

Bandwagon “Activism,” Uncritical Thinking, and the Ostracism of Jews in the Name of Progressive Anti-Zionism

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Abstract

The October 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Hamas changed the positionality of Jewish progressives in the United States. Left-leaning American Jews were suddenly viewed as politically conservative, right-wing, and even extremist by the same organizations they had supported and advocated for just days earlier. Many progressive activists and organizations, especially on college and university campuses, condemned Israel and shared anti-Zionist messages before Israel had even responded militarily to the massacre. While modern progressivism can be interpreted as critical in both thought and action, the unquestioning allegiance of some American progressives with Hamas and Palestine is rooted in factual inaccuracies, false equivalencies, and rehashed antisemitic stereotypes that have existed for millennia. The progressive left’s refusal to see the Israel-Palestine conflict as anything but a “with us or against us” binary has left American Jews in a state of existential flux. This paper explores the progressive’s reactionary, uncritical stance during the current Israel-Palestine conflict, the place of American Jews in the changing sociopolitical spectrum, and what this means for American Jews and progressive solidarity in the future.

Keywords: progressive left, anti-Zionism, activism, antisemitism

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Introduction

The Hamas attack of Israeli citizens in October 2023 was a life-changing event – not just for the Israeli citizenry, but for American Jews, as well. Overnight, those who lived their lives as liberal progressives (were) shifted right, far right, without their consent or active participation. In activist discourse, on social media, and on college and university campuses across the United States, American Jews, the vast majority of whom lean left politically¹, were positioned as politically conservative, right-wing, and even extremist by the same organizations they had supported and advocated for just a day prior.

In a striking exacerbation of the spreading antisemitic trend on college campuses across the country², liberal and progressive Jews have since become unwelcome in progressive communities; that is, unless they disavow the Jewish ideology of Zionism and the State of Israel and pledge their full support for both the safety and nationalist ambitions of Palestinians in Gaza. The explicit requirement or stated expectation that any Jewish American person must provide a perspective on the politics of Israel, regardless of that perspective, or choose a side in a related conflict, has been labeled antisemitic by nature, even by progressive groups³. Yet the tacit expectation today is that, in order to be progressive, one must denounce both Israel and an appropriated and reductivist understanding of Zionism. Given that approximately 80 percent of U.S. Jews report a connection (i.e., spiritual, political, ancestral, or otherwise) to Israel⁴, this expectation amounts to the exclusion of the majority of Jewish Americans from spaces that otherwise profess a dedication to social justice and the uplift of oppressed peoples.

While the actual meaning of progressivism in the U.S. has changed greatly over time⁵,

modern progressivism is believed to be concerned with “social and economic inequality and support for policy innovation and [sociocultural] institutional changes”⁶, such as the struggle for adequate housing, a living wage, and improved health care for all Americans⁷. Even more importantly, “Progressivism has historically been associated with science, rationality and an approach to government and society reliant on knowledge and empirical methods”⁸. Therefore, modern progressivism can be interpreted as critical in both thought and action; all economic and sociopolitical policies are meant to be questioned and analyzed for the betterment of all citizens in a democratic society. Yet, the unquestioning allegiance of some American progressives with the Palestinian cause, no matter the methods, is rooted in factual inaccuracies, false equivalencies, and rehashed antisemitic stereotypes that have existed for millennia. The critical foundation of modern progressive thought – the quest for knowledge and scientific truth for the betterment of society – seems to have been replaced with a pathos-driven reactionism, built upon a flimsy structure of vitriol, self-righteousness, and the refusal to see the Israel-Palestine conflict as anything but a demagogic “with us or against us” binary.

The progressive left’s collective abandonment of the Jewish community occurred before Israelis or American Jews had even the time to mourn their dead after the worst mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust. What has seemed like a never-ending attack on Zionism in the mass media, and on popular social media platforms like TikTok, in the months since has been deeply disappointing and, to many, dumbfounding. American Jews are left to wonder what has happened to the progressive organizations they had once supported. As many Jewish scholars, activists, and writers have offered testimony to their experiences of ostracism and isolation from progressive U.S. spaces⁹, it is not our intention to offer the same. Instead, this paper will draw upon rhetorical analysis informed by conceptual frameworks of critical pedagogy, critical

whiteness, and antisemitism studies to analyze the progressive stance during the current Israel-Palestine conflict and the place of American Jews in the changing sociopolitical spectrum.

First, we provide historical and theoretical context by offering a brief review of the existing literature on the themes and rhetorical dynamics of supposedly progressive antisemitism since the second half of the twentieth century. Then, we discuss four interrelated dynamics prevalent among the U.S. Progressive Left since the October 7th attacks and resultant war in Israel and Gaza that serve, intentionally or incidentally, to isolate Jewish progressives, especially in academic spaces, from their presumed ideological peers. These dynamics are an uncritical bandwagon “activism,” symbolic solidarity, binary thinking, and a misunderstanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict informed by privilege, distance, and reductive applications of U.S. racial discourse. To illustrate and explicate these dynamics with greater detail and specificity, we consider the rhetorical operations that sustain each dynamic. As progressive Jewish scholars and educators ourselves, our intent is to shine a spotlight on the hypocrisy of modern progressive movements that exclude American Jews in the name of anti-Zionism. Rather than being so hubristic as to suggest simple solutions for pervasive problems, we hope this examination will encourage our progressive colleagues to better reintegrate Jewish perspectives into U.S. progressive spaces and achieve the inclusive, critical ideals of progressivism that appear to have been sorely misplaced.

The Recycled Rhetorics of Leftist Antisemitism

The idea that (supposed) progressive communities would turn against Jewish people is likely not new nor even surprising to the Jewish scholars who have long written about the antisemitic and increasingly antidemocratic rhetoric of the U.S. left. Over the past two decades, scholars (many themselves progressives) have pointed to the overt and covert antisemitic

ideologies and rhetoric emerging from contemporary progressive movements, often, ironically, under the guise of human-rights activism¹⁰. The rhetoric of these movements has, at times, been overtly and expressly antisemitic, such as at the 2001 United Nations Durban World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerances, at which representatives of countries and nongovernmental organizations displayed Nazi symbols and simultaneously, if ironically, asserted that antisemitism should no longer be identified as a contemporary form of racism¹¹. More often, however, antisemitic ideologies have been disseminated through covert yet complex rhetorical dynamics such as the erasure of Jewish memory¹², (mis)appropriation of Jewish beliefs and concepts, the reduction of complex social and cultural dynamics into political and intellectual binarism¹³, and the de-Judaization of both the Holocaust¹⁴ and Middle Eastern history¹⁵, as well as strategies of conflation¹⁶, metaphor and metonymy¹⁷, analogy¹⁸, victim-blaming, and inversion¹⁹.

The progressive left antisemite's toolbox comprises these strategies and others; importantly, the operation of these tools by "those who think of themselves as antiracist and democratic"²⁰ long predates the terrorist attack of October 7 and the ensuing war. The metonymic usage of "Zionist" as derogatory codeword for "Jew," for example, was common in the 1950s, when it was employed in the Soviet Union by the political left²¹ and in the U.S. by the political right²², and it has been employed in much the same manner since by American and European white supremacist groups as well as Islamist terrorist organizations²³. Likewise, comparisons between Israel and Nazis are not new; these comparisons, which might be considered "articulatory practice" in that they create associations among concepts with societal implications²⁴, were already in operation in the mid-twentieth century²⁵. What was once "the major trope in the 1960s and 1970s Soviet antisemitism"²⁶ has been one of the foremost

rhetorical strategies of progressive anti-Zionism in the twenty-first century²⁷.

As historian and scholar of antisemitism James Wald has noted, “it should be disturbing that the Holocaust-Auschwitz linkage is by far the most common analogy employed in English-language coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict...The more it occurs the more we should be on our guard”²⁸. It *should* be disturbing, yet what is perhaps most disturbing is not just how undisturbed so many so-called progressives seem to be by it, but also the frequency and vigor with which they weaponize the genocide of Jewish people just eighty years ago against Jewish people today.

If the particular rhetorical dynamics of antisemitism in the wake of the October 7th attacks didn’t shock Jewish scholars, however, the rapid emergence and widespread dissemination of antisemitic rhetoric were far more surprising. As U.S. diplomat and Middle East policy expert Dennis Ross wrote in February 2024: “Antisemitism came as no surprise to me, but how quickly it was unleashed...did”²⁹.

The Progressive Left Defense of Hamas

In the immediate aftermath of Hamas’ massacre of Jews in Israel, non-Jewish Americans who identified as politically and socially progressive staunchly defended the Hamas attack. On university campuses across the United States, support for Hamas was placed at the forefront. As evidence, an associate history professor at Cornell University stated at a pro-Palestinian rally that he felt “exhilarated” by the horrific Hamas massacre on October 7³⁰. Just one day after the invasion, a professor at Columbia University wrote an online article that praised the actions of Hamas. He asserted that the surprise attack was an “astounding,” “awesome,” “remarkable,” and “shocking success of the Palestinian offensive”³¹. These perspectives were shared by entire academic programs as well: Via Facebook, the Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas

(AMED) Studies program at San Francisco State University posted a picture of Hamas militants bulldozing through an Israeli security wall and stated that the attack was an “epic and unprecedented Palestinian Offensive” by “resistance fighters” against “settler-colonial regimes”³². And, as we will unpack later in this essay, multiple university ethnic studies programs across the United States released statements of support for Palestine in the days following October 7 in which there was no mention of Hamas, the initial attack of Israel, the taking of hostages, or the brutal murder of 1,200 Israelis.

There was neither time nor place for solace or sympathy for Israeli deaths, it seemed; online and in the streets, students, activists, and academics vociferously excused, refuted, and even celebrated Israeli murders by Hamas, even though the organization’s admitted purpose is to wipe all Jews off the face of the earth³³. Yet, both Israeli Jews and American Jews, even those who felt no personal connection to or political inclination regarding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, were framed as genocidal, inhumane, child-killers aligned with the Jewish state – simply for being Jewish. Just days after the attack, chapters of progressive left organizations in the U.S., such as Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Socialists of America³⁴, insinuated, in not-so-subtle terms, that the 1,200 Israeli civilians deserved to be raped, tortured, and slaughtered because of the Israeli government’s policies regarding Palestine. These callous and flippant responses suggested that Israelis, by virtue of being Israelis, had - to put it crassly - been asking for it.

In light of the erroneous and reductive framings of Israel as a white supremacist oppressor³⁵, Jewish people were likely less surprised that the entity of Israel was positioned as having “asked for it,” so to speak, than that civilian victims, many of whom were peace activists who worked alongside Palestinians, were seemingly, by proxy of simply being Israeli, accused of

being white, colonial oppressors. Jews were left to wonder: Did progressives actually believe that young Israeli children and the elderly deserved to be slaughtered and burned alive? Did they believe that Israeli women deserved to be tortured, raped, and mutilated before being murdered with knives, box cutters, and nail guns³⁶?

If leftist organizations suggested that Israelis deserved to be maimed and murdered simply for being Israeli, some more mainstream progressive and humanitarian organizations refused to acknowledge that these atrocities were even committed against Israelis at all. In late October 2023, the United Nations, the same international intergovernmental alliance behind the 1947 resolution to partition Mandatory Palestine, called for a truce and the immediate provision of aid to civilians in Gaza, but refused to condemn the Hamas attacks on Israel. UN Women, the UN entity that aims to ensure “all women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence”³⁷, remained silent for nearly two months following Hamas’ violent attacks on Israeli women, the brutality of which were documented in photographs, video, and live streams. In November 2023, the group posted - and almost immediately deleted - a brief social media statement. A month later, following calls from Jewish women’s organizations and a bipartisan letter from U.S. congressional members, UN Women released a statement, the opening line of which did not condemn the attacks on Israeli women but instead stated: “We deeply regret that military operations have resumed in Gaza”³⁸.

Even in spaces thought to be politically neutral - or at least guided by journalistic ethics - new information coming from Israeli news sources was questioned as biased or framed as fabrication, while news reports from the (Hamas-run) Palestinian Ministry of Health were simply taken as fact: Claims from Hamas-run sources were repeated by U.S. mainstream media without question or critique³⁹, despite the proof and prevalence of disinformation. For example, the *New*

York Times, *Associated Press*, and other news outlets, drawing on (mis)information from Hamas and video from *Al Jazeera*, initially blamed the Israeli military for a Gaza hospital bombing in mid-October, 2023; intelligence reports from the United States, France, Canada, and the United Kingdom concluded that the most likely cause of the explosion was a rocket launch from Palestinian militants from inside Gaza itself⁴⁰. Although Israel was not guilty of this possible war crime, many Americans, it seems, were unbothered by the considerable evidence that antisemitic propaganda is pervasive in Islamist coverage of the Israel/Palestine conflict⁴¹, evidence that includes admissions from the propagandists themselves⁴². The reasons behind the oversight - or acceptance - of antisemitic rhetoric in the context of Israel/Palestine may be explained by other observable dynamics among the progressive left since October 7.

Uncritical Bandwagon “Activism”

One of the most readily observable, if among the most absurd, dynamics of progressive anti-Zionist groups today is blatant ignorance masquerading as activism. A June 2023 University of Maryland Critical Issues poll examining American attitudes toward Israel showed that nearly two-thirds of participants were “unfamiliar” with Zionism or responded “I don’t know” when asked about the topic. Among the remaining respondents, more than half said they held neither a positive nor negative impression of Zionism. When asked if they thought that attitudes against Zionism were antisemitic, nearly two-thirds, regardless of political affiliation, said they didn’t know⁴³. In other words, three months before October 7, people in the U.S., generally speaking, knew very little about, and did not hold negative perceptions, of Zionism. Such ignorance and apathy provide important context for the rapid spread of anti-Zionism in the months that followed.

The ignorance could not be more evident than when students chant, “From the river to the

sea, Palestine will be free” at the ceasefire protests that have become commonplace at colleges and universities nationwide. While many pro-Palestine activists assert that the chant is simply a message for peace - a Palestine “free” of Israeli military occupation and/or control in both Gaza and the West Bank of Israel - Jews see it as a call for genocide. After all, the largest land mass between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea *is* the State of Israel. The use of this slogan is believed to have originated in the 1960s and has been used by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas, organizations that have advocated for the complete destruction of Israel and, in the case of the latter, the death of all Jews living in Israel and around the world. Therefore, to most Jewish people, the phrase constitutes antisemitic hate speech as a call for the extermination of all Jews in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. This chant took on added importance and urgency after the Hamas attack on October 7, in which 1,200 Jews were murdered and over 200 were taken hostage into Gaza. Consequently, Hamas supporters also began using the provocative slogan soon after Israel began its military invasion in response to the attack⁴⁴.

It is quite humorous, if not infuriating, that a large percentage of non-Palestinian anti-Zionist progressives apparently have no idea what “From the river to the sea” means or how it can be interpreted negatively by Jewish people around the world. A recent survey found that college students (86 percent) overwhelmingly support the use of the chant as a form of protest⁴⁵, yet almost half of the respondents were unable to name the actual river and sea in question. The students provided answers such as “the Nile and the Euphrates, the Caribbean, the Dead Sea (which is a lake) and the Atlantic [Ocean]”⁴⁶. One would like to think that protesters who advocate for a highly contentious issue actually know what the slogan means to all parties involved, especially since other research has demonstrated that much of the contention around

the phrase is a result of its different meanings amongst Palestinians and Jews⁴⁷.

Once the college students who participated in the survey learned some basic facts about the Middle East, almost 68 percent of them no longer agreed with the controversial “From the river to the sea” message⁴⁸. Previously, “these students had never seen a map of the Mideast and knew little about the region’s geography, history or demography. Those who hope to encourage extremism depend on the political ignorance of their audiences”⁴⁹. Such conditions may demonstrate extremists’ strategies, but a question remains: “Why are so many students supporting a stance on an issue they know little about, or even going to protest on campus or in city streets?”⁵⁰. Psychologists have noted that young people, broadly speaking, desire to be a part of a group in order to help form their personal identities⁵¹. Moreover, progressive movements have historically connected disparate groups of young people. What students learn at universities may be a contributing factor, but there is another important factor that is arguably more impactful in drawing students to protests today: Social media.

For those who lack either the time or the interest to learn about the complicated history of the Middle East, short catchphrases and slogans on social media may be especially attractive⁵². Since social media uses complex, sophisticated algorithms:

content...[can] be targeted at, and customized for, relevant audiences, increasing the power to persuade...Many policymakers and scholars have argued that the Internet and social media, in particular, allow groups engaged in protests and violence to more easily target and recruit potential allies and activists. Activists are able to use social media networks to increase the likelihood of political participation through persuasion and mobilization.⁵³

Depending on one’s personal beliefs, social media can be either a bane or a blessing for

spreading information, as well as misinformation and disinformation, at a rapid pace. The space and audience constraints of social media, however, mean that the information being shared, even if not intentionally propagandistic, often lacks nuance. Unfortunately, “it is likely easier to fall back on foundational archetypes of hatred than to deal with the more complex realities of the contemporary Middle East [including] the ties Judaism has with its historical land, and the differing approaches within the Arab world in addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict”⁵⁴.

Progressives who do not take the required time to study up on the complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict and simply choose to jump on the anti-Zionist bandwagon will continue to follow mantras with which they might disagree if they had a more comprehensive knowledge and understanding of what they were actually saying.

Through social media, the anti-Zionist movement has become a massive bandwagon issue. While there are arguably many people who are invested in the issues at hand (Palestinian safety, Israeli militarism, etc.), it has been asserted that there is also “a desire by many people, especially students, to be involved in the ‘hot’ social media issue of the day and ‘not so much due to a true genuine desire to either make a difference or have a positive, meaningful impact made’”⁵⁵. Scholars with little connection or education on the Middle East have been quite vocal in their condemnation of Israel on social media⁵⁶. Thus, social media apps like TikTok enable young users in the U.S. to become a (minimally) active part of the anti-Zionist movement and feel confident that they are knowledgeable about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Middle Eastern history, in general⁵⁷.

Unfortunately, social media has been a hotspot of antisemitic rhetoric⁵⁸, which may result from a “cross-pollination” of ideas among various ideological groups⁵⁹, including leftist activists, white supremacists, and foreign government actors. There is an especially alarming

number of both antisemitic and anti-Zionist messages on TikTok, which reaches more than a billion users worldwide⁶⁰, including the majority of U.S. teens⁶¹. While a growing number of adults report getting their daily news from TikTok, especially those aged 18 to 29⁶², “TikTok’s users are predominantly young children and teenagers who are more naïve and gullible when it comes to malicious content”⁶³. This is of great concern when attempting to increase understanding of complicated social issues, like between Palestine and Israel.

The repeated exposure to decontextualized anti-Zionist messages in spaces already rife with antisemitism may help to explain the participation of so many young people in a contemporary progressive left movement that appears to be more about fanaticism than activism or advocacy. As forms of strategic public communication, activism, and advocacy require attention to the rhetorical nature of communication and, therefore, acknowledging and engaging the interests and goals of an audience⁶⁴. Fanaticism, however, is necessarily static and uncritical, for it “has almost no tolerance for any data that do not confirm its own point of view”⁶⁵.

Symbolic Solidarity

The nature of fanaticism might help to explain some of the contradictions emerging from the contemporary progressive left anti-Zionist movement, particularly on college campuses. For example, shortly before the October 7th attacks, Rice PRIDE, an LGBTQ student organization at Rice University, severed ties with Houston Hillel, a Jewish organization that had, until that point, sponsored Rice PRIDE events and contributed funding for the Rice Queer Resource Center, in professed solidarity with Palestinian students. Of course, as one student admitted, “no one has specifically cited that Houston Hillel itself has made them uncomfortable in any way”⁶⁶. This was an apparently symbolic separation, albeit one with tangible consequences, for, until that time, the campus Hillel had in fact served as Rice PRIDE’s *only* institutional partner⁶⁷.

The international group, Queers for Palestine, can be seen to act similarly - both symbolically and uncritically. With more than 14 thousand Instagram followers, Queers for Palestine actually comprises a few different groups, but it has been a mainstay at anti-Israel and pro-Palestine rallies for about a decade. Of course, as one writer for the queer magazine *The Advocate* noted in 2015, “their affinity for Palestine isn't reciprocated”⁶⁸. Like many Muslim and Muslim-majority countries, Palestine is a very hostile and homophobic environment for GLBTQ+ people⁶⁹. A report by Amnesty International explains that those who are GLBTQ+ continue to face both discrimination and a lack of protection in Gaza and the West Bank: while “consensual same-sex relationships are not criminalized in the West Bank...Section 152 of the Penal Code applicable in Gaza criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual activity and makes it punishable by up to 10 years’ Imprisonment”⁷⁰. There are also many stories of torture, murder, and beheading of Palestinian civilians (and even Hamas soldiers) simply due to being found out as GLBTQ+⁷¹. In contrast, GLBTQ+ people living in Israel, including citizens and residents of Arab descent, are legally protected under the law and provided with GLBTQ+-friendly health-care programs⁷². Indeed, some Palestinians who identify as GLBTQ+ and therefore risk persecution, now live as asylum seekers in the State of Israel⁷³.

Of course, to some pro-Palestinian supporters in the U.S., the provision of this information is seen as “pinkwashing”, a strategy by which, these supporters claim, “Zionists portray the nation-state of Israel as more humane, modern, and accepting than an otherwise ‘backward’ Arab world”⁷⁴. We are sensitive to the dynamics of seemingly comparing cultures, but the accusation of pinkwashing enables avoidance of a more nuanced conversation on the experiences of queer people in Palestine and Israel, particularly in the context of queer support for Palestinian nationalism. It should be possible to acknowledge both that Israel is an imperfect

place where Palestinians experience unequal treatment and that “gender and sexual rights are systematically violated in the Palestinian territories, by the Palestinian National Authority, by Hamas and Islamic Jihad”⁷⁵.

Refusing to acknowledge those conditions enables self-identified progressives who profess a commitment to GLBTQ+ justice to maintain a singular anger at Israel, despite the reality that Palestinian society treats GLBTQ+ individuals much more harshly than does Israel. Some insight might be gained from a deeper exploration of pinkwashing, an accusation that relies on a reductive and historically inaccurate framing of the Israel-Palestine conflict as a racial conflict wherein Israel represents whiteness and Europeanness. “Israel’s pinkwashing,” activist and poet Sarah O’Neal writes, “not only implies that there are no LGBTQ Palestinians but also that they cannot possibly be accepted as they are, where they are. In other words, they must flee to a more ‘civilized’ society, i.e., a white, European one”⁷⁶. Positioning Israel as a white, European society and Israelis as white Europeans misrepresents Israeli culture and the contemporary Israeli Jewry, approximately 40 percent of whom have no European ancestry at all⁷⁷ and ignores the phenotypical similarities among Israeli and Palestinian people. Framing even European Jewish people, who once were indigenous to the Middle East and who were never considered white in Europe, as white Europeans whitewashes Jewish history⁷⁸.

Still, this racial binary, misapplied though it may be, builds much of the foundation of the U.S. progressive perspective on Israel - and contributes to the types of support provided by U.S. progressive groups. After all, many progressive queer groups aren’t actually calling for equitable treatment for GLBTQ+ citizens in Palestine (or Israel for that matter). On their Instagram account, Queers for Palestine, for example, claims that Israel is an apartheid state that is committing genocide⁷⁹. Thus, the actual conditions for the queer population in Gaza may be

beside the point when it comes to contemporary solidarity-based activism.

We wish to note that when we speak of Queers for Palestine or similar groups, our goal is not to criticize members of these groups or their support for those they also perceive to be persecuted, but rather, better understand the logical processes that enable the singular focus on the actions of Israel and the oversight of any injustice in Gaza, such as the persecution of GLBTQ+ Palestinians, that cannot be attributed to Israeli state oppression. These dynamics within progressive organizations today appears to support the views among some conservatives that there is a

tendency within social justice movements to pick a clear protagonist and antagonist, the oppressed and the oppressor, and to proceed from there in one-size-fits-all fashion. Some progressives decided long ago that Palestine is the former and Israel is the latter, which is the seed from which everything must grow.⁸⁰

Therefore, no matter how Israel might treat GLBTQ+ citizens, it can still be positioned as uniformly unjust, whereas Palestine, regardless of its treatment of GLBTQ+ people, is positioned by progressive groups in the U.S. as uniformly righteous. The realities, however, demonstrate the limitations of symbolic solidarity, especially as it pertains to the Middle East.

Binary Thinking

Ideologically, the U.S. progressive left's position has generally been to side with those seen as less powerful (i.e., the underdog or victims) in a particular context and then find a way to defend them⁸¹. This is, to be certain, a laudable approach, and one we generally admire.

However, simple understandings of power are far more complex in the context of Israel-Palestine and corrupted by the antisemitic (and Islamophobic) ideologies embedded in the dominant U.S. white Christian supremacist imaginary⁸².

Too often, the progressive left framing of the struggle in the Middle East is an overly simplistic binary of right versus wrong - and, in the reductive binary of U.S. racial discourse, white versus nonwhite - rather than an ongoing and historically complex battle between two marginalized populations, each with nationalistic ambitions and indigenous connections to the land but only one of which holds the legally recognized status of nationhood, the projections of recent collective memory, and the stain of colonialism. Particularly notable about the binary framing of oppressor/oppressed in the context of Israel-Palestine is that it is seemingly immutable, despite shifts in context or new information that, if temporarily, challenges its assignments.

Consider, for example, the application of the term “genocide” in the discourse that emerged in progressive academic and academic-adjacent spaces in the aftermath of October 2023. On October 17, the nongovernmental organization Genocide Watch, which has been highly critical of Israel’s actions in the months since, published an alert declaring the violence committed by Hamas as “acts of genocide”⁸³. At the same time - and, in fact even earlier - progressive academics and organizations in the U.S. accused *Israel* of committing genocide against Palestinians. On October 16, 2023, faculty at the University of California, Berkeley published a statement accusing Israel of “premeditated genocidal violence”⁸⁴. That same week, the University of California, San Diego department of ethnic studies posted a statement online calling for “an immediate end to the war crimes and genocide taking place against the Palestinian people”⁸⁵. Before any Israeli troops had even entered Gaza, Stanford University students held a “Sit-In to Stop Genocide,” demanding that the university call for a ceasefire and declare Israel an apartheid state. And, on October 7, 2023, just hours after the Hamas attacks, 34 student groups at Harvard University signed a letter declaring: “We... hold the Israeli regime entirely responsible

for all unfolding violence...In the coming days, Palestinians will be forced to bear the full brunt of Israel's violence. The apartheid regime is the only one to blame"⁸⁶.

The particular language employed in these statements is illustrative of the groups' operating logics. Declaring Israel "entirely responsible" and the "only one to blame" cements a binary understanding of the conflict that predetermines Israeli culpability and absolves Hamas of any and all responsibility. Israel is seen as evil and genocidal while Palestinians, including Hamas terrorists, are perpetual victims forced to retaliate against an oppressive and domineering regime. Once again, the logic suggests that Israel was asking for it, and Israeli citizens, too, got what they deserved.

The oft repeated accusation of genocide, a term initially used by a Jewish Holocaust survivor to describe Nazis' attempted annihilation of Jewish people, is a significant discursive aspect in the solidification of the oppressor/oppressed binary and, therefore, the assignment of the totality of blame to Israel, for the Holocaust operates in the western imaginary as the epitome of state evil⁸⁷. Lest readers continue to think that these statements were responses to Israel's military actions in the wake of the terrorist attack, we offer the reminder that these assignments of blame and accusations of genocide were levied *before* Israeli military retaliation. The timing of these accusations of genocide made against Israel in the immediate aftermath of an attack on Israel by Hamas, an admittedly genocidal terrorist group, demonstrates that, for these activists, Israeli guilt was predetermined.

Through no rhetorical strategy is the binary framework of Israel-Palestine or the presumed total guilt of Israel better shored up than the comparison of Israelis and/or Jews to Nazis, a morally repugnant and arguably antisemitic strategy scholars have referred to as Holocaust inversion⁸⁸. The comparison, which has characterized both far left and Islamist

framings of Israel-Palestine since the early 1950s, if not earlier⁸⁹, has been approaching “the center of contemporary antisemitic discourse” on social media in recent years⁹⁰.

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has been labeled by U.S. protestors as “the new Nazi Germany”⁹¹, American Jewish women have been called “Nazi bitch” and “murderous Jews”⁹², and “Jews R Nazis” has been graffitied on college housing⁹³. Hamas, too, has called Israel the “Nazi enemy”⁹⁴, just as they do in their 1988 Covenant and 2017 Charter, which list their ideological motives, among which are the beliefs that Jews (sometimes called “Zionists”) caused the French Revolution, the Communist Revolution, and both world wars and created the League of Nations to rule the world⁹⁵, and objectives, including to “fight the Jews and kill them”⁹⁶.

Whether all comparisons of Israelis to Nazis are by definition antisemitic or merely morally repugnant⁹⁷, these examples show the antisemitism that underlies and is animated by the equation of Israel and Zionism to Nazism. Moreover, the selectivity with which Israel is called out, and the singularity that characterizes the framing of Israel in progressive rhetoric, are hallmarks of antisemitism disguised as legitimate political criticism of Israel. Not only do such double standards draw upon antisemitic tropes of Jewish abuses of power⁹⁸, the idea that Jewish people, as individuals or a collective, are *uniquely* evil or culpable has been a constant of antisemitic discourse since the advent of Christianity, when hatred of Jews was largely considered to be religious in nature⁹⁹. The uniqueness of Jewish culpability has long served the purpose of deflecting and distracting from societal ills for which non-Jews also bear responsibility.

Colonial Guilt and the Privilege of Distance

It is hard to fault anyone for opposing war violence, especially when it is enacted by a state with more military power than its opponent. It is difficult to see the images of Gazan

destruction and even more difficult to see the images of injured children. Jewish people, across the political spectrum, struggle with these realities too, especially given that Judaism teaches that all human life is valuable. Many Jewish Israelis, including those whose family members have been murdered or taken hostage, have been calling for an end to the war for months now¹⁰⁰.

In the U.S., despite some participation from Jewish, Israeli, Palestinian, and Muslim activists - participation that has been tokenized, as we will explicate shortly - many protesters on college campuses have little personal connection to Palestine, Israel, or any of the peoples most directly impacted. Some of this is a matter of statistical representation: The U.S. is approximately 70% Christian, less than 2% Jewish, and less than 1% Muslim¹⁰¹, a demographic breakdown that is somewhat less pronounced but generally reflected in the college student population. Statistics, however, do not tell the entire story of progressive anti-Zionist activism among young people in the U.S.

According to Villasmil, “There are many people [in Gen Z] who feel (not think) that [the Israeli-Palestinian] conflict has only victims and oppressors,” and, “In a way, they’re motivated more by vanity than by compassion. They want to let others know how much they care, but their expressed empathy is not often accompanied by charity”¹⁰². For many years, Israel has been perceived to be the aggressor (i.e., colonizer, human rights violator) and Palestine as the victim¹⁰³, a perspective that has been fomented by disproportionate attention and mechanization of policy by organizations like the United Nations, the very same group that adopted the Partition Plan for Palestine in November 1947 and declared the establishment of Israel six months later¹⁰⁴. Mor has named this mentality as:

gamma anti-Zionism. This is the anti-Zionism that acknowledges the existence of Israel but holds that Israel was created in sin and is tainted in its every action by sin...Israel is

an exemplar of all the world's worst sins. It is a racist endeavor. It is colonialist. It commits ethnic cleansing and genocide. It embodies all the excesses of nationalism, militarism, Western imperialism.¹⁰⁵

It is arguably this view of Israel as the embodiment of nationalism and colonialism that undergirds progressive anti-Zionism and, to some extent, justifies the defense of Hamas or is at least willing to overlook its genocidal terrorism. It is also this view of Israel that exposes the simultaneous attitudes of guilt and privilege that remain pervasive in and operate through U.S. progressivism.

Legal scholar Lesley Klaff has surmised that leftist anti-Zionism may be understood in “terms of the left’s distancing itself from a legacy of colonialism”¹⁰⁶. The British historian Simon Schama has called this same attempt the result of “post-colonial guilt” taken out on “its prize whipping boy, Zionism”¹⁰⁷. Rather than address the vestiges of colonialism in their own lives, Americans who wish to maintain their “self-definition as unprejudiced” without having to contend with their own participation in an unjust system¹⁰⁸ may redirect their focus outward, to a nation that is, in part because of their lack of direct connection, easier to critique than the one in which they reside¹⁰⁹. This outward gaze, when combined with dominant positioning such as white, Christian, or American privilege, leads to the presumption that one who is not of the marginalized group can accurately define the parameters of marginalization, even when, as we’ve shown earlier in this essay, one lacks necessary context.

Consider, for example, the “CRES Statement of Support for the Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism” produced by the University of California, Santa Cruz Critical Race and Ethnic Studies (CRES) department on October 11, 2023, just four days after the Hamas attack on Israel. The CRES asserted that the world was, once again, witnessing Israel “retaliate against a trapped

Palestinian population in Gaza,” which makes “the study of Zionism in the context of power...more imperative than ever.” While the CRES program acknowledged (nebulously) the loss of Israeli lives in the Hamas attack when they stated that “we are grieving lives lost, fearing the many more to come”¹¹⁰, there was absolutely no mention of Hamas’ participation in the attack that occurred only a handful of days earlier. Actually, the only attacks the CRES department condemned in its public statement were the supposed attacks on their own Institute for the Critical Study of Zionism (ICSZ). The department claims that the ICSZ and affiliated faculty and students were victims of “underhanded efforts” and “baseless campaigns” by Jewish nonprofit organizations “to smear them and their work as antisemitic”¹¹¹.

The authors further suggest that those who would see their comments as antisemitic are abiding by a “distorted definition of antisemitism”¹¹². The authors seem to be referencing the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, which has been the subject of heated debate, including among Jewish scholars, for its suggestion that criticism of Israel, in certain contexts, is antisemitic¹¹³, but it is notable that a group of primarily non-Jewish educators feel so confident that they are in a position to accurately define antisemitism. As Klaff points out, principle (and policy in some locales) states that the most qualified judge of a particular form of discrimination is a member of the group targeted by that discrimination.¹¹⁴ In practice, however, it is often the case that members of dominant identity groups deny that minoritized persons “have any special insight into the nature of their own oppression”¹¹⁵.

The CRES’s preemptive deflections of accusations of antisemitism via condemnations of Jewish nonprofit organizations take the form of a rhetorical strategy known as the Livingstone Formulation, the “allegation that those raising concerns about antisemitism are doing so in bad

faith in order to silence criticism of Israel”¹¹⁶. The Livingstone Formulation, named in reference to the overtly antisemitic former British politician Ken Livingstone, incorporates four elements, as defined by sociologist David Hirsh:

1. refusal to “discuss the content of the accusation by shifting focus instead onto the hidden motive for the allegation,”
2. counter-accusation that the person pointing out antisemitism is both wrong about their assessment and “getting it wrong on purpose,”
3. the subsumption of everything said about Israel into a vague but “legitimate category like ‘criticism,’” and
4. the allegation that anyone who calls out antisemitism does so “as part of a common secret plan to silence such ‘criticism.’”¹¹⁷

The Livingstone Formulation deflects accusations of antisemitism by declaring that any such accusation is strategically designed and unscrupulously deployed to silence criticism of Israel. In this way, the strategy also reflects and reinforces long standing antisemitic tropes about presumed Jewish conspiracies, the likes of which have circulated for generations through antisemitic tracts like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which rely on other stereotypes of Jews as dishonest and manipulative¹¹⁸. The formulation is an example of a broader rhetorical dynamic of the “‘bad faith’ charge...an allegation that the discrimination claimant knows or should have known that her claim was baseless”¹¹⁹. Ultimately, the Livingstone Formulation serves to normalize antisemitic rhetoric not merely by denying its antisemitic character but by denying the very possibility that it could be antisemitic - and therefore, it is really a rhetoric of projection: “By its accusation of silencing, it silences”¹²⁰.

It is unclear from the CRES statement, just as it is unclear from many similar statements

from progressive left activist and academic spaces, exactly how these groups are supporting Palestinians, including those on their campuses. Instead, the focus seems to be on criticizing (to put it mildly) or condemning (to put it more accurately) Israel. For too many U.S.-based activists, support for Palestinians seems to be an abstract, ideological endeavor informed more by academic theory and reductive conceptual framings than concrete knowledge about the Middle East or aims to improve the lives of the actual human beings in Palestine or in the U.S.

Conclusion

Progressive American Jews who position themselves as advocates for social justice, no matter their allegiance with the State of Israel or Zionism, are at a critical philosophical crossroads. Long-standing progressive left allies have suddenly become unwelcoming, even downright hostile, to Jews since October 7. Marc Dollinger, Professor of Jewish Studies at San Francisco State University asserts that, “As the old social justice alliances between Jews and other marginalized groups have broken down, many American Jews now lament the strong pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel posturing of their one-time allies”¹²¹. Ultimately, on college and university campuses across the United States, many Jewish scholars have felt abandoned by their progressive colleagues¹²².

It is very difficult to work alongside progressive left organizations when their knowledge of the Israel-Palestine conflict is founded upon and centered in illogical, uncritical, and binary thinking. Scholarly analyses, ours included, of the illogics of some progressive left anti-Zionist rhetorics are rendered useless when “standing up for good causes is intertwined with a sort of mechanical critique of Israel”¹²³. That the critique is so “mechanical,” rather than well-informed, makes progressive analysis of Israel more fallacious and non-intellectual than many progressives even realize, particularly when housed on university campuses and preached by academic

faculty. To these educators and activists, both Israel and its citizens were already guilty before October 7, and that guilt was predetermined and inescapable. Such thinking is not critical; rather, it is assumptive and reactionary.

The progressive left's embracing of anti-Zionist rhetoric is concerning for Jews as well as for a unified progressive solidarity that was once expected from the Jewish community. Scholars and advocates, such as ourselves, are still trying to make sense of the seismic shift of Jewish place in progressive movements since October 7, and while it is yet to be seen how Jews will align themselves with progressive causes after the Israel-Hamas war reaches its conclusion, it is vital to shine a spotlight on the theoretical and analytical weaknesses in their arguments that do far more harm than good to their causes.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no potential conflict of interest.

Biography

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Mara Lee Grayson, PhD is a researcher, writer, and educator specializing in rhetorics of antisemitism and racism in higher education. She has published widely in academic and literary journals and is the author or editor of five books, including *Antisemitism and the White Supremacist Imaginary: Conflations and Contradictions in Composition and Rhetoric* (Peter Lang, 2023). Previously a tenured faculty member in the California State University system, she now works as the Director of Content Development for the Campus Climate Initiative at Hillel International.

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- ¹¹¹ *CRES Statement*, para. 3.
- ¹¹² *CRES Statement*, para. 3.
- ¹¹³ Mara Lee Grayson, “Avoiding Conflation, Deflection, and Distraction: Untangling Antisemitism from Zionism and Anti-Zionism,” in *Challenging Antisemitism: Lessons from Literacy Classrooms*, edited by Mara Lee Grayson and Judith Chriqui Benchimol (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), pp. 37-58.
- ¹¹⁴ L. Klaff, “Fraser v. University.”
- ¹¹⁵ D. Schraub, “Playing with Cards, p. 297.
- ¹¹⁶ L. Klaff, “Fraser v. University,” p. 207.
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- ¹²¹ M. Dollinger, para. 7.
- ¹²² D. I. Rubin, “‘Liberated’.”

¹²³ B. Berkovits, "Social Criticism," p. 54.