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SHIFTING DEMOCRATIC GROUNDS ON ISRAEL? THE RECENT ROUND OF VIOLENCE AND DISCOURSE DYNAMICS ON THE U.S. POLITICAL LEFT



TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'

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Introduction and summary

This document highlights a number of trends emanating from progressive discourse on Israel during the conflict that began with tensions in Jerusalem and spiraled into violence within Israeli cities and towns and bombing campaigns between Hamas and the IDF. It focuses on trends that **currently present as significant evolutions of the status quo of reactions to Israeli-Palestinian conflicts** over the years, including that:

- **Progressive prisms frame the logic and language of activity on the left in opposition to the Israeli side of the conflict.** Specifically, this is evident in conflating the conflict with the struggle for Black lives in the U.S., and in challenging the very existence of a special U.S.-Israel relationship.
- **A robust progressive organizational infrastructure and prominent progressive policy voices play a central role in mainstreaming on the left and in the Democratic Party the progressive brand of activism in opposition to Israeli side of the conflict.**
- **Increasing doubt and uncertainty about Israel’s future is reflected in the current progressive discourse, particularly among Jewish groups.**

The conceptual clash

The U.S. approach to Israel has traditionally largely adopted an Israeli narrative that places at its center the exceptionality of Jewish vulnerability and a self-conception as a peace-seeking nation with inherently Western-aligned values.

These attributes are erased or distorted through the prism of prevalent progressive paradigms, which center on class-based and skin color-based designations, as well as a categorical division between defenders of the status quo versus promoters of a radical upending thereof. Jews accordingly are cast uniformly as powerful white oppressors, including in the Israeli context.¹

¹ For more on what can happen when contemporary progressive discourse enables, often unwittingly, a *de-facto* negation of the right of Jews individually or collectively to define their own identify, experience, and vulnerability, see [here](#) on ‘Erasive Anti-Semitism.’

Specifically in the context of the current conflagration, **anti-Israel elements are increasingly framing the conflict as parallel to the struggle for Black lives in the U.S., and are seeking to undercut the basis of the U.S.'s special relationship with Israel in favor of a progressive approach to 'even-handedness.'**²

Skin-color and class-based 'categories'

Progressive discourse on this latest round of violence prominently frames Israel as the white oppressor in a social justice conflict. This frame increases the contemporary resonance of comparisons of Israel to Apartheid-era South Africa, which are also buoyed by a spike in focus on allegations of Israeli apartheid spearheaded by the recently released HRW report.³ It is also evident in comparisons between Palestinian struggles in and outside of the Green Line, and that of Black Americans (see more [here](#)), for example in:

- Parallels with the Black social justice struggle thematically showcased by the Squad and allies. See [here](#): The pro-Palestinian bloc of lawmakers “respectively contextualized Israel's treatment of Palestinians through their own respective lenses — ranging from their religious heritage, their experience encountering militarized policing and U.S. military funding to human rights abuses abroad.” See especially Ayanna Presley in this [clip](#) drawing direct parallels between white and police brutality against Blacks in the U.S. and Israeli dynamics vis-à-vis the Palestinians. See also Jamaal Bowman's [tweet](#): “Enough of Black and brown bodies being brutalized and murdered, especially children. Enough of the inhumanity. The White House must act.”

From Bernie Sanders' New York Times [op-ed](#): “... we are seeing the rise of a new generation of activists ... in American streets last summer in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. We see them in Israel. We see them in the Palestinian territories.... We must recognize that Palestinian rights matter. Palestinian lives matter.”

- Analyses of emerging discourse linking the struggles: See in [Slate](#), “How Black Lives Matter Changed the American Conversation About Israel and Palestine”; in [Newsweek](#) on how the “most recent round of violence may deepen this solidarity between Palestinians and Black Americans. The rhetoric, imagery, and protest tactics that developed in the wake of Floyd's death are already influencing Palestinian activists and helping them spread their message on social media, particularly English-language services”; and in [The Intercept](#) on how “ [w]ith the newfound skepticism of law enforcement and incarceration wrought by

² In the background, progressive foreign policy has centered on an ‘inclusive foreign policy’ approach, promoted, for example, by [Ihan Omar](#), which seeks to engage uniformly through a human-rights centered concept framed through progressive ‘conceptual categories,’ and in which Israel can be framed through the prism of white privileged regional oppressor.

³ See [here](#): “Progressives on the rise today are more likely to draw parallels between the plight of the Palestinians and the injustices faced by Black Americans, or to compare Israel's posture with apartheid-era South Africa.” See also Rashida Tlaib on Israel maintaining an apartheid system ([here](#), for example) and this AOC [tweet](#) stating that, “Apartheid states aren't democracies.”

the George Floyd movement, many in the “woke” world seem to have found resonance with the scenes of Palestinian civilian protests throughout the territories and Israel...”

- Discourse on the confluence between plight of Israeli Arabs and BLM: [See](#) for example, “The murder of George Floyd... started a global movement. The same themes that provoked those reckonings exist in the struggle of Sheikh Jarrah...”
- Relating ‘Israeli human rights violations’ to systemic racism in American police violence against Black people: See this analysis in [Slate](#) of how Black and Palestinian solidarity has “fostered more attention to how these technologies of oppression... are intimately intertwined. Not only does the U.S. government give billions of dollars in military aid to Israel each year, but U.S. metropolitan police forces receive training in Israel. The same surveillance technologies and security contractors engaged to quell protests in the U.S. are also used by the Israeli military.” See also this [Teen Vogue](#) article relating Israeli human rights violations to American policing.
- Discourse on Jewish support for Israel as complicity with racism: [See](#) on a letter that dozens of American rabbinical students issued calling on American Jewish communities to hold Israel accountable for “violent suppression of human rights,” and accusing American Jewish institutions of complicity with racial violence because of their silence on Israeli and Palestinian inequality.
- The way the base views the conflict: From the [New York Times](#), “.. the ascendant left views it as a searing racial justice issue that is deeply intertwined with the politics of the United States.” The article quotes James Zogby: ““The base of the party is moving in a very different direction than where the party establishment is. If you support Black Lives Matter, it was not a difficult leap to saying Palestinian lives matter, too.”

See also: An [organizer](#) of San Francisco Palestinian solidarity march, “We see the Black struggle for liberation the same as the Palestinian struggle for liberation... We are joining in our struggles, we have people from the Black Lives Matter movement coming to our protest today, just as we went to the George Floyd Black Lives Matter protests,” and #PalestinianLivesMatter [trending](#).⁴

De-exceptionalizing the U.S.-Israel relationship

By imposing blanket categorizations, progressive discourse can fail to capture, or actively distort, the Jewish experience, including that its vulnerability tracks differently. This flattening of identity and context can result in a failure to distinguish the pillars underlying the U.S.-Israel relationship, or Israel’s unique circumstance within the region, in conducting engagement

⁴ Popular celeb angle: [See](#) Gigi Hadad to her 60 million Instagram followers, “One cannot advocate for racial equality... and other injustices yet choose to ignore the Palestinian oppression,” and Halsey, “It is not ‘too complicated to understand’ that brown children are being murdered + people are being displaced under the occupation of one of the most powerful armies in the world.”

This threat is manifesting in rhetoric on the current violence that challenges the status quo of U.S. support for Israel as singling Israel out for exceptional treatment, and attacks on Biden’s foreign policy for not uniformly applying progressive metrics of oppression and criteria for vulnerability in evaluating the conflict and actors. See: The statement [issued](#) by approximately 140 progressive groups calling on the Biden administration to condemn the Israeli government on the basis that “the Biden administration has said that it's going to respect human rights around the world and Israel should be no exception”; a [Foreign Policy](#) piece describing the U.S. “... being so out on a limb and so far from these professed commitments and values when it comes to Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians exposes the U.S. government to vulnerabilities that can easily be exploited by others.” In relation to receiving aid, see [Betty McCollum](#): “By treating Israel differently than any other country receiving U.S. assistance, the U.S. is effectively giving a green light to Israel...” See also the [Bernie Sanders’ New York Times piece](#) calling on the U.S. to encourage an immediate cease-fire in the Middle East and adopt an “even-handed approach.” (In contrast, see Anthony Blinken’s arguing against the idea of equivalence between a terrorist group firing rockets and Israel defense measures, [here](#) for example.)

A partner concept to this take on ‘even-handedness’ is ‘equity of outcome,’ which posits that given an assumption that all human beings are equally deserving, and one group enjoys a pervasive advantage in outcome over another (measured, for example, by wealth, or, in times of crisis, body counts), the logical conclusion is that the advantaged group is unfairly taking from the other.⁵ This gives a clear indication of where blame should be placed. In the context of the current conflict, **the pervasiveness of this lens strengthens claims of ‘disproportionate’ force used by the IDF and the imbalance in casualties as evidence of culpability** (see [Slate](#) piece on “a surge in attention to the asymmetry inherent in this conflict. U.S. social media has been filled with critiques of the illegal Israeli occupation and accounts of the disproportionate use of force ...”).

Importantly, in the background, Biden has centered on a human rights-based foreign policy agenda, which leaves him in a position of needing to justify his approach. See: in [Vox](#), titled “Biden wants human rights at the center of his foreign policy. Israel is a test”; and AOC attack on Biden on the basis of accountability to a human rights-centered foreign policy approach [here](#).

The mainstreaming of anti-Israel policy rhetoric on the Democratic left

This latest round of Israeli-Palestinian violence happens at a political moment characterized by the emergence of a **robust progressive organizational infrastructure and prominent progressive policy voices.** They play a central role in mainstreaming the progressive brand of activism in opposition to the Israeli side of the conflict on the left and in the Democratic Party, evident in:

⁵ See Ibram X. Kendi [here](#): “Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing... A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups.”

- The Squad platform brings policy prominence to anti-Israel rhetoric, see [here](#) and [here](#).
- Ubiquitous and prominent ‘can’t miss it’ coverage broadcasting the point that there is a deepening rift among Democrats around support for Israel, and growing pressure on Biden from the left wing of the Democratic Party, as significant new developments. See in: The New York Times [here](#) and [here](#), the [Economist](#), [The Hill](#), [The Guardian](#), the Washington Post [here](#) and [here](#), and the [NBC News](#).
- Louder and wider circle of critical voices on Israel, including longtime pro-Israel Democrats [here](#) and [here](#).
- Pushback against support for Israel from powerful progressive voices: See [here](#) against Ed Markey in context of Green New Deal and including Sunrise Movement, and [here](#) against Andrew Yang. See also an [Axios](#) piece stating that Chuck Schumer’s “longtime support for Israel puts him on a collision course with the progressive wing of his party as the conflict between Israel and Hamas worsens... This is the toughest political position the New York Democrat has been in since becoming majority leader. The fighting in the Middle East is dividing his party – and creating a clear rift among its different wings.”
- Linkage between disapproval of the Israeli campaign and demands to restrict or condition aid is center stage.⁶ Since recent events in Israel exploded, discourse opposing Israeli actions in recent weeks has frequently connected the issue to aid restriction (see, for example, [here](#), and Bernie Sanders calling for a ceasefire and in the same [tweet](#) to “also take a hard look at nearly \$4 billion a year in military aid to Israel. It is illegal for U.S. aid to support human rights violations.”)

Notably, commentary frequently frames U.S. aid to Israel as usurped from investment in the American people. See for example: The argument that U.S. aid to Israel comes at the expense of funding to help Black lives in the U.S., [here](#); and Nicholas Kristof in the New York Times in a [column](#) titled, “What Your Taxes Are Paying For in Israel” questioning whether it is “really a better use of our taxes than... national pre-K at home?”

⁶ Prior to the recent conflagration between Israel and Palestinians, the growing centrality of the idea of conditioning or restricting U.S. aid to Israel attention pointed to a shifting discourse (see [here](#): “...what was once a solid, bipartisan wall of support for unconditional US support for Israel is slowly cracking”).

Significantly, the public opinion climate enables the normalization of this rhetoric. See for example, a Gallup poll [published](#) in March found that, among Democrats, 53 percent want the U.S. to pressure Israel more, the first time a majority has taken that position. Research cited in the [Washington Post](#) shows that a majority of Democratic voters support imposing sanctions or at least some form of tougher measures on Israel over its expansion of settlements. JStreet’s going on the “offense, carefully” on aid restriction, see [here](#), also indicates a degree of mainstreaming of the prospect on the left.

Challenged Jewish identification with Israel on the left

The divergence between intensifying “woke” values on the global left, on the one hand, and realities on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the other hand, are increasing stressors on support for Israel, particularly noteworthy among Jewish communities.⁷ Importantly, Israel is not the same Israel as it was in previous campaigns. The right-wing government is seen as more deeply entrenched. Hopes for a two-state solution have significantly faded. A perceived right-wing shift and increased influence of the religious right has diminished degrees of sympathy.⁸ The effects of these shifts on Jewish support for Israel is evident in relation to the recent round of violence, during which time discourse has highlighted:

- **The contribution of Jewish progressives to shifting Democratic grounds on Israel.** [See](#) James Zogby on the recent success of pro-Palestinian advocacy, “If it weren’t for young, Jewish progressives ... we would be in a very different place right now.” According to Zogby, “the emergence of a vocal and organized community of Jewish Israel critics, ranging from the moderate group J Street to more radical factions, like IfNotNow and Jewish Voices for Peace, has created space for Arab Americans and other non-Jews to criticize the Israeli government with less fear of being brand an anti-Semite.”
- **A number of soul-searching pieces on clashes between Jewish identity and Israeli values,** for example [here](#); and on the unsustainability of the occupation, see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Notably, a recent piece by Peter Beinart advocating for a Palestinian right of return has been cited in mainstream media to illustrate a breaking of a Jewish consensus on Zionism (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

⁷ For background: “Most Jews are not fans of Netanyahu, and only a third think Israel is sincere about peace with the Palestinians” (see [here](#)).

⁸ Mainstream coverage examples: [attributing](#) the strengthening “faction of unabashed Israel critics in Congress” to the “dramatic rightward shift of Israeli politics under the 12-year premiership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,” noting in particular residual effects on the left of the Bibi-Trump alliance; and [describing](#) “Israel’s Unraveling.”