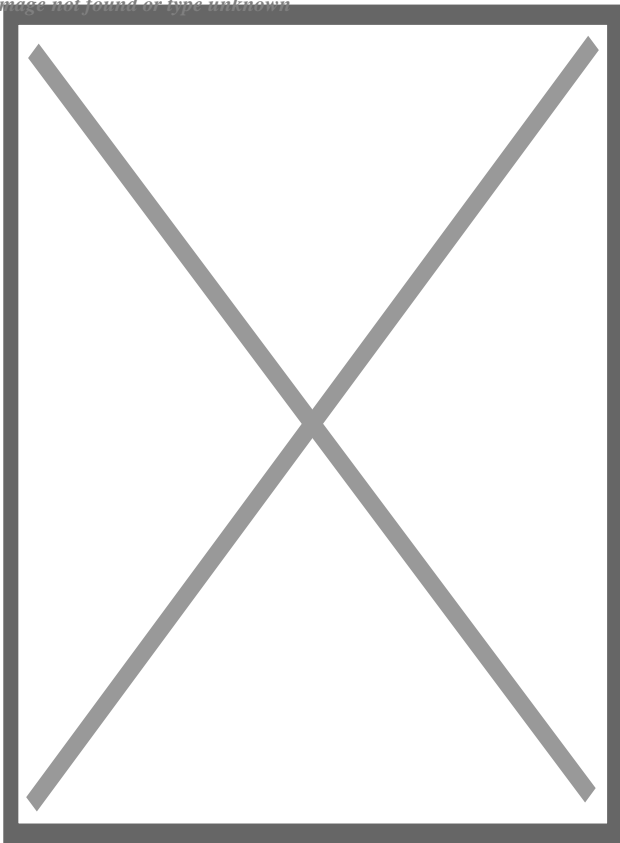


Celebrating St. Patrick's Day, many Irish Americans turn against Joe Biden over Israel's genocidal war of aggression on Gaza

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New York, March 17 (RHC)-- One evening in 2004, when John Francis Mulligan, a U.S.-born Irish citizen, was in the West Bank, a stranger asked him to walk her to a funeral. It was after curfew in Nablus, and

Palestinians weren't allowed out on the streets. A young man had been killed earlier that day, and because of religious beliefs, his family needed to bury him within 24 hours, Mulligan recalls. But if they went outside, the Israel armed forces "would open fire on them for violating curfew".

The dead man's mother asked Mulligan: "Can you march with us? Can you stand at the front with our family? Because they're not gonna shoot you, you're white ... I just need someone, literally, to stand with me."

This moment – the struggle to bury the dead in peace – hit home for Mulligan, 54, who went to primary school in Northern Ireland during the Troubles in the late 1970s. "It felt, to me, very much like going into political funerals in the north of Ireland, where helicopters would be overhead – in that case, it was the British Army. And here it was the Israeli army," he says. "It really resonated."

Mulligan points to these parallels as part of the reason he is rallying with other Irish Americans in the US to support Gaza.

Leaders from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland are meeting Biden this weekend. First Minister Michelle O'Neill met Biden on Friday, telling him "the world watches on in horror at the genocide of the Palestinian people," and urging him to work towards an immediate ceasefire and sovereign Palestinian state.

But only Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar will attend the St Patrick's Day White House ceremony on March 17, where he will present President Biden with a bowl of shamrocks, in a token of friendship, as per the decades-long tradition. But the annual ceremony and meeting between the taoiseach and Biden promises to be unusually tense this year, as a growing chorus of voters – both within Ireland, and among the Irish American diaspora – voice outrage over Biden's support for the war on Gaza.

"I can recognise colonial oppression, colonial state violence," because of a childhood in Ireland, says Mulligan. Now, in Palestine, "they're dehumanising people. They're criminalising resistance, criminalising the complete population," and using "starvation as a tactic" as the British did in Ireland during the Great Famine. "It's the same exact playbook happening in Palestine."

John Francis Mulligan says that after spending his formative years in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, "the starvation of Gaza, the blocking of aid - it's something I really recognize."

Cuán McCann, an Irish stick fighting coach in Baltimore whose family emigrated through Ellis Island, New York, generations ago, says he's been stunned by how rapidly a network of Irish Americans has connected around support for Palestine.

"Some folks are in touch with organisers in Ireland, others are chatting through social media, many are talking to friends and siblings," explains McCann, who has almost 20 years of experience organising for advocacy and protests. He calls the rapid and organic nature of the network-building "jaw-dropping", adding that "every time I have a conversation, it leads to three more with three other people."

Ireland has long been one of Palestine's foremost Western supporters: The country was the first EU member to endorse a Palestinian state, and after October 7, Irish lawmakers were among the first in the West to call for a ceasefire. The Irish public's support is even more robust than their politicians: About 80 percent of Irish people believe Israel is committing genocide in Gaza, and many have called for a boycott of the White House meeting. In light of this fierce support, an Israeli minister recently told Palestinians to "go to Ireland or the desert".

And so as Biden continues to support Israel's military campaign, the Irish public has largely turned on him. In November, a mural of Biden in his ancestor's hometown was spattered over with red paint along with the words "Genocide Joe". Irish Member of European Parliament (MEP) Clare Daly addressed recent

remarks directly to “Butcher Biden” in a fiery speech, thundering, “The ancestors of the Ireland that you claim to be from disown you. Keep our country out of your mouth.”

Now, Alison O’Connell, a lead organiser with Irish Americans for Palestine, says her group has a chance to be effective “because Biden talks so much about his Irish heritage”. Last week, O’Connell delivered a letter in person to the Irish embassy, asking them not to meet Biden as usual. “The energy that comes up to St Patrick’s Day – people know this is our moment to at least make some kind of statement,” O’Connell adds.

This week, protests against the White House meeting are planned in at least seven states and in multiple cities, including New York, St Louis, Washington-DC, Minneapolis and Albuquerque.

On March 3, Mike Doyle, a teacher in Brooklyn who is fourth-generation Irish, marched in the “St Pat’s for All Parade” in Queens, New York, a long-running alternative to the official New York City parade, the oldest and largest St Patrick’s Parade in the world. Some groups hoisted signs and banners for a ceasefire in Gaza, and Doyle recalls that as they walked through the historically Irish neighbourhood of Sunnyside neighbourhood, “pretty much the whole street was cheering for us and shouting, ‘Ceasefire!’”

As the election approaches, Irish Americans who object to Biden’s support of Israel have said the plan is to make their voices heard not only at protests, but also at the polls. McCann voted for Biden in 2020, but says he will vote for “uncommitted” in Maryland’s primary, a vote held in May to choose the state’s Democratic presidential candidate. O’Connell notes that her father, once a Republican, voted for Biden in 2020, but is now undecided.

In an “Irish Americans for Biden-Harris 2024 Campaign Kick-off” meeting on Friday, Biden told attendees that he needed Irish Americans to win in November. The swing states of New Hampshire, Maine, and Pennsylvania have the most Americans of Irish descent in the country – #1, #5, and #6 “most-Irish” respectively.

Some have blamed “insufficient attention to Irish-American communities”, at least in part, for Clinton’s 2016 loss to Trump.

“I just don’t understand how he can defend the bombing of hospitals, of universities, 900,000 children internally displaced,” says Mulligan. “He’s lost my vote, certainly. He would’ve had it before,” Mulligan adds, “But this went beyond the line.”

Brian O’Dwyer, vice-president of the Irish-American Democrats Political Action Committee (PAC) and the Irish for Biden campaign, likewise stressed the importance of the Irish vote, saying there is “no question” it is one of the few remaining swing votes in the US.

“Biden won the presidency in 2020 in large part because of the Irish vote in Pennsylvania and Michigan,” which both voted for Trump in 2016, O’Dwyer says, adding that those states “certainly will be targeted in this upcoming election”.

But O’Dwyer says Irish-American Democrats remain “very supportive of the way President Biden has handled his support for Israel”. When asked about the Irish Americans who’ve protested and objected, O’Dwyer backtracks somewhat: “Of course, there’s a shift in the last few years, weeks, days. That’s become very apparent.”

O’Dwyer says that in order to hear from Irish-American voters, “this time of year, we’re meeting regularly with members of the community,” both virtually and in person. He clarified that the PAC has not done polling on the issue.

He added that while “there certainly are a number of people” who’ve brought up concerns over Gaza, “from what I’m hearing from the broader community, they think the president’s position is exactly right.” Speaking just hours after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called for an end to Netanyahu’s rule, O’Dwyer agreed with the Senator, calling Netanyahu “the major impediment to peace ... We all think it’s time for him to go.”

McCann, a registered Democrat who says he works with Irish Americans in more than 30 states, called O’Dwyer “willfully out of touch with the actual sentiment of our communities nationwide”. He estimates more than 90 percent of Irish Americans he speaks with support a free Palestine.

Asked about current U.S. policy in Gaza, Matt Carthy, foreign affairs spokesperson for the Irish lead opposition party Sinn Fein, wrote in an email, “Quite simply the U.S. is on the wrong side of history. They must stop funding and arming Israel while it remains in gross violation of international law.”

Sinn Fein Party President Mary Lou McDonald is in the US this week. She told an audience at Georgetown University that Biden was getting things “badly, badly wrong”. McDonald is meeting with US leaders including Schumer and Michigan Representative Rashida Tlaib.

Carthy also notes that “we have a real sense that public opinion there has shifted, notably within the Irish-American community, who rightly have seen parallels between the fate of their ancestors and what the Palestinian people are currently enduring”.

Doyle also feels the Democratic Party establishment is “misgauging, certainly the younger people” who don’t support Israeli occupation.

“That’s not what contemporary Ireland looks like,” he says. “It’s anticolonial. It’s increasingly secular. It advocates for human rights and liberation. I think there’s a lot of Irish Americans who would gladly identify with that. In fact, the widespread interest this month as folks, young and old, have started to assemble as Irish Americans for a Free Palestine demonstrates just that – it really embodies the spirit of ‘Palestine will set us all free,’ as it gives us a chance to lean into our Irish heritage and our values as people of conscience.”

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