

Reframing “The Conflict”: Social Media Activism’s Impact on the Israel- Palestine Narrative

By Zane Pasha

This May, Israeli forces brutalized Palestinians during invasions at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, forced evictions in East Jerusalem, and relentless bombings of the Gaza Strip over several weeks.^{1,2} The global community’s response varied along the political spectrum—many on the left expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people, while those on the right largely reaffirmed their support for Israel’s limitless violence on the basis of Palestinian “terrorism.”^{3,4} Today, the crisis in Israel-Palestine is no closer to resolution. Both the occupation and Israel’s egregious human rights abuses have not yet ceased; however, this summer marked the first time in several years that the Israeli-Palestinian “conflict” garnered extensive media coverage worldwide.⁵ Notably, social media played a significant role in allowing Palestinians to share their perspectives and thus have a say in shaping the Israel-Palestine narrative.⁶

Last summer, the rise of social media activism surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and police violence against Black Americans had an undeniable impact on issues of racist policing and racism in general. Millions

of people demanded change at protests in cities across the globe.⁷ In the United States, we have indeed seen progress in policy reform (mainly at the local level),⁸ but the shift in public opinion is perhaps the most consequential. A June 2020 poll found that the number of Americans who view racial and ethnic discrimination as a big problem rose to over 75 percent from just 51 percent in 2015.⁹

A year later, social media became a platform to share news and images of the violence in the Israeli-Palestinian region, as well as a tool for digital organizing among Palestinian activists and their supporters. Although the mainstream Western media remains solidly pro-Israel, there has been a promising shift in the public and political discourse around this issue. This summer, arguably because of social media activism, a substantial number of people in the West were willing to consider and support the Palestinian cause after decades of Israeli propaganda effectively controlling the framing of the conflict.^{10,11}

Unlike broadcast television, which is controlled by political and commercial elites, social media allows ordinary Palestinians to share their stories and





broadcast footage of events as they occur.¹² Knowing that this kind of information-sharing can be impactful, the Israeli government colluded with social media companies to restrict and remove pro-Palestinian content.^{12,13}

Despite Israel's censorship efforts, numerous users on apps such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok were able to call attention to the forced evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and Jerusalem, the devastating bombings in Gaza, and the general plight of Palestinians living under occupation.⁶ Furthermore, celebrities such as Bella and Gigi Hadid—who are Palestinian themselves—and Dua Lipa publicly declared their support for Palestinians on social media.¹⁴ Taking into account their collective 180 million+ followers on Instagram, one can imagine the influence of their posts on Palestine.

Shortly after posting, these three women were accused of antisemitism in a full page advertisement in *The New York Times*.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, the ad was paid for by the World Values Network, a nonprofit that aims “to promote and defend the state of Israel.”¹⁶ Dua Lipa strongly condemned the smear attempt, saying the organization was “shamelessly using her name to advance their ugly campaign.” She and the Hadids refused to let this deter them from using their voices to raise awareness for the Palestinian cause. In an Instagram post with 1.24 million likes, Bella Hadid said, “I won't stop talking about the systemic oppression, pain and humility that Palestinians face on a regular basis.”^{15,17}

Although US opinion polls from recent years have indicated steadily increasing support for Palestinians, people who publicly speak out on their behalf or condemn the Israeli government for its well-documented human rights abuses have routinely been labeled antisemitic and thereby denounced and silenced.^{18,19,20} Thus, these celebrities'

fearless response to the backlash they faced does not bode well for Israel's public diplomacy strategy, known in Hebrew as “hasbara.”²¹ Hasbara is the investment of “massive amounts of time and effort into polishing [Israel's] external image [and] hiring well-groomed and articulate representatives to speak on behalf of their government.”²² These PR campaigns depend upon portraying Israel as a victim of a perpetual terrorist threat, an innocent actor in a sea of Arab aggressors. In addition to the self-defense justification, “the [Israeli state's] most common tactic has been to link any criticism of Israeli policies, whether it's human rights violations or illegal colonisation of Palestinian land, to anti-Semitism.”²¹

Not long ago, most would not dare to use the word “apartheid” to describe the situation in Israel-Palestine. This has recently changed, in part because of the widespread attention that the Palestinian cause has received.¹¹ On May 15, U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted, “Apartheid states aren't democracies,” referencing Israel's human rights violations in the days prior. The tweet received over 320,000 likes and AOC was joined by other members of “the Squad” in calling out Israeli apartheid.²³ Moreover, videos with the hashtag #apartheidisrael currently have a combined 4.6 million views on TikTok. This development was not limited to social media, however. In fact, 25 percent of American Jews—once a staunchly pro-Israel demographic—now believe that Israel is an apartheid state, according to a July poll.²⁴

The Palestinian solidarity movement's latest strides are much more than just words and posts online. Many millennials and members of Generation Z who participated in the racial reckoning and Black Lives Matter protests last year wanted to take action to support

Palestinians as well. Thousands of people gathered for pro-Palestinian protests in cities across the U.S. and around the world.²⁵ Organizing efforts fueled by youth groups such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement also gained traction. In the past, any endorsement of BDS would likely have been targeted and labeled antisemitic by pro-Israel organizations and the media, but advocating for BDS is another measure that has moved further into the mainstream in recent months. Aside from the hundreds of thousands of Instagram posts tagged #BDS, the call to action has reached teacher unions in San Francisco, Seattle, and Los Angeles, who voted to endorse boycotts of Israel.²⁶

Long championed as a business with “progressive values,” popular ice cream company Ben and Jerry's has spoken out in favor of left-leaning stances on many issues such as racial injustice, climate justice, and criminal justice reform.²⁷ Many people took note of Ben and Jerry's silence following the escalation of violence in Palestine, however. Ben and Jerry's was heavily scrutinized by the Palestinian solidarity movement for their hypocrisy in taking a stand on numerous progressive issues except for Palestinian rights.²⁸ Likely due to the extensive criticism they faced on social media, Ben and Jerry's broke their silence in July 2021:

“We believe it is inconsistent with our values for Ben & Jerry's ice cream to be sold in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). We also hear and recognize the concerns shared with us by our fans and trusted partners.”²⁹

Ben and Jerry's recognized the occupation of Palestinian territories as unlawful and pledged to stop selling their ice cream in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, where Palestinian homes are regularly invaded and demolished

by Israeli forces and settlement organizations.³⁰ Though this step by Ben and Jerry's does not come close to meeting the demands of BDS nor the expectations of Palestinians and their allies, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has vowed to “act aggressively” against the decision.³¹ Israel's Ambassador to the U.S. and the United Nations Gilad Erdan urged American governors to speak out against the boycott, which he described as “the de-facto adoption of anti-Semitic practices and advancement of the delegitimization of the Jewish state and the dehumanization of the Jewish people.”³² Ben and Jerry's decision is simply a protest against Israel's human rights abuses, but the Israeli government's extreme response reveals their anxiety about the changing landscape and their loss of total control over the framing of the conflict.

It is clear that the Israel-Palestine narrative has evolved. Social media activism has made many people aware of and outraged by Israel's flagrant violations of international law and Palestinians' basic human rights. As media attention dwindles, however, it is imperative that we do not disengage and become complacent. The horrors of the occupation and apartheid in Israel-Palestine cannot stay hidden. We must continue watching Sheikh Jarrah and other Palestinian communities facing expulsion, and we must continue taking action and demanding change. This summer, Israel's war crimes were met with some of the largest protests in the history of the Palestinian liberation movement, and more people than ever were willing to publicly declare their support for Palestine.³³ Those in solidarity with Palestinians should be encouraged by this shift, but it is up to us to ensure that this progress persists.

