#), standing outside the court cases with signs reminding jurors that they have the right to acquit based on their conscience. And lots of people outside and inside the court make it known that the people in court are not alone. This is important also for the morale of the people who are inside, to understand that you are fighting a bigger fight, and that whatever happens, whether you're guilty or not guilty, we know that history will vindicate us all, that we are on the right side, and that we will continue to fight. So support outside and inside court is crucial.

Ed: Stepping back from current and recent examples, how does Scotland fit into the history of the situation of the Palestinian people?

HA: One Scottish connection with Palestinian history is the Balfour Declaration. It is named after a Scot called James Balfour. When Balfour was UK foreign secretary in 1917, he issued a declaration that called for a Jewish homeland in historic Palestine. Prior to this, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Palestinians used to live as one people. Shortly after the 1917 Balfour Declaration cemented the first steps for creating the apartheid state of Israel, British soldiers were on the ground. Under what they called the British mandate, they were arresting Palestinians, killing Palestinians, suppressing the indigenous population who were uprising against the colonisation of their lands by the British. One of them was my great-grandfather. He was shot and killed by a British soldier shortly after the Balfour Declaration.

There were instances where they would destroy indigenous villages. In essence, these soldiers were paving the way for the Nakba, which was when Zionist militia who were armed and trained by the British went in in 1948 and forced out more than 750,000 from their homes, destroyed over 500 towns and villages, and massacred many families. After 1948, even though the British were not on the ground, Scottish, English and Welsh diplomatic links, financial links, and other ties were maintained with the Israeli apartheid state. What is happening in Palestine is extremely connected to where we are in the imperial centre.

Ed: Palestine Action is part of a tradition both of Palestinian solidarity and of struggle against the arms trade. Are your tactics and methods informed by previous campaigns?

HA: Many of us have been inspired by ploughshares activists, who broke into nuclear weapons bases in Scotland, and who broke into BAE systems facilities in England and stopped the Hawk jets from getting to Indonesia in 1994. Then there were the Irish activists, the Raythen Nine. While Israel was bombing Lebanon in 2009, they went inside the Raythen weapons factory in Derry, smashed the computers and threw them out the windows, smashed the whole site up, and then sat down to play cards and wait for the cops. They were arrested, they all went to court, and they were found not guilty by a jury. And then nine women did the same, and they were found not guilty too. The fact that no one would convict these activists meant that the company had no legal protection, and so the

factory was forced out of Derry.

These examples are a really important inspiration for the type of action we are taking. We have watched decades of lobbying, decades of petitions, protests, and marches across the country, and seen nothing change. If anything, the ties [between our government and the Israeli state] have been increasing. You see this, and you also see that every single day Palestinians are being raided, arrested, shot, bombed by weapons made in your country. That is when you realise, OK, we need to take direct action. It is the only route left, especially when you think about how Britain was so crucial and remains crucial to the oppression of Palestinians. You know you can't keep appealing to those oppressors. And so, for us, direct action was the road to take. Inspired by these activists, we wanted to do the same, but on a more sustained, regular basis, in a way that more people could get involved in, and be inspired to take these kinds of actions themselves against these weapons factories which are complicit in what is happening.

One of the main tactics we use is climbing on the roofs of these weapons factories. Sometimes people will cause damage to the factories, to the infrastructure, and stay there as long as possible. And sometimes, when these actions happen, the factories are forced to stay shut for longer, because they have to do all the repairs. All of this is aimed at disrupting the production of weapons, stopping the weapons from being able to be sent to Israel, and stopping the companies from being able to profit from the genocide. We target them where they are, in their factories, at their offices, but also at their big events, their ceremonies and awards dinners where they meet and make weapons deals. We have the ability as ordinary people to intervene in those processes. If we don't want them sending weapons to Israel, we have to intervene in those events, intervene when they're producing weapons, and stop them ourselves.

Ed: Where do you draw your courage from when you develop, plan, and carry out your actions?

HA: The main inspiration is the Palestinian people themselves, and how they resist day in and day out. Despite all the odds, despite the strength of the Israeli military, they continue to find new ways to resist. So, for us, when we're facing court cases or charges under the legal system, when you see what Palestinians are going through, and see their strength, it's easy to draw inspiration from that strength, and to know that you're acting in solidarity with them.

After one of our actions, Palestinians painted a mural on walls in Gaza depicting Palestine Action stopping the war machine, and writing 'Thank You Palestine Action'. It confirms that you are doing the right thing, and that you are on the right track. There was also an action where people threw a red substance on the Balfour statue in Parliament, and a group from Gaza wrote a letter thanking Palestine Action for doing it. It's really, really good to see how they feel about those actions.

Ed: Is there an element of faith that drives your actions?

HA: When we started Palestine Action, myself and Richard, another Palestine Action cofounder, were with the Catholic Workers in London, which is a community of asylum seekers and refugees, and they also try to incorporate resistance against what's wrong in this world. Our opposition isn't necessarily based on faith. It's mostly based on trying to end the complicity in the colonisation of Palestine. But it involves a faith in humanity and in those trying to end these war machines which uphold imperialism, and are based in the imperial cell. I think a motivation for us all is solidarity with those who are at the other end of these weapons that are being built on our doorstep. Within that, people have a range of things they have brought into our movement. We have a lot of Muslims, for example, as well as Christians, and Jewish activists as well. What we've seen is that so many different types of people have come together around one goal. It is quite incredible to see. And we

are open in the sense that we understand that people have different perspectives that all draw them to the same conclusion: that these weapons factories really shouldn't be here.

Ed: How does Palestine Action fit within the wider culture of resistance and ecosystem of movements in Scotland?

HA: We started Palestine Action right after Extinction Rebellion launched. XR made it culturally more normal to take actions which might lead to arrest. Now, obviously we are quite different in our approaches. We take direct action which we see as directed to the source where these weapons are being made, to stop their production, whereas their action is more public disruption. But what they did was change culture, and also made it more acceptable to say, 'you know what, the democratic process is broken, and there are other ways we can go about this'. And so I think the groundwork was kind of set for Palestine Action to launch, and also I think we had a strong amount of faith that a lot of people were willing to risk their liberty when it comes to taking action. So we have had lots of people come over from climate action to action for Palestine - and so many who are doing both.

So I think we are part of the same culture of movements that's happening now, and the move towards more direct action or civil disobedience, but at the same time we are quite distinct in the sense that we are focused on the weapons trade, particularly on Palestine, but also exposing other imperialist projects. For instance, Elbit or Leonardo test their weapons on Palestine, but they are sending them over to Myanmar to be used in Kashmir, and to other places. So I think we have more of an anti-imperialist focus than other groups.

There's also definitely a culture that has come from different campaigns like CND. Maybe compared with the past, different movements have strayed away from talking about colonialism and imperialism as much because they see their focus as the climate. But that's where we step in.

Ed: If the momentum is shifting towards direct action and civil disobedience, how important or relevant is trade union support? How can trade union mobilising come in behind what you are doing?

HA: I would say that trade unions are not top of our agenda. Before Palestine Action, a lot of unions passed motions calling for arms embargoes, saying they support the boycott, divestment, and sanction of Israel. Of course it is great to have motions saying that, but the issue is that many of them had workers in different arms companies and weren't mobilising them in order to stop the arms actually going from this country to Israel. So I think it has become very apparent that motions are being passed, support is being shown, but material disruption and material ending of those links of complicity wasn't happening from the unions. It wasn't there, and it wasn't their focus.

Sometimes, however, unions have been incredible. During an action in Leicester at the UAV Tactical Systems factory in 2021, when the activists were on the roof of the factory, the Fire Brigades Union were called, and they told the fire service not to cooperate with the police, and not to remove the activists from the roof. They did that several times, and it was incredible to see fire fighters refusing orders by the police in solidarity with Palestine. Of course, the fire service centres find workers who aren't unionised to do the work, but it is still pretty incredible to see these moments of solidarity.

There is a lot of crossover between different movements, and some people come from the trade union management to join Palestine Action. But as a whole the big unions, the head offices, haven't jumped to support us, and we're not necessarily trying to seek their validation. We're trying to bring in all different types of people, wherever they are as individuals, to come in and join us. Obviously they have their big marches, but I think we understand, from the history of campaigns for Palestine, the limits of trade unions when it comes to mobilising for Palestine.

Ed: Thanks for your time talking with me. Is there a line or quotation or slogan that could bring the interview to an end?

HA: Yes, there are two by Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian revolutionary assassinated by Israel over 50 years ago. The first is about striking imperialism in Europe or any other place:

Imperialism has laid its body over the world, the head in Eastern Asia, the heart in the Middle East, its arteries reaching Africa and Latin America. Wherever you strike it, you damage it, and you serve the world revolution.

And there is another one about the cause of the Palestinian people:

The Palestinian cause is not a cause for Palestinians only, but a cause for every revolutionary, wherever they are, as a cause of the exploited and oppressed masses in our era.

Find out more about Palestine Action at www.palestineaction.org.

Scottish Left Review
Huda Ammori

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