

## After Gaza, The Great Sorting Begins

By Amr Al-Ahmed and Alberto M. Fernandez  
As the Arab Spring entered its second month, there is some clarity in the region amidst much uncertainty. There are some things that are very different and some which are strikingly similar. Certainly, for Israel, the attack launched on October 7th, 2023 and the slaughter by Hamas of over a thousand Israeli citizens changed much in terms of Israelis' sense of their own security. The effect of this attack on Israeli policies going forward will be dramatic in ways we do not fully understand.



For the ordinary Palestinians in Gaza, the war has been a disaster much larger and deeper than previous, periodic exchanges of fire between Hamas and Israel. Another change has been the (so far only partial) debut of Iran's network of militias and terrorist groups in the region. While Hamas has been taking the full force of Israel's response, the Iranian-directed network has allowed the Houthis in Yemen to lob long-distance missiles and drones at Israel while Iranian surrogates in Syria and Iraq have mostly concentrated on attacking American bases in those countries. Hizbullah, the jewel in the crown of this Iranian regional network has so far refrained from fully entering the war.

As for the region as a whole and the Muslim world in particular, the anger and turmoil has been extensive but – some may disagree with me – it has been very much along the lines seen in past bloody confrontations between Israel and its adversaries, larger at times but similar in noise, scope, and impact. I lived through two of those confrontations while in government – the 2006 Tammuz War with Hizbullah and (while working in Jordan) the so-called battle of Jenin in 2002. Both of these clashes were shorter and smaller than the current war, but the discourse was similar, a mixture of euphoria at the beginning followed by rage at the end and vacillations between the two. This current war may change the face of Israel and of the Palestinians, but I doubt what, if any, lasting effects it will have on the region as a whole.

Where the Gaza War is indeed breaking new ground is not so much in the region – more of the same there – but in the West. The size and the scope of pro-Palestine marches and activism has been unprecedented. Some of this is due to unchecked migration to the West over the past decades and clearly many of the demonstrators comes from migrant Muslim backgrounds. But also, Muslim demonstrators have been joined by the local, homegrown left – young Socialists, Communists, Greens and others. And not surprisingly, advocacy for Palestine has inevitably included violence and intimidation of Jewish communities from Australia to Harvard.

Large demonstrations in the West about foreign policy issues are not new. There have been large protests in the past about American nukes in Europe or about the war in Iraq. Twenty years ago, in the United States, hundreds of thousands of young people rallied to "Save Darfur." Decades earlier the U.S. War in Vietnam led to mass protests worldwide, especially among American and European university students. But all of those rallies, even the largest, were essentially standalone protests on particular niche issues. The people doing them may have considered themselves leftists or liberals but an overall program transcending the specific issue at hand was rarely if ever enunciated except perhaps by a tiny, deeply committed political fringe. Darfur was forgotten as people moved on to other trendier causes of the moment, because Darfur was not connected to anything else.

In contrast, the pro-Hamas rallies in the West are nothing if not connected and "intersectional." There is an overlap with the activism associated with Black Lives Matter, with Antifa and with progressive activism on gender and ethnic issues. While many joked at incongruous banners announcing "Queers for Palestine," it actually makes sense if Palestine nationalism is seen as part of supposed liberation or anti-colonial movements in the Global South, which are themselves connected to anti-Western, anti-white or anti-system progressive movements embedded in Western societies.

The Great Sorting occurring will be confusing and jarring to many. The Democratic Party in the U.S. is – or was – the party of the overwhelming majority (68% in a 2021 Pew Research poll) of American Jews. It was also the party of the majority of American Muslims of American Jews (66% in a 2017 Pew Research poll). This means that those who may presumably be the strongest advocates of different sides in the conflict are to be found inside the same political party.

While a plurality of Americans (47%) support Israel in this war, 30% believe Israel has gone too far. But in contrast, among Democrats, a slight majority (51% in a late November 2023 NBC News poll) believe Israel has gone too far and only 27% believed that Israel's military actions are justified. A wealth of other polling also shows younger people in general being more critical of Israel than older Americans.

Republicans are generally perceived as being more pro-Israel of the two American parties, but will this matter in 2024? Many of the public critics of Israel seen since October 7th also have a visceral hatred of the United States, seeing it, like Israel, as an oppressive, white, "settler colonialist" state. But Republicans have also grown increasingly wary of foreign entanglements after Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine. The common wisdom in U.S. elections is that foreign policy issues don't really matter. But will they matter this time, given that both on the left and on the right, foreign issues are now connected to broader *domestic* conceptions of nationhood, history, ethnicity and identity?

And beyond America, the mass rallies seen in favor of Palestine have been shocking to many in the West, showing how rapidly Western societies have been influenced by mass migration over the past couple of decades. Migration skeptics like Hungary's Viktor Orban have been seemingly vindicated. And the alliance of much of migrant society (with a few notable exceptions) with the political left has been graphically revealed. This is the same political left which is extremely powerful if not hegemonic in Western academia, culture, media, and government bureaucracies. The same left which has the power to mobilize aggressive, media-savvy "instamobs" dominating both the street and media coverage. Reaction is surely coming from the political right, although it may come late in a political game where the political left has built-in institutional advantages.

The Great Sorting has already begun but how it will end is not clear. What began as the latest episode in a decades-long war over land in the Holy Land is potentially transforming politics in the West, rather than in the supposedly volatile Middle East, where it is largely business as usual.

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