

Opinion | Why Pacific Islanders, Steeped in Christian Zionism, Are Protesting for Palestinian Rights

Israel loves to tout the support of small Pacific states like Samoa, Fiji and the Marshall Islands, especially during key UN votes, but the soaring death toll in Gaza is undercutting longstanding sympathy for the Jewish state and sparking unprecedented pro-Palestinian sentiment, another cogent reminder of the war's diplomatic fallout

Nic Maclellan Jan 24, 2024 4:30 pm IST [Follow](#)

Last November, the Pacific Islands Forum held its annual summit in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Presidents, premiers, and prime ministers from around the region came together at the annual summit of the leading organization of island nations, to discuss the climate emergency, development assistance and sustainability of the oceans.

But just four weeks earlier, [the brutal Hamas attacks of October 7](#) led to military operations by the Israeli Defense Forces, with massive airstrikes and deployment of forces in the Gaza Strip. As the number of civilian casualties surged, a small group of Cook Islands women rallied outside the Forum summit, holding a banner that called on Pacific leaders to "Please condemn the killing of displaced Palestinians and God's innocent children in Gaza."

Cook Islands is a nation of just 17,000 people in the eastern Pacific, and it's more than 18,000 km from Gaza to Rarotonga. But since October 7, IDF attacks on Palestinians in Gaza and operations in the West Bank have reverberated

across the Pacific islands, undercutting longstanding sympathy for Israel that has been much touted by Israeli leaders.

For decades, Israel has maintained significant diplomatic support from governments in the Pacific region. Micronesian nations like Nauru, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, and Marshall Islands regularly vote in support of Israel and the United States on UN resolutions about Palestine. Some Pacific nations have even announced plans to move their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Israel has pledged to bankroll the running costs of the new Papua New Guinea embassy in Jerusalem, opened in September 2023).

However, in line with global trends, there have been numerous rallies, petitions, and vigils across the islands region since the war began, calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Such public support for Palestinian rights is unprecedented in this far-off part of the world. Most astonishingly, growing community concern over the ongoing deaths of civilians has led to some Pacific leaders abandoning their often-uncritical support of Israel.

In late October, Israel and the United States were joined by twelve other nations to vote "no" on the first UN General Assembly ceasefire resolution on "protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations." Of those twelve, six were Pacific Island states: the Kingdom of Tonga, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji.

After the October 7 attacks, the Fiji government led by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka strongly condemned Hamas and called for the release of all hostages. However, despite a ban on pro-Palestine rallies in Fiji, there were soon public calls

for a ceasefire and an end to hostilities. Fiji then switched its vote from "no" to "yes" in the second UN General Assembly resolution on December 12.

Samoa's embassy at the United Nations didn't vote on the first UN General Assembly ceasefire resolution. In response, community members formed "Samoans for Ceasefire," organizing rallies and collecting signatures on [a petition for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza](#). The campaign pressed the Samoan government "to use its influence and advocate for an immediate ceasefire in Palestine." Samoa then switched to vote "yes" in the resolution on December 12 (as did Australia, which had abstained in the first vote in October).

Over nearly four months, there have been protests in countries and territories across the Pacific region condemning Israel's attacks in Gaza, focused especially on the death of Palestinian civilians and non-combatants. Though small, the number, diversity and reach of rallies, vigils and petitions is unprecedented, and a new, younger generation are learning the history of trauma, occupation and conflict in Israel and Palestine.

In Fiji, women's groups have gathered each week to call for "[justice for Palestine](#)", while church and community organizations organized livestreaming of the hearings on South Africa's genocide petition to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In the Kingdom of Tonga and the extensive Tongan diaspora in Pacific Rim countries, hundreds of people signed petitions criticizing their government's support for Israel.

The mobilization in independent states is also occurring in the Pacific territories of the United States and France. In the French Pacific dependency of New Caledonia, the USTKE trade union confederation [mobilized supporters](#) outside the

French High Commission, to call for a ceasefire and to pledge solidarity with the Palestinian people. In the U.S. territory of Guam, which hosts key American military installations, indigenous Chamoru [islanders have rallied](#) for an immediate ceasefire, an end to the Gaza blockade, an increase in humanitarian aid and cessation of US funding for Israel's military operations.

Even as the U.S. military extends airbases and military facilities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), the network '[Marianas for Palestine](#)' rallied outside the CNMI Congress on Saipan, urging senators to call for protection of civilians and non-combatants in Gaza. The protestors highlighted the global impact of militarisation, telling local media: "If there's a war out there, it's intimately connected to the way that the militarization out here is happening."

The Republic of Marshall Islands has been a long-time diplomatic partner of Israel and the United States, but the crisis in the Middle East has led to new debate. Poet and author Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, the daughter of current President Hilda Heine, wrote [an op ed in the country's only newspaper](#) that criticised government policy on the ceasefire, arguing that "Marshall Islands needs to update its foreign policy on Israel and stand against genocide."

These examples highlight the reality that, despite Israeli hasbara (the Hebrew term for advocacy), [the humanitarian and strategic crisis](#) since October 7 has resonated into some of the smallest nations on earth.

Compared to mass rallies in London, Sydney, and New York, of course, these solidarity protests are small and there remains significant diplomatic support for Israel in the Pacific islands, drawing on Christian Zionism and faith

traditions about the Holy Land. But despite this, Israeli diplomacy is failing. In line with global trends, the disproportionate number of civilian deaths and injuries in Gaza is generating unprecedented support for Palestinian rights, even in small island developing states located thousands of miles from the Middle East.

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