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Antiwar/Solidarity Activism on Gaza: New Generation, New Challenges

Israel's war on Gaza and the Biden administration's strident support for the massive Israeli assault in the face of widespread violations of international humanitarian law and the international outrage at the civilian death toll has brought a new generation of activists to the fore on campuses and elsewhere across the United States. I have followed campus activism on Palestine as both an observer and occasional participant since the 1970s, and recent months have witnessed a dramatic quantitative and qualitative shift in mobilization.

This essay examines these recent developments, the reasons behind the dramatic growth in pro-Palestinian activism among young activism, and the challenges these movements face from both valid and specious allegations of antisemitism.

These activists, even more so than protesters against controversial foreign policies of previous administrations, are disproportionately young. There is a huge generational disparity regarding political attitudes towards the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the U.S. role, which exceeds even that regarding Vietnam during the famous "generation gap" of the 1960s. A recent poll shows that 72 percent of voters ages 18 to 29 disapprove of Biden's handling of the war on Gaza.^[i] That is a higher percentage of young voters than those who disapproved of Bush's handling of the war in Iraq,^[ii] Reagan's handling of the wars in Central America^[iii] or even Nixon's handling of the war in Vietnam.^[iv]

Another poll in December noted how 18-29 year olds sympathized more with Palestinians than Israelis, while those over 65 were seven times more likely to sympathize with Israelis. Similarly, while two-thirds of Americans over 65 thought it "very important" for the United States to support Israel, only 14% of those under 30 agreed.^[v] A poll in early March showed that only 38% of Americans age 18-34 have a positive view of Israel, as compared with 71% of those over 55.^[vi] With the possible exception of LGBTQ+ rights, there is no other political issue in which there is such a direct correlation between age and political attitude.

There are a number of reasons for this. While older Americans remember Israel under social democratic leadership open to territorial compromise, younger Americans have only known Israel under rightwing and overtly racist leadership who openly seek to colonize and incorporate the occupied territories. Younger Americans are more racially and ethnically diverse and therefore more likely to identify with Palestinians against the predominantly white Israeli leadership, including a growing percentage of young Muslims who have become politically mobilized. With young Jews often in the forefront of pro-Palestinian campus activism and nearly half of younger Jews believing Biden is too supportive of Israel,^[vii] it has become easier for young non-Jews to be openly critical of Israel and U.S. policy without coming across as being motivated by antisemitism.

The older generations of Americans, even among those willing to acknowledge excesses by the Israeli government, saw Zionism as a legitimate national liberation movement of an oppressed people. By contrast, today's youth are not only more cognizant of indigenous rights but, as a result of the mobilizations around Black Lives Matter and greater awareness of institutionalized racism, the Palestinian struggle less in isolation

and more part of broader global struggle. Though such a lens, Zionism appears to be more of a colonial-settler enterprise. Indeed, young Americans are less likely to see nationalism itself as progressive force as it was back when it was challenging colonialism and neocolonialism in the Global South, and are more likely to see it as a reactionary force like the nationalist movements which have emerged in Eastern Europe in recent decades. A related shift is that, unlike during the previous century, they are less likely to see the nation-state as the only vehicle through which a people can assert their collective rights, making Israel appear less central to Jewish identity.

Another change is that, unlike the first several decades of Israel's existence when its primary American support came from the liberal establishment, today Israel's biggest backers are rightwing Republicans and Christian fundamentalists. Up until the 1980s, the Republican Party—in part due to its ties to oil interests and the Arab monarchies—largely took a more balanced perspective on Israel/Palestine than did the Democrats. With the ascent of the Christian Right as a major force in conservative politics in the 1980s and the more recent ties between Netanyahu's Likud and the Trump-led Republican Party, combined with the growing influence of Bernie Sanders and young progressives in the House of Representatives critical of traditional U.S. support for the Israeli government, support for Israel is increasingly seen in terms of a left/right divide.

The growth of the movement against the Gaza War is not exclusively among younger people, of course. Among older liberals and progressives—who had marched against the Vietnam War, the nuclear arms race, apartheid in South Africa, intervention in Central America, and the invasion of Iraq—there had traditionally been a reluctance to address U.S. policy towards Israel/Palestine. That has changed dramatically in recent months, as veterans of these struggles have joined younger activists. Polls now show that 55% of Americans now oppose Israel's war on Gaza, including 75% of Democrats.^[viii] Similarly, a growing number of mainstream peace groups and multi-issue progressive organizations, which had also traditionally put Israel/Palestine on the backburner, have now pushed the Gaza War front and center on their agenda.

However, it is on college campuses where the movement is most visible and most controversial. Congressional hearings on alleged rampant antisemitism and the failure of universities to crack down on pro-Palestinian protests have led to the resignation of two Ivy League presidents, cancellation of speakers and films, and other suppression of dissent. There are problems with this campus activism which have not been fully confronted. Too young to remember the U.S. war in Iraq and born long after U.S. wars in Central America and Vietnam, many student activists have difficulty seeing U.S. support for Israel in the context of broader U.S. foreign policy in the region and beyond. There is little appreciation for and understanding of previous popular movements against U.S. support for rightwing allies engaged in war crimes. There has therefore been a temptation to see U.S. policy not as a reflection of a long history of pushing false narratives, denigrating international legal institutions and human rights organizations, and defying a broad consensus of the international community, but as some kind of unique aberration singular to Israel.

One problem with this approach is that it builds upon the exaggerated notion that U.S. policy towards Israel/Palestine is rooted primarily in the pro-Israel lobby. The "Lobby", centered around the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and allied organizations, has indeed created a climate of intimidation on Capitol Hill, has sought to censor speakers and other public events critical of Israel, and has generally made it more difficult to challenge U.S. support for the Israeli government. However, the assumption that U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would somehow be based upon a commitment to international law and human rights, when the U.S. has often failed to uphold these principles in other conflicts involving U.S. allies, is demonstrative of this failure to recognize how U.S. policy towards Israel/Palestine fits into the modern history of U.S. foreign relations.

U.S. support for Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory is not unique. In the 1970s, the United States vetoed a series of UN Security Council resolutions opposing apartheid South Africa's illegal occupation of Namibia. Between 1975-2000, the United States supported Indonesia's 24-year occupation of and repression in East Timor, where U.S.-backed Indonesian forces were responsible for the deaths of up to 200,000 civilians, nearly one-third of that island nation's population.^[ix] Today, the United States not only supports Morocco's ongoing occupation of the nation of Western Sahara in defiance of a series of UN Security Council resolutions and landmark decision of the International Court of Justice, it is the only country besides Israel to formally recognize Morocco's annexation of that country, a full member state of the African Union.^[x] Freedom House has ranked Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara along with only three other countries as having the least political freedom in the world.^[xi] In none of those cases was there a powerful domestic lobby forcing the United States to support governments engaged in such flagrant violations of international legal norms.

During the 1980s, the U.S. supported bloody counterinsurgency campaigns in El Salvador, Guatemala, and elsewhere and supported a far-right armed insurgency against the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua, all of which primarily targeted civilians. As with Gaza today, there were civilian casualties in the tens of thousands, the United States vetoed a series of otherwise-unanimous UN Security Council resolutions^[xii] and dismissed rulings by the International Court of Justice.^[xiii] Also, like today, the majority of Americans opposed U.S. policy and demonstrated in the hundreds of thousands, including widespread acts of civil disobedience, only to be largely ignored by Washington policymakers.

Similarly, U.S. support for Israel's war crimes in its bombing of crowded urban areas of the Gaza Strip are not that different than U.S. support for Turkey's bombings of Kurdish towns and villages in the 1990s and of Saudi Arabia's bombing of civilian areas in Yemen just a few years ago. Indeed, U.S. support the Saudi war was even more direct—helping the Royal air force with targeting and refueling fighter bombers in flight.^[xiv] There was opposition raised by human rights groups and peace organizations and some unsuccessful efforts by bipartisan members of Congress to challenge U.S. policy, but there was nothing close to the mass movement there is today regarding Gaza.

If seen to be in the strategic interests of the United States, Washington has proven itself quite willing to support the most flagrant violations of international law and human rights by its allies and block the United Nations or any other party from challenging it. No ethnic lobby is necessary to motivate policymakers to do otherwise. As long as the amoral imperatives of realpolitik remain unchallenged, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere will not reflect the American public's longstanding belief that U.S. international relations should be guided by humanitarian principles and ethics.

Few of today's young pro-Palestinian activists are aware of this history, however. Though the movement is largely centered in the left, many of them have embraced the analysis pushed by neorealists like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt,^[xv] former State Department Arabists, and others unwilling to put forward a more systemic critique of the assumptions of the foreign policy establishment, sometimes referred to as "the blob,"^[xvi] or acknowledge that U.S. support for Israel is part of a well-established pattern of supporting allies engaged in flagrant violations of international legal norms.

While there are certainly reasons to argue that U.S. support for Israel ultimately harms U.S. interests, the overall consensus within the foreign policy establishment that the strategic relationship is of overall benefit.

Israel has successfully prevented victories by radical nationalist and Islamist movements in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, while also keeping anti-American regimes like Syria and Iran in check. The militaries of the United States and Israel are inextricably tied. Israel's frequent wars have provided battlefield testing for

American arms, and Israel's intelligence service has assisted the United States in intelligence-gathering and covert operations.^[xvii] Israel has also served as a conduit for U.S. arms to regimes and movements too unpopular for openly granting direct military assistance. During the Cold War, this included apartheid South Africa,^[xviii] the Islamic Republic of Iran,^[xix] the military junta in Guatemala,^[xx] and the Nicaraguan Contras.^[xxi] More recently, Israel has backed Colombian paramilitaries^[xxii] and various Kurdish militia^[xxiii] as well as Moroccan occupation forces in Western Sahara.^[xxiv] Israel has cooperated with the U.S. military-industrial complex on research and development for new jet fighters^[xxv] and anti-missile defense systems.^[xxvi] The country has even trained U.S. forces bound for Iraq and other Middle Eastern destinations in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations.^[xxvii]

Former Secretary of State Alexander Haig referred to Israel as the United States' "unsinkable aircraft carrier." And Joe Biden once said, "Were there not an Israel, the United States would have to invent an Israel to protect [its] interests in the region."^[xxviii] He has repeated version of that phrase subsequently, including as president.

By failing to recognize how U.S. support for Israel's war on Gaza and U.S. support for Israel's rightwing leadership overall is part of a longstanding policy of supporting allied governments regardless of their violations of international legal norms, it opens up antiwar and pro-Palestinian groups to charges that they are unfairly singling out Israel. Similarly, placing most of the blame on powerful Zionist organizations and overstating their influence uncomfortably parallels the historic antisemitic tendency to exaggerate the power of an alleged cabal wealthy Jews controlling the actions of non-Jewish political leaders. While it is certainly not antisemitic to be anti-Zionist, when "Zionist" is used in a manner similar to the old antisemitic tropes (i.e., "Zionist" control of government, the media, finance) it certainly does cross that line. For example, too many young activists assume that the media bias in favor of U.S. policy supporting Israel is a result of Zionist pressure rather than a general predisposition to support the politics of U.S. allies and militarism overall. Similarly, when a member of Congress takes a right-wing position on virtually any issue, the assumption is that it is a result of their ideological proclivities, while if the same politician takes a right-wing position in relation to the Middle East, many young pro-Palestinian activists will often assume that they are being forced to take such perspectives due to powerful Zionist interests.

In the long history of protests against U.S. policy towards conflicts in the Global South, whether it be support for far rightwing governments engaged in war crimes, such as El Salvador and Israel, or direct military intervention, as with Vietnam and Iraq, it was not uncommon for small far left groups—through manipulation, hustle, and other means—to take a disproportionately visible role in demonstrations and elsewhere. Anti-intervention groups would sometimes become dominated by those who were not just opposed to U.S. culpability in war crimes, but who insisted that true solidarity meant unquestioningly supporting the policies of whatever government or armed group was challenging U.S. imperialism and its allies.

Marching amid an occasional banners praising Marxist revolutionary groups seeking to liberate their country from far-right generals and feudalistic landowners during the 1980s was less awkward and less likely to discourage broader participation than is marching among those praising Hamas and calling for the physical destruction of Israel. While it can certainly be argued that U.S. and Israeli policies are largely responsible for the rise of Hamas and its extremist ideology, uncritical support of any a group which espouses antisemitism and terrorism can seriously harm a movement's ability to widen its appeal.

Part of the problem is that there are segments of the anti-imperialist left who fail to recognize that the leading adversaries of Western imperialism today are not what they were during the Cold War when similar movements challenged U.S. foreign policy. While the national liberation struggles opposed by Washington and its repressive allies during the Cold War were often more militaristic and authoritarian than many American antiwar activists

would have liked, there was a sense that they represented progressive alternatives to the rightwing dictatorships and the colonial/neocolonial forces backed by Washington. By contrast, Hamas—like Al Qaeda, ISIS, and other Salafist groups; the Iranian regime and its allies; Putin’s Russia; as well as other leading opponents of Western hegemony today—are decidedly reactionary.

Even though the vast majority of student activists are motivated by sincere outrage at Israeli war crimes and U.S. culpability rather than a rigid ideological agenda or bigotry against Jews, these problems have hampered the effectiveness of campus activism in changing U.S. policy.

The bigger problem, however, is in U.S. policy itself. Recognizing that, despite two-thirds of Americans, including 80% of Democrats, supporting a permanent ceasefire^[xxix] while the Biden administration and all but a few dozen members on Congress are unwilling to take such a stance, many in this new generation are becoming alienated with electoral politics and the two-party system. Not only will the resulting lower turnout among young voters threaten Democratic electoral prospects in November, the frustration at the failure of the political system to respond to constituent demands could contribute to the embrace of more extremist ideologies. Regardless, just as Vietnam did for the Baby Boomers, Central America did for Gen X, and Iraq did for Millennials, the legacy of the October 7 terrorist attacks and the war that has followed will likely have a major impact on Gen Z and their politics in the coming years.

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