

# RETURN IS INEVITABLE

## PAINTING A WEST LONDON COMMUNITY MURAL IN SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE

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**Community Partner:** [Palestine Youth Movement Britain](#)



**Photos 1, 2 and 3:** Million person Nakba 76 March in London on 18 May 2024. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

As far as the eye could see, the black, green and red of the Palestinian flag filled the grey skies of empire. Students from university encampments across the UK, South African anti-apartheid activists, Black Lives Matter protestors, South Asian solidarity groups, queers for Palestine, among countless others have been marching together in London, week on week since 7 October 2023, to demand liberation for the Palestinian people. Through months of direct action, occupying public spaces, boycotting, divesting, sanctioning, marching and organising on an international scale, this wave of movements converging serves as a rallying call that *could not be louder*; that truly:

*'In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians.'*

On 18 May 2024, Fearless marched alongside 1 million people in London to mark 76 years since the Nakba, or the 'Catastrophe'. As a South Asian organisation tied to movements in the global south, little brings us to work in the heart of empire. Yet at moments like this, when we believe we've seen the very worst of humanity, only for it to be surpassed the very next day, the very next hour, it becomes crucial to look at the roots and intersections of what unites us. The South Asian decolonial movement is inextricably linked with the ongoing liberation struggle for Palestine. The British empire, which drew the borders for the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, also signed the Balfour Declaration, in favour of 'the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people'. 800,000

Palestinians were forced to flee their homes during the Nakba in 1948, with keys to their homes in hand. The images are reminiscent of the millions of South Asians displaced and dispossessed during the Partition at the same time. South Asian poets, writers, politicians and workers have historically been brothers and sisters in arms for the Palestinian cause. As the mass killing of more than 36,000 Palestinians and their continued displacement escalates before our very eyes, we know that the Nakba did not begin, nor end in 1948, and that the cultural resistance must live on.

Fearless came to London to occupy public space in the heart of this empire, to create a public monument in the form of a mural, that tells the story of our people of the global south and our resistance against ongoing imperialism.



**Photo 4:** A fist closing around a key in our workshop, symbolising the fight for the Palestinian Right to Return to their homeland. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

Since the Nakba, Palestinian keys have been carried across borders and passed down through families who have never been able to go back. They have become a catalyst for intergenerational resistance, an inheritance of the revolutionary spirit, and the assertion for Palestinians to remain steadfast until they can, one day, return to their homeland. With our inspiring partner, Palestinian Youth Movement, a transnational, grassroots movement of Palestinian and Arab youth in exile, we hosted a storytelling workshop to imagine what Return to the homeland actually looks like, after all these years. 13 young, relentless Palestinian and West London organisers joined us in this imagining.

In Palestinian mythology, the red colour of their national flower, the poppy, comes from the blood of martyrs – they believe the land honours their life by turning their blood into flowers when they are buried. In the UK, the red poppy is imposed upon every citizen for the entire month of November, to

honour a very different set of martyrs, those who died in World Wars 1 and 2, for ‘armistice’, literally meaning ceasefire. Meanwhile, the British state turns a blind eye to the 36,000 martyrs that its complicity in the Palestinian genocide is actively creating. In an act of reclamation, we invited each participant to step into a ring of fiery Palestinian poppies, to hold up their fists, and to answer the question: *‘How do I resist?’*



**Photo 5:** Local Palestinian activist, Essad, in the workshop. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

For most participants, it was important to call out the contemporary movements they draw their power from, especially those that have faced state violence closer to home:

*“I take the lead from the people at the frontlines in Gaza, in Jabalia, from the people who, from the moment the fire started at Grenfell, began organising themselves and taking over spaces, even in the face of destruction and death”.*

And the intergenerational resistance movements, on whose shoulders they stand:

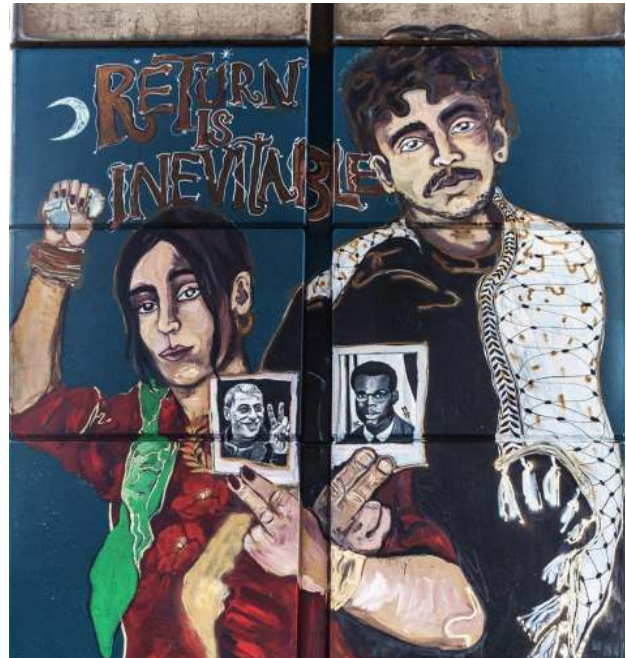
*“We need to understand that Palestine is not the only region under colonial organisation that sought liberation. Especially [inspiring] when you look at revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and the role they played in fighting for liberation. We are a collective in this struggle.”*

Others spoke of the ways in which they face their own fears in the resistance:

*“I have combatted my fear so much by reading prison memoirs. I resist by looking at our prisoners and our martyrs, because they are the ones who’ve paid the ultimate sacrifice”.*

Responses to rituals and questions from our workshop directly feed into the mural we create. Usually, these consist of large-scale self portraits of our workshop participants, whose presence reclaims space from the political and consumerist propaganda that typically occupies our streets. Yet, given the

discussions about inter-movement and intergenerational solidarity, when choosing which portraits would make up the mural, there was much to weigh up between spotlighting the leaders who have been pillars of our community partner's movements and revolutionary histories, and the faces of the people who have been organising for Palestine in the room. Portraits of popular heroes often mean spotlighting their personalities and all the discourse attached to their very publicly-led lives, over the significance of the movements they spearheaded. Ultimately, we recognised that in a movement, we are all drops in the ocean of a wave that is rising. But it is key to also honour the force that propels this wave forward. So we arrived at our first two portraits:



**Photos 6 and 7:** Two young activists holding polaroids in the workshop, which served as inspiration for the mural.  
Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

Two participants held polaroids of figures on whose shoulders they stand. On the left is Walid Daqqa, one of the most prominent Palestinian prisoner intellectuals, who relentlessly defied Israeli prison authorities for 37 years, and who died earlier this year just months before he was finally due to be released. On the right, Kelso Cochrane, an Antiguan expatriate who was murdered just 1 mile from our mural site at the hands of a gang of white fascists in 1959. His murder became symbolic of the resistance of the local Caribbean community in the face of rising far-right political groups who wanted to 'keep Britain white'.



**Photo 8:** Here, poet and activist Shareefa Energy, associated with the Freedom Theatre honours the 6 Palestinian lions, who escaped from an Israeli prison, dug a tunnel deep in their cell with rusty spoons in 2021.

Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

Once they answered how they resist, each participant put down their fist and held a large key close to their chests, sat in the ring of poppies and answered: *‘To what do I return?’*

This was a difficult question for most, especially as the continuing physical destruction of Gaza lives each moment behind our eyes, from the screens of our phones, to the telescopes from space. After some pause, participants spoke of the natural landscape which prevails, affirming that,

Like spring, Palestine will bloom again.

And soon.

Others spoke of the Return to the ocean.

*‘If Palestine is liberated, people from the West Bank can finally return to the sea.’*



**Photo 9 (left):** Community participants painting the garden of Palestine. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle



**Photo 10 (right):** With each wave of the sea, the prayer and affirmation: we will return. Photo credits: Khushali Shingala

Some grappled with the Palestine of the past that they have been taught to know through stories, and the one they hope to build in their lifetimes.

*'I return not to an idealised version of what Palestine was, because it doesn't exist. But rather, to a region that has been completely liberated from any oppressive force. I return to the land of Palestine that we will continue to steward'.*

In a way, the creation of the Fearless mural became an exercise of rehearsing this freedom on the streets of London. The freedom to build, steward and nurture the idea of a Palestine that exists both as a place 'to be returned to, and an entirely new place'.



**Photo 11:** Wheatpastes of vintage images of Palestinian life in the past, against a bright Palestinian garden, blossoming once again. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

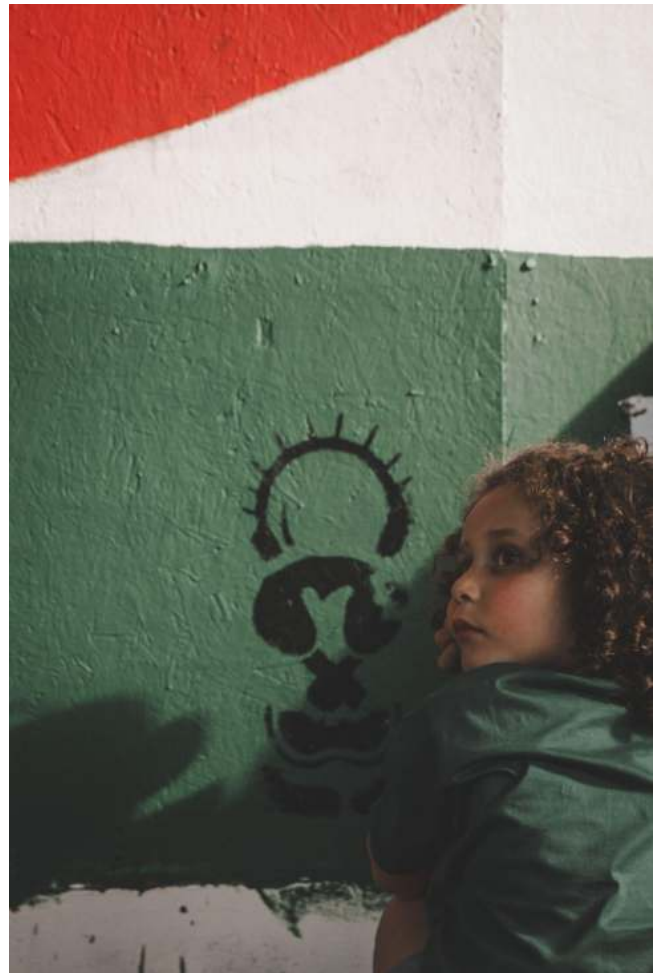
Procuring a wall to paint a mural for Palestine in London was a practice of endless patience and uncertainty, six gruelling months. In the end, we received permission from the West Way Trust which controls 23 acres of land underneath the WestWay highway in London. The highway's construction in 1970 displaced 5,000 families for each mile built. The pillars we painted were eventually reclaimed by the local North Kensington community through decades of sustained civic action. It felt even more fitting, then, to be painting these walls with an image signifying resistance until return to one's land. Only seven years ago, the North Kensington community faced the complete barbarity of state violence when the Grenfell Tower, within eyeshot of the mural, caught on fire due to state negligence, taking

the lives of 72 people, mostly working class people of colour. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the same borough that has ignored the bereaved families and survivors, is also enabling the genocide in Gaza. The company that manufactured the flammable cladding put on Grenfell, Arconic, also manufactures materials for Israeli fighter jets used in the genocide of Palestinians.



**Photo 12:** Lead artist and Fearless founder, Shilo Shiv Suleman. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

Connecting the dots of these movements, we painted the mural over a week, bringing to life symbols of the return to Palestine through the natural world of olive groves, jaffa oranges, cacti and poppies, with the Grenfell green scarves, the abolitionist spoon, and the rock which represents a slingshot, a symbol of the will to resist against overwhelming odds. We had a flood of participation from Londoners. Parents4Palestine, local youth organisations and different groups across the city came to paint. We were honoured to be joined by muralists from North Carolina, and local artist Toby Laurent Belson, who painted the portraits of our two ancestors. Our youngest and most enthusiastic painters were maybe three years old, chalking out Palestinian resistance symbols on the ground. The mural served as a site of radical placemaking for the movement, as PYM organised teach-outs that engaged bystanders in reframing the narrative of the Nakba, the links between the anti-Apartheid movement and Palestinian liberation, as well as the resistance to the Westway's construction. Locals brought their own stencils and cutouts of maps of Palestine, passed round cups of warm chai from thermoses, only for them to be forgotten the next minute in their excitement to try their hand at the darbuke.



**Photo 13:** The keffiyeh is a symbol of Palestinian resistance and solidarity. It was traditionally worn by Palestinian peasants to protect them from the sun. During the peasant-led Arab Revolts of the 1930s, the peasants would immediately be recognised in the towns due to their keffiyehs by the British. In solidarity, people from towns who usually wore the tarbouche started wearing the keffiyeh to stop them from being recognised. Photo credits: Nur Hannah Wan.

**Photo 14:** Handala (stencil) is a 10-year old child, dressed in worn out clothes. This is the age he fled his home during the Nakba. He will remain this age until freedom and return: only then will he start to grow, only then will we see his face. He shares his name with ‘handal’, a resilient, bitter Palestinian plant that has deep roots and always grows back, even if it is weeded out. Photo credits: Nur Hannah Wan.

Nearly 150 people attended the closing ceremony for the mural, a street party which began with the uproarious flipping of the maqluba and carried through with the spoken word poetry of local artists like Isis, Shareefa Energy, and the incredible rapper Peaky, to the renowned South Asian songstress, Ganavya. The night closed with joyous dabke performances and Palestinian music and singing. It was palpable that joy and beauty are truly the engines of our movements.





**Photo 15, 16, 17 and 18:** Closing ceremony at the mural site, which featured spoken word and musical performances as well as the joyous Palestinian dabke. Attendees wrote their hopes for Return into the wall. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle

As artists, our role is to not only make visible the imperialist projects that ethnically cleanse our people, and dispossess and displace us from our lands, but also to create fearless portals to the future we return to.



**Photos 19 and 20:** Shareefa (left) and Essad (right). Photo credits: Nur Hannah Wan

Liberation and return for Palestine is not something that happens 'over there' but rather, in the spirit of the people of Gaza that remain steadfast, the Sudanese, the Congolese, the Kashmiris, the Tamils, the Burmese, and the historically resistant communities of North Kensington, we see an affirmation that victory, and 'return' are inevitable as long as we continue to resist.



**Photos 21 and 22:** The mural still stands to be written into by anyone passing by at 198, Latimer Rd, W10 6RF.

Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle.

And while the idea of return is embedded in a past, it is an act that takes place in the future.

We have the ability to inhabit, and return to worlds that do not even exist yet.



**Photo 23:** Return is inevitable. Mural by Fearless Collective and PYM. Photo credits: Fabrice Bourgelle.