



The New Left and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in the United States

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The youthful activists who made up the New Left during the 1960s were largely in accord in their opposition to the Vietnam War and their support for the black freedom movement. By contrast, they were deeply divided about how to approach the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some left-wing youth championed the Palestinian cause as another example of support for anti-imperialist struggles in the Third World. Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party (BPP), and famous Youth International Party (Yippie) figures Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin felt this way, as did certain members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Other members of the New Left balked at calling Israel an imperialist oppressor and pushed back, including some in SDS, but also groups like the Radical Zionist Alliance. The result was bitter conflict and invective that was worsened by the fact that left-wing Jews, who were present in disproportionately large numbers in the New Left, were represented on both sides of this issue.

IN THE 1960s, the New Left in the United States was famous for fighting racism, protesting the Vietnam War, and trying to cure socioeconomic and political ills at home. Yet what some may not remember today, five decades after the killings of students at Kent State University and Jackson State College in May 1970—events that hastened the New Left’s demise—is that the various youthful forces that made up the New Left also adopted strong stances on the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹ Some of the most vocal of these activists championed the Palestinian cause, which engendered much criticism of the New Left. Yet such stances also prompted strong resistance from other New Leftists sympathetic to Israel. Racial/ethnic identity was a strong factor in this intra-left divisiveness, which became a major source of conflict within a New Left whose activists were otherwise fairly unanimous in their support for the black freedom struggle, their calls for a “new politics” in the United States, and their passionate demands to end to the war in Vietnam.²

The New Left—the term was coined in 1960 by sociologist C. Wright Mills³—refers to a variety of young black and white leftists who sought structural change in America in the 1960s on the basis of moral passion, direct action, and sometimes, revolutionary fervor. Whom to support in the Arab-Israeli conflict was much clearer for left-wing black groups like the BPP and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Because of their overt transnational solidarity with oppressed peoples of color around the world, they naturally embraced the Palestinians as

an example of just such a people. They not only identified with them but also saw their own struggle and that of the Arabs in the Middle East as one and the same: a struggle against racialized U.S. imperialism.

The question of which side to support in the Arab-Israeli conflict proved immensely controversial within the white New Left, however, and two major fault lines emerged. The first dealt with competing ideological visions. Those who hailed the Palestinian struggle against Israel did so out of their commitment to a revolutionary internationalism that aimed to overthrow Western capitalism and its imperialist grip on colonized peoples around the world. From this perspective, they too believed that Israel was a U.S. ally that had dispossessed a people of color, the Palestinians. By contrast, those who were pro-Israeli tempered their revolutionary ideals when it came to Israel. They viewed it as a brave little socialist nation that fought for its very existence against a sea of bloodthirsty Arabs, not as an imperialist lackey of the United States dominating and dispossessing a native people.

The second fault line dividing the white New Left regarding the Middle East stemmed from personal ethnic identity, which sometimes intersected with and affected members' ideology. The white New Left contained a disproportionately large number of Jews,⁴ and for some of them, the Arab-Israeli conflict invoked deep, personal, and sometimes conflicted ethno-religious emotions. Feelings of pride in and support for Israel that were instilled in them as youngsters therefore presented a challenge to many but certainly not all Jewish New Leftists when they were called upon to denounce Israel for starting the June War and for dominating a native people like the Palestinians.

This study details the stances on the Arab-Israeli conflict adopted by both the black and white "wings" of the New Left in the 1960s, pointing out how various activists' ideological understandings of imperialism and the conflict were often tempered by their own racial/ethnic identities. It further notes the ways that where the New Left stood on the conflict ultimately helped lead to its demise, as in-fighting over Israel among white leftists dovetailed with other factors to diminish the New Left by the early 1970s.⁵

Black Power Sets the Stage

Some blacks in the United States had long been developing a strong sense of transnational solidarity with the Third World, including the Arab world.⁶ By the 1960s, the Black Power movement, in particular, followed events in the Middle East. Rather than pursue a reformist agenda trying to integrate blacks into mainstream white America, Black Power advocates wanted African Americans to achieve actual power: political, cultural, and economic. For some, their agenda included the revolutionary transformation of U.S. society so that blacks, whom some Black Power militants viewed as an internal colony of the United States, could be free. An early pioneer in the movement was Malcolm X. Malcolm's worldview was deeply shaped by his revolutionary internationalist belief that the various black peoples around the world that were dominated by a global system of imperialist oppression were rising up and fighting to be free. In using *black*, Malcolm meant "non-white—black, brown, red or yellow people."⁷ He explained: "The dark masses of Africa and Asia and Latin America are already seething with bitterness, animosity,

hostility, unrest, and impatience with the racial intolerance that they themselves have experienced at the hands of the white West.”⁸ He argued that U.S. blacks were part of this same global revolutionary fervor. “What happens to a black man in America today happens to the black man in Africa,” he wrote. “What happens to one of us today happens to all of us. . . . The negro revolt [will] evolve and merge into the world-wide black revolution that has been taking place on this earth since 1945.”⁹

Malcolm’s internationalism led him to support the Palestinians.¹⁰ As far back as the late 1950s Malcolm had been speaking out in transnational support of Palestinian liberation. Several factors accounted for this. As an adherent to the black religious organization the Nation of Islam (NOI), Malcolm felt a natural kinship with other Muslims, including Arabs. Arabs had long been involved or in contact with the NOI, among them Jamil Shakir Diab, a Palestinian who immigrated to the United States in 1948 and taught Arabic at the NOI’s University of Islam in Chicago.¹¹ Of particular note in Malcolm’s pro-Palestinian leanings were two visits he made to the Palestinians’ homeland. He first briefly toured Jordanian-controlled East Jerusalem in July 1959. During a subsequent trip to the Middle East in April and May 1964, he met in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, with Haj Amin al-Husseini, who had been the preeminent political and religious leader of Palestine’s Muslims during the period of the British Mandate. When Malcolm returned to the region a few months later for a lengthy stay in Cairo, he left the city for a two-day tour of Egyptian-controlled Gaza in September 1964. While there, Malcolm visited several Palestinian refugee camps, went to the cease-fire line with Israel, and held a press conference at the Palestinian Legislative Council building in Gaza City before carrying out his evening prayers at a mosque in the company of Gaza City’s mayor, Munir al-Rayyis. He returned to Cairo and attended a press conference given by Ahmad Shuqayri, the chair of the newly created Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), after which he published a scathing critique of Zionism titled “Zionist Logic” in Cairo’s English-language newspaper, the *Egyptian Gazette*.¹²

Malcolm was murdered in February 1965, but it was only a few short years later that other Black Power advocates continued along the path he blazed, particularly after Israel soundly defeated its Arab enemies in the June 1967 war. SNCC was the first group to champion the Palestinian cause forcefully. Established in 1960s, SNCC had famously moved from being a civil-rights to a Black-Power group in mid-1966 under the leadership of its chair, Stokely Carmichael. Shortly after the war, SNCC jolted parts of the Left (and others) with an article in the *SNCC Newsletter* in August 1967 that stridently attacked Israel. Reflecting Malcolm’s transnational views on the interconnectedness of the black struggle in the United States with that being waged by the Palestinians against Israel, the article asserted that U.S. blacks were “an integral part of the Third World” who needed to know what “our brothers are doing in their homelands.” As for Israel and the Palestinians, the article stated, Zionism was “a worldwide nationalistic Jewish movement, organized, planned and created the ‘State of Isreal [sic]’ by sending Jewish immigrants from Europe into Palestine (the heart of the Arab world) to take over land and homes belonging to the Arabs.”¹³

Black Power support for the Palestinian struggle emerged again just two weeks later at the National Conference for New Politics that convened in Chicago from 31 August through 4 September 1967. The mostly white organizers of the conference attempted to bring together various black groups, New Leftists, and anti-Vietnam War activists to discuss unified action. Yet militant Black Power

advocates were in no mood to follow others' agendas. Hundreds of black activists staged a walkout, while several hundred others stayed and demanded that the conference adopt a thirteen-point policy statement that included a condemnation of "the imperialistic Zionist war" that Israel had launched three months earlier. Following outcries and a walkout by some white delegates, this statement was softened later on to a condemnation of "the Israeli government" for starting the war.¹⁴ Intra-left dissension over Israel and the Palestinians was manifesting itself.

SDS and the Yippies Embrace Palestine

Internationalist worldviews were also present in the white New Left from its beginnings in 1959–60.¹⁵ Specific support for the Palestinians, however, surfaced after the 1967 war, notably within SDS, the largest New Left student organization in the United States.¹⁶ SDS was a largely white student activist organization that emerged in 1960 out of the Social Democratic group, League for Industrial Democracy. In Washington in April 1965, it helped organize the first major national protest against the Vietnam War. As the 1960s progressed, some leading SDS activists began thinking of themselves no longer as participants in a student movement for change but partisans for revolution in the United States.

Some in the group then joined with black militants to denounce Israel for launching the June War. Just nine days after the war ended, the influential SDS publication *New Left Notes* published a motion that SDS national interim committee member Roy Dahlberg wanted to be discussed at an upcoming national meeting. Dahlberg noted that the war had "brought about strong reaction [s] from American Jews and confusion on the Left in general," and urged his comrades to use an anti-imperialist analysis to understand the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than succumb to emotion.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, Arab students attending the annual SDS conference on 25–30 June 1967 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, discussed the Middle East with their U.S. colleagues. A foreign affairs workshop at the gathering ended up producing a minority report that denounced the United States' role in the establishment of the State of Israel.¹⁸ Later in the year, SDS printed a pamphlet by Larry Hochman, a professor and former Zionist, titled *Zionism and the Israeli State: An Analysis in the June War*. In it, Hochman noted the growing anti-imperialist lens through which many in SDS were then viewing the world: "To become more fundamental, the central issue in Southwest Asia is the fact that a Jewish state has been established in the midst of the Arab world without the invitation or consent of the indigenous population."¹⁹

Despite these early stirrings, it would not be until late 1968 and early 1969 that SDS leaders decided to push hard for the organization to stand firmly with the Palestinians. The Palestinian resistance movement was by then much in the headlines; Palestinians were also soliciting SDS members for their support. In Paris, during the summer of 1968, Peter Pran, a Norwegian graduate student who was president of the SDS chapter at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, met some Palestinian students who asked him if SDS supported their struggle. Several months later, Pran published an article in *New Left Notes* arguing that SDS suffered from ideological inconsistency in failing to support the Palestinian cause more forthrightly: "SDS cannot pretend to be a consistent backer of revolutionary struggles around the world without taking a strong stand on the Middle East war, one of the most important battles in the world today."²⁰

Pran's sentiments reflected the growing feelings among some in SDS who were beginning to embrace revolutionary anti-imperialism, a stance heightened by their move toward Marxism. They felt that the Palestinian struggle against Israel was part and parcel of a wider anti-imperialist movement around the world that they, as U.S. revolutionaries, were duty bound to support. Yet, others in SDS felt that Israel deserved their support in what they saw as its life-and-death struggle against reactionary Arabs. This growing tension within SDS was emblematic of a seam line dividing the group. The famous SDS figure Mark Rudd stated clearly that supporting the Palestinians was that dividing line: "It distinguished the true anti-imperialists from the liberals."²¹

This divide was exacerbated by another one that affected it symbiotically. Some national SDS figures felt that being Jewish required them to move beyond their upbringings and look into the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rudd recalled that the conflict had led to much "soul-searching" for him as a radical Jew in 1967, something that ultimately led him to rethink Zionism: "I realized at that time that nationalism (Jewish in this case), meant a whole lot less to me than internationalism; and that I was thoroughly anti-imperialist."²² Bob Ross, who helped found SDS, felt that his secular, non-Zionist Jewish background "absolutely" led him to investigate the situation in the Middle East.²³ Mike Klonsky, who worked at the SDS national headquarters in Chicago, stated that his being a Jew in fact required him to support the Palestinians: "A lot of the activists at that time were Jewish, and a lot of us felt we had a special responsibility to speak out on those issues [like the Arab-Israeli conflict] because we were Jewish. I interpreted my role as a Jew as someone who needed to support such causes."²⁴ But other SDS-affiliated Jews balked at attacking Israel because they had been raised to think of it as a symbol of the Jewish people's redemption after the Holocaust. It was, as one contemporary noted, "a very volatile issue, especially at heavily Jewish campuses such as Columbia."²⁵

Despite the lack of unanimity within the organization, the SDS national leadership decided to push the group toward a clear stance in favor of the Palestinians starting in late 1968 and early 1969, and the national interim committee began distributing information to the membership. This included a publication titled *The Struggle in the Middle East*, the cover of which bore the emblem of the Palestinian guerrilla organization Fatah, and a pamphlet first produced by an Israeli anti-Zionist group called Matzpen.²⁶ The most significant level of pro-Palestinian information disseminated by the national leadership came in the form of a series of articles on the Palestinians that were written for *New Left Notes* by Susan Eanet. Eanet was a staff writer for *New Left Notes* and another U.S. Jew pushing SDS to support Third World liberation movements like the Palestinian struggle. She published several articles on the Middle East in six issues of *New Left Notes* in the first four months of 1969 and echoed the growing internationalism of SDS leaders by writing that other than Vietnam, the Middle East was "the leading struggle against US imperialism in the world today." She also compared the Zionist displacement of the Palestinians with that of the American Indians by white settlers.²⁷

Not all within SDS appreciated reading such strong criticism of Israel. *New Left Notes* began receiving negative letters to the editor criticizing Eanet's pieces. Rumors circulated of declining financial support. As national SDS leaders had planned, the entire question of the Arab-Israeli conflict was then discussed at the SDS national council meeting in late March 1969. Klonsky chaired a workshop on the Middle East, but only seven people attended, and they failed to adopt

Klonsky's proposed motion on the issue.²⁸ Whom to support in the Arab-Israeli conflict not only proved divisive to SDS, it was perceived by many SDS stalwarts as a tertiary issue to more immediate issues that struck a personal note, like stopping the war in Vietnam, the black freedom struggle, and overhauling the U.S. political system.

In spite of the prominence of SDS, one of the flagships of the New Left, it neither developed a cohesive stand on the Arab-Israeli conflict nor carried out concrete actions related to it. This characterized another group that for better or worse epitomized the New Left in the eyes of many Americans: the Yippies. A chaotic fusion of radical New Left politics and hippie countercultural values, the Yippies carried out daring, often humorous, street-level actions that garnered them a great deal of publicity. The two Yippie figures most in the news in the 1960s were Rubin and Hoffman. Like a number of prominent New Leftists, both were Jewish, and both also sharply criticized Israel and used strongly anti-imperialist ideological positions to analyze the Arab-Israeli conflict. Rubin grew up knowing Arab students and accepted their criticisms of Israel. He later lived in Israel from mid-1961 until late 1963 and associated with Palestinians and communists, which caused him to be put under surveillance by Israeli intelligence agents. In Israel, he later noted, "I became anti-Israeli and pro-Arab."²⁹ His support for the armed Palestinian resistance movement was clear when he boldly wrote in 1971 that "if Moses were alive today, he'd be an Arab guerrilla."³⁰ Rubin's wife and cofounder of the Yippies, Nancy Kurshan, noted years later that "Jerry was definitely supportive of the Palestinian struggle as was I. . . . We viewed it as a struggle similar to the Vietnamese or perhaps the American Indian Movement in the country."³¹ Other Yippies agreed: "Our pro-Palestinian sentiments came from the fact that the Yippie core were all pretty much rebellious Jews," recalled Judy Gumbo Albert. "We identified with all the liberation movements of the day of which the Palestinians were one."³²

Hoffman was similarly sharply critical of Israel. "I hate Israel and want to see the Palestinians triumph," he once wrote his wife, Anita,³³ and in 1969 he informed his strongly pro-Israeli lawyer, Alan Dershowitz, of his support for the PLO during the famous Chicago Eight trial.³⁴ Attending protests at the Democratic Party's 1972 national convention in Miami, Hoffman later opined, "I am very pro-Jewish, but anti-Zionism."³⁵ Unlike Rubin, however, Hoffman did not generally make his views public, although his post-Yippie letters to his wife in the early and mid-1970s revealed a visceral anger at Israel. In December 1974 he wrote, "I am violently anti-Israel and no longer believe they have a right to exist. During the past ten years they have forfeited any right they might have 'earned.'"³⁶

Like those in SDS who supported the Palestinians, the Yippies discussed and wrote about their feelings toward the Arab-Israeli conflict but never actualized them. Jim Retherford, who ghostwrote Rubin's best-selling book, *Do It!: Scenarios of the Revolution*, recalled that the issue was not as "straight-forward" as Vietnam and thus did not prompt them to demonstrate or carry out other concrete actions in support of the Palestinian struggle.³⁷ John Sinclair and Lawrence "Pun" Plamondon, two leaders of the White Panther Party (WPP), a radical group allied with the Yippies, similarly sided with the Palestinians, but like much of the white New Left, never acted on it. Plamondon did visit the Fatah office in Algeria in 1970, but years later, he expressed the feeling of many New Leftists when he stated that "the Middle East was not a significant focus of my or

other WPP members' attention. The war in Vietnam and the threat of U.S. fascism was my/our primary focus."³⁸

The Black Panthers Project the Guerrilla Image

At the time that Jewish and other white New Leftists in SDS, the Yippies, and the WPP grappled with the Arab-Israeli conflict in the late 1960s, doing little more than arguing about which side to support, the BPP deepened earlier Black Power support for the Palestinians demonstrated by Malcolm and SNCC. Two southern transplants to Oakland, California, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, formed the BPP in October 1966 as an armed force to protect Oakland's black citizens from police violence. The group soon developed a wider left-wing, anti-imperialist ideology that spoke of revolution at home in the United States and support for Third World liberation struggles abroad.³⁹ This included the Palestinians. Starting in October 1968, the BPP newspaper, the *Black Panther*, began running articles hailing the Palestinian struggle and the guerrilla group Fatah, in particular. The following month, a piece in the paper summed up the party's stance: "Israel IS because Palestine's right to be was canceled."⁴⁰

In 1969, as the New Left was at its peak, the number of BPP public statements of support for the Palestinians increased significantly. In fact, the party published thirty-three articles supporting the Arabs or attacking Israel in the forty-three issues of the *Black Panther* that came out between 1 June 1969 and 28 March 1970.⁴¹ Newton and Seale, as well as BPP chief-of-staff David Hilliard and Field Marshall Donald "D. C." Cox, made clear that the Palestinian struggle mirrored that of U.S. blacks and that both struggles were part of a wider global conflict with imperialism. So did BPP minister of education Raymond "Masai" Hewitt, who stated in August 1969, "We recognize that our oppression takes different forms—Zionism in Palestine and fascism here in America—but the cause is the same: it's U.S. imperialism."⁴² Palestinians agreed. A few months later, the *Black Panther* quoted PLO chair Yasir Arafat: "The Palestinian Liberation Movement considers itself a part of the people's struggle against international imperialism. We are fighting the same enemy. The mask may differ, but the face remains the same."⁴³ The party followed this up with an article titled "Zionism (Kosher Nationalism) + Imperialism = Fascism" that announced "victory to the people's struggle of Palestine!" and proclaimed that "the Zionist fascist state of Israel is a puppet and lackey of the imperialists and must be smashed."⁴⁴

A significant fact contributing to the BPP's embrace of the Palestinians in 1969 was the fact that their minister of information, Eldridge Cleaver, took up residence in Algiers that June while on the run from U.S. law enforcement. Along with his wife, Kathleen Neal Cleaver, and several others, Cleaver openly associated with Fatah cadres in the city. He opened the Afro-American Information Center near Fatah's offices in July 1969 and publicly declared that Israel was a "puppet and pawn" of the United States and that "al-Fatah will win"—all with a Fatah figure standing by his side. He also delivered a speech at the nearby Fatah office⁴⁵ and later met Arafat in the city that December. The following year, Algerian authorities officially designated the BPP a liberation movement and allowed the Panthers to open the International Section of the Black Panther Party in September 1970 in a villa formerly occupied by the National Liberation Front in Vietnam (Viet Cong). The international section of the party thereafter

continued to express both its support for the Palestinians and the BPP's belief in the commonality of their struggle. "The struggle of the Palestinian people for their freedom and liberation from US imperialism and its lackeys is also our struggle. We recognize that if the Palestinian people cannot get their freedom and liberation neither can we," declared a statement issued in September 1970.⁴⁶

In a sign of the dissension within the New Left about the Arab-Israeli conflict, the BPP received criticism from some white comrades over its strident attacks on Israel and bristled in response. Hewitt noted in August 1969 that "the white left gets uptight because we dig Al Fatah" and pointed out that the BPP was dedicated to armed revolution, not discussions, books, or mere symbols of radical culture. "Culture is manifested in AK-47s," he argued, and "the most beautiful thing I saw at the [1969] Algerian conference was the symbol of Al Fatah—the dove of peace perched on the balance point of an AK-47."⁴⁷ At about the same time, Hilliard attacked what he called "little bourgeois snotty nose motherfucking S.D.S.'s," and complained that "we don't see S.D.S. as being so revolutionary. . . . S.D.S. had better get their politics straight." For his part Seale asserted, "We want to make it clear to all the S.D.S.'s . . . that we have a mind of our own, and yes we support Al-Fath [*sic*] in the struggle. And that we make our decisions and we support who we want to support, and that we're here to make revolution."⁴⁸

Conflicts on Campus Further Divide the New Left

Divisiveness over the conflict not only led some in the white New Left to criticize the BPP but also characterized student activism on college campuses. Berkeley was a highly politicized campus in the late 1960s that was illustrative of students' conflicted attitudes toward the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even before the June War erupted, some Arab students held a demonstration at Berkeley's iconic Sproul Plaza on 16 May 1967 and distributed a leaflet titled "Zionism, Western Imperialism, and the Liberation of Palestine." Just days later, pro-Israeli socialists staged a counter demonstration on 25 May. In October, a group called the Friends of the Tri-Continental Progressive Students held a press conference in Berkeley at which it said it would commence efforts to present the Arab perspective to the campus. The group also issued a pamphlet declaring that the Palestinians and the Viet Cong had declared their mutual support, and therefore the U.S. antiwar movement should "draw the parallel" between the two movements.⁴⁹ In May 1969, Berkeley joined with over thirty other campuses to host a "Palestine Week," followed by another pro-Palestinian event in October 1970 in the wake of the Jordanian army's attack on Palestinian forces, an event known to Palestinians as Black September.

Still, the Arab-Israeli conflict continued to divide student activists at Berkeley. As a result, noteworthy Berkeley radicals Mario Savio and Michael Lerner formed the Committee for a Progressive Middle East in March 1969 to bridge the gap between strongly pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian students and, they hoped in the process, to save the Left from destroying itself over the issue. Lerner later recalled that while the "Left was totally anti-Israel . . . the discourse that was prominent in the Jewish world was [also] deeply distorted."⁵⁰ Their committee issued a statement in the spring of 1969 that urged both Israel and the Palestinians to stop fighting each other and instead focus on the real enemy in the Middle East, capitalist imperialism. It also called on Fatah

to halt guerrilla attacks against Israel and to fight the Arab world's internal enemies instead, and also affirmed Israel's right to exist.⁵¹

Columbia University was similarly famous for student activism in the 1960s, and it too witnessed sometimes tumultuous campus events related to the Middle East. A gathering held on 18 April 1969 titled "Teach-In on the Middle East: Arab Liberation vs. Imperialism-Zionism" descended into chaos when fistfights broke out between pro- and anti-Israeli students in the audience.⁵² Of note was the fact that members of the Organization of Arab Students (OAS) worked with U.S. leftists to organize the event.⁵³ A debate in 1970 went more peacefully and featured two Jewish SDS students arguing for replacing a Zionist Israel with a secular democratic state, as called for by the PLO. Debating them was another Jewish student from a Zionist group on campus who supported Palestinian nationalism but still upheld Zionism.⁵⁴ However, October 1970 witnessed a return to violence on campus when protestors demonstrating against an Israeli army officer who was visiting Columbia were attacked by militants from the Jewish Defense League, prompting the New York police to intervene.⁵⁵

Pro-Palestinian actions were held on many other campuses across the country. A teach-in on "The Arab Liberation Struggle and Its Relationship to Zionist Israel" was held at Wayne State University in February 1969, followed by an OAS-sponsored symposium titled "Palestine, the Arabs, and Zionism" in February 1970. Like at Berkeley, Palestine Week in May 1969 was celebrated at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, Harvard, New York University, the University of Pennsylvania, the State University of New York at Buffalo, the George Washington University, the University of Chicago, and several dozen other schools. In 1970, the University of Texas at Austin staged Arab Refugees Week, while Antioch College witnessed a gathering called The Middle East Crisis, Israel, and the Palestinian Revolution. A teach-in on the Palestinians was also held at Emory University in Atlanta that same year. Beyond special events, students also began forming groups to rally support for the Palestinians. The OAS once again worked with U.S. students to form the Palestine Solidarity Coalition at Indiana University in Bloomington, and Arab students at the George Washington University set up the Palestine Solidarity Committee and a "Palestine House" in 1970. At the University of Virginia, a group of U.S. and international students formed the American Friends of Free Palestine in April 1970, and that summer students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee founded a group called Students for Peace and Justice in the Middle East.

Such pro-Palestinian campus activities prompted a strongly pro-Israeli response. At Northwestern, graduate student Jack Nusan Porter, who had been involved with SDS, formed the Jewish Student Movement in 1968. "We will not identify with or join with any groups that argue for the destruction of the State of Israel," he declared.⁵⁶ In February 1969, Michael J. Rosenberg and other Jewish leftists met at the State University of New York at Albany to form a militant Jewish organization on campus called Am Yisrael as a direct response to the anti-Israeli actions of groups on campus. Rosenberg wrote in 1971, "In dealing with those who oppose Israel we are not reasonable and we are not rational. Nor should we be." In shoring up Am Yisrael's left-wing credentials, he noted, "We are radicals. We actively oppose the war in Viet Nam. We support the black liberation movement as we endorse all genuine movements of liberation. And thus, first and foremost, we support our [Jews'] own."⁵⁷

These groups heralded the growth of a large number and wide variety of Jewish student organizations dedicated to defending Israel on campus. A notable feature of this backlash was the Radical Zionist Movement, which sought to combine New Left values with support for Israel. One example of this movement was the Jewish Liberation Project, formed in New York City in July 1968. The organization saw itself as Zionist and socialist, and while it supported Palestinian aspirations, it sought to “communicate a positive position on Israel to the American Left.”⁵⁸ Another group, the Radical Zionist Alliance, was originally formed as a coalition of like-minded, left-wing, pro-Israeli Jewish organizations. It emerged from a conference held in Palmer, Massachusetts, in February 1970 and also supported “the national rights of the Jews and Palestinian Arabs.” It urged its members to become involved in radical actions both at home and, eventually, in Israel. It boasted the slogan “Be a Revolutionary in Zion, and a Zionist in the Revolution.”⁵⁹

Divisions within Left-Wing Publications

This dissension within the New Left also manifested itself in left-wing political journals, and once again often pitted Jew against Jew. One of the most significant of these in the 1960s was the *National Guardian*. Conscious of the rising tensions in the Middle East in the spring of 1967, it published two stories on the eve of the June War in an effort to be evenhanded. One was written by Abdallah Schleifer, a U.S. pro-Palestinian and Jewish convert to Islam living in East Jerusalem, while the other was by socialist Zionist journalist Richard Yaffe. As the war came to an end one week later, *National Guardian* laid out its own thoughts about the Israeli victory in a less even-handed way. The editors wrote that Israel was in alliance with imperialism in its struggle against the Arabs. The piece also decried Israel’s Law of Return for allowing only Jews to immigrate to Israel, but not Palestinian refugees displaced since 1948.⁶⁰

Irving Beinin was a major figure at the *National Guardian* and played an important role in its editorial stance on the Middle East thereafter. A Jew and a former Trotskyist with a number of Zionist relatives who had helped establish Jewish settlements in Israel, he criticized Israel in a piece written after the war, noting in the late spring of 1967 that the country was faced with two choices: peace with the Arabs at any cost, or, as it ultimately chose, “escalation of the nationalist, anti-Arab sentiment, glorification of the Jewish military and reliance on might to establish Jewish hegemony.” He argued that Israel’s rejection of cooperation with the Arabs left alliance with U.S. and British imperialism as its only option.⁶¹ Beinin’s stance engendered a fierce response. In the first few weeks after the war, the letters-to-the-editor section of the *National Guardian* exploded with a lively exchange of letters about the conflict from the journal’s readers. It was clearly the first time some of them had seen such strong opinions about Israel since the war had ended, and like those leftists who were aghast at New Left criticisms of Israel, they were not happy. According to Beinin, a “majority” of the letters he received criticized the newspaper’s coverage and editorial stance on the June War.⁶²

Just after the 1967 war broke out, another venerable left-wing journal reflected the Left’s conflicted thinking about the Arab-Israeli conflict by publishing rival editorials for only the third time in its history. *Monthly Review*’s longtime, cofounding editors, Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman, offered readers their own respective and divergent assessments of the violence in the

journal's October 1967 issue. Huberman was a Marxist Jew who maintained warm feelings toward Israel. He wrote that the main enemy of the Arab masses was "not Israel, but their own feudal, reactionary, bureaucratic governments which exploit them, and Western imperialism which robs them of their wealth." A true Arab liberation struggle therefore would go after the master, the West, and not the lackey, Israel.⁶³ Sweezy, by contrast, took a much tougher stance against Israel. He wrote that "[Israel's] very existence as a colonizing state rests on the expropriation of lands from the Palestinian Arabs, and in keeping with its Zionist exclusionary character it practices systematic, principled discrimination against all Arabs. . . . Arab hostility to Israel is of the same kind and as natural as black hostility to white settler states in Africa."⁶⁴

Like other left-wing publications read by the New Left, *Ramparts* magazine covered the 1967 war and its implications soon after hostilities ended, and initially tread carefully. Its July 1967 issue carried several signed articles discussing the war and the wider Arab-Israeli conflict from various perspectives. The writers I. F. Stone and Paul Jacobs, both Jewish, called for Israel to realize that it could never secure ultimate peace by military force. In marked contrast, the Jewish academics Michael Walzer and Martin Peretz offered a full-throated defense of Israel against the growing chorus of left-wing criticism that emerged after the 1967 war. *Ramparts's* editors contributed an editorial, as well, lamenting the fact that too many Americans, including liberals, were exulting in Israeli triumphalism. They also noted, "The hallowed memory of Jewish lives taken by the Nazis is not served by continuing the plight of the Arab refugees." On the other hand, the editorial pointed out that the Arab-Israeli issue transcended the simplistic idea floated by some leftists that the conflict was one pitting Arab socialism against Israel, the tool of Western imperialism.⁶⁵

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Despite its unanimity on so many issues, the New Left suffered from deep divisions about whether to support Israel or the Palestinians. These fissures stemmed from differing notions about imperialism and left-wing internationalism that were sometimes superheated by ethnic identity issues. Black leftists were motivated to champion the Palestinians as a result of their transnational anti-imperialism. Theirs was a worldview based on a racialized understanding of imperialism and colonialism, and supporting the Palestinians as a kindred people of color suffering from U.S.-Israeli domination came easily to them. By contrast, the white New Left, with its disproportionate number of Jews, was split between those who felt similarly to their black comrades and those whose Jewish identity seemed to complicate their understanding of Israel as a colonial/imperialist power. These disagreements not only led to a virtual Jewish civil war on the Left but also contributed to further straining of black-Jewish relations, which were already tense.

The New Left was essentially gone by the end of 1973. Various factors account for this: U.S. troops had left Vietnam, military conscription had ended, eighteen-year-olds could vote, and black militants suffered from the might of state repression. On top of this, the intra-Left fissures over the Arab-Israeli conflict also helped weaken the Left as some, notably Jewish Social Democrats, defected from the Left and moved rightward, spurring the growth of neoconservatism. At the same time that five decades of retrospection reveals how the New Left's lack of unity on the Arab-Israeli conflict hurt it at the time, it is instructive to note how much support for the Palestinians has grown among progressive Americans, notably young (and Jewish) ones, in the decades since. Of particular note has been the transnational and intersectional solidarity with

Palestinians displayed by black Americans in the twenty-first century. Among other actions, in August 2015 over eleven hundred persons signed the 2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine,⁶⁶ and in August 2016 the Movement for Black Lives issued a platform that spoke of U.S. complicity with the “genocide” befalling the Palestinian people.⁶⁷ Nor are sympathy with the Palestinians and criticism of Israel simply restricted to African Americans. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in April 2019 revealed that just 27 percent of Americans under the age of thirty hold a favorable view of the Israeli government,⁶⁸ and a Pew poll from 2018 showed that the number of self-described liberal Democrats who sympathized with the Palestinians was nearly twice the number of those in the Democratic Party who were sympathetic to Israel.⁶⁹ While some liberal-to-left-wing Americans still balk at criticizing Israel, and in turn are accused of being “PEP” (progressive except for Palestine), events in the Middle East in recent decades truly have escalated popular U.S. support for the Palestinians, building on support first articulated forcefully by leftists long ago in the 1960s.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Few scholars have examined how the New Left approached the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is not mentioned, for example, in Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); John McMillian and Paul Buhle, eds., *The New Left Revisited* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003); or Vann Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretative History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). One exception is Irwin Unger’s *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959–1972* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
- 2 This topic is covered more extensively in Michael R. Fischbach, *The Movement and the Middle East: How the Arab-Israeli Conflict Divided the American Left* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).
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- 4 Much has been written, starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s, about how and why Jewish youth were attracted to the New Left and highly represented in it, including Seymour Martin Lipset’s “The Socialism of Fools: The Left, the Jews, and Israel,” *Encounter*, December 1969, pp. 24–35, and Nathan Glazer’s “The New Left and the Jews,” *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 11 (1969): pp. 121–31. An entire conference on this topic was held in 1970 that led to publication of Mordecai S. Chertoff, ed., *The New Left and the Jews* (New York: Pitman, 1971). Some of these analyses offered some fairly critical and hostile psychological explanations for what motivated Jewish leftists, as did Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter’s later work, *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians, and the New Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Other writers analyzed this phenomenon more charitably, including Noam Chomsky’s “Israel and the New Left,” in *The New Left and the Jews*, ed. Chertoff, pp. 197–228.
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 - 8 Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 47.
 - 9 Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 48.
 - 10 See Michael R. Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine: Transnational Countries of Color* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018) for more about this topic. The best writings on this subject are those produced by Malcolm himself. See, inter alia, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1966), and Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*.
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 - 15 For a study of early New Left internationalism, see Vann Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (New York: Verso, 1993).
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