

Palestine: The Political Context of the Crisis in Gaza

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New Politics (NP): Is there a Palestinian left? What is its significance and what positions does it take?

Joel Beinin (JB): The core problem of politics among the Palestinian people is that they are dispersed.

One group is Palestinians who are citizens of Israel—second class citizens to be sure. But they have the right to vote and to organize politically. They are the descendants of those who were not sent into exile or did not flee in fear during the 1948 war, what the Palestinians called the Nakba, or catastrophe.

Palestinians of East Jerusalem, which Israeli annexed in 1980, are mainly Israeli residents. They can vote in local, but not national elections. Their residency, their property rights, and their right to build housing, etc. are always under threat. A small number of them are Israeli citizens.

There are Palestinians who live in the West Bank under military occupation, and they have a very different set of political rights. They don't vote for anything, or at least not on a regular basis. Most of them are nominally ruled by the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority, which is an authoritarian regime. Israel's military government has the ultimate say over everything that happens to Palestinians in the West Bank.

Palestinians in the Gaza Strip also haven't voted for anything since a plurality of them voted for Hamas in 2006 along with the West Bankers. Hamas also runs an authoritarian regime which doesn't tolerate free political discussion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and so on. Gaza is also under Israeli occupation, since Israel controls much of what goes on there—entry, exit, the population register, etc.—despite having withdrawn its settlements and armed forces in 2005.

Then there are the Palestinians in various diasporic locations. The largest number are in Jordan, which is an absolute monarchy and has a nominal democratic apparatus, but with power remaining in the hands of the royal court. Another large group are in Lebanon, which has become a dysfunctional state despite having many aspects of democratic process. There are also Palestinian communities in the United States, Western European countries, Australia, and so on, where up until

October 7, anyway, they could more-or-less freely engage in democratic political processes. There's always of course been anti-Palestinian sentiment and Islamophobia. But October 7 escalated that many fold and there has been substantial repression against all manner of Palestinian political action and political expression, especially on various campuses.

In these circumstances, there couldn't possibly be a unified Palestinian left of any sort, one political party that would claim adherence and loyalty from all those various sectors of the Palestinian people.

The easiest sector to understand is the Palestinian citizens of Israel. They number 1.9 million, almost 21 percent of all Israeli citizens. They are divided today into four political parties, only three of which now have representation in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. The biggest is the Islamist party which has 5 Knesset seats, and which is in no sense left at all. It's socially conservative, vocally anti-LGBTQ, anti-women's rights, antifeminist. They are popular because they represent the wave of Islamism that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

The next most important force among the Arab community is Hadash/al-Jabha, or the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality. This is a coalition whose core is the Communist Party of Israel, which is a Jewish-Arab party, but overwhelmingly Arab. Nonetheless, they always make sure that one of the members of Hadash who will be elected to the Knesset is Jewish. (Israel's electoral system is single constituency, proportional representation by party. If 10 percent of the votes go to your party, then you get 12 out of the 120 Knesset seats. Therefore, they know roughly how many seats they're going to get.) In the current Knesset they have five seats, four occupied by Palestinian Arabs, and they are in a coalition with what we could call a centrist nationalist party (Ta'al) whose popularity came about because its leader, Ahmad Tibi, enjoyed a close relationship with Yasser Arafat. They are a kind of pro-Fatah force in Israel, except that they were never engaged in any kind of armed struggle against the occupation.

Then there is a party which is not represented in the Knesset, Balad/Tajammu', the National Democratic Alliance. I would call them a left leaning nationalist party whose principal slogan is that Israel should be a state of its citizens. That slogan is deeply threatening to Zionist sensibilities, which is to say to all the political parties in Israel that are dominated by Jews. The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality would also support that slogan as the way to achieve equal rights for Jewish and Arab citizens of the state of Israel alongside a Palestinian state.

Of those four parties, the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality is the only one that openly identifies itself as left. Its roots are in the Communist Party of Palestine, which was established in 1923 (if you want to know what I think about them, you could read my July 28, 2023 article in [+972 Magazine](#)).

In the West Bank, there is the remnant of the historic Palestine Communist Party, the Mubadara, or Palestinian National Initiative, which has two seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council (out of 132) and is led by Mustafa Barghouti, who is in my estimation the most honest, the most perceptive, and the most real in every sense of the word Palestinian political leader. I would vote for him if I were a resident of the West Bank. He has only limited popularity because he doesn't work on the basis of families and clans and those kinds of traditional alliances. Rather, he's built his public position out of work with grassroots NGOs. He himself is a physician and for many years he has led the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, which provides the largest network of primary care services in both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

NP: He's been on CNN and other media quite a bit now.

JB: His English is perfect. He knows how to speak to a Western audience. He did a nine-month nonprofit management certificate program at Stanford. When people ask him about a two-state solution—because everybody asks that irrelevant question—he says, world opinion supports two states, Israel doesn't support two states. Why should I give that up? Meaning that he understands that there is no two-state process happening, but what do the Palestinian people gain by saying, no, we don't want our own state? He would be perfectly happy living on the basis of equality with Jews.

If we move to the Gaza Strip, there was historically a very strong left. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which called itself a Marxist-Leninist organization, was strong there. It was decimated by Ariel Sharon in his capacity as commander of the Southern Front in the early 1970s. There are remnants of it still there. Some of them engage in armed resistance and other kinds of political struggle. But they're a shadow of their former selves. There was also a Communist Party presence in the Gaza Strip, but I haven't heard anything from them in decades.

Let's go to the United States where we have a very complex situation. There is a presence of a Palestinian-American left and their allies in Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). They dominated DSA's approach to Israel-Palestine until, amidst much rancor in 2022, the national leadership [disbanded and then rechartered](#) the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Working Group, while maintaining a ban on their members taking leadership in other DSA bodies. The bad feelings from that episode remain. On the *positive* side of that internal struggle, they shepherded DSA's transition from a pro-Zionist, classically social democratic approach to Israel-Palestine—which came from its founding leaders and original social base—to a position of Palestine solidarity. DSA supports the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement. Its members in Congress, most prominently Rashida Tlaib, who deserves to be promoted to sainthood for what she's been going through, are absolutely, unequivocally outspoken on Palestinian rights. Cori Bush, a DSA member, is the originator of the House resolution calling for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. In this sense, there is a Palestinian-American left, which has support from broader elements of the still very small, not very powerful, American left. Jewish Voice for Peace, generally speaking, supports that trend. If Not Now has become increasingly assertive and outspoken in support of Palestinian rights. Others—neither Jews nor Palestinians, just people who are interested in international affairs and pay attention—tend to also support that perspective. All of this is positive.

The *downside* is that left politics in the United States today is dominated by identity politics. We have forgotten—many of us, but not all of us, hopefully—the values and ideals that used to be represented by a phrase like internationalist solidarity. Consider the debate over the slogan “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” Rashida Tlaib was censured in Congress for defending the use of that slogan. On one level it's very difficult to be critical of that slogan. It doesn't say anything that anyone who thinks of themselves as on the left could oppose. Moreover, the platform of Likud (Israel's ruling right-wing party) says the same thing: “between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty.” You can't say that “from the river to the sea” is antisemitic unless you're also willing to say, in the same breath “from the river to the sea” when Jews say it is anti-Palestinian racism.

That captures the problem. What is there going to be from the river to the sea, after Palestine is free? An organization that thought of itself as left in the traditional sense would propose something. Maybe they wouldn't have a detailed constitutional arrangement in mind, but something that could form the basis of a joint Jewish-Arab struggle for that liberated land to defeat the current settler-colonial regime in Israel with its quasi-fascist, Messianist, religious right-wingers in power, and to establish a regime—one, two, one-and-a-half states, or a confederation is secondary—that will ensure equal civil and political rights for all, and national rights for both peoples in its place.

I would counterpose to that slogan an organization in Israel which is comprised of both Palestinian

and Jewish citizens; Standing Together is the English name. They have a [website](#). Its leaders are Sally Abed who is Palestinian and Alon-Lee Green who is Jewish. They don't talk about how many states there should be in the future and what the constitutional arrangements might be. They say: Whatever there will be between the river and the sea, the principle is that all individuals have equal civil and political rights, and both peoples have equal rights to the land. That's good enough for me. I don't want to put myself down as an unequivocal supporter, but that seems to me the minimal level of specificity and the right principles if you want to call yourself left.

NP: I'd like to ask the same question now about Israel. Is there an Israeli left and what is it? How would you describe its components?

JB: In Israel, left means being willing—in one form or another—to accommodate or conciliate with Palestinians. The traditional, historic international understanding of left isn't the relevant, definitional factor. Historically, elements of the labor Zionist movement were the most prominent forces in Israeli society that were prepared for some kind of compromise with Palestinians.

Let's take several steps back. What was historically known as the Israeli left—commonly considered to be the left wing of the labor Zionist movement and the various NGOs that it generated that imbibed a lot of its values—was decimated with the outbreak on the Second Intifada. That's because the vast majority of Israeli Jews, like the vast majority of the Western public, accepted the factually inaccurate Israeli narrative that Palestinians were offered everything at Camp David in 2000 and Yasser Arafat turned it down and in response to the failure of the 2000 Camp David summit, the Palestinians launched the Second Intifada with all of the suicide bombings. According to that narrative this proves that there's no one to talk to: anyone who talks about two states or any other kind of a conciliatory resolution of the conflict is just dreaming.

That's where things were until October 7. It was not possible for a Zionist party to even participate credibly in an Israeli election if they called for the establishment of a Palestinian state or for reopening political negotiation with the Palestinian Authority or the PLO. The Israeli Jewish left that survived in that context consists, first of all of Jews who support and vote for the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality.

Second, there are Jews, like the former speaker of the Knesset, Avraham Burg, who is, along with the Palestinian co-founder, Faisal Azaiza, a leader of a new political party called "All Its Citizens." That is its slogan: Israel should be a state of all its citizens, the same as the Arab party, the National Democratic Alliance. Burg wouldn't be considered a leftist if socialism were the criterion or anything like that. But in Israeli terms, he is very, very far left because that's a slogan that only primarily Arab parties have previously raised and he's trying to build a joint Jewish-Arab party on that basis.

What you have then in terms of political parties are historically the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality and this new effort to create a party that calls for Israel to be a state of all its citizens. There is also Standing Together and a plethora of NGOs like B'Tselem, a human rights NGO which has declared that Israel is an apartheid regime, and many, many others that work for various aspects of Palestinian rights, a shared Palestinian-Jewish society, or labor rights or women's rights or some combinations of those. They all have been catastrophically weakened by the Hamas attack of October 7.

I watched a webinar with the very intrepid journalist for *Haaretz*, Amira Haas, who lives in Ramallah and previously lived for several years in the Gaza Strip, and Noam Shuster-Eliassi, who grew up in the one intentional Arab-Jewish community in Israel, Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam/Oasis of Peace, so she is bilingual. She's a stand-up comic, but she's very much identified with the left, as is Amira Haas. They both were nearly crying and said, "We're afraid to go out of the house. We don't know

what we can do now.” Once the heavy fighting is over, that may change, there might be a little bit more space than there has been since October 7. (Update: This has changed to some extent and there have been anti-war demonstrations.) But the short-term outlook for any kind of Jewish left is not very good.

NP: And the political representation of any of these left forces that you mentioned is zero?

JB: There’s the one Jewish Knesset member for the Democrat Front for Peace and Equality, Ofer Cassif, who was suspended from the Knesset and had his pay docked for two weeks for criticizing Israel’s assault on the Gaza Strip. The furthest left-wing Zionist Party, Meretz, which historically came into existence around support for two states and a social democratic economic and social program, didn’t get enough votes in the December 2022 elections to get into the Knesset.

The Labor Party—the historic center-left social democratic party that led the establishment of the state of Israel, and which was hegemonic both in Zionist politics and in Israeli politics from the 1930s until 1977—has four Knesset seats, which is the minimum that you can get. If you don’t get four seats worth of votes, you don’t get into the Knesset. They are of almost no consequence whatsoever. That’s it for political parties of what’s historically called the non-Zionist and Zionist left.

NP: Let me shift to Hamas. They were founded in 1988 as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood with a very reactionary founding charter. Then they had a new document in 2017 and made various statements in recent years suggesting that perhaps there was a basis for a non-maximalist settlement with Israel. Did October 7 suggest that that’s totally changed? What do you think they were hoping to accomplish?

JB: First, let’s go back a little bit further. Hamas grew out of the Gaza Strip branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the oldest and most well-established Sunni Islamist organization founded in 1928 in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood was present in Palestine before 1948 and in the Gaza Strip after 1948 because Egypt administered the Gaza Strip from 1949 until 1967. In 1973, they formed *al-Mujamma’ al-Islami*, the Islamic Center. In 1979, the Israeli occupation authorities that ruled the Gaza Strip after the 1967 War recognized them and allowed them to set up the Islamic University of Gaza and an array of social and cultural institutions. Why did Israel do that? Because they thought, these are Muslim social activists. They’re pietists. They’re not interested in Palestinian nationalism and certainly not in armed struggle to liberate Palestine—and that was true. And so, *al-Mujamma’ al-Islami* functioned from 1979 until the first Intifada in 1987 with no confrontational attitude towards the Israeli occupation. When the first Intifada erupted, and the Gaza Strip was the flash point in early December 1987, all of a sudden the entire Palestinian people are rising up in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and they were supported globally by the Palestinian diaspora. And where is *al-Mujamma’ al-Islami*? They’re not part of this whatsoever. They had nothing to do with it. It’s under those circumstances that they regrouped and, in August 1988, formed Hamas, which is an Arabic acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement.

The charter that you mentioned, which is highly antisemitic and politically reactionary, was formulated as an alternative to the secular organizations that were connected to the PLO—to Fatah first and foremost, but also to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and at that time the Palestine Communist Party, which was not part of the PLO, but which was part of the secret underground leadership of the first Intifada. Hamas was on the outside of that. The Intifada pushed to the fore the two-state solution. That’s the solution that the local West Bank and Gaza Strip leadership of the Intifada supported; it had a lot of popular support as a way of eliminating the occupation among the people of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The local West Bank and Gaza Strip leadership pressed the PLO leaders, who were then based in Tunis and had been debating adopting a two-state position for over a decade, to adopt it and that's how we got to the Oslo process and the 1993 Declaration of Principles. Hamas said, absolutely not. They opposed the two-state solution. They are for the liberation of all of Palestine from the river to the sea, and they have an Islamic argument for why that area is a Muslim religious endowment, a *waqf*, and it can't be ruled by Jews—religious argumentation that even a lot of observant Muslims would not accept. The only way we're going to get that, they say, is jihad. That has been their doctrine consistently, although there have sometimes been indications of a willingness to consider tactical compromises.

The 2017 political document reflects the thinking of some of the leadership of Hamas that at that point that was outside the Gaza Strip, in Qatar, Turkey, and elsewhere. (Some of them were in Syria before 2011, but they couldn't stay after the Syrian civil war broke out). Outside the Israeli occupied territories, these Hamas leaders were exposed to all the political currents in the world, where somebody probably whispered to them, "you know, your charter is an antisemitic document, you won't get much international support with this kind of document." One time I was giving a lecture on Israel-Palestine and a guy from the Rotary Club asked me, why does Hamas hate the Rotary Club? I said, "What? Hamas hates the Rotary Club?" And he said, yeah, look at the Hamas Charter: it says the Rotary Club! Whoa, I hadn't paid attention to that, but it's there. Hamas has a deeply regressive view of the world. The leaders outside Gaza led the way in developing, shall we say, a more open approach. They didn't abandon the notion that jihad is the only way to liberate Palestine because that's the *sine qua non* of their organization's ideological perspective. What they came up with was, we could have a hundred-year truce with the Zionists, because Muhammad had a truce with the forces that were opposed to Islam and then ten years later when he got stronger, he conquered Mecca and overcame those forces: we could do that for a hundred years and then we'll eliminate the Jewish state.

Of course, no Israeli political figure is going to take that very seriously. I mean, it was hard enough in 2017 for Israelis to accept any Palestinian peace offer since, from their point of view, Israel had made one in 2000 and the Palestinians rejected it. That's not exactly true but it is what most Israelis think. That makes peace with an organization that says they'll wait a hundred years before they eliminate you not very attractive.

NP: It sounds like what you're saying is that there was never really—beyond image—a change in Hamas's ideology.

JB: It may be that the leaders abroad, and those within the Gaza Strip who supported them, truly believed that they were leading the organization in a direction that would make them more acceptable to global opinion, and which might even moderate substantially the organization's commitment to armed struggle. I don't know exactly what they thought. Tareq Baconi would be a good person to ask that question. He's the author of a very fine book called [Hamas Contained](#), published by Stanford University Press. But at the same time that this political recalibration was going on, Israel and Egypt, but primarily Israel, were holding the Gaza Strip in a state of permanent siege that was imposed in 2007 after Hamas won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections of 2006 and refused to bow to the dictates of Israel, the United States, and the EU that they abandon their political program and adopt the political program of Fatah who they had defeated in the elections.

There are now people who are teenagers or even twenty years old who remember nothing but living in this open-air prison in the Gaza Strip, in which Israel controls everything from outside. I cannot imagine trying to convince angry, frustrated teenagers and twenty-somethings, among whom unemployment rates are over 65 percent, who are on the edge of malnutrition, who suffer from the

lack of everything imaginable, who have never been outside of the Gaza Strip in their life, who have no horizon whatsoever, to adopt the perspective that we need to abandon armed struggle against Israel. Can you imagine trying to convince people of that? Palestinians, and there are many, who are committed to popular unarmed forms of struggle have a very difficult political task.

NP: There were statements from Hamas that if the Palestinian people voted for the Arab Peace Plan—that was essentially a two-state plan—they would not object.

JB: Right, the political leadership of Hamas said that they would accept the will of the Palestinian people. The 2002 Arab Peace Plan, which has been renewed on several occasions, is a very important document, which doesn't have a lot of public acknowledgment in the West. It is first and foremost a proposal for two states. But a very specific kind of two states that every Zionist political party in Israel rejects. The 1967 lines—the Green Line—should be the boundary; East Jerusalem should be the capital of the Arab state. Today there are about 215,000 Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem alone. It also advocates that Palestinian refugees should have the right to return. No Jewish political party in Israel accepts that as the basis for a discussion.

If we actually got into it, and they wanted to be serious, the real sticking point is the right of return of the refugees, which most Israelis imagine is the end of the Jewish state because they have a certain understanding of what a Jewish state means. It entails Jewish supremacy, which would be very difficult to sustain if the Arab population were much larger than it is. In fact, for many Jewish right-wingers, the Arab citizen population is already too large.

When the PLO and the Israeli representatives were negotiating in Taba in the Sinai Peninsula after the collapse of the 2000 Camp David summit, the refugee question was put on the table, though it had not been on the table at the summit. There was never going to be any agreement unless this question was addressed. There's no written record of this so it could be not entirely so, but according to well-informed people who were close observers of the negotiations, the Palestinian side said we want you to allow 200,000 refugees to return. And the Israeli side said, 50,000. There are lots of questions to be raised about that. One, if they had split the difference and the Israeli side went home with an agreement based on that, would the Labor Party have been reelected in the elections scheduled to take place only weeks later? Maybe, maybe not. As it was, the Labor Party and its prime minister Ehud Barak went down in the biggest defeat in Israeli history because people were convinced he was going to give away East Jerusalem and because Barak's own government had promoted the false narrative that Israel made a generous peace offer and the Palestinians responded with violence.

On the Palestinian side, there are some five million refugees and their descendants. There would have been a huge outcry. What? A hundred or however many thousand of us are going to be allowed to return and you call this a peace agreement and end of the conflict and we have no more claims? What is that? The core of the Palestinian experience is the Nakba and exile. There can't be a peace agreement that doesn't honestly engage with that question.

The 2002 Arab Peace Plan does engage the issue of the right to return. The UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 says all refugees have the right to return to their countries. Palestinians typically would rather base their claim on UN General Assembly resolution 194, which I think is more equivocal than that. But whatever: refugees have the right to return. That's a principle of international human rights law and practice.

If we get down to the mechanics; are all of those five million refugees going to return? No, not likely. Some years ago, there was a survey in Lebanon where at the time there were about 400,000 refugees. They asked people: Would you return? A big majority—I don't remember the exact

numbers—said yes. When it got down to the details: “Would you return to the state of Israel if it remained in its current form as a Jewish state?” 10 percent said yes. Things have surely changed a great deal since then, but it’s clear that once you establish the *principle* that refugees have the right to return, you could have a negotiation that would figure out who and how many and when and under what circumstances and all those things. But the principle that refugees have the right to return has to be part of any kind of reasonable final settlement.

NP: Returning to Hamas, what do you think they were hoping to accomplish on October 7?

JB: Of course, they haven’t told me. So this is speculative to a certain extent.

There were several different objectives. This had been planned for a very long time, some Israeli analysts now are saying as much as a year in advance or more. There were reports in the Israeli press that army spotters actually observed them training for this. But their commanding officers refused to take their reports seriously—which is a comment on colonial hubris and also male chauvinism, since the spotters were young women and their commanders were men (these are explanatory factors in many different circumstances).

The most important thing I think that Hamas wanted was to break the stalemate. Israel imposed this siege on the Gaza Strip since 2007. They have been de facto annexing large chunks of the West Bank with a slow-motion ethnic cleansing. Some twenty Palestinian villages and settlements have been forcibly evacuated by the pressure of Israeli settlers since 2020 in the South Hebron Hills, the Jordan Valley, and the hills east of Ramallah. Settlers have also targeted several neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. There is little discussion of this problem in the corporate media. There are no negotiations. There is no international pressure. Everybody says, “two states, two states, two states,” and where is this Palestinian state going to be? The settlers are gobbling up more and more Palestinian land.

Even before October 7, the Gaza Strip was living in desperate conditions. In 2017, the UN Conference on Trade and Development declared that by 2020 Gaza would become uninhabitable. Now it’s 2023 and it has indeed become uninhabitable, except that 2.2 million people were living there, with 96 percent of the water from the aquifer unpotable and over 50 percent of the people depending on international aid; the majority of the population food insecure and under the poverty line and unemployment around 50 percent with youth unemployment even higher. These were totally outrageous circumstances. And no political leaders in the West thought that this is an urgent problem. So, first and foremost, Hamas sought to break that stalemate. To show that Israel can’t dominate us forever: seize the initiative, demonstrate Palestinian agency; show that Israel is not invincible, show that there is indeed a threat to Israeli security if they continue to treat us like this.

Some people would say, they achieved that. I would say they achieved that at the cost of their international credibility. No one who thinks of themselves as a leftist or a liberal can believe that Hamas represents the potential to liberate *anything* after what they did on October 7. That is simply not a humane political perspective.

More immediately, there was the danger that Israel was going to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia. That would effectively liquidate the question of Palestine in the Arab world—among the Arab governments. The cause of Palestine remains popular among Arab people. You could see that at the last World Cup where every time Morocco won a game, they would take out a Palestinian flag and there were Palestinian flags flying in the stadiums in Qatar, and the Moroccan team tied itself openly and enthusiastically to the cause of Palestine. Palestine remains a very potent issue in the Arab world.

But the Arab *governments* would have long ago liked to be done with it if they could. The only reason that the Saudi-Israeli recognition didn't happen is because the Saudis are embarrassed that Israel is treating the Palestinians the way they're treating them and the Saudis want to claim leadership of the Arab and Muslim world and so, "Israel, please give us at least a fig leaf so that we can do this deal" is basically what the Saudis were saying and Israel said, "No, we're not doing it, that's not a price we're willing to pay."

There's a lot of talk about whether the plan included all of the atrocities, the rapes, the really abusive behavior that they engaged in. I don't think we know the full story of that yet. Apparently, the political leadership didn't know all the details of the operational plan; they approved it at a very high level of generality and maybe they didn't approve some of the worst atrocities. However, a detailed accounting of the extent of the atrocities that Hamas committed, who did or did not order or approve them, and how they occurred would not alter my view that Hamas as an organization and an ideology has no liberatory potential.

NP: What do you think about the speculation of an Iranian role? Perhaps precisely to prevent the Israeli-Saudi rapprochement?

JB: There's no evidence that Iran played a direct role in the planning and execution of this attack. Iran has funded and trained Hamas. But Hamas is not a proxy for Iran in the way that Hezbollah, in Lebanon, is a proxy for Iran.

It's probably the case that the military leaders who planned and carried out the attack on October 7 hoped, maybe even expected, that Hezbollah would enter the battle to support them, and maybe they expected other things would happen too. A popular uprising in the West Bank? Perhaps also in Jordan where Palestinians are the majority of the population? And those things haven't happened. Yes, Hezbollah has fired rockets into Israel, but as of mid-November—this could change tomorrow—they have played by what are called the rules of the game. Munitions only up to a certain size, bombardment of only a certain intensity. Now, of course, the rules of the game are not written down and they're not precise and miscalculation is built into this structure of armed equilibrium. There are already debates in Israel, "No, they violated the rules. Let's hit them hard." And then other people in the Israeli military and political hierarchy say: "But then we would have to fight a war on two fronts, and we know that Hezbollah is a much more formidable opponent than Hamas. We can take them on easily if it is one on one, but one on two? Let's try to chill it down, at least for as long as we can."

Hamas leaders have been saying, "Go Hezbollah and hit them hard." And Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech in which he said all the right words, but he also said in effect, "We're responsible for the Lebanese people." Hezbollah is the biggest political party in Lebanon in addition to having a powerful militia. And they don't want to bring havoc to the Shia population of the Lebanese South, which would surely happen judging from what Israel is doing in the Gaza Strip. So, both sides have reasons to keep it at a low boil rather than a full-fledged war.

NP: Let me go back a little bit. Before you talked about Israel's role in supporting Hamas early on. But now there are stories about Israel having supported Hamas in recent years. Can you say what was behind that?

JB: Yes, that's true. Absolutely true. There are many published quotes in which Netanyahu and his supporters say very clearly that Hamas is our ally in preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state. Why? Because supporting Hamas splits the Palestinian political leadership between Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Fatah in the West Bank, and it keeps the Palestinian people divided geographically because the idea of a Palestinian state is based on the premise that the Gaza Strip

and the West Bank and East Jerusalem would all be part of it.

For example, in a Hebrew book Haim Ramon, former member of the Israeli Knesset, a very well-informed person politically, quotes Netanyahu as saying, “those who want to thwart the possibility of a Palestinian state should support the strengthening of Hamas.” Adam Raz, a very perceptive and hardworking historian who has been scouring declassified Israeli documents and writes articles about them in the Israeli *Haaretz* weekly magazine, [wrote](#) on October 20, “for fourteen years Netanyahu’s policy was to keep Hamas in power.” And Major General Gershon Hacoheh, now in the reserves, who’s particularly close to Netanyahu, said to the Israeli news web outlet, [Ynet](#), “We need to tell the truth. The Netanyahu strategy is to prevent the option of two states. So, he’s turning Hamas into his closest partner. Openly, Hamas is an enemy. Covertly, it’s an ally.” Since Netanyahu came to power, in March 2009 — and except for the period between June 2021 and December 2022, he’s been in power constantly since then — that’s been the policy.

NP: What has the U.S. role in all this been, both since October 7, but also in bringing us to this point?

JB: There is one view that says the United States is Israel’s biggest supporter. We give them \$3.8 billion in military aid every year. We veto all the resolutions of censure against Israel that come up in the UN Security Council. We run diplomatic interference in various international bodies. And all of that is true. Israel would not be able to do what it is doing today, it would not have been able to impose this open-air prison on Gaza since 2007, without the nearly unrestrained support of the United States. However, we know that except for the Trump administration, whose foreign policy deviated from the inside the Beltway consensus, American presidents of both parties would have preferred that Israel relinquish control of at least a large part of the Occupied Palestinian Territories and agree to the establishment of a Palestinian state, lower tensions in the region, enhance stability, and not embarrass important American allies, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt over this question.

President Clinton, after not pressing for a final status agreement and supporting Israel for most of his eight years in office during which the Oslo process was underway, very belatedly decided that he was going to try to deal with this and—too little, too late—there just wasn’t enough time. Also, fundamentally, he was not prepared to twist Israel’s arm hard enough to make it happen. President George W. Bush made some movements in this direction. Condoleezza Rice shepherded secret negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2008 that came close to an agreement. There are differing views about whether it actually could have come to fruition or not. I tend to think not. But the Bush administration wanted that to happen.

The Obama administration began with a very strong statement. No less a person than his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, said, “Settlement freeze means settlement freeze, including Jerusalem.” And Netanyahu just gave her the finger. Belatedly, President Obama sent John Kerry to mediate talks and they blew up because, as even Kerry and others close to him said, Israel didn’t want to make a deal.

What we see is a picture that’s a little bit more complicated. Yes, Israel is America’s ally. Right up there with Saudi Arabia in importance in the Middle East. The United States is not going to allow any fundamental weakening of Israel. The U.S. is not going to allow any coalition of Arab countries—and especially not if they’re backed by Iran or China or Russia—to gang up on Israel. At the same time, the U.S. would like Israel to solve this problem. But the Israeli right-wing—both the secular right-wing represented by Netanyahu and the religious right-wing represented by the quasi-fascist Messianist religious extremists in his government—say no. And the religious folks have the best argument: “We don’t have to do that because what we’re doing, settling the West Bank, and eventually annexing the West Bank and Judaizing the whole region from the river to the sea, that’s

going to bring the Messiah. And the Messiah's going to come and solve all the problems, so don't tell us about political instability and whatever diplomatic problems. The Messiah's coming!" You can't argue with that.

NP: People like Mearsheimer and Walt in their book, *The Israel Lobby*, say that U.S. support for Israel has been contrary to American national interests. It's only the influence of the Israel lobby that causes the United States to act this way. On the other hand, there are those who say, Israel is America's aircraft carrier in the region and therefore the Israeli tie is precisely in the U.S. national interest. How do you assess that question?

JB: The fundamental problem is that the category of U.S. imperialism does not exist for Mearsheimer and Walt. On the one hand, they claim to be realists and so, no soft talk about human rights and things like that. But they imagine the United States as a force for good in the classical liberal internationalist version of international relations. They don't really fundamentally differ with the prevailing foreign policy consensus on that. When the United States acts out of what they imagine to be America's national interest, that's good for everybody. But we could bring the whole list of anti-democratic, destabilizing actions—from supporting the coup in Iran in 1953, to Guatemala and Chile, and we could go on and on and on forever—to show that their view of the world and of America's role in it is simply historically wrong.

They do, however, have their finger on a very important problem: the Israel lobby is indeed very, very powerful in this country. It intimidates Congress in particular. Very few American politicians have been willing to call them out on what they do. Several of those who have, have been defeated. Both Republicans and Democrats. That's not an insignificant thing.

The money of Sheldon Adelson, of accursed memory, was not a small factor in American politics and in the Republican Party. On the Democratic Party side, Haim Saban doesn't have as much money as Adelson but is equally single-mindedly supportive of Israel. Their money, and that of the various lesser figures makes a real political difference. According to one informed analysis, 50 percent of all the money raised by pro-Democratic Party PACs in a presidential election cycle comes from Jews. Not all those Jews are gung-ho Zionists; many of them are more interested in climate or other kinds of issues. But that's a pretty big deal, like an elephant in the room. Of course, the Israel lobby does not consist only of Jews, there are organizations like Christians United for Israel, which claims over ten million members and is an important component of the social base of the Republican party. The arms industry also supports Israel. They directly profit from the \$3.8 billion in annual military aid the United States gives to Israel and from the arms purchases of Israel's Arab neighbors. Israel's current war in Gaza has been good for business. Military industry stock prices were [up about 7 percent](#) in the weeks following Hamas's October 7 attack.

The kind of support for Israel those profits produce for the American ruling class is perfectly consistent with maintaining and supporting America's hegemonic role in the Middle East, which it has had since the late sixties, early seventies. During the Cold War, the value of the U.S.-Israeli alliance was clearly visible, not only in the Middle East when Israel stood against Soviet allies like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. In addition, Israel supported the dictatorial regimes in Latin America; Israel supported apartheid South Africa. It was a global U.S. partner in the Cold War.

What happened after the Cold War? Clinton came into office, and he was probably the most pro-Israel president there had ever been to date. Why did that happen? Well, Clinton's personal commitments, just like Joe Biden's personal commitments, play a role. It matters who the person of the president is. It's not just simply an empty cipher that you move around. Clinton was through his whole being inclined to be supportive of Israel and was personally very close to Yitzhak Rabin and then also to Ehud Barak who succeeded Rabin as Prime Minister of Israel. And the same is true for

Joe Biden.

After Clinton passed from the scene, very quickly we had 9-11. And then there was this astonishing scene of Ariel Sharon, then prime minister of Israel, a quintessential hardliner, the most hardline prime minister Israel had until Netanyahu began to toughen himself up in opposition to Sharon and seize from him the leadership of Likud. Sharon comes to the United States, embraces George Bush, who looks like a child next to him, and says, "We know what terrorism is. Now you've experienced what we've experienced. We're going to teach you how to deal with terrorism." The whole repressive anti-terrorist mania that dominated the United States from 9-11 arguably until today, but certainly for the next good number of years, was very heavily influenced by Israel and deepened the U.S.-Israeli alliance.

The U.S.-Israeli relationship is also built on joint intelligence, joint production of spyware and surveillance equipment, and the close interweaving of Israeli high-tech companies with Silicon Valley. Hebrew was the second language of Silicon Valley at a certain point. There were companies where you could do the language of the interview in Hebrew. There are 200 Israeli companies listed on the NASDAQ. There is an extraordinarily dense interpenetration at the level of political economy. At the personnel level, high tech people commute back and forth from Silicon Valley to Israel every two weeks. That's not just a figure of speech. I know people like that. With that level of interpenetration in one of the most important economic sectors of the U.S. and with Barack Obama being elected with critical support from that sector, that's going to limit how hard he's going to land on Israel when Netanyahu spits in his face repeatedly, as he did.

Did Obama like the fact that Netanyahu gave him the finger? Did he like the fact that the Republican Party brought Netanyahu to give a speech to a joint session of Congress to oppose the Iran nuclear deal? No, he didn't like it whatsoever. But the social-economic structure of the Israel-U.S. relationship at that point made it very hard for Obama to smack Israel down. Doubly hard for a Black man with Muslim connections and all of the racism that would have been deployed against him — and which was in fact deployed against him anyway—had he actually done anything.

So, it's very complex. Even the domestic politics argument that Mearsheimer and Walt make contains a political economy element that they ignore.

NP: For those of us in the United States who support justice for Palestinians, what are the possibilities for action? What are the pressure points that is it possible to influence?

JB: The immediate prospects do not look very good at all. We are going to have to play a defensive game for a while. That means, first, defend people like Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Cori Bush in Congress against the attacks that have come and will probably come in even greater force in the primary season. Personally, the first thing I did after Rashida Tlaib was censured was send her a donation. I don't do that very often. There are very few politicians who I think deserve fifty cents of my money. But I thought it was very important to stand with her at that moment. Second, Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students have come under vicious assault on college campuses. Brandeis banned the local Students for Justice in Palestine chapter, Columbia banned both the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter and the Jewish Voice for Peace chapter for the rest of the semester.

At Stanford—although all the facts of this are not out yet—a white supremacist community member, not someone affiliated with the university, ran down an Arab Muslim student, after yelling vile remarks about Islam. That person had been previously seen harassing people at events of Students for Justice in Palestine. And there's been a news blackout on what happened after the student victim was interviewed on CNN. This was not a small deal. He went to the hospital as a result, although he

didn't suffer a serious long-term injury. I don't know the outcome of that story, but that's terrifying. I'm going to Stanford University to talk about Israel-Palestine, tomorrow. My next-door neighbor thinks I have to ask them if they're going to have armed security, which I certainly don't want. But it's scary. (Update: They did have security but unarmed.) I should also mention the murder in Illinois of a Palestinian, because the landlord decided to hate him.

It's also true that there has been an enormous increase in antisemitism in this country, perhaps especially on college campuses. Swastikas have been painted on several Jewish institutions here in Portland, Oregon, and there have been similar incidents all around the country. It is not good.

We're experiencing a wave of anti-democratic repression of free speech if your opinions are supportive of Palestinian rights, and we are experiencing a wave of antisemitism. That genie was let out of the bottle by Donald Trump and all of the forces that supported his election the first time around and who are the same forces that are supporting his election in the current cycle, people who believe in Jewish space-lasers and the like. If we believe the polls, although it is still very early, his chances of being reelected at this point are very good. In that context, we can still keep the pressure on, although we have to be cognizant of the possibility that this will bring about Biden's defeat by Trump in the next election. Jewish Voice for Peace led a sit in in the Capitol in collaboration with If Not Now. They are the two biggest activist Jewish organizations that are not supportive of Israeli policy. They led a sit-in at Grand Central Station. They led a sit-in here in Portland of the Federal Building and there have been others in San Francisco and elsewhere. (Update: And many similar actions since then.)

All of that should continue and escalate to the extent of our capacity. As long as Israel is slaughtering civilians in the Gaza Strip, we have to try to make that stop as soon as possible. Yesterday would have been too late. But that too is defensive. It's basically a reaction to the horrific loss of human life.

If we're thinking about what a left would want to do going forward, then U.S. support for Israel is one small piece, an important piece, but a small piece of a broader foreign policy based on imperial domination, projection of military force everywhere. And we need to advocate for that to change. I think the horror that many Americans have expressed about what Israel is doing now could be translated into a broader critique of the militarized imperial foreign policy that the United States has had since the end of World War II. But even the best of our congressional representatives, the Squad and its extensions, aren't taking that on because they got elected based on domestic political issues. Bernie Sanders has, from time-to-time, said something about foreign and military policy, though not nearly enough. In the Senate, Sanders is usually the lone voice. At least in the House, there are a dozen or more Representatives who are prepared to speak about this, though not the broader Congressional Progressive Caucus.

NP: There are more than a dozen House signatories (currently over 40) to a ceasefire resolution, but I think now only Dick Durbin in the Senate and not Bernie Sanders supports a ceasefire. (Sen Jeff Merkley, D-OR and Peter Welch, D-VT have since called for a ceasefire.)

JB: And they are all going to be targeted by AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby. And much as I don't think that electoral politics ought to be the center of gravity of any kind of left politics in this country, we need to defend them. We cannot allow it to be established that if you speak out for Palestinian rights, you're going to be erased from the political map. And we need to support others who want to run for office and have expressed a willingness to join them.

NP: You referred to both the increase in antisemitism and in Islamophobia and anti-

Palestinian dynamics. But the antisemitism seems not at all structural or institutional, while you find all kinds of significant institutions canceling Palestinian programs.

JB: That's right. It is important at the analytical level that we bear that in mind. The antisemitism, as I said, was the genie let out of the bottle with Trump's election campaign and the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlotte, which was openly antisemitic in a way that hadn't been seen in this country in decades. Defeating Trump and eliminating Trumpism would go a great distance towards rolling back antisemitism.

You also come up against this bizarre contradiction that the most right-wing, gung-ho supporters of Israel in the Jewish community also support Trump. There's a problem that Trump is very pro-Israel, but he's unleashed all these antisemitic elements and it's an incoherent politics.

On the other hand, Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian sentiment is deep in the structure of very substantial American institutions: the FBI's Abscam Program of the late 1970s/early 1980s, the infiltration of mosques post-9-11, and the no-fly lists which inadvertently or intentionally targeted Muslims and made it very difficult for Muslims to go about their normal lives after 9-11. There have been murders of Muslims, and even Sikhs because somebody thought they looked like a Muslim, in this country since 9-11. And vile expressions in Congress by right-wing Republicans, which have no basis in reality, and they are not censured as Rashida Tlaib was.

All of that has to do with the whole structure of white supremacy and the way that our ruling institutions—maybe more so under Republicans than Democrats, but the Democrats are not immune from this by any means—turn our focus on new immigrants, this ethnic or that religious minority, this gender orientation—that's how the ruling class keeps itself in power by turning us against each other and keeping people disunited.

NP: I'd like to ask you something that may be out of date by the time New Politics comes out. What do you think is a good way to encapsulate our position in a series of demands? What should we ask for in terms of hostages, ceasefire, the siege, military aid?

JB: There are the immediate demands which hopefully will be out of date: ceasefire, free the hostages, stop killing civilians, provide humanitarian aid to Gaza. What will likely still be appropriate to be on the table in two months and going forward is: end the siege of the Gaza Strip, allow the people of Gaza to go back to their homes, mobilize international support to help them rebuild their homes (according to some accounts, 40 percent of all the structures in the Gaza Strip have been damaged and 10 percent of them are totally unusable), demand that Israel end the occupation, demand that the U.S. stop funding the Israeli occupation by giving the \$3.8 billion to Israel. Those are the demands that we should make of the political system.

In our own movement—or movements—we should encourage approaches to the resolution of this problem that are based on internationalism and reject identity politics as the way to understand this issue. Meaning there are two peoples in Israel/Palestine. Neither one of them is going anywhere. Whatever resolution of the conflict there will be must be based on full equality of both peoples and all individuals who live between the river and the sea.

New Politics
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