

A meeting in Harlem: Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, and the struggle for Palestine



Fidel Castro and Malcolm X met at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem.

Lee en español [aquí](#)

In September 1960, in the heart of Black America, Harlem's Hotel Theresa became the stage for one of the world's most monumental encounters.

When Malcolm X and Fidel Castro met there 65 years ago, Harlem itself was transformed into a crossroads of revolutionary fervor. The rendezvous would leave an indelible mark not only on New York City but on the entire world, becoming a watershed moment that helped shape the conscience of generations of freedom fighters and sped the rhythm for the struggle for liberation in the United States and across the globe.

The meeting between Fidel and Malcolm X at the Hotel Theresa was not a mere photo-op; it was a potent symbol of an era of

revolution and national liberation struggles crystallized in an embrace between two young revolutionaries facing the wrath of the US empire and sending a powerful statement against US hegemony and racial oppression.

This event, born out of circumstance and defiance, continues to hold profound relevance today, particularly in the context of global debates on self-determination and the ongoing struggle for Palestinian liberation. Like the Cuban Revolution in 1960, which embodied the dreams and aspirations of oppressed people worldwide, the Palestinian cause and the people of Gaza today serve as a compass for those seeking to change the world. The unyielding spirit of resistance in Gaza has become a powerful symbol for a new generation of activists fighting for liberation everywhere.

US hostility and the Harlem welcome

Fidel's visit to New York for the 15th session of the UN General Assembly was met with hostility from the US establishment. When he and the Cuban delegation were initially booked at the downtown Shelburne Hotel, the management demanded a hefty USD 20,000 cash deposit for "damages" and the US State Department restricted their movements. This was a clear political attack, part of the broader US campaign to isolate the young Cuban Revolution as the CIA's sabotage and terror attacks on the island began to pick up steam.

It was in this moment of diplomatic tension that a group of Black leaders, including Malcolm X, stepped in. They extended an invitation for Fidel and the Cuban delegation to move to the Hotel Theresa, a beacon of African American cultural and political life in Harlem. Fidel accepted, turning a diplomatic insult into a powerful political statement against the Eisenhower Administration's attempt to silence him. By moving to Harlem, Fidel would create a headache for Washington by intentionally highlighting the hypocrisy of a nation that claimed to be a champion of democracy and freedom abroad while

its Black citizens faced systemic segregation and oppression at home.

The atmosphere in Harlem was electric. Thousands of people, defying the rain, gathered outside the Hotel Theresa to cheer the revolutionary leader, a testament to the popular support for Cuba's struggle against US imperialism among African Americans. As Malcolm X himself later wrote in his autobiography, Fidel "achieved a psychological coup over the US State Department when it confined him to Manhattan, never dreaming that he'd stay uptown in Harlem and make such an impression among the Negroes."

Rosemari Mealy, in her work "Fidel & Malcolm X: Memories of a Meeting", emphasizes the profound significance of this move. She notes that the meeting symbolized "the respect that both men expressed towards each other" and their shared struggle for self-determination and national liberation. To the thousands who gathered outside the hotel, "the idea began to build that Castro would come here to stay because he had found out, as most Negroes found out, the nasty ways the underdog was treated downtown." Fidel was seen as a revolutionary who had "told White America to go to hell," as a contemporary Black newspaper put it. This powerful sentiment resonated deeply within the community.

Anti-imperialist meeting in the heart of Harlem

The Hotel Theresa meeting was a crucial moment in the history of internationalism and anti-imperialist solidarity. It demonstrated a clear understanding that the struggle against racial oppression and for human rights in the US was inextricably linked to the struggle against colonialism and imperialism abroad. This is a central theme explored by scholars like Rosemari Mealy in her work, which compiles firsthand accounts and reflections, highlighting how the meeting symbolized an era of decolonization and human rights struggles among Black and Third World peoples globally. It was

a powerful rejection of the Cold War narrative that sought to frame these movements as isolated and illegitimate.

The meeting exposed the hypocrisy of US claims of being a beacon of freedom while its own Black citizens faced systemic segregation and violence, not just in the US South under Jim Crow, but even in the urban centers of the US North. Fidel's decision to move to Harlem and his subsequent meetings with world leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt from his "new headquarters" transformed him from a hemispheric figure into a global one. As Simon Hall writes in "Ten Days in Harlem", Fidel's actions highlighted that "the stain of segregation was alive and well in the urban north," and placed the politics of anti-imperialism and racial equality at the center of the Cold War. The image of the Hotel Theresa, a Black-owned establishment, serving as a hub for global leaders challenging US power, was a tangible manifestation of the rise of the Third World project of sovereignty and independence in the making.

On September 24, the atmosphere in Fidel's room at the Hotel Theresa was electric, a small room buzzing with the energy of a young revolution. It was cramped with Cuban guerrillas, youth who had descended from the Sierra Maestra mountains less than two years earlier. At 34, Fidel himself was a whirlwind of motion; his famous beard and olive-green fatigues radiated a restless energy. The room, cluttered with drafts of his upcoming UN speech and scattered news cables, served as a makeshift headquarters. Across from him sat Malcolm X, 35, who, in a sharp suit and with an equally commanding presence, embodied the increasingly militant Black liberation movement within the United States. The encounter was a profound, if brief, exchange between two men who recognized the mirror of their struggles in one another, a shared fight for what Fidel would later call, two days later, in his historic four-hour-long UN speech, "the full human dignity" of all oppressed people. Only a few Black journalists were permitted inside,

where Fidel, speaking in English, expressed his admiration for the resilience of African Americans. "I admire this," he said. "Your people live here and are faced with this propaganda all the time, and yet, they understand. This is very interesting." Malcolm X's reply was succinct and powerful: "There are twenty million of us, and we always understand." As he left the hotel, facing a throng of hostile journalists asking about his sympathies for the Cubans, Malcolm X defiantly replied "Please don't tell us who should be our friends, and who should be our enemies".

Though Fidel and Malcolm X would never again meet in person, their lives became intertwined through a shared commitment to internationalism. Just a few years after their historic encounter, Malcolm X would travel to Gaza, where he met with the newly formed Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and wrote his powerful essay "Zionist Logic," describing Zionism as "a new form of colonialism." This solidarity mirrored that of the Cuban Revolution; earlier Cuban delegations, including Raúl Castro and Che Guevara, had also visited Gaza, and Cuba would become one of the first countries to recognize both the PLO and the Palestinian state.

From Harlem to Palestine

The echoes of the 1960 meeting resonate powerfully with the upcoming 80th high-level segment of the UN General Assembly. The core principles that defined the encounter between Fidel and Malcolm X, self-determination, anti-imperialism, and the full dignity of oppressed peoples, are being intensely contested today. This is most evident in the ongoing genocide in Palestine, where for nearly two years, Israel, with the unwavering support of the United States, has sought to eradicate the Palestinian people in Gaza through a brutal campaign of endless war, siege, and man-made famine.

Today the struggle of the Palestinians mirrors the oppressive blockade and genocidal siege Cuba has endured for decades.

While Cuba's fight against the US blockade and sanctions has been a protracted war of attrition, marked by a calculated erasure from the news cycle, the Palestinian experience has been one of constant, visceral carnage. US and Western media consistently delegitimize the realities of both peoples, yet they differ in their immediate, brutal visibility. The solidarity Malcolm X showed Cuba, seeing in Fidel a kindred spirit in the fight against a powerful US empire, is the same spirit that animates pro-Palestinian movements today. Just as Fidel and Malcolm X recognized their shared cause, a new generation of activists around the world is increasingly linking the Palestinian struggle to their own anti-colonial, anti-racists, and liberation movements. Across continents, the Palestinian flag and the keffiyeh have become inseparable from the fight for self-determination. Youth in their millions around the world today challenge the domination of US hegemony and re-center the debate on the fundamental human right of all oppressed peoples to live free from imperialism through the lens of the Palestinian struggle.

The dynamics of the 1960 meeting are mirrored in the current debates at the UN. The US government continues to use its power to stifle opposition and punish those who challenge its foreign policy agenda, particularly concerning Palestine. The unprecedented decision on August 29, 2025, by Secretary of State Marco Rubio [to deny visas to the entire Palestinian delegation](#) is a stark example of this. In a statement, Rubio made it clear that the US will use its visa authority to advance its political agenda, stating, "It is in our national security interests to hold the PLO and PA accountable for not complying with their commitments, and for undermining the prospects for peace."

This act of diplomatic isolation, much like the treatment Fidel received in 1960, is designed to delegitimize the Palestinian cause and prevent it from continuing to gain traction on the world stage. Despite the contradictions raised

by the Palestinian Authority's role as the only representative of the Palestinian people at the UN, it's important to recognize that it's an attempt to silence a people whose very existence is under siege. However, the more burning issue is that the international community's response to the genocide taking place in Gaza must move beyond simple expressions of sympathy. While several European countries and US allies are poised to recognize Palestinian statehood formally, this gesture alone will not be enough to end the genocide and the ongoing man-made famine. The UN must move beyond symbolic recognition and take concrete action. At a minimum, this must include sanctions against Israel and a concerted effort to end the blockade of Gaza. Furthermore, based on international law and accusations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the presence of Netanyahu or any Israeli representatives at the UN General Assembly should be rejected. How can the UN credibly host individuals who have been found responsible for designing and executing mass atrocities?

The struggle for Palestine today, akin to the struggle for Cuba against the blockade, is a fight for self-determination. The lessons of the Fidel-Malcolm X meeting are clear: solidarity across movements is a powerful weapon against imperialism. Sixty-five years later, we are still drawing inspiration from that brief yet monumental meeting in Harlem, learning that solidarity is not a mere gesture but a vital tool in the fight for liberation.

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