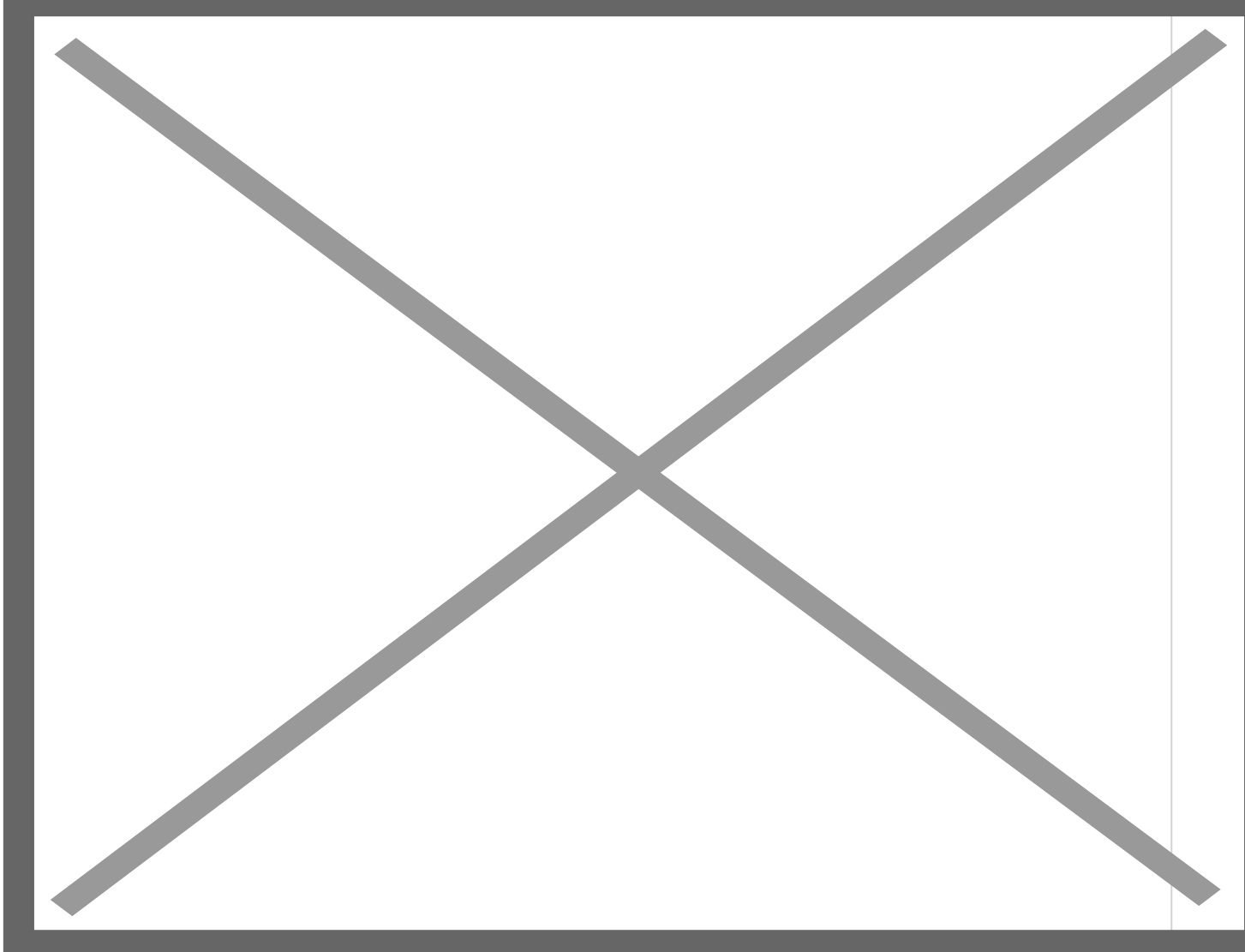


In Chicago's Little Palestine, locals protest and mourn amid Gaza war

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A truck covered in Palestinian symbols /// A motorist poses next to a truck covered in Palestinian symbols in Bridgeview, Illinois [Ali Harb/Al Jazeera]

Chicago, August 28 (RHC)-- Standing outside his local mosque in suburban Chicago, Robhi Gharallah said Israel's war in Gaza is on everyone's mind in his neighbourhood. "We're praying. We're protesting. We're raising funds. We're doing all we can for Gaza," he told Al Jazeera after Friday prayer.

But Gharallah said there is one action he and his neighbours are uncertain about — and that is how to vote in the upcoming presidential election.

Gharallah lives in Bridgeview, Illinois, an area informally known as Chicago's Little Palestine. It sits in Cook County, home to an estimated 22,518 Palestinian Americans — one of the largest Palestinian communities in the United States.

Sporting a cap with the colours of the Palestinian flag — red, white, green and black — Gharallah underscored that the Palestinian diaspora is a prominent presence in Chicago's cultural and business sectors.

But he said Palestinian Americans are facing a dilemma in the next election, with both the Republican candidate Donald Trump and his Democratic rival Kamala Harris showing staunch support for Israel.

"There is no good in Ammar nor Amira," Gharallah said, using male and female names in Arabic to represent Trump and Harris. "We are American citizens, and we want to vote, but we don't know for whom. Whether you vote for this one or this one, it's the same thing. And if you don't vote, it's like you don't exist [politically]."

Bridgeview was in the national spotlight this month, as the Democratic National Convention arrived in Chicago. Just a day before Gharallah spoke to Al Jazeera, Harris appeared on stage at Chicago's United Center — only 24km (15 miles) away from Bridgeview — to accept the Democratic Party's nomination for the presidency.

For Chicago-area Palestinians confronting the devastating war in their homeland, the convention served as an opportunity to bring awareness to their cause.

But residents and community advocates told Al Jazeera that the event was also a bitter reminder that the Palestinian identity continues to be vilified and pushed to the political margins, including by Democrats who claim to value inclusivity.

They pointed to the Harris campaign's refusal to feature a Palestinian American speaker on the main stage of the convention. That exclusion, they said, added insult to injury, given the size of Chicago's Palestinian community.

'Not normal'

Jinan Chehade, 26, decried "the moral apathy and dissociation from the reality" she saw as Democrats gathered to celebrate Harris, while US bombs dropped on Palestinian civilians.

"That's why it's so important for us to bring people together and remind them that this is not normal, that we're not going to be filtered or drowned out," Chehade told Al Jazeera, as she sat at a Bridgeview cafe with a mural depicting the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

In Bridgeview, a town of 17,000 people, Palestinian symbols are almost never out of sight. At the cafe, there were several paintings related to the war, including depictions of Palestinian victims such as Hind

Rajab, the six-year-old girl who was stranded in her family's car and gunned down by Israeli tank fire before rescuers were able to reach her.

At the front counter, a map of historic Palestine — drawn with coffee beans — was arranged over the word "Palestine" spelled out in Arabic.

Chehade, a lawyer and protest organiser, said that, while Chicago-area Palestinians have always had a strong sense of identity, the community has seen a "transformation" over the past 10 months, with pro-Palestinian activism reaching new heights.

"The thing about Palestinians, the first thing you'll know about them is they are Palestinian especially here because everybody is very proud to be representing Little Palestine," she told Al Jazeera.

Like much of the suburban U.S., Bridgeview has broad stretches of urban sprawl: low-rise buildings and rows of shops connected and separated by multi-lane roads. But in Bridgeview's Little Palestine area, many of the businesses — restaurants, cafes, barbershops, jewellery stores and clothing boutiques — are distinguished by Arabic signs and Palestinian flags in their windows.

During the Democratic convention, some storefronts featured posters promoting the protests outside the United Center. "We will not surrender," read a mural above a store that sells hijabs and abayas, next to a bakery that raised funds for Gaza by selling pins that say "Free Palestine".

Motorists especially put their Palestinian identity on display in their vehicles, with flags, keffiyeh-patterned headrest covers, watermelon air fresheners and bumper stickers calling for an end to the occupation of Palestine.

For many of the residents who spoke to Al Jazeera, being Palestinian is not just about the keffiyeh and merchandise.

They explained that it is an inherently political state of existence, one that requires them to constantly humanise and highlight the plight of Palestinians under occupation and bombardment in the Middle East.

Sereen Atieh, a 20-year-old Palestinian American immigrant, said while Little Palestine feels like home, she has struggled with a deep sense of sadness since the start of the war on Gaza. So she has turned to activism on her college campus.

"All I can think about is my brothers and sisters being killed in Palestine," Atieh, draped in a Palestinian flag, told Al Jazeera at a protest outside the Democratic convention.

"I've been trying to do everything I can to help people understand that this is not just a conflict but a genocide, where Israel is trying to remove the Palestinian identity."

In Bridgeview, Mohammad Numan, who works in digital media and advertising, said people in the community are trying to do everything they can to stand with their brethren in Palestine. "These are humans. They have dreams. They want to live. So we are with them until the last moment," Numan told Al Jazeera.

When asked about Harris's support for Israel, Numan said Palestinian Americans will not support any politician who does not support Palestinian human rights. "We have a strong community. We stand together at every turn," he told Al Jazeera.

Several others vowed not to vote for Harris, but Illinois remains a solidly Democratic state. That means the Palestinian diaspora in Chicago does not have the same electoral sway as their fellow Arab Americans in Michigan, a key swing state, where even a small minority of voters can decide the outcome of the vote.

But what they lack in swing-state leverage, Chicago's Palestinian Americans make up for with advocacy and activism. Locals have led weekly protests for Gaza since the start of the war, and they organised demonstrations every day of the convention.

While the Palestinian American community is concentrated in Bridgeview, they are prominent across the entire Chicago area, which is home to leading Palestinian rights organisations, including American Muslims for Palestine, the US Palestinian Community Network and Palestine Legal.

Concern for community

Chicago is cosmopolitan and liberal, but that has not spared it the hate and violence that Palestinian Americans — and Arabs and Muslims more broadly — have experienced since the outbreak of the war.

In October, six-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume was stabbed 26 times in a suspected hate crime in the Chicago area. The alleged perpetrator, a neighbour, shouted, "You Muslims must die", as he attacked Al-Fayoume, according to the boy's mother. His funeral was held at the Mosque Foundation in Bridgeview.

Nouha Boundaoui, a 32-year-old local activist of Algerian descent, said she was fearful in the first few weeks of the war, especially as a Muslim woman who wears a hijab in public.

"I can't speak for the whole community, but personally, I think being at the protests, organising and seeing just how much people have been activated in the last 10 months has made me feel safer," she told Al Jazeera.

Other communities have shown solidarity with the Palestinian Americans in Chicago. Nader Ihmoud, the editor-in-chief of the Chicago-based Palestine in America magazine, said Israeli atrocities in Gaza have pushed more Americans to be sympathetic to Palestinians and learn more about the issue.

Still, with political rhetoric heating up ahead of the elections, anxiety persists in Chicago, and Ihmoud says the city's visibility as a home for the Palestinian diaspora makes it vulnerable to violence. "Freaks come out at night," Ihmoud told Al Jazeera. "And right now, these next months, I consider them political darkness."

<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/363880-in-chicagos-little-palestine-locals-protest-and-mourn-amid-gaza-war>



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