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January 2025



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Introduction

The devastation resulting from Israel's brutal war on the Gaza Strip has been the most pivotal global event in the United States (US) and around the world over the past year. The unprecedented violence, coupled by heavy American military, diplomatic and financial support to Israel, have pushed the war to center-stage in the US. Yet, the most notable development in relation to the war on Gaza in the US has been the student protests, and more generally the Pro-Palestine protest movement that has swept the US, as well as Canada and many parts of Europe.

Politicians and political pundits alike were surprised and horrified at the mass demonstrations held in America's cities. The presence of tens of thousands of people marching through America's urban centers to demand an end to the Biden administration's policy of providing unwavering support to Israel was an unforeseen development to many. Israel is, first and foremost, the US's closest ally in the Middle East region. Israel has enjoyed bi-partisan support from both Congress and the White House for decades. Israel also enjoys the privileges of soft power in the United States, in fields such as the mainstream media, the entrepreneurial sector, and the entertainment industry.

American academia has historically been less supportive of Israel relative to other institutions. The fact that university populations tend to be more diverse, younger and more intellectually-oriented than other American institutions has made academia a place for members of underrepresented groups to speak their minds freely about their struggles, including the Palestinian cause. For this reason, student movements, for instance Students for Justice in Palestine, have long established an organizational network on American campuses that is lacking in other public spheres in the US. Nevertheless, the unprecedented scale of the mass protests that took place across American campuses, and the protests spilled over onto the streets beyond the universities and colleges, came as a shock to many.

In this paper I aim to explain the sudden rise of the pro-Palestine protests and the Pro-Palestine student movement in the US and assess its achievements. I will also highlight the pushback it received from the Washingtonian elites and generational shifts within the American debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The protest movement in numbers

Per a study conducted by the University of Connecticut and Harvard University's Crowd Counting Consortium, thousands of protests¹ took place in the United States between October 7th, 2023 and the end of the past academic year in late-April 2024. Over 130 campuses were the sites of organized student encampments, particularly during the months of April-May 2024. The data also indicate that over 525 protests took place at universities and high schools across the US and that the country witnessed roughly 3,700 days of "protests against the genocide".² Unlike the wider protest movement, the student protest movement that took place on US campuses focused on one general demand: divestment from companies linked to the Israeli war machine. In some universities, such as Columbia and Yale, the protestors also demanded an end to joint academic and research projects with Israeli institutions.³

The fact that the university encampments were set up at Ivy League universities including Harvard, Stanford and Princeton raised the profile of the protest movement in the media globally. The two universities that received the most attention from the media are Columbia University in New York and UCLA in Los Angeles. The Columbia University encampment was the first of hundreds of encampment protests to be set up across the United States. In April 2024, the international media's attention turned to Columbia after a group of student protestors took over Hamilton Hall, which houses the university's administration, and renamed the building "Hind's Hall", in honor of Hind Rajab, a five-year-old Gazan girl who was murdered by Israeli military forces along with her family and two paramedics who had come to rescue her.⁴

The UCLA protests also garnered widespread attention as they turned violent as a result of attacks by pro-Israeli students against protestors.⁵ Violence against the student protest movement has become a contentious political issue; while many politicians and journalists have accused the protestors of antisemitism and violence (without providing evidence to substantiate their accusations), it was, in fact, the protestors who were the victims of violence in Los Angeles. A study published by the University of Connecticut indicates that over 250 pro-Palestinian student protestors were incarcerated at UCLA⁶ in early May a day after counter-protestors violently attempted to disrupt the encampment, injuring several protestors in the process.⁷

1. Ulfelder, Jay. (2024, May 30). Crowd Counting Consortium: An Empirical Overview of Recent Pro-Palestine Protests at U.S. Schools. [Harvard Kennedy School](#).

2. Ibid.

3. Saric, Ivana. (2024, April 26). What pro-Palestinian protesters on college campuses want. [AXIOS](#).

4. Aljazeera. (2024, May 1). 'Hind Hall': How Columbia's Hamilton Hall became its signature protest hub. [Aljazeera](#).

5. Ramirez, Nikki McCann. (2024, May 1). Pro-Israel Demonstrators Attack UCLA Student Encampment as Protests Continue Nationwide. [RollingStone](#).

6. Ulfelder, Jay. Reference No. 1.

7. Ramirez, Nikki McCan. Reference No. 5.

The fact that a significant portion of the student protestors in the pro-Palestine movement are Jewish students also came as a shock to many in the US. The question of whether the Jewish community continues to stand as a monolith in support of Israel caught the media's attention during the protests.⁸ Thousands of Jewish students, as well as Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voices for Peace and If Not Now, played a major role in the protests. The large and well-organized presence of Jewish students and protestors⁹ from the earliest days of the protest movement reignited debates about the meaning of antisemitism and the limits of support for Israel in the US.¹⁰

The success of the student encampment protests, as they came to be known in the US, was soon picked up on by student activists in Europe. By May 2024, encampments and mass protests were regularly taking place in European countries, followed by the mass arrests of protestors in the Netherlands, Germany and Austria, among others.¹¹

Despite the ongoing debate over the protests in the west – with pro-Israel elements claiming them to be anti-Semitic in nature and supporters viewing them as a movement against an American-funded genocide – there is a consensus that the protest movement in the US has been a huge success. The protests received unprecedented media coverage and cast US policy towards Israel and Palestine in a negative light. Several factors led to the success of the protest movement, first and foremost the fact that the movement reflects the US's present-day demographic makeup.

A changing American demography and narrative

Unlike the supporters of Israel, who occupy the echelons of power who hail largely from a narrow racial and cultural background, the protest movement more accurately represents the US's contemporary multicultural fabric. While Israel sought to garner support from a variety of communities in the United States, the bulk of its support has come from established communities that are largely White and Christian. However, due to changing attitudes on religiosity in the west and a rise in non-European immigration to the US, the core supporters of Israel in the country are not as demographically dominant as they were in the past.

8. Omer, Atalia. (2024, May 21). For many American Jews protesting for Palestinians, activism is a journey rooted in their Jewish values. [The Conversation](#).

9. Jewish Voice for Peace. (Undated). The largest ever Jewish protest in solidarity with Palestinians. [Jewish Voice for Peace](#).

10. For more see: Chenoweth, E. (2024, October 18). Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023–2024. [HARVARD Kennedy School](#).

11. Kassam, Ashifa. (2024, May 7). Clashes and arrests as pro-Palestinian protests spread across European campuses. [The Guardian](#).

Another factor in the success of the protest movement has been its ability to attract younger Americans to engage in protest against their government's policies towards Gaza. Many protestors both on university campuses and in the wider public sphere are relatively young. The generational gap between the Pro-Palestine protestors and Israel's supporters lends credence to the student movement. Polls have confirmed this finding, revealing divergence in positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on age, and indicating that younger Americans sympathize more with the Palestinian cause than do older Americans.¹²

In short, the multi-ethnic pro-Palestine student movement projected a more authentic reflection of US public opinion and of America's demographic future. Indeed, once America's new demographic makeup is better reflected in its political establishment, it will become much more difficult for Israel and its supporters to uphold the US-Israeli alliance as it currently stands.

A central message of the pro-Palestine student movement in the US that has not received much attention is the protestors' opposition to their government's close involvement in and support for the Israeli war machine. Since the start of the war on Gaza, the US has provided Israel with over 18 billion dollars in aid.¹³ This aid package comes in addition to the 3.8 billion dollars in military aid that Israel receives from the US annually.¹⁴ Furthermore, the United States has vetoed three ceasefire resolutions that have come before the United Nations Security Council since December 2023.¹⁵ The US eventually passed its own ceasefire resolution in March 2024, and yet failed to implement a ceasefire on the ground. While the US officially blames Hamas, many officials within the administration accuse the Israeli government of sabotaging a ceasefire agreement.¹⁶ The fact that every US ceasefire proposal to date has been rejected by Netanyahu's government without repercussions for Israel has also angered many protestors, who would like to see their government challenge Israel and Netanyahu's rejectionist posture.

Many protestors are convinced that if the US were to end her support for the Israeli war machine or use her leverage to force Israel to end the hostilities, then the war would end immediately. Thus, the protestors regard the Gaza war as an internal US issue as much as a global issue and have sought to force their government to change course over it.

12. Moulton, Cyrus. (2024, February 23). A generational divide on views of Israel ... in both parties, according to new survey. [Northeastern Global News](#); Jordan, Muchnick; Kamarck, Elaine. (2023, November 9). The generation gap in opinions toward Israel. [Brookings](#).

13. Knickmeyer, Ellen. (2024, October 7). U.S. military aid for Israel tops \$17.9 billion since last Oct. 7. [PBS NEWS](#).

14. Masters, Jonathan; Merrow, Will. (2024, May 31). U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts. [Council on Foreign Relations](#).

15. Bengali, Shashank. (2024, March 22). A Look at the Three Previous U.N. Cease-Fire Resolutions the U.S. Vetoed. [The New York Times](#).

16. Tibon, Amir; Koury, Jack. (2024, August 11). U.S. and Other Mediators Threaten to Call Out Israel, Hamas if Gaza Hostage Talks Fail. [Haaretz](#).

Biden's Zionism as a driver of the protest movement

Outrage at the American administration's reluctance to stop Israel from continuing the war in Gaza is coupled with anger that many protestors hold towards Joe Biden personally. The outgoing American president spent 36 years as a member of the Senate and eight years as Vice President before entering the White House. Throughout his long political career, Biden has been known for his pro-Israel stance and to be one of the largest recipients of political donations from pro-Israel lobbying groups.¹⁷

A report released in January 2024 publicized the fact that Biden supported Israel's brutal tactics during the first Lebanon war in 1982. In a meeting with then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1982, Biden stated, "I support your efforts [in Lebanon] and will fight even if the price includes [dead] women and children". Biden's hawkish comments were even rebuked by the right-wing Begin, who responded, "According to our values, it is forbidden to hurt women and children, even in war."¹⁸

Many believe that Biden's ideological commitment to Israel has undermined his ability to end the war and broker a deal that would serve American interests. Biden's perceived apathy in the face of the unprecedented numbers of innocent civilians killed in Gaza stems from his pro-Israel position. Even at the height of the war, amid a flood of international accusations against Israel for committing war crimes, Biden maintained his unwavering support for the state. In February 2024, Biden stated on national television, "I am a Zionist; you do not have to be Jewish to be a Zionist."¹⁹ Biden has even lent his support to the Israeli propaganda war, repeating false reports about "beheaded babies" in the early weeks of the war.²⁰ For many of the protestors, Biden's stance on Israel's policies in Gaza is not only a distortion of American values and ideals, but also a testament to the generational divide on Israel and Zionism within US society.

The generational divide extends to Arab Americans and Jewish Americans, albeit for differing reasons. Among young Jewish Americans, particularly young non-Orthodox Jews, Israel's policies and narrative stand out as antithetical to the American-Jewish experience. Most young American Jews were raised in a multi-cultural environment that emphasizes equal rights for all, particularly minorities, including American Jews. Thus, supporting Israel's ethno-nationalist project, which involves embedded institutional discrimination against the country's largest minority (Palestinians with Israeli citizenship), is an unattractive proposition for most young American Jews.

17. "Open Secrets" staff. Pro-Israel Recipients: Money from Pro-Israel Groups to US Senators 1990-2024. [Open Secrets](#).

18. Scahill, Jeremy. (2021), April 27). 1982: Israeli Invasion of Lebanon. [The Intercept](#).

19. The American Presidency Project. (2024, February 26). Interview with Seth Meyers on NBC's "Late Night". [The American Presidency Project](#).

20. Scahill, Jeremy. (2023, December 14). Joe Biden keeps repeating his false claim that he saw pictures of beheaded babies. [The Intercept](#).

The protest movement on US campuses also saw a greater organized presence of Arab Americans. Unlike their parents, most young Arab Americans are not immigrants, but were born in the US and are fully integrated into mainstream US culture. Young Arab Americans were therefore better able to present their arguments in a coherent manner to the general public. They used their civic rights to mobilize the Arab and Muslim communities, particularly in the state of Michigan, which is among the most important states in the 2024 presidential election.

The rise of the progressives and the changing nature of the Democratic Party

Changes in the US political landscape over the last few years have also contributed to the mainstreaming of the protest movement. The rise of the progressives within the Democratic Party over the last decade paved the way for greater pro-Palestinian activism within the party's leadership. Since 2018, the Palestinian cause has had an active congressional caucus within the Democratic Party advocating on its behalf. While the caucus represents only 3-4% of the entire Democratic caucus in congress, the progressives have nonetheless succeeded in capturing the attention of many Democratic Party supporters. A poll published by the University of Maryland in March 2024 indicated that 47% of Democrats believe Israel's actions in Gaza "have gone too far."²¹ Just 15% of Democrats believe that Israel's actions are justified. Activists in the Democratic Party have been at the forefront of demands for a ceasefire and a more assertive American approach towards Netanyahu's policies on Gaza. A study published by Pew Research in April 2024²² found that 47% of Democrats aged 18-29 supported the Palestinian cause, compared to a mere 7% who supported Israel. A poll conducted by Harvard University's Center for Political Studies found that 60% of young Americans believe that Israel's actions constitute "genocide".²³

The shifts in attitudes within the Democratic Party are not entirely surprising. Many Democrats have been particularly frustrated with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his interference in American politics. They lamented Netanyahu's attempt to scrap the JCPOA agreement (i.e. the Nuclear Deal) between Iran and the United States in 2015. Furthermore, Netanyahu's attempt to interfere in the 2012 presidential elections in favor of the Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, added to frustrations with Israel within the Democratic Party. Netanyahu's non cooperative attitude toward the Biden administration during the Gaza war, despite the administration's full support for

21. Telhami, Shibley. (2024, March 8). Americans feel the need to be extra careful when discussing Israel-Palestine. [Brookings](#).

22. Silver, Laura. (2024, April 2). Younger Americans stand out in their views of the Israel-Hamas war. [Pew Research Center](#).

23. Harvard Harris Poll. (2023). Harvard Caps Harris Poll. [Harvard Harris Poll](#).

Israel, is further alienating Democrats, particularly younger Democrats. The frustrations with Netanyahu's policies have helped create an unprecedented atmosphere in American politics that is antagonistic toward Israeli interests. Trump's election may soothe tensions between the US and Israel temporarily, but the underlying forces challenging Israel's status in Washington are only growing.

The pro-Israel response and future prospects of pro-Palestine activism in the US

The success of the pro-Palestine student protest movement has alarmed many supporters of Israel due to its strategic implications. After all, the apartheid regime in South Africa began to crumble only once it lost American and western support. The American student movement began highlighting the injustices taking place in apartheid South Africa following the end of the Vietnam War. After just a few years of advocacy, the anti-apartheid stance of the students' movement at the time was adopted by a new generation of politicians in Washington.²⁴

A young Senator by the name of Joe Biden was among the leaders of the anti-apartheid movement in Congress during the 1970s and 1980s that eventually brought an end to the relationship between the US and apartheid South Africa and imposed crippling sanctions on the latter. As a result, the apartheid regime was dissolved, and a multi-ethnic democracy established in its place. Many supporters of Israel have voiced fears that the pro-Palestine students' movement could lead to anti-Israeli sentiment that will find its way into Congress in twenty years' time.

To prevent a replication of the South African experience in Washington, many of Israel's supporters have pushed back against the protest movement, mainly by weaponizing antisemitism. For years, advocates of Israel have been attempting to expand accepted definitions of antisemitism to include criticism of the State of Israel. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) included in its definition of antisemitism the act of calling Israel "a racist endeavor" and applying "double standards on Israel" as forms of antisemitism, leading many to sound the alarm that pro-Israel elements in the United States seek to curtail free speech in defense of Israeli crimes.²⁵ Moreover, leading Jewish-American institutions such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have begun including "expressions of opposition to Zionism" in their reports on antisemitism.²⁶

24. For more on the student movement and anti-Apartheid activism, see: Culverson, Donald. (1996). The Politics of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in the United States, 1969-1986. *Political Science Quarterly*, 111 (1).

25. Ullah, Areeb. (2021, April 16). Antisemitism: What is the IHRA definition and why is it controversial? [Middle East Eye](#).

26. Honderich, Holly. (2024, October 5). Antisemitic incidents in US surge to record high - report. [BBC](#).

Aside from weaponizing antisemitism, elected officials have targeted the protest movement directly. The Republican Governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, ordered state troopers to crackdown on protestors and called for them to be put in jail even though no violence was reported.²⁷ The Republican Governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, denounced the protestors and promised to expel protestors "that intimidate Jewish students" from their universities.²⁸ In a further attempt to intimidate Palestinians in the US, Republican Congressman Ryan Zinke of Montana proposed a bill aiming to cancel US visas for all Palestinians.²⁹ In November 2023, incitement by elected officials against the protest movement reached a peak when Congress voted to censure Palestinian-American congresswoman Rashida Tlaib. It was only the 26th time in history that a Member of Congress was censured, and the first occasion for a foreign policy-related topic.³⁰

Another tactic employed by supporters of Israel to silence the student protests is threatening their future livelihoods. Pro-Israel billionaires such as Bill Ackman have threatened to blacklist graduates who participated in the protests from employment in their companies in the hopes of intimidating them to bring an end to their protests.³¹ Pro-Israel billionaires and their Republican allies in Congress scored a symbolic victory when they succeeded in bringing about the resignation of the Presidents of Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania for their perceived lack of protection of Zionist students. These tactics aim to force academic institutions to take a more forceful stance against the protest movement. A study conducted by the University of Maryland found that over 80% of Middle East studies scholars in American academia resort to self-censorship when discussing Israel in order to avoid persecution.³²

Summary

The pro-Palestine students' protest movement in the US sheds light on broader shifts occurring in the American political landscape, as a result of the factors and trends outlined in this paper. For the first time in decades, Israel is facing a serious crisis of support among the American public. Influential figures in the political, academic and

27. Hennessy-Fiske, Molly; Svitek, Patrick. (2024, April 25). Criticism, praise of Texas governor after dramatic use of troopers on protesters. [The Washington Post](#).

28. McDonald, Scott. (2024, April 26). Anti-Israel protesters at Florida universities can be 'expelled': DeSantis. [Fox News](#).

29. Timotija, Filip. (2023, November 3). GOP Rep. Zinke proposes bill to ban Palestinians from entering US. [THE HILL](#).

30. Farnoush, Amiri. (2023, November 8). House votes to censure Rep. Rashida Tlaib over her Israel-Hamas rhetoric in a stunning rebuke. [Associated Press](#).

31. Bushard, Brian. (2023, October 7). Billionaire Ackman, Others Pledge They Won't Hire Harvard Students Who Signed Letter Blaming Israel For Hamas Attack. [Forbes](#).

32. Lynch, Marc; Telhami, Shibley. (2023, December 5). Scholars Who Study the Middle East Are Afraid to Speak Out. [THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION](#).

social spheres of the country are openly questioning US support for Israel and calling for radical change in the country's policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While most of these changes are a result of developments that occurred prior to the current war, the success of the protest movement has provided a new framework for Palestinian activism in the west that has been overlooked by Arab and Israeli elites alike.

However, resistance from Israel's supporters in the centers of power in the United States should not be underestimated. Despite the unprecedented nature and scale of the protest movement and the mass outpouring of sympathy for Gazans from the American public, Israel remains an influential actor in Washington. Israel still enjoys the support of the vast majority of Members of Congress, outgoing President Biden, and President-elect Trump, along with most of his Cabinet nominees. Israel also still commands considerable support among many sections of the American public. While it is true that a shift has been taking place among Democrats and younger voters in particular, many Americans still consider the historical US alliance with Israel to be worth preserving.

Hence, it is difficult to predict at this stage how the struggle of Pro-Palestine student protestors will develop over the coming months. This depends, of course, on the developments of the war on the ground, the policies of the incoming Trump administration, and the ability of the students to withstand the pressures exerted by Israel's supporters on themselves and their academic institutions.



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