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*Editorial*

GAZA AND NEW YORK

*Where the stench is biggest,  
The biggest words are spoken.  
If a man has to stop his nose  
How is he to stop his ears?*

—Bertolt Brecht, ‘On the News  
of the Tory Bloodbath in Greece’

**T**O UNDERSTAND the unique position Israel occupies in American domestic politics, it is enough to compare the passions aroused by the successive wars over Palestine with those generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. If the latter has been ubiquitous, attachment to it has for the most part been shallow and media-driven. To wit, the near complete collapse of interest in the fate of Kiev, on which the struggle between liberal democracy and autocracy was supposed to turn, after the Hamas attacks and Israeli onslaught in October directed all attention to the Middle East. If there has been no shortage of whipped-up emotion since, the share of genuine feeling—hatred, fear, indignation—is far higher, deriving from a century of Zionist colonization and regional resistance, overdetermined by imperial calculations. The extermination of Jews in Europe, and the expulsion of Arabs from their ancestral home in Palestine, are catastrophes that continue to reverberate among the respective kin of four continents.

As with the arms and territory that each side enjoys there, the material and ideological resources at their disposal in the West are staggeringly

unequal. The US exemplifies this asymmetry. Here Israel can not only draw on deep reservoirs of emotion, but motivated electorates that span the two main parties and their standard geographic dispersions: from Jews to Christian Zionists; the synagogues of West Los Angeles to the mega churches of East Texas and Alabama. As a matter of electoral manoeuvre, the issue goes back to Truman, whose gradual move to back the creation of Israel as a Jewish state was based in part on Democratic prospects in 1946 and 1948, including fear of losing New York if he did not.<sup>1</sup> The ‘Zionist lobby’ as it was then known has since grown beyond what any purely electoral calculus would warrant, to become one of the most vigilant influence operations in Washington.

Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer first dissected its operations in 2006 in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq. Unable to publish ‘The Israel Lobby’ in a US outlet, they did so in the *London Review of Books*. In their analysis, the extraordinary level of military and diplomatic support given to Israel never reflected a rational strategic choice, still less solid consensus in society, but rather the ability to ‘prevent critical comments from getting a fair hearing’, amidst wider indifference—since ‘candid discussion of US–Israeli relations might lead Americans to favour a different policy’. Enforcing this depended on three things: a steely grip on the legislature, leverage over the executive, and efforts across think tanks, universities and the media to shape public opinion. Twenty years on, what does the current turmoil reveal about the status of the Israel issue as it plays out in each of these realms?

### *Political lockdown*

Over Congress, the blanket of consensus is by one measure more suffocating. After 9/11, Bush Jr at first pressed Israel to halt Operation Defensive

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<sup>1</sup> The Zionist lobby—as distinct from the Jewish community, swathes of which rejected Zionism—was less important than Zionist advisors in the White House, party funders, Christian Zionist organizations and New York’s Electoral College votes (as well as Connecticut, Illinois, Pennsylvania, California). In November 1947, Clark Clifford, Truman’s key advisor on Palestine, submitted a memorandum which noted: ‘The Jewish vote, insofar as it can be thought of as a bloc, is important only in New York. But (except for Wilson in 1916) no candidate since 1876 has lost New York and won the Presidency, and its 47 votes are naturally the first prize in any election.’ Jews made up about 14 per cent of the state and 20 per cent of the NYC population. See Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1990, pp. 54–56, 60–61. See also Truman’s 1946 conversation with Ernest Bevin on congressional elections: p. 68.

Shield, its invasion of the West Bank to crush the Second Intifada, as damaging to US interests in the Muslim world, where he sought out collaborators for the wider War on Terror. Congress responded with two resolutions backing Israel alongside an aid package, passed 94–2 in the Senate and 352–21 in the House. Twenty years later, in October 2023, a similar resolution passed the lower chamber by a larger margin, 412–10. The funding bill accompanying it also vastly exceeds the earlier offer: even if disbursements to Ukraine are stripped out by Republicans, and a humanitarian tuppence is thrown in for Gaza as a sop to softer hearts among the Democrats, it will no doubt pass to bipartisan cheers—sending \$14 billion to Israel, on top of the \$3.8 billion it has received annually since 2016 in a deal signed by Obama.

If anything, these figures understate the uniformity of opinion in Congress, while obscuring the distinct role of each party in foreclosing debate there. All but one of the holdouts to the October resolution were Democrats: if, against them, AIPAC has launched its usual fusillade—Jamaal Bowman and Ilhan Omar are set to face primary challengers—it has done so in cahoots with party leaders, who see it as their job to quash talk of a ceasefire emanating from these quarters. For defending protestors making this demand, and condemning Israel for the strike on Al-Ahli Hospital, Rashida Tlaib was censured for ‘promoting false narratives’ and ‘calling for the destruction of the state of Israel’. Republicans sponsored that motion, but 22 Democrats joined them to pass it—including the top recipients in New York of AIPAC money, Ritchie Torres and minority leader Hakeem Jeffries. The latter then joined hands with Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer and the new Republican speaker, Mike Johnson, at the March for Israel on the Mall, against a backdrop of American and Israeli flags, to chants of ‘no ceasefire’ and ‘never again’.

Seventy Democrats had already signed a statement to ‘reject the use of the phrase “From the River to the Sea”’. Is a single binational state ‘the genocide of the Jewish people’? It is the historic programme of the Israeli left, including the pan-Israeli-Palestinian Communist Party. This was different from the Republican censure. In providing cover for the actual policies of Tel Aviv and Washington, it was worse: ruling out a ceasefire in the name of Israel’s ‘right and obligation to defend itself’, it mooted a ‘humanitarian pause of limited space and time’, if several conditions were met—including ‘the release of all Palestinian civilians being detained by Hamas as human shields in Gaza’. All two million

of them? To where? As Hellfire missiles and other US-made ordnance slammed into hospitals, schools, universities, apartments, refugee camps and convoys, Congress busied itself with the social media posts of its one Palestinian member—thumbs twiddling while Gaza burned.

As the destruction mounts, a sinister frivolity continues to reign. More members may have signed onto statements backing a ceasefire, or pause, or the enforcement of laws already on the books prohibiting weapons exports that harm civilians; yet each of these underscores the curious passivity of lawmakers, as if they were mere petitioners standing outside the capital, rather than elected representatives to it. Ignoring them, the House ploughed ahead with a resolution in time for the holidays that simply defined anti-Zionism *as* anti-Semitism: 311-14 with 92 present. Jerrold Nadler, congressman for Manhattan's Upper West Side, gently suggested that this could not be squared with history, and might even be used to tar his constituents, in the second-most Jewish district in the country, for basic criticisms of the current Israeli government.

Above this fray, the White House has appeared to be operating on automatic, following the script of past administrations: the US as honest broker, gesturing to the kind of broader strategic or moral horizons that deliver accords, frameworks or road maps; the mirage of a two-state solution. Biden rushed to hug Netanyahu. Blinken has travelled to the region four times in the last month—on each occasion to Israel, together with 'partners' Jordan, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey. Portrayed as a 'balancing act', these trips have been occasions to publicly urge Israel to exercise 'restraint' and vouchsafe 'humanitarian pauses', while trying to bribe Cairo and Amman into opening their borders for a new Nakba of refugees from Gaza and the West Bank. In his own teetering appearance in Tel Aviv, Biden invoked Washington's experience of 9/11 to caution, 'while we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes'. From a politician responsible for so many of these, his remarks sounded almost self-reflective, advice offered humbly to a friend—even if the failure to specify what mistakes, or how they could be squared with justice, rendered it weightless.

In practice, however, the hand of restraint—on Israel—has been more of a pat on the back. From a military standpoint, the rush of materiel to the region has had just the opposite aim—to pin down Hezbollah in Lebanon and deter Iran, so Israel can conduct its ground invasion

without undue interference. Thus the dispatch of two aircraft-carrier strike groups to the eastern Mediterranean, at least one additional nuclear submarine, fighter jets from RAF Lakenheath, A-10 ground-attack aircraft and air-defence systems. The US monitors signals traffic from the Negev, while its drones surveil Gaza from above; offshore, it has open access to Britain's Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus, where Akrotiri acts as a hub for weapons deliveries and the NSA provides intelligence—including targeting support—to Israel. Around 57,000 troops and contractors are stationed across the region; some are already carrying out strikes from bases in Iraq and Syria, claiming they have come under fire from 'Iranian-backed' militias there. Against these escalations meant to 'avoid escalation', what has restraint amounted to? Encouraging Israelis to 'use smaller bombs'—which the US is providing to them, along with the bunker-busters that rip through city streets like a cloud of shrapnel locusts.

Diplomatically, the behaviour of the Administration has been even starker. Blocking UN votes adverse to Israel, no matter how bland and toothless—the US vetoed a Brazilian resolution to condemn violence against all civilians and urge humanitarian aid to displaced Palestinians on 18 October—is standard practice. It also buys time for Israel to carry out its methodical killing of civilians, mounting towards 20,000 as this goes to press, two-thirds of them women and children, while the US leads the negotiations to invent a mechanism for ruling whatever remains of Gaza at the slaughter's end. The pressure on Egypt and Jordan to take in a million refugees apiece appears to have come to nought, despite financial emoluments and the alleged backing of Biden's 'special humanitarian envoy'.<sup>2</sup> But that leaves plenty of other options: an international force, under Arab, UN or NATO-lite auspices;

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<sup>2</sup> David Satterfield, ex-US ambassador to Lebanon (1998–2001), was appointed Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs by Trump in 2017. In 2005, the FBI found that he had passed classified information to AIPAC lobbyists Steven Rosen and Keith Weissman; Rosen then allegedly gave some of this information to Israel. The charges against Rosen and Weissman were dropped in 2009; Satterfield was never charged—State Department officials argued that he had 'acted within his authority'. See: John Hudson, 'As Leak Probes Around Tillerson Promotes Diplomat Who Passed Classified Info to AIPAC', *Buzzfeed*, 16 August 2017; Akbar Shahid Ahmed and Rowaida Abdelaziz, 'Who "Would Accept Such a Life?" Gaza Conditions Worsen As US Aid Comes Up Short', *HuffPost*, 10 November, 2023.

perhaps with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank as a native fig leaf forcibly grafted onto Gaza.<sup>3</sup>

US opposition to growing calls for a ceasefire internationally is not categorical or indefinite, but intended to control its timing and terms. Most stories of dissensus within the executive branch should be read in this light. When Israel told Palestinians in northern Gaza to leave their homes on 12 October, the State Department warned staff to avoid three phrases, in its own preparation for the ground invasion: ‘de-escalation/ceasefire’, ‘end to violence/bloodshed’, ‘restoring calm’. Many ‘leaks’ since then have simply been variations on this directive; a question of pacing. ‘White House frustrated by Israel’s onslaught but sees few options’, the *Washington Post* revealed a month later, as confirmed civilian deaths soared past the total in two years of fighting in Ukraine.

### *Losing the plot*

In contrast to the halls of power, it is the hold over public opinion that now seems shakiest. Two-thirds of American voters support a ceasefire, rising to 80 per cent of Democrats. For the first time in two decades, the latter say they sympathize more with the Palestinians than Israelis. Biden’s standing among 18–34 year-olds has fallen most—by 15 points, with 70 per cent disapproving of his handling of the war. Blocked so far from expression at the level of politics, solidarity with the Palestinians has found niches in the culture industry writ large: news outlets and journals, advertising and social media, the worlds of art and film, academia. This is itself a sign of crisis since, as Walt and Mearsheimer note, the special status of Israel has traditionally been defined by its insulation from debate; a trompe l’oeil image of public assent generally sufficient to enforce it in reality.

Thus the fierce response of many proprietors, executives, trustees and administrators to dissent from within the institutions they run, where even gestural deviations have been harshly punished. Dependent on donors, subscribers, tickets, clicks, and to one degree or another the good will of the state, ‘best practice’ is to keep a lid on things. How successful has this been? On the one hand, this is a war of words, waged

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<sup>3</sup> James Shotter, ‘Palestinian Authority and US Work Up Postwar Plan for Gaza’, *Financial Times*, 8 December 2023.

with the means available to this milieu, and in its tone and vocabulary: accusations of intimidation, threats, bullying, unsafe conditions; policing of acceptable speech. The Anti-Defamation League has led a huge push to disqualify 'From the River to the Sea' as 'exterminationist'. These language games draw power from their intimations of violence, in the staid context of white-collar work; when set against the suffering of the bombed and besieged, to intimidate those who might have a qualm about it, they risk provoking the opposite response. The *crème de la crème* of the young American-Jewish intellectual precariat—writers, artists, scholars—signed an eloquent denunciation of the 'anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism' formula, published by *n+1* under the title, 'A Dangerous Conflation', after a 'corporate-owned magazine' refused to run it.

But the consequences of taking a public stand have been real enough. In New York, letters and counter-letters have flown—with some, in fits of enthusiasm or remorse, signing both. So have resignations and firings. *Artforum's* owner, billionaire trucking heir Jay Penske, ejected its editor a week after he posted an open letter 'in solidarity with the Palestinian people'. The campaign to oust him had a public face—led by the gallerists Dominique Lévy, Brett Gorvy and Amalia Dayan (granddaughter of Moshe Dayan, the cyclopean general who led IDF assaults during Suez and the Six-Day War, in a career stretching back to Haganah repression in the 1930s); and a private one, in which a billionaire Bed Bath & Beyond heir told artists, galleries, and other collectors to remove their signatures and pull ads. At the 92nd St Y, the poetry-centre staff quit after its board pressured the director to cancel a talk by Viet Thanh Nguyen, based on a letter he had signed in the *London Review of Books* deploring the 'deliberate killing of civilians' that also called for a cease-fire and aid to reach Gaza.

New York is the terrain on which this war of position is being fought, for two obvious reasons: as site of the most important museums, universities, publishers, corporate headquarters, banks and non-profits; and because it is home to more Jewish people than any other city in the world. Dense as ties of sentiment or kinship therefore are to the state of Israel, so is the concentration of Jews with none, who are non-practicing or from traditions critical or even hostile to it: Satmar Hasidim and socialists, including disillusioned Labour Zionists and their offspring. Centre of the 'Jewish community', the city is also home to an Arab diaspora, less than a quarter its size—who have driven broader demands for a free Palestine,

and borne the brunt of accusations of anti-Semitism for it, notwithstanding the presence of so many Jewish New Yorkers alongside them.

In print media, the *New York Times* has provided the most comprehensive news and analysis of the war since early October as compared to its liberal peers with large US circulations: *Guardian* reporting is as thin as a picked-over Oxfam shop, with Yuval Noah Harari and Jonathan Freedland shoring up an opinion section that can condemn Netanyahu, but not his war against ‘a different kind of enemy’ in Hamas, nor call for a ceasefire; this is beneath the standards even of CNN, where Jake Tapper could eventually castigate the Israeli cabinet for anti-Arab bigotry, and the killing of over 170 Palestinians in the West Bank in a month. The *Economist* is, as usual, in a league by itself, running headlines like ‘Why Israel Must Fight On’ beneath photos of a cratered Gaza City.

At the start of November, several outlets began to recalibrate. The bombing of Al-Shifa Hospital may have been a turning point—the NICU babies, pleas from nurses as power dwindled, sights and sounds that overwhelmed the justifications for it, with claims the basement was a ‘command center’ (later a ‘node’) for Hamas. The *New Yorker* expressed unease about the disparity in death and destruction, with editor David Remnick trekking to Israel to see for himself (even as the *Atlantic*, at the right end of the liberal spectrum, went on ignoring the Palestinians, under the practiced hand of ex-IDF prison guard Jeffrey Goldberg). The *Times* editorial board also turned a corner. Without revising its initial statement that, ‘what Israel is fighting to defend is a society that values human life and the rule of law’, by 3 November it thought a humanitarian pause ‘worth trying’, and a week later printed historian Omer Bartov’s ‘guest essay’, calling for swift action to halt the ‘unbearable and untenable’ violence in Gaza.<sup>4</sup>

But this is accompanied by a house style that tends to make a mockery of what its reporters are beaming back to 41st Street—passive-voice constructions and hedging so elaborate it is hard to tell who is doing what to whom. After Israel bombed a refugee camp: ‘explosions Gazans say was airstrike leaves many casualties in dense neighborhood’; hospitals around which ‘fighting erupts’; casting doubt on casualty figures,

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<sup>4</sup> Omer Bartov, ‘What I Believe as a Historian of Genocide’, *NYT*, 10 November 2023.



attributed to the ‘ Hamas-run health ministry ’.<sup>5</sup> Yet the gaps are as visible between legacy media—the *Washington Post* almost immediately backed up the Gaza figures—as inside them. Towards the end of November, one front-page story in the *Times* noted that the ‘ pace of death ’ and ‘ use of very large weapons in dense urban areas, including US-made 2,000 pound bombs ’ had ‘ few precedents in this century ’—even as another implied the pause in fighting had benefited Hamas, and the editorial board chimed in with fatuous calls to revive the two-state solution blaming Palestinians for its failure since the ‘ breakthrough ’ of Oslo.<sup>6</sup>

Beneath these international media outlets lies a stratum of New York journals that hew more closely to the preoccupations of its local intellectuals. Many with a stake in Jewish culture are riven by similar generational-class *cum* political fissures. On the right, Gen X editors at *Tablet* parrot Israeli PR, denouncing ‘ staged scenes of Palestinians suffering violence ’, compare Yale to Hamas by way of Qatar, and castigate Biden for doing too little to ‘ punish ’ Iran and its proxies, thereby ‘ shielding it against retaliation ’.<sup>7</sup> *Jewish Currents*, revived from an old CPUSA title as a progressive challenger to *Tablet* in 2018, has had intense internal battles over the line to strike after 7 October, but clearly reflects a millennial view—with articles against the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism and suppression of pro-Palestinian speech in the US, and dispatches from Gaza and the West Bank that call the incursions there ‘ textbook cases of genocide ’.<sup>8</sup>

*Dissent* combines Zionists and liberal interventionists of the ‘ democratic left ’ in their eighth or ninth decades—Michael Walzer, Michael Kazin and others—with a distinct cohort in their third or fourth. Typically, it

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<sup>5</sup> On 17 October, the *New York Times* initially attributed the explosion at Al-Ahli Hospital to Israel, before revising this under pressure. ‘ Biden jumped in a week later, stating he “ had no notion that Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed. ” He also privately complained about the *NYT* headlines on Al-Ahli during a meeting with Wall Street bankers’, Matthew Petti, ‘ Media Amplified US, Israeli Narrative on Palestinian Deaths ’, *Responsible Statecraft*, 20 November 2023.

<sup>6</sup> ‘ The Only Way Forward ’, *NYT*, 25 November 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Landes, ‘ Pallywood’s Latest Blockbuster ’, *Tablet*, 29 November 2023; Armin Rosen, ‘ What Yale has in Common with Hamas ’, *Tablet*, 28 November 2023; Jay Mens, ‘ Iran’s Implausible Deniability ’, *Tablet*, 26 Nov 2023.

<sup>8</sup> The *Jewish Currents* debate is evoked in an editorial responding to 7 October: see Arielle Angel, ‘ We Cannot Cross Until We Carry Each Other ’, *JC*, 12 October 2023.

has tried to have it both ways: Joshua Leifer echoes his elders after 9/11, upbraiding the ‘ultra-left’ in Brooklyn for siding with terrorists; Gabriel Winant argues that ‘the genuine humane sentiment that it is possible to grieve equally for those on both sides is, tragically, not true. One side has an enormous grief machine, the best in the world . . . the other is starved for grief.’<sup>9</sup> At some distance from these intra-communal exchanges, *n+1* and *Jacobin* staked out the most consistent positions. The former publishes literary critics like Saree Makdisi and other writers in the slipstream of BLM, unapologetic that the 7 October attack opened up a ‘hole in the limits of the world’; the latter, in less lyrical tones, criticizes mainstream Democrats for failing to back a ceasefire, while stressing the possibilities for labour to force one, if linked to pro-Palestine movements globally.<sup>10</sup>

### *Impressionable minds*

University campuses, where many of these writers study and work, have long been targets of the Israel Lobby. During the Second Intifada, it invested heavily in countering pro-Palestinian student groups and faculty, monitoring them through outfits like the Caravan for Democracy, the David Project, Campus Watch, Canary and the Israel on Campus Coalition, this last staffed in part by AIPAC, funded by billionaire Adam Milstein, and apparently reporting directly to Israel, in violation of US laws.<sup>11</sup> The growth of BDS as a fulcrum for campus organizing brought a renewed push from these entities, which have now sprung into action again to deal with the wave of protests since October.

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<sup>9</sup> Jo-Ann Mort and Michael Walzer, ‘Israel Must Defeat Hamas—And Then Get Serious About Peace’, *The New Republic*, 18 October 2023; Michael Walzer, ‘Even the Oppressed Have Obligations’, *Atlantic*, 6 November 2023. Leifer, ‘Towards a Humane Left’, *Dissent*, 12 October 2023: ‘The question of whether there can be a decent left has been posed perennially in this magazine’s pages, most clearly by Michael Walzer in 2002, but I must admit that I often contested its premise . . . Now, I am afraid that I have been terribly naïve.’ Compare Winant, ‘On Mourning and Statehood: A Response to Joshua Leifer’, *Dissent*, 13 October 2023: ‘in the several days that we spent arguing about whether the left was sufficiently decent about Hamas’s victims, Israel geared up its genocide machine—which it now is releasing.’

<sup>10</sup> *n+1* has given space to other efforts in New York, including a round-table on the US role in the conflict from a New School teach-in on October 26.

<sup>11</sup> See reporting from James Bamford, including ‘Israel’s War on American Student Activists’, *Nation*, 17 November 2023.

These have been widely reported as the latest flashpoints of an elite culture war, with Accuracy in Media trucks tooling around Harvard Yard, displaying the faces, names and addresses of undergraduates who dared to sign a Palestine Solidarity Committee letter, and partial or permanent suspensions of Students for Justice in Palestine, Coalition Against Apartheid, Jewish Voices for Peace and other groups at MIT, Brandeis, Columbia. Publicly, the Anti-Defamation League has pressed for Students for Justice in Palestine to be investigated for ‘materially supporting a foreign terrorist organization’. In private, its leader puzzles over Israel’s loss of clout among young people, and wonders if celebrity influencers might fix the problem. Reporters covering the protests for the *Times* suddenly sneered at the pernicious effects of ‘academic jargon’ on impressionable minds, who were inserting the war into a colonial and social-justice context with which it had nothing whatsoever to do.<sup>12</sup>

But the clampdown is not confined to elite universities, or to large state schools under the thumb of Republicans in Florida. City University of New York, the largest urban public system in the US, is subject to a double-barrel pressure, its Chancellor issuing statements stigmatizing expressions of solidarity with Palestinians as ‘internal organizations sponsoring rallies to celebrate or support Hamas’, even as the NY Governor—Democrat Kathy Hochul, who ordered all state buildings lit blue and white, then flew to Israel to show her support for ‘the civilized world versus the uncivilized world’—launched a ‘probe’ to root out anti-Semitism on CUNY’s 25 campuses.<sup>13</sup> Here the problem for authorities is a working-class student body of over 200,000 that is 40 per cent immigrant and 75 per cent of colour, with a vocal pro-Palestinian presence.

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<sup>12</sup> Pro-Palestinian students ‘see their movement as connected to others that have stood up for an oppressed people . . . Referencing resistance movements, the pro-Palestinian cause is “anticolonial.” Echoing the struggle against institutionalized racism in South Africa, Israel is an “apartheid regime.” Resonating with the concern for Native American land rights, the Palestinians are “Indigenous peoples.” Gaza is a form of mass incarceration, “Israel’s open-air prison.” Anemona Hartocollis and Stephanie Saul, ‘After Antisemitic Attacks, Colleges Debate What Kind of Speech Is out of Bounds’, *NYT*, 9 November 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Displaying an appetite for theatrical pandering worthy of her predecessor, Andrew Cuomo, whose resignation following a sexual harassment scandal resulted in her initial elevation to office, Hochul refused to fly home when news arrived that her father had suffered a brain aneurism in Florida: ‘Ms. Hochul’s grief made some of her exchanges in Israel seem more poignant’; Luis Ferré-Sadurni, ‘Kathy Hochul, Grieving Her Father’s Sudden Death, Presses On in Israel’, *NYT*, 19 October 2023.

Protests have spread beyond colleges to most large and medium-sized cities across the US; here too, however, New York is the epicentre. By mid-October a pattern had set in of relatively small but daily actions: demonstrations of a few thousand marching from points in midtown to the UN, put on by Palestinian organizations—Al-Awda, In Our Lifetime, Palestinian Youth Movement—along with the DSA or People’s Forum; boisterous, tightly-packed protests in Bay Ridge, with a diverse Arab community in south Brooklyn; occupations involving at most a few hundred at Black Rock, JP Morgan, the offices of the *New York Times*, or glued to the route of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. The most spectacular have been led by Jewish Voice for Peace: shutting down Grand Central Station, taking Liberty Island, blocking the Manhattan Bridge, a mass of black shirts that read ‘Not in Our Name’. One challenge for these coalitions is to grow and converge; another, more daunting, is to push beyond civil disobedience. The UAW has become the biggest union to back a ceasefire, in front of the White House, a month after postal workers and many locals did. But few industrial actions have followed. Links between campus, street and workplace are weak or non-existent; forging them offers the best chance of shattering the complacency of the political class and impeding the war machine at its disposal.<sup>14</sup>

### *Hegemon and helpmate*

Here it may be illuminating to compare briefly the scenes in New York and London. Demonstrations in the British capital—the largest anywhere in the West and growing by an order of magnitude each week through November to reach nearly a million—provide an indirect sense of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the left that arose there, out of the economic and political crises that stretch back beyond 2008, to 2003. The sea of humanity flowing through the West End, or across Westminster Bridge towards the US Embassy in Vauxhall, inevitably recalls the last event that galvanized this level of protest. It was his vocal opposition to the invasion of Iraq that gave Corbyn his moral appeal when he first

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<sup>14</sup> The possibility of labour actions to disrupt production and shipment of arms to Israel—and current or past examples, from Pinochet’s Chile to apartheid South Africa—has been a consistent theme of *Jacobin*: Katy Fox-Hodess, ‘Dockworkers and Activists Can Block the Shipment of Arms to Israel’, 27 November 2023; Stephen Semler, ‘US Weapons Shipments to Israel Are Enabling War Crimes’, 22 November 2023; Olly Haynes, ‘Shut Down the Companies That Are Arming Israel’s War’, 18 November 2023.

stood for Labour leader, a decade after Blair and Brown plunged Britain into that conflagration at Bush's side. The sense of crisis shaking the party today reflects the same grim commitment, with its current leader pursuing the purge of his predecessor far beyond what electoral expediency or internal party management would otherwise require, in a reset to the Israeli Embassy and Blair.<sup>15</sup>

As in the US, a gap has opened up between popular sentiment and any meaningful political expression of it: 80 per cent of Labour voters—and 64 per cent of Conservatives—want a ceasefire. One difference is the capacity of the issue to mobilize in Britain, and thus to dramatize that divide. Keir Starmer has, in the face of this groundswell, continually modulated his initial statement that Israel had a right to cut off water, power and food to Gaza—in that capsizing legalese peculiar to him—‘if it complied with international law’. In practice, he has stymied all efforts to hold it to this standard in Parliament. When the SNP tabled its own ceasefire motion, Starmer warned that frontbenchers voting for it would be sacked. 56 MPs defied the whip to back the amendment anyway, amidst a collapse in Labour's support among Muslim voters from 75 to 5 per cent—overdetermining the votes of MPs under pressure from Bradford to Birmingham, Blackburn to Luton. Fifty local councillors have quit the Party since October.

This unusual dissensus, running from the heights of Westminster to Burnley Council, suggests that the anti-imperial element of Corbynism had the potential to resonate beyond its core electorate. What if such spontaneous scenes of protest and opposition to the reflexes of empire had found a tribune in the next Prime Minister, rather than a police cosh? The protests outside—and only then inside—the PLP have also revealed the limits of the anti-Semitism smear: as systematically applied by the *Guardian* and the BBC to a mild-mannered anti-war activist, too shocked by the moral enormity of such an accusation to be able adequately to rebut it, it was highly effective. But it was another matter when the Conservative Home Secretary tried it on nearly a million people marching under banners of peace and justice: this time, it was she, not the ‘hate marches’, that went.

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<sup>15</sup> As former Tory defense minister Michael Portillo put it, Starmer had ‘done exactly the right thing’ opposing a ceasefire in Gaza, since the US ‘would want to know whether a Labour government was going to deviate from the alliance with the United States which is so important.’ *Good Morning Britain*, 5 November 2023.

In the imperial core, a different dynamic is playing out. If the British left can—in the aftermath of its rout—still draw on an existing ‘Stop the War’ strand of organizing, which has mobilized against every imperial military adventure since the invasion of Afghanistan, the American is reckoning with the limits of its own. Here the figurehead of the Democratic Socialists, Bernie Sanders, refused to back a ceasefire, taking the same line as other top Democrats: doing so, he repeated for two months, would hand a victory to Hamas, which Israel had every right to eliminate.<sup>16</sup> The trajectory of Sanders, as compared to Corbyn, since their failed bids to lead and reorient their respective centre-left parties, speaks to the different kinds of challenge they posed to the reigning orders. To start with, an anti-Semitic smear campaign was not needed in the US: not just because its likely efficacy was always doubtful—Sanders is Jewish, and enough Jewish people actually live and disagree publicly with one another in the US to make it difficult to ventriloquize them through an officious-sounding board, as in Britain—but on political grounds.

After packing in his campaign and endorsing Biden in 2020, Sanders has been showered with praise and committee chairs, in a process already under way four years earlier, when he joined the Democratic leadership. Many have noted the disillusionment of his millennial admirers over his stance on Israel, mostly in order to praise his grizzled statesmanship over their Quixotic passions. Another reading of this development is possible, however, that spares neither. When Sanders and his chief foreign-policy advisor praised Biden’s aggressive forwarding of NATO response as ‘the progressive option’ on Ukraine, the voices raised in criticism of them were fewer, and softer, than now. But the American empire is not served *à la carte*, as the White House itself underscores at every turn, linking these conflicts in its attempts to procure fresh funds for both. The Treasury Secretary reassured her fellow citizens from the outset of fighting in Gaza: they could ‘certainly afford’ to pay for two wars at once.

Alexander Cockburn identified this problem decades ago. Never fond of Sanders, his criticisms of him were political: accusing ‘the “independent” hot-air factory from Vermont’ of steering the left into the Democratic

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<sup>16</sup> Kayla Guo, ‘On Israel’s War Against Hamas, Sanders Faces a Backlash from the Left’, *NYT*, 30 November 2023. Faiz Shakir, campaign manager in 2020, loyally explained his position: ‘As a deeply committed, progressive person that Bernie is, he finds it impossible to advocate for trusting a decidedly unprogressive Hamas.’

fold even after Clinton gutted welfare, and voting for the crime bill, NATO's bombing of Serbia, and to fund—if not authorize—the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In analysing the fragilities of the anti-war movement that sprang up at that time, as compared to the 1960s, Cockburn argued that neither should be judged solely on their success in stopping war: 'anti-war movements are often most significant in their afterlives—schooling a new generation in attitudes and tactics of resistance.'<sup>17</sup> Today, the left faces a new situation, in which most younger people and people of colour are disgusted by what they see unfolding in Palestine, and with Democrats for facilitating it: anti-imperialism is a popular position, and it cannot be marginal to the project of economic redistribution, whatever emerges next to carry forward those dual aspirations.

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Cockburn: *The Golden Age is in Us: Journeys and Encounters 1987–1994*, London 1994, pp. 414–5 ; 'Whatever Happened to the Anti-War Movement', NLR 46, July–Aug 2007.