

“We are All Palestinian”: Gaza, the War, and Global Solidarity

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Across the world, the Israeli bombardment of Gaza has been viewed with horror and outrage. The massive loss of human life in the densely-populated occupied territory has sparked worldwide condemnation and protest. In Europe, North America, the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and Asia, millions of people have demonstrated against the Israeli version of “shock and awe.” The number and size of these protests are a testament of global solidarity with the Palestinian cause, and open new fronts against Zionism and U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Global Solidarity with Palestine

In the Middle East, for example, hundreds of thousands of people have gathered and marched in Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Egypt. In many cases, these protests have blamed the Arab regimes for colluding with Israel and the United States, and have faced severe repression as a result. Protests and riots have also occurred across the occupied West Bank and have suffered repression from the joint forces of Israel and Fatah. In Israel itself, protests by Arabs, communists, anarchists and Jews have also taken place, including a few “civil disobedience” actions.

Expressions of solidarity from outside the region have been no less remarkable, especially in terms of their size, intensity and political composition.

As part of the global day of protest on January 3rd, up to 60,000 people gathered in London against the war and British complicity. After the rally, more than one thousand shoes were tossed at the Prime Minister’s Office on Downing Street. Solidarity protests were also held in smaller cities in England such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle. On January 10th, more than 100,000 people marched in a loud, militant protest in London.

The size and scope of these demonstrations cannot be overestimated: for the first time, they mark the Palestinian struggle as a central, galvanizing issue for the anti-war movement in Great Britain, even in small towns and cities.

Protests have been similar across Europe. On the weekend of January 3-4, up to 20,000 people marched in Paris and 10,000 in Berlin and Frankfurt. Demonstrations were also held in Stockholm, Helsinki, Rome, Lyon, Madrid, Amsterdam and other large cities on the continent. After a demonstration in Athens outside the embassies of Israel and the United States, an effigy of George Bush was burned along with a number of banks. Building on a long tradition of solidarity with Palestine, demonstrations were also organized in Belfast and Dublin. On January 8th in Norway, at least 40,000 people marched in Oslo, as well as in five other cities, in a protest called by an alliance of about 80 organizations. This past weekend,

rallies in Paris, Berlin and other European cities drew equally large numbers, including 100,000 in Madrid. In Greece, a planned demonstration for January 15th has forced the government to cancel a contract with the U.S. military, which hoped to use the port of Astakos as a transit point for new arms shipments to Israel.

These demonstrations in Europe have catapulted the issue of Palestine to the fore of anti-war organizing and sparked new demands for a boycott and divestment campaign and for Israeli leaders to be tried for war crimes. The protests have also forced many European governments to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and to put new trade relations between the E.U. and Israel on hold.

Down Under, protests have also occurred in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia, as well as in Auckland, New Zealand, where a monument to Israel was recently doused in blood and paint.

Similarly, on January 5th, university students in Delhi, India threw 200 shoes at the Israeli embassy before being arrested. Over the past two weeks in Srinagar, Kashmir, police have repeatedly used tear gas and batons against hundreds of protesters chanting, "We're with the Palestinians" and "Down with Israel."

In Afghanistan, demonstrations have been held at mosques in Kabul and Herat, where thousands of people chanted "Death to Israel, America and Great Britain."

Outrage was also demonstrated this past week in South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Japan and Thailand, where thousands of people participated in protests.

In Latin America, the governments of Ecuador and Brazil have accused Israel of "crimes against humanity" and "state terrorism," while the President of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, and the President of Bolivia, Evo Morales, have expelled Israeli ambassadors. At the grassroots level, protests have occurred across the region, from Mexico and Nicaragua to Colombia, Bolivia, Argentina, Costa Rica and Cuba.

North American Demonstrations

Even in North America, there has been a clear outpouring of anger against the bombing and ground invasion. In Canada, hundreds of people have gathered in Ottawa, Halifax, Winnipeg and Vancouver for vigils and protests. In Toronto, up to 10,000 people attended a protest on January 3rd organized by a large coalition of Palestinian solidarity and anti-war groups. On January 7th eight Jewish women were arrested after occupying the Israeli consulate in downtown Toronto. In Montreal, 4,000 people gathered on January 4th for an emergency protest against the war. Last Thursday, thirty people occupied the Israeli consulate in Montreal, demanding the expulsion of the Consular General and an immediate end to the Israel invasion and siege of Gaza. In Canada, these protests and the campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions have also been supported by a number of trade unions, such as the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Canadian Union of Public Employees who have both issued public statements against the Israeli actions in Gaza.

Most surprising, perhaps, are the demonstrations in the United States. In more than 100 American cities, both large and small, thousands of people have attended protests and vigils since the bombing began on December 27th.

For example, two weekends ago, up to 20,000 people gathered for a protest in Manhattan, New York. This demonstration was the largest ever on the issue of Palestine in the city and brought together many groups of the Left and Arab community.

San Francisco in particular has been the scene of raucous protests. Over the past two weeks, hundreds of people have engaged in marches and civil disobedience, including a street "sit-in" of approximately 50 Jewish anti-occupation activists. In record numbers, Americans have also gathered in Boston, Houston, Washington DC, Seattle, Chicago, Cleveland, Minneapolis, Nashville, Denver, Kansas City, New Orleans, Portland, Orlando, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Greenville, Sioux Falls, Toledo, Dayton, Raleigh, Des Moines and Oklahoma City, amongst other places. Most recently on January 14th about 15 Jewish activists attempted to shut down the Israeli Consulate in Los Angeles by blocking its driveway and locking themselves to the entrance.

The Importance of Emerging Palestinian Solidarity Activism

These demonstrations are significant for a number of reasons.

First, they have re-galvanized an important layer of the U.S. anti-war movement, which has been relatively dormant since the failed campaign to elect Senator John Kerry as a Democratic President in 2004.

Second, they are the first demonstrations in the United States to put the question of Palestine at the centre of the anti-war movement. In the past, the movement has been seriously divided over whether or not to address the issue of Palestine as part of the broader campaign against U.S. policies in the Middle East. In this context, the current demonstrations represent a potential watershed moment in which Palestine becomes a leading issue for the anti-war movement. While UFPJ (United For Peace and Justice) has so far refrained from organizing a mass demonstration, it did encourage people to attend the protest in Washington DC last weekend held by ANSWER (Act Now to Stop War & End Racism) and a number of Arab, Muslim and Palestinian organizations. Pressure and protest from below will have to be maintained in order to keep the large anti-war organizations focused on Palestine over the long-term.

Third, these protests reflect an important shift in popular consciousness against Israeli policies. According to a new Rasmussen poll, the American public is highly divided on the current war, with 44 percent expressing support and 41 percent dissent. Amongst Democratic voters, however, 55 percent oppose the Israeli operation against 31 percent in support. These numbers are highly significant given the full support offered to Israel by the Democratic Party leadership, Congress, and mainstream media. Indeed, the poll suggests that increasing numbers of Americans are starting to question and oppose the consensus on Israel within elite circles.

Fourth, the protests create hope that the anti-war movement will operate independently of the incoming administration of Barack Obama. While Obama has an old history of working with the Palestinian and Arab communities in Chicago, and has promised a new approach to American foreign policy in the Middle East, his more recent positions on Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Palestine demand protest and strict opposition from the anti-war movement. For example, his decision to remain quiet during the current conflict in Gaza stands in stark contrast to his condemnation of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, and suggests a tacit nod of support for Israeli measures. In this context, it is positive that anti-war and Palestinian

solidarity activists have already demonstrated outside of Obama’s vacation hotel in Hawaii and his transition headquarters in Washington, DC. These demonstrations are hopeful signs that the anti-war movement will not be incorporated and marginalized by the Obama-machine, which is stacked with veterans from the Clinton and Bush II administrations.

Fifth, the protests are a vindication of the small-scale, community organizing around Palestine over the last few years. Every major city in the U.S. (and in Canada and much of Europe) now has a wide-ranging network of Palestinian solidarity activities, from film festivals and poetry groups to active campaigns around the Right of Return, the siege of Gaza, and the movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. Protests are organized on a regular basis outside of Israeli consulates, and boycott campaigns are being directed against a host of companies with ties to Israel.

Palestinian and Arab activists in the diaspora are leading these struggles across North America, and are generally unified around (1) the critique of Israel as an apartheid state; (2) building a movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel; and (3) the demand for a one-state, bi-national solution to the conflict, with the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees.

As the protests reveal, this organizing around Palestine has developed a real momentum and significance. In fact, there is a real possibility that Palestine may emerge as a central issue for the anti-war movement and the radical left in the U.S. in the near future. While the media and political elite continue to offer full support to Israel as the main ally of U.S. imperialism in the Middle East, there are unequivocal signs of grassroots opposition on a national scale to this alliance and to the ongoing oppression of the Palestinian people.

In both the United States and around the world, then, we are witnessing the emergence of a global movement of solidarity with the Palestinian cause. From New York to London, from Caracas to Beirut, this movement encompasses people of all nationalities and faiths, and asserts that “We Are All Palestinian” and support the right of resistance to occupation, colonization and state terror.

As such, these protests build the potential foundation to isolate and sanction Israel through a boycott and divestment campaign, as demanded by Palestinian civil society institutions around the world. Just as the 1976 massacre in Soweto, South Africa led to the imposition of sanctions on the apartheid regime, so too might the war on Gaza spark the same kind of international movement against the Zionist state.

The global character of recent protests gives hope for such an outcome.

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