

United States: Many Speak for Palestine

The solidarity movement doesn't have a single leader—and it doesn't need one

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On April 18 the new [president](#) of Columbia University and the previous director of London School of Economics, Minouche Shafik, called the New York Police Department to have Columbia students arrested for [building](#) a “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” on campus to demand the university’s divestment from Israel. The [arrest](#) of 108 students—the largest set of arrests at Columbia since the antiwar protests of 1968—came hours after Shafik’s interrogation at Congress about allegations that anti-Semitism is rampant on campus.

“In her willingness to unleash state violence against student protesters, Minouche Shafik proved herself to be a willing ally to extremists,” Moira Donegan [observes](#) in the *Guardian*. “The raid was nothing less than the product of collusion between a university administration and rightwing politicians to suppress politically disfavored speech.” Hours after the arrests, the Columbia chapter of the American Association of University Professors promptly [declared](#) it had “lost confidence” in the university president. What’s going on?

In the face of the genocide in Gaza, campuses are becoming ungovernable across the United States and internationally. This is a development of historic proportions. Disciplinary measures unleashed on faculty and students evidence the fearful recognition of this fact by university administrators.

Insisting that the Palestine solidarity movement display “support” for Hamas inhibits the cultivation of the broad alliances we need to end the genocide.

One notable example came in a letter dated April 13, when the president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges “relieved” political theorist Jodi Dean of all her teaching duties at the institutions in the name of defending “student safety.” The punitive measure came in response to Dean’s [article](#), “Palestine Speaks for Everyone,” which was published on the Verso Books blog on April 9. By now, more than 4,900 scholars, including myself, have [petitioned](#) the university to revoke Dean’s suspension from teaching. As Judith Butler [asserts](#), Dean has the right to express her views without punishment from her employer, “however intensely any of us may disagree with them.”

And disagree with her views we must. Take the thorny kernel of Dean’s argument: that the Palestine solidarity movement should follow Hamas as its leader. “The struggle for Palestinian liberation today is led by the Islamic Resistance Movement—Hamas. Hamas is supported by the entirety of the organized Palestinian left. One might have expected that the left in the imperial core would follow the leadership of the Palestinian left in supporting Hamas,” she writes. Since “Palestine speaks for

everyone,” and since Hamas speaks for Palestine, her logic goes, Hamas should speak for everyone. This is a questionable argument for the way it presumes (1) that Hamas is the singular leader of the Palestine liberation movement, (2) that the international movement in solidarity with Palestine needs a singular leader, and therefore (3) that the movement in solidarity with Palestine must “support” Hamas and follow its leadership.

Dean’s argument is weaker than it appears. First, it does not do justice to the complexity of political movements within Palestine. As Bashir Abu-Maneh [observes](#), the sort of rhetoric used by Dean “collapses a whole range of political positions in Palestine into what one militant group says and does.” Dean fails, in other words, to appreciate what Abdaljawad Omar [names](#) “the alliance system of Palestinian resistance.” This alliance system has allowed the Palestine liberation movement to deploy various political forms and strategies—including the [Great March of Return](#)—in a complex political scene where different [worlds of struggle](#) coexist.

Second, the Palestine solidarity movement currently sweeping the world does not have a singular leader, nor does it need one. The movement is diverse—socially, culturally, ideologically, and otherwise—yet it is united around the common desire to end the genocide in Gaza and achieve a free Palestine. Like the liberation movement within Palestine, the international solidarity movement is multifaceted; it has [differing views](#) on what a free Palestine may look like and what it would take to achieve that freedom. From a two-state solution to a one-state solution, from diplomatic collaboration to open confrontation, the range of views is remarkably wide.

Dean appears to think this multiplicity is a problem—one to be solved by deferring to the leadership of Hamas. But by demanding a singular politics and a vanguard party for the Palestine solidarity movement, Dean does it a disservice by objecting, in effect, to its ideological, strategic, and tactical diversity. Insisting that the Palestine solidarity movement display “support” for Hamas inhibits the cultivation of the broad alliances we need to end the genocide in Gaza and achieve a free Palestine. *This* is the reason Dean’s claims about the need to follow Hamas’s leadership must be opposed, not because those claims pose a threat to “student safety.” (They don’t.)

As student mobilizations in solidarity with Palestine demonstrate today, there is no need for a singular party to lead everyone. Precisely in its ideological diversity and creativity, its initiative and autonomy, and its multifarious organizational forms, the Palestine solidarity movement has succeeded—even if too briefly yet—to stop the world for Gaza. The fact that across the West, universities are doing their best to stop this movement from spreading demonstrates its actual and potential power. On April 22, when New York University colluded with the NYPD to arrest more than 100 faculty and students at the school’s Gaza solidarity encampment, they unwittingly acknowledged this fact. So too have the dozens of universities across the country deploying police forces—whose militaristic aggression seems to be ratcheting up by the hour—on campus occupations and encampments. May ’24 is brewing as May ’68 once did. If our solidarity movements are to flourish, their strategies and tactics will need to be multiple.

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P.S.

• Boston Review. May 1, 2024:

<https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/many-speak-for-palestine/>

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