"The U.S. and Israel Make the Connections for Us": Anti-Imperialism and Black-Palestinian Solidarity

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ESSAYS

"The U.S. and Israel Make the Connections for Us"

Anti-Imperialism and Black-Palestinian Solidarity

NADINE NABER

In the summer of 2014, as activists in Ferguson, Missouri, faced the military-grade weapons of four city and state police departments—tear gas, smoke bombs, stun grenades, and tanks—Gazans were confronting Israel's heavy artillery shelling, massive use of cannons, mortars, and half-ton to one-ton missiles.[1] The canisters fired in both Gaza and Ferguson were U.S.-made.[2]

Worldwide, activists began making ideological and human connections, especially in Ferguson and Palestine. Ferguson protesters held up signs affirming their solidarity with Palestinians, while Palestinians issued Palestine solidarity statements, including advice on how to deal with tear gas.[3] In October 2014, local groups, including the Organization for Black Struggle and the St. Louis Palestine Solidarity Committee, with national groups, such as Muslims for Ferguson, the U.S. Palestine Community Network, the Palestine BDS National Committee, the Palestinian Youth Movement, and African Americans for Justice in the Middle East and North Africa organized a weekend of resistance in Ferguson called the "Palestine Contingent to Ferguson" whereby those supporting Palestinian liberation came to stand in solidarity with the people of Ferguson.

Also following the summer of 2014, African American delegations to Palestine (or to Lebanon to work with Palestinians), ongoing since the 1970s, became increasingly prominent.[4] In early 2015, members of the Dream Defenders (the Florida-based youth movement that formed in the shadows of the killing of Trayvon Martin) and racial justice groups like the Black Youth Project and Black Lives Matter sent a delegation to Palestine. Dream Defender activist Ahmad Abuznaid explained:

> The goals were primarily to allow for the group members to experience and see firsthand the occupation, ethnic cleansing and brutality Israel has levied against Palestinians, but also to build real relationships with those on the ground leading the fight for liberation. . . . In the spirit of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael and many others, we thought the connections between the African American leadership of the movement in the US and those on the ground in Palestine needed to be reestablished and fortified.[5]

After months of organizing between Students for Justice in Palestine and the Dream Defenders, the latter passed a resolution to support the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement in December 20, 2014.[6] Indeed, growing solidarity mounted alongside an escalation in state violence in both places, culminating in the Black for Palestine Statement of August 18, 2015, signed by more than a thousand Black activists, artists, scholars, students, and organizations reaffirming their "solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and commitment to the liberation of Palestine's land and people."[7]

To many, these displays of solidarity appear new, prompting questions of what motivates the sense of connection between such seemingly diverse sites. The most common explanation has pointed to the parallel or similar struggles of Black people in the United States and Palestinians. Though separated by space and facing distinct political contexts, Black Americans and Palestinians, it is argued, make natural allies given their shared experiences of oppression. To be sure, this narrative of similar struggle does inspire solidarity, and Black and Palestinian movement activists have been among the most vocal drawing these explicit comparisons. Consider how residents of Ferguson have used the term "occupied" to describe their economically devastated, predominantly Black town run by a predominantly white, racist police force.[8] Confronting a row of military-style tactical vehicles, protesters have explicitly evoked the language of similarity: "You gonna shoot us? Is this the Gaza Strip?"[9] Also consider Rania Khalek's reflections on Ferguson in 2014 via the Palestinian-focused website The Electronic Intifada:

> The dystopian scenes of paramilitary units in camouflage rampaging through the streets of Ferguson, pointing assault rifles at unarmed residents and launching tear gas into people's front yards from behind armored personnel carriers (APCs), could easily be mistaken for a Tuesday afternoon in the occupied West Bank.[10]

Likewise, the Blacks for Palestine Statement of August 2015 asserts:

> Israel's widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians evokes the mass incarceration of Black people in the US, including the political imprisonment of our own revolutionaries. . . . U.S. and Israeli officials and media criminalize our existence, portray violence against us as "isolated incidents," and call our resistance "illegitimate" or "terrorism."[11]

In October 2015, Noura Erakat spearheaded a video project highlighting Black Palestinian solidarity, featuring celebrities and activists such as Lauryn Hill, Angela Davis, Danny Glover, Alice Walker, and Rasmea Odeh. Titled "When I See Them, I See Us," the project in October 2015 declared: "We each struggle against the formidable forces of structural racism" as "two groups of people dealing with completely different historical trajectories, but similarities."[12]

Yet understanding Black-Palestinian solidarity has not been univocal, though other narratives have received far less attention. Other activists, in both sites, employ a broader global and historical lens to argue that beyond being merely similar, Black Americans and Palestinians are, in fact, fighting a common enemy. According to Robin Kelly, many Black activists conceptualize their struggle beyond a [U.S.] nation-based framework of racial justice:

> The Dream Defenders, like some of the activists in Ferguson, are actually, I would dare say, radical organizations—meaning that they don't see the problem as simply racial discrimination. They see it as structural inequality, they see it is an issue of global power, they see it as an issue of decolonization.[13]

Among the conjoined forces of global power that structure Black and Palestinian oppression (in different ways and to different degrees) are the U.S.-Israeli alliance; U.S.-led empire building, militarism, and war; neoliberal economics; and white supremacy. Dream Defender organizer Cherrell Brown argues, "Our [Black and Palestinians'] oppressors are literally collaborating together, learning from one another—and as oppressed people we have to do the same."[14] From this perspective, African Americans and Palestinians should look to one another not because their struggles share similarities, but because their struggles are *conjoined*—and have been so for some time. There is a growing recognition among activists in both sites that Black people and Palestinians have been hailed, in different ways and forms, into the violence and brutality of global power structures, and we share a common enemy—even as that enemy works through different logics in different locations.

The internationalist understanding within current Black solidarity with Palestine continues the legacy of 1960s radicalism.[15] The political understanding of the 1960s—which has its roots, in turn, in the 1930s—recognizes U.S. Blacks as confronting internal colonialism and thus in solidarity with other colonized peoples, including Black South Africans, struggling against white settler regimes in the context of imperialism.[16] Keith Feldman refers to the Black Panther Party's framing of permanent war, and analyses of U.S. capitalism and racism as internal colonialism, as connected to global struggles around postcolonial nationhood and against neoliberalism. Black struggle in the United States is thus located as sort of Third World within, highlighting the connections between racialized and classed ghettos and prisons in the United States and those struggling against colonialism, white supremacy, and imperialism in other parts of the world.[17]

While earlier strands of Black radicalism supported the idea of Zionism on the basis of its claim to strive for land and self-determination, by 1967 Black radicals began asserting solidarity with Palestinian people as an oppressed Third World nation, while questioning the image of Israeli vulnerability.[18] Israel's capture of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem caused Black activists, like those in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to view Palestinian struggles against Israel as similar to other decolonizing movements. Mounting Black solidarity with Palestine during this period was reflected in Black Power's adoption of pro-Palestine resolutions in 1968, an ad published in the *New York Times* in 1970 titled "An Appeal by Black Americans Against United States Support of the Zionist Government of Israel," and the 1972 Black political convention in Gary, Indiana, where nearly every sector of Black political actors, from revolutionary nationalists to elected officials, agreed to a stance (albeit an extremely tense one) in support of self-determination for Palestine.[19]

Black solidarity with Palestine emerged out of the Cold War context and the neocolonial projects that destroyed anti-imperialist liberation movements in most of Africa and internationally.[20] These and other global alliances grew out of the analysis that the Cold War sidetracked liberation movements and processes for most African countries, that liberation movements were being co-opted by military and corporate elites, finance capital, and efforts to control resources and create the new imperialism. Within this internationalist frame, South Africa and Palestine were considered central sites of Western neo-imperialism and, as such, were identified as locations whose struggles were intrinsically connected to all forms of anticolonial critique. Keith Feldman argues that the Black Power movement understood sites

and struggles within the United States and abroad as interconnected and relational: "Black Power enunciated an epistemic imperative to clarify and contest the saturation of racial violence endemic to U.S. imperial culture and intensified by the fierce state repression of anticolonial movements in the United States and abroad."[21] Black solidarity with Palestine continued into the 1970s, and though it eventually lost its taken-for-granted status as a central component of African American political understanding, it has continued to resonate within activist circles and wherever anti-imperialist sentiment circulates[22]—providing the foundation for the resurgence of such solidarity today.

Whether understood as separate but similar or fundamentally conjoined, Black-Palestinian struggle and solidarity remain alive today, but in the context of altered and expanded structures of white supremacy, colonization, and empire. The irony is that, to the extent that the connections between these groups faded from view, it is the relentless expansion and intensification of U.S. imperialism that has brought them back into focus again. Since the 1970s, the role of the United States as a sponsor of Israel has multiplied, as have the technologies, strategies, and breadth of U.S. empire—including the massive expansion in policing, militarism, security, and prisons. In the contemporary moment, four developments help elucidate the structures of empire that entangle and connect Blacks and Palestinians, reviving their sense of solidarity today: (1) the increasing militarization of police in the United States; (2) the training of U.S. police in Israel; (3) the growth of the Zionist movement within the United States and its repression of resistance movements; and (4) the removal of key resources for survival from poor communities of color in the United States to fund the U.S. war machine. As Black activist and signatory of the Black for Palestine statement Khury Petersen-Smith puts it, "The U.S. and Israel make the connections for us . . . the same urban police departments that harass, brutalize and murder black folks here train with Israeli law enforcement—who oppress Palestinians. . . . [Meanwhile,] funds for Israeli weapons are resources diverted from black neighborhoods in desperate need."[23]

MILITARIZATION OF THE POLICE

The United States provides military equipment and services to Israel in the form of firearms, assault weapons, ammunition, missiles, rockets, explosives, vehicles, aircraft parts, and military training, among others. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the United States exported about $216 million worth

of weapons to Israel in 2014.[24] In 2014, the United States authorized about $1.5 billion worth of military articles and services to be transferred to Israel within a four-year period.[25] The U.S. war machine, selling and trading arms for profit and power, is deeply enmeshed in the problem of police brutality in the United States. It is well established that federal programs are now providing surplus military equipment to police departments and outfitting officers with war-grade firepower, weapons, and tactics designed for war zones. This had led, in turn, to systematic patterns whereby police send heavily armed offers to perform "standard" police work, escalating situations that may not ever have involved violence, and disproportionately targeting communities of color.[26] A 2014 ACLU report, "War Comes Home," points out that SWAT teams "originally devised as special responders for emergency situations, are deployed for drug searches more than they are for all other purposes combined. The change in equipment is too often paralleled by a corresponding change in attitude whereby police conceive of themselves as 'at war' with communities rather than as public servants concerned with keeping their communities safe."[27] The militarization of police began in the Reagan era with the War on Drugs, but the post-9/11 era's War on Terror has pushed it to another level. Military contractors such as Blackhawk Industries gain broader markets by selling their equipment to police agencies with massive Department of Homeland Security grants—from stun grenades to armored tanks, counterattack vehicles and beyond.[28] The War on Drugs remains deeply connected here as law enforcement breaks up narcotics rings, seizes property and cash (even if they are not convicted or charged with a crime), and busy paramilitary equipment with the asset forfeitures.[29] Of course, this incentivizes raids and seizure of property. The militarization of police also includes using contractors to train police and SWAT teams, binding the military, policing, and profit closer and closer together.

POLICE TRAINING IN ISRAEL

Part of the militarization of U.S. law enforcement has also involved the training of U.S. police in Israel. It is there that the U.S.-Israeli anti-Arab/anti-Muslim racism that justifies the War on Terror and Israel's colonization of Palestine meets U.S. anti-Black racism that justifies domestic police brutality. Training programs in Israel claim to teach U.S. law enforcement professionals how to protect the United States from "criminal" and "terrorist" threats. The 2015 Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine draws an explicit

connection between the racist criminalization of Black people in the U.S. and U.S.-Israeli criminalization of Palestinians in general and Arab Muslims in general:

> U.S. and Israeli officials and media criminalize our existence, portray violence against us as "isolated incidents," and call our resistance "illegitimate" or "terrorism." These narratives ignore decades and centuries of anti-Palestinian and anti-Black violence that have always been at the core of Israel and the US.[30]

Evidence confirming that two of the police departments deployed in Ferguson to quell protests had sent representatives to Israel for training—including the St. Louis County police chief[31] and the Chief of St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department[32]—reinforced Black-Palestinian solidarity. Likewise, the Oakland police, who used tear gas and rubber bullets against Occupy Oakland protesters in 2010, had just returned from a joint training exercise with Israeli and U.S.-allied Bahraini police forces.[33] In working with Israeli defense forces, U.S. police ostensibly gain training in "crowd control" and "counterterrorism," but the Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine describes it more accurately:

> Israel's widespread use of detention and imprisonment against Palestinians evokes the mass incarceration of Black people in the US, including the political imprisonment of our own revolutionaries. Soldiers, police, and courts justify lethal force against us and our children who pose no imminent threat. And while the US and Israel would continue to oppress us without collaborating with each other, we have witnessed police and soldiers from the two countries train side-by-side.

In Israel, U.S. law enforcement learn how to combat demonstrators and repress resistance with military force and they take trips to military installations, surveillance outposts, and checkpoints and observe Israel's Border Patrol, Defense Forces, national police, and intelligence services' military operations. Indeed, the training of U.S. police in Israel and with Israeli forces has impacted the kind of equipment used in the United States. Identical gear is used by security forces in both countries. This includes stun and tear-gas grenades manufactured by the same U.S. companies—Combined Systems Incorporated and Defense Technology Corporation.[34]

ZIONISM IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE REPRESSION OF RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS

Zionist activism in the United States has partly enabled the training of U.S. law enforcement officials. A year after September 11, 2001, pro-Israeli interest groups such as the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee's Project Interchange, and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs have been funding the militarization of U.S. law enforcement, financing trips to Israel for police officers.[35]

Furthermore, all of this is taking place within a context where questions of *which* struggles are similar and connected remain contested and parallels can, technically, be drawn by anyone. Consider, for example, repeated instances in which institutionalized voices of Zionism have appropriated Black struggle in order to repress Palestinian resistance. In 2012, the president of the University of California, Mark Yudof, not only used the long-standing tactic of dismissing Palestinian struggle by equating it with anti-Semitism, but also equated Palestinian resistance with anti-Black racism. He compared Palestinian rights activism "to the hanging of nooses on African American student's dorm doors and [the] drawing of swastikas on Jewish students' property."[36] The effect, however, was the opposite of what Yudof intended. Black and Palestinian students, along with Latino/a, Native American, and Asian American students rallied together and affirmed both their solidarity and their long-standing political alliances. Similarly, Zionist groups' targeting of African Americans, such as former Black congresswoman Cynthia McKinney, through the tactics of defamation and labeling them anti-Semitic also served only to forge solidarity.[37] One couldn't help but notice echoes of the FBI's COINTELPRO program of the 1950s–70s, a collaboration with the Anti-Defamation League that put 62,000 "subversives," including civil rights, Black Power, Chicano, Indigenous people's, pro-Palestinian and other social movements, under secret investigation and sought to paint the Black Power movement as anti-Semitic and thus disrupt support for the Panthers. According to the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, "The primary motives of Zionist institutions in supporting these destructive campaigns are to keep these communities from challenging U.S. policies and programs that support the state of Israel and from supporting the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. Zionist institutions understood then as they do now . . . that any victory or foothold gained by one anti-racist, anti-apartheid, anti-colonial, national liberation struggle solidified the ground for another, including the Palestinian liberation movement."[38]

As the U.S. Empire, founded on settler colonialism, white supremacy, and the racialization of its victims, has found its perfect imperial ally in Israeli settler colonialism, this alliance reverberates back within the United States through the growing collaboration between the U.S. government, Zionist institutions in the United States, and the Israeli government. At this historical moment, the growing success of the BDS movement has inspired a vicious backlash against Palestinian activism and BDS, coupled with the fact that since 2005, the Department of Homeland Security (with additional funding from the Israeli government) has been providing "anti-terrorist" funding to anti-Muslim activists and NGOs, and Jewish Zionist organizations have been receiving between 80 and 97 percent of this funding. The resulting backlash includes concerted campaigns, funded by a small group of donors through family, public, and community foundations, to stop any and all criticism of Israel and investing more than $300 million in "propaganda, surveillance, and lawfare directly aimed at silencing dissent and solidarity with Palestine."[39]

TRANSFERRING COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO THE MILITARY

The movement of resources from working-class U.S. immigrant communities and communities of color to the U.S. war machine—and the concomitant cut in resources, the destruction of neighborhoods and social safety nets, and the deterioration in material economic conditions—has everything to do with growing critiques of militarism and U.S. aid to Israel among radical activists emerging from working-class immigrant communities and communities of color. In communities like Ferguson, rather than investing in communities, rebuilding schools, ensuring affordable housing, or creating jobs, people have faced massive losses in financial aid for such things as housing, heating, and health care, at the same time as an increase in unemployment and wage stagnation, and the massive expansion of prisons, police, and strategies of criminalization. As Barbara Ransby explains:

> The post-industrial era and the age of global neoliberal policies means cities and neighborhoods have been abandoned. Some of the areas where police have recently killed black civilians are reeling from more than 30 percent unemployment. They're challenged by a booming underground economy that puts participants and bystanders at greater risk of being jailed or killed. In Chicago's North Lawndale, in West Baltimore, or almost any neighborhood in my hometown of Detroit, there simply are no jobs and no real grocery stores. There is dilapidated and abandoned housing and dramatically

> dwindling services. The one problem, from a crude capitalist standpoint, is that there are still people in these post-economic areas but their labor is no longer needed in the steel mills, factories or private homes. These superfluous, redundant bodies are the dilemma of 21st-century racial capitalism.[40]

Among the material realities that produced the Ferguson uprisings are federal, state, and local housing policies that produced the residential segregation of Ferguson and the St. Louis area, including: racially explicit zoning decisions that designated specific ghetto boundaries within the city of St. Louis, turning Black neighborhoods into shantytowns; segregated public housing projects; denying residents of Black neighborhoods social services; removing Black people from proximity to white neighborhoods; gentrification and "re-development"; and government supported agendas that made suburban housing less affordable for African Americans.[41] As this segregation and poverty increases, the United States continues annually to send over $3 billion in Foreign Military Financing to Israel. The Congressional Research Service claims that future military assistance could reach $4.2–4.5 billion per year until 2028.[42]

The contemporary resurgence and renewed visibility of Black-Palestinian solidarity helps to make visible the continued restructuring of the global economy and militarized neocolonial projects, while also inspiring new alliances and strategies. It is forces and analyses like these that led to the 2015 Black Solidarity Statement on G4S (a British multinational security services company) as a target for joint struggle. Capturing the transnational structures of power out of which this call for joint struggle emerged, Angela Davis argues:

> This company [G4S] is the third largest private corporation in the world after Walmart and Foxcomm, and is the largest private employer on the continent of Africa. It has learned how to profit from racism, anti-immigrant practices, and from technologies of punishment in Israel and throughout the world. G4S is directly responsible for the ways Palestinians experience political incarceration, as well as aspects of the apartheid wall, imprisonment in South Africa, prison-like schools in the United States, and the wall along the US-Mexico border. Surprisingly, we learned during the London meeting that G4S also operates sexual assault centers in Britain.[43]

Given these transnational connections in both global power and grassroots resistance over the last fifty years (or more), the frame of similar or parallel

struggles does not fully capture what has been transpiring between Black and Palestinian movements. For the purposes of understanding the forces and relations that seek to oppress them, Palestinians and African Americans do not exist in two distinct spatiotemporal locations and the United States and Israel-Palestine are not separate geographic places. The transnational structures of U.S. empire require that we collapse the space-time distinctions of our activism and analyses between U.S. empire "at home" and "abroad. U.S.-led imperialism abroad doesn't just impact the formations of U.S. state violence within the United States, but is an extension of that violence. Similarly, the domestic targeting of communities of color for increasingly militarized policing doesn't just mirror strategies already enacted in Israel-Palestine, but demonstrates the mobility of those strategies across contexts. Black communities in the United States may not experience military violence in exactly the same ways as people in Palestine, but it is imperial military violence all the same. Black-Palestinian solidarity emerged in response to structures of militarism, white supremacy, and racism in the United States and in Palestine that constitute a common imperial project. And as the aspirations of that project become ever more global, so too are activists reconsidering the appropriate spatiotemporal context for resistance.

The framework of "sharing a common enemy" cannot blindly assume unity on all fronts, especially considering the important differences between Black and Palestinian struggles, historical contexts, and realities. Also, we must diligently defy situations whereby the very forces African American, Palestinian, and Arab activists are fighting to dismantle together, such as white supremacy and capitalism, contribute to the ways sectors of Arab American communities have become complicit in the structures that normalize the exploitability and disposability of Black lives. Noteworthy women of color and queer of color activists have been at the forefront of some of the most transformative and collaborative work framed through the lens of multiple conjoined struggles—from the Arab Women's Solidarity Association North America's (AWSA NA) dialogue on difficult issues between Black and Arab women in Seattle in 1994 to the Southwest Youth Collaborative's (SWYC) work on Juvenile Justice and post-9/11–related war and racism in Chicago; INCITE!'s antiwar and antimilitary recruitment campaign; the Black Lives Matter movement's insistence on centering the lives of people marginalized within Black Liberation movements; the recent struggle against the Loyola University administration that brought together Black students, Students for Justice in Palestine, and the Middle East Student Association; and papers like Robyn Spencer's intersectional feminist analysis of

Palestinian and Black liberation presented at the American Studies Association annual meetings in 2015.[44] As we move forward, there is a lot to be said about what can happen when movements place women of color and queer and transgender people of color's life struggles at the center of struggles aimed at keeping people alive. And there remains so much more work ahead, like challenging transactional models of solidarity (i.e., establishing solidarity in exchange for legitimacy or visibility or solidarity for the purpose of broadening our base); broadening solidarity beyond the "already converted"; working intentionally through day-to-day relationship building toward an organic coalitional consciousness and lifelong relationships as opposed to short-term victories; developing strategic, grassroots projects to eliminate anti-Black racism in the intimate spaces of the neighborhoods and living rooms of all communities—including standing up when interracial marriages are banned among Arab Americans; showing up when any of us are colonized, sexually assaulted, intimidated, brutalized, or killed; and continuing to figure out the fine, but critical, balance between taking differences, tensions, and power imbalances seriously while expanding our joint struggles and solidarities.

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NOTES

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