

# Crackdown on Palestinian Solidarity Exceeds Reagan-Era Activist Repression

*Efforts to silence and intimidate human rights activists must be challenged, no matter who is perpetrating them.*

Historically, would-be authoritarians of various stripes have used the threat of other forms of authoritarianism to consolidate their own power. We saw this during the Cold War, when the alleged threat of communism led to everything from McCarthyism in the United States to right-wing military coups in Latin America.

We are seeing this again today, as some of President Joe Biden’s supporters attack, belittle, and impinge the motivation of peace and human rights activists who oppose his support for Israel’s genocidal war on the population of Gaza. Such supporters often use the specter of a Trump victory — and employ legislative and legal means — to suppress these activists’ valid criticisms.

During the 1980s, critics of Ronald Reagan’s support for the Salvadoran junta and Nicaraguan contras — who were responsible for tens of thousands of civilian deaths — routinely had their patriotism questioned and were accused of supporting communism and a Soviet takeover. Similarly, peace and human rights activists who have criticized President Biden’s policies are being routinely attacked as supporters of Trump, fascism, Russia or Hamas “terrorism.”

For instance, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi claimed [in a CNN interview](#) on January 28 that protesters calling for a ceasefire in Gaza are echoing “Mr. Putin’s message,” adding that, “Some I think are connected to Russia,” and that she plans to “ask the FBI to investigate” supposed Russian funding of peace demonstrators. Two days later, [a video from October 29](#) depicting antiwar protesters outside her home went viral. Demonstrators correctly pointed out that a majority of Democrats support a ceasefire in Gaza, and Pelosi responded by [shouting](#), “Go back to China where your headquarters is!”

Today’s activism in opposition to U.S. support for the Israeli government is reminiscent of activism in the 1980s regarding Central America and South Africa. Ironically, however, the Biden era is proving to be far more repressive than the Reagan era.

During this earlier period, there were hardly any cases in which solidarity groups opposing U.S. intervention in Central America or U.S. backing of white minority rule in South Africa were banned, even though many of these groups engaged in acts of [mass civil disobedience](#) and other disruptive tactics that led to thousands of arrests. By contrast, a number of campuses have [banned chapters](#) of Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, and other groups opposed to Biden’s support for Israel’s war on Gaza.

Likewise, professors are not immune. For example, Biden’s Department of Education has opened a new [Title VI investigation](#) into the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill because a Black professor in the Department of Communication said in class that “Israel and the United States do not give a shit about international law or war crimes.” Such criticism of U.S. policy, according to the Biden administration, may constitute discrimination against Jews.

While Democratic leaders in Congress during the 1980s condemned apartheid in South Africa and largely supported anti-apartheid activism, today [they denounce](#) human rights groups for even acknowledging that Israel is engaging in a [form of apartheid](#). Similarly, while advocacy for one-person, one-vote was universally supported by Washington Democrats in regard to South Africa, calls for one-person, one-vote for all of historic

Palestine (consisting of Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, sometimes referred to as “from the River to the Sea”) [is condemned](#) as “antisemitic” and is equated with calling for the [physical destruction of Israel](#) and the mass murder of Jews. Claiming that calls for universal suffrage in a single binational Palestinian state is a call for violence makes it easier for campus administrators and others to suppress advocacy groups by falsely claiming that they are advocating genocide.

Electoral advocacy should not be conducted through efforts at intimidation and suppression.

One of the most successful tactics of the South African anti-apartheid movement were calls for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against the white minority regime. A number of campaigns targeting university endowments, state pension funds and individual corporations were successful, and played an important role in getting corporations and governments to belatedly impose economic sanctions on South Africa, which helped force the white minority government to accept majority rule.

These earlier BDS campaigns received a lot of pushback by those falsely insisting that foreign capital was a progressive and modernizing force that actually helped South Africa’s Black majority. However, there were no serious attempts to punish corporations which did honor sanctions against South Africa or individuals who advocated BDS.

Largely due to the success of this earlier BDS movement, however, corporate interests and supporters of the U.S.’s backing of Israel have succeeded in passing [anti-BDS legislation](#) in a majority of U.S. states punishing individuals, companies, religious denominations, academic associations, and others who not only support BDS in regard to Israel, but even those who solely target the Israeli occupation and settlements. These have even resulted in laws, such as [in Arkansas](#), which effectively ban scholars, writers and artists from speaking at public universities unless they sign a statement saying they do not boycott companies investing in Israel or even just companies supporting the Israeli occupation and settlements.

Such actions are not limited to Republican-controlled states. For example, [New York’s state pension fund](#) divested from Unilever because one of its subsidiaries — Ben & Jerry’s — refuses to sell its ice cream in illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, even though it produces and sells ice cream inside Israel. New York also forbids its standard travel support for professors at state universities to attend academic conferences if a sponsoring academic association supports the academic boycott of Israel.

Nationally, while the [2020 Democratic platform](#) did not even mention (much less criticize) the Israeli occupation and illegal settlements, it did condemn the BDS campaign.

In 2018, Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, now the House Democratic leader, [sponsored a bill](#) which would have effectively criminalized support for boycotts against Israel or companies doing business in Israel or the occupied territories. It would have made it a crime to support or even furnish information about a boycott directed at Israel or the Israeli occupation supported by any entity of the United Nations, the European Union, or other intergovernmental organizations. The penalties proposed were draconian, including fines of up to \$1 million and up to 20 years imprisonment. The legislation failed, but could possibly be revived as hostility toward pro-Palestinian activists increase.

This past fall, the majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives joined Republicans in [equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism](#) despite the fact that Zionism has historically been quite controversial, even within the Jewish community. The goal, apparently, was to suppress opposition to the policies of President Biden, who has [proudly proclaimed](#) that, “I am a Zionist.” Given how the Democratic Party has also gone on record saying

it does not welcome the support of antisemites, does this then imply that the party therefore does not want the votes of the growing number of Democratic-leaning voters who now identify as anti-Zionists?

Polls show that Biden's support for Israel's war on Gaza places him at odds with a [sizable majority of Democrats](#), which has led to a precipitous drop in his support among young and diverse voters — key constituencies whose turnout is critical if Democrats are going to win. There is a real prospect that Biden's support for the genocidal assault on Gaza could condemn him [to the fate of Democratic presidential nominees](#) who supported unpopular wars in 1968 and 2004 and narrowly lost to flawed Republican candidates. This has contributed to the backlash toward antiwar activists by Democrats terrified that such outspoken anger toward Biden will result in a Trump victory and the truly disastrous consequences that would follow.

Anyone seriously engaged with progressive politics must be able to acknowledge the extent of Israeli war crimes and the administration's culpability. Even as we fully acknowledge the threat of looming authoritarianism, we must be able to criticize a president who is enabling war crimes the [International Court of Justice](#) recognizes is plausibly on the level of genocide. Electoral advocacy should not be conducted through efforts at intimidation and suppression.

A new Trump administration could result in major steps toward authoritarianism in the U.S., and severely heightened attacks on a range of marginalized communities. We should acknowledge that many conscientious Americans opposed to Israel's war on the people of Gaza are still planning to vote for Biden to stave off this threat of authoritarian governance.

Still, ongoing efforts to silence and intimidate peace and human rights activists must be challenged, no matter who is perpetrating them.