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Why Has Palestinian Activism Been So Successful?

And what can the pro-Israel movement learn?



WHAT DOES it take to build a movement? According to Simon Greer, a longtime community and labor organizer active in Obama's 2008 presidential campaign who now does anti-polarization work, social movements go through several distinct developmental stages as they grow and achieve lasting change.

First, successful movements usually begin on the margins of society, where they offer a critique of the mainstream, pointing out a contradiction between the society's stated values and its reality. This is where and how the movement gathers its initial energy. For example, the civil rights movement began with labor efforts such as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (the first all-black union founded in 1925)


and highlighted the tension between the American ideals of “liberty and justice for all” and the realities of racial segregation.

Gaining steam, an activist movement then cultivates its own language, narrative, and culture expressed through coherent and replicable practice. In the civil rights movement, “We Shall Overcome” and similar songs were adopted by communities and popular singers alike, broadening the influence of the movement by promoting acts of nonviolent resistance: freedom rides, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches.

These practices quickly engendered a sense of community and belonging. Previously on the margins, a successful movement now begins to take on a magnetic force, drawing in followers from the mainstream once the social rewards of affiliation outweigh the social costs that may have once seemed insurmountable. In the 1960s, it was groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the legendary Baptist churches of the South that served as centers of such rich, purposeful community.

The community then selects and elevates some of its members as heroes and martyrs—Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr. Attaching names to the communal narrative enhances its epic quality as a story that not only continues in the energetic present but that will endure well into the future when these names will be solidly memorialized.

In the final stage, a successful movement shifts societal norms, winning a combination of hearts and minds, structures and systems. By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement had not only achieved various formal goals, including the Supreme Court’s 1955 ruling striking down bus segregation and the passage of the Civil Rights Act ten years later, it had also meaningfully shifted the culture. Public attitudes toward race and civil rights had transformed across America, desegregation was the law, and government agencies worked to create opportunities for black Americans. The times, they were a-changin’.



But the times can also change for the worse. The success of a movement is not proof of its moral warrant. Plenty of nefarious movements—National Socialism in Germany, Soviet Communism in Russia—have seen their way through the same stages of development described above. Unlike civil rights in the United States, these movements led to social catastrophe rather than progress, even spreading their disastrous means and ends to other countries.

This is what we are witnessing today in the anti-Israel movement. The parallels of the above trajectory to this movement's success are well worth exploring, if only to examine what a more effective movement in support of Israel might look like.

Beginning on the margins. Before it registered on the radar screen of most Americans, the Palestinian narrative began to take hold in academia as the 1968 generation made its way into university humanities and social science departments. As Rachel Fish has documented in these pages, Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978, and a scholarship based on Marxism and postcolonialism slowly began to fester in academic obscurity. It took some years before Palestinian “resistance” against Israeli “domination” became de rigueur in elite universities, but it did so by generating energy on the margins of intellectual, political, and cultural discourse. The political version of what was happening in the academy was the Black Power movement, also at odds with the prevailing integrationist ethos, which came to embrace Palestinian militancy, giving a distant foreign movement an important ally on the fringes of American society.

Celebrity performers with fringe politics also eventually got in on the act: Vanessa Redgrave dedicated her 1978 Oscar to the “proud” Palestinian people standing up against “Zionist hoodlums.” (Before

the evening was over, she was rebuked on the same stage by Paddy Chayefsky, to great applause.)

Pointing out a contradiction between a society's stated values and its reality. As part of the antiestablishment culture of the 1960s, especially on campus, Palestinian activists positioned themselves as scrappy underdogs speaking truth to power (never mind that it was Israel that remained the real underdog in the region, not yet a beneficiary of American security guarantees, while facing the enmity of the entire Arab world and its allies in the Soviet Union). The Six-Day War of 1967, which although fought in defense resulted in the expansion of Israel's territory, only bolstered their position that Israel was belligerent and undeserving of Western, particularly European, support. The pro-Palestinian movement appropriated the language of human rights and, later, antiracism, arguing that standing up to institutional power meant opposing Zionism, even if it involved rejecting, rewriting, and politicizing history.

Cultivating its own language, narrative, and culture expressed through a coherent and replicable practice. The academic year of 2023–24 made the chant of “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” ubiquitous. But the Palestinian movement has long created easily replicable models for activism, particularly on campus. Israel Apartheid Week began in 2005 and quickly spread to major cities across the world, as well as becoming an annual staple at American and Canadian universities. Around the same time, BDS resolutions on campus, usually in the form of student referendums in which small percentages of students participate, gained traction. Although more than half have been defeated and none have yet been adopted at the administrative level, they have given momentum to a movement. The result is that divestment has made its way to the trustees of several universities.

Nowhere did we see how quickly a practice can be replicated than with the campus encampments that started with Columbia in April 2024: By the end of the month, copycat encampments had taken hold on 40 additional campuses.

Language that had been largely confined to academia was mainstreamed within the movement: *apartheid*, *colonialism*, *ethnic cleansing*. Despite the Israeli government's clear articulation that it is waging war against Hamas, the movement effectively rebranded it as a war on Palestinians, whom we have recently seen protesting Hamas themselves. The keffiyeh became a fashion statement. After October 7, the watermelon as a symbol of Palestinian "resistance" was being worn as a pin by airline attendants and public library staff. Paraglider imagery glorifying the way some Palestinian terrorists entered Israel on October 7 became hipster chic.

Engendering a sense of community and belonging. The chicness of pro-Palestinian activism has been strong since at least the founding of Students for Justice in Palestine in 1993. Fueled by dubious funding sources, the organization operates socially as a kind of anarchic political avant-garde. It has often been the first student group to ally with others on the political Left, claiming in the early 2000s, for example, that divestment from Israel was an equivalent demand to divestment from Sudan. They have done so as a way to expand the community, situating themselves as the center of social revolutionary gravity. While the rise of intersectionality brought the Palestinian movement many more allies among other racial and ethnic groups, the explosion of public support for "anti-racism" and Black Lives Matter in 2020 further mainstreamed the Palestinian cause within the movement for racial justice. Members of Congress such as Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib added political weight to the progressive-Palestinian alliance, and the num-

ber of clueless students joining the encampments in 2024 made clear that there was social capital to be gained by joining the protests. Amid a much-cited loneliness epidemic exacerbated by school lockdowns, young people are especially susceptible to the appeal of community in activism.

Elevating heroes and martyrs. While most students joining the encampments had not yet been born in 2000, the Muhammad al-Durrah affair of that year turned Palestinian children into martyrs of the movement. Following allegations that the 12-year-old child was killed by IDF fire, multiple investigations (including a meticulous report by James Fallows in *The Atlantic*) found it more likely that he had been killed by Palestinian fire—or possibly not killed at all. Cast as a Palestinian Emmett Till, al-Durrah was followed by Ahed Tamimi, arrested as a teenager for assaulting an Israeli soldier. Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who went to prison for hijacking a plane in 1969, was invited to speak at multiple college campuses in recent years (then becoming a free speech cause célèbre when some of these events were canceled under pressure). At George Washington University, Students for Justice in Palestine marked this stage by projecting the words *Glory to our martyrs* onto the walls of the university library. Now there is Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia University activist whose arrest by the Trump administration has turned him into a political martyr among progressives and libertarians for free speech.

Shifting societal norms. While the Palestinian movement still claims to be marginalized, it has been funded by some of the biggest names in philanthropy: Ford, Soros, Rockefeller, and others. The BDS movement has been legitimized through serious debate at the university trustee level, and its cause has been taken up by the human-rights

establishment. Riding the wave of intersectionality, DEI frameworks, and antiracism, Palestinian activists—with the support of Qatari funding—have influenced K–12 education through teachers’ unions, ethnic studies, and even pre-K lessons (college students need no longer take a Middle East studies class at Columbia to be inclined to see Israel as a colonizer and apartheid state). They have taken over Pride marches and the Women’s March (resulting in a meltdown over antisemitism), and blocked bridges, highways, and Thanksgiving Day parades.

So much for Jewish control of the media: In many print, broadcast, and social-media institutions, to be an activist on behalf of the Palestinians is to be mainstream, while to be Jewish or Zionist is to be marginalized. The Palestinian cause is part of the anti-Western zeitgeist that has taken hold of large portions of our education and government systems, not to mention areas where it seems completely irrelevant. At Columbia it has been included in classes on astronomy and architecture. The students reading *Orientalism* in the 1980s are now themselves teaching at elite universities, running NGOs and philanthropic foundations, and publishing widely.

Social-media platforms—and the mostly progressive influencers that dominate them—have given unprecedented reach to the Palestinian cause, with 86 percent of college students learning about the ongoing Hamas–Israel war through such avenues. Another popular (and now trusted) source for information, Wikipedia, has been commandeered by Palestinian activist editors and writers injecting their own bias and falsehoods into dozens of articles, including the entry on Zionism.

Misinformation in both social and mainstream media runs rampant because many journalists are predisposed to believe the Palestinian narrative: When there was an explosion at a Gazan hospital early in the war, everyone from the BBC to the *New York Times*

breathlessly amplified Hamas reports of an Israeli strike that caused 500 civilian deaths. That nearly every fact of this story was quickly shown to be untrue caused little soul-searching: The BBC is now investigating itself all over again for airing a documentary that relied on and whitewashed Hamas propaganda.

The most recent Gallup poll, in February 2025, shows fewer than half of Americans expressing more sympathy for Israel than the Palestinians, with Democrats sympathizing with the Palestinians over Israel by a 3–1 margin (59 percent to just 21 percent). Even among independents, just 42 percent felt more sympathy toward Israel.

If this isn't mainstream, what is?



It would be a mistake to ascribe the ascent of the Palestinian movement to any one set of factors, including those enumerated here. The role of the media, for example, does not fit neatly into this rubric but surely plays a more significant part than the above suggests. And, of course, to compare the pro-Palestinian movement to the American civil rights movement would be an insult to one of the most important and meaningful social justice movements in history. Palestinian activists have twisted history and good-faith politics in their efforts: Mohammad Al-Durrah, Ahed Tamimi, and Marwan Barghouti are not James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. The BDS movement lacks the noble aims of the Montgomery bus boycott, but to ill-educated students, the dishonesty is invisible. Palestinian activists have, in many ways, adopted the tactics of the civil rights movement for a far darker cause, building community and momentum around a narrative that should collapse in the face of rigorous scrutiny, and Israel's activists have been understandably unwilling to play by the same rules (or lack thereof).

The winds of culture don't seem to be in Israel's favor. Still, it is

worth asking what American Jews can learn from a movement-building perspective. Who are our heroes, and what are our mantras? How can we draw attention to the hypocrisy of shunning Israel among those fighting for human rights and against racism? And how do we build a community that others want to join?

Encampments took hold disproportionately at elite universities, yet that is also where the Jewish community spends much of its energy. Jewish college students are exhausted and constantly on the defensive. Perhaps rather than spending our resources fighting BDS resolutions at Harvard (whose attractiveness is already falling among Jews), we should tell Israel's story at the schools where it isn't heard. (SAPIR editor-in-chief Bret Stephens reports that one of the most robust conversations on Israel he's had on campus took place at Colorado Mesa University, a campus with slightly older students, including many veterans.)

David Bernstein, Rajiv Malhotra, Tyler Gregory, Dana White, and others have written in these pages about new allies — Asian Americans, Hindu Americans, historically black colleges and universities — where Israel activists can build community. As the tides turn against the ideological conformity of DEI, Israel activists have an opportunity to ride the momentum of the American desire for a return to sanity, including the values that undergird support for Israel.

The Israeli narrative resists simplification and therefore sloganeering. But in the age of protest and social media, pithy and memorable messaging is crucial. Israel is a story of self-determination, innovation, and resilience. Let's tell it less apologetically and more boldly and confidently than ever before. And—maybe—let's read the playbook as closely as our enemies have. *

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