



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Gaza and the War Between the Democrats

By Dr. Alex Joffe

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,035, May 18, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The war between Israel and Hamas has brought a crisis between progressive Democrats and the party headed by President Biden fully into the open. As progressives have racialized the conflict into “white” Israelis oppressing “brown and black” Palestinians, a look at the trajectory of the British Labour Party is instructive. Buoyed by Muslim immigration, Britain and now the US are beset by antisemitic electoral politics and threats of violence. And just as this phenomenon has helped sideline the British Labour, it may in the near future undermine the Democrats.

The current conflagration between Israel and Hamas has many old and new features. Among the most novel is the outspoken opposition of progressives within the Democratic Party. Another is the full racialization of the conflict along purely American lines: Israelis are the white oppressors while Palestinians are the brown and black victims.

These attributes have been emerging over the past few years, notably among the BDS movement that began to loudly draw the comparisons after the 2014 Ferguson riots, and they have become a feature of Nation of Islam and Black Lives Matter rhetoric. But this has now been fully articulated as a cultural and political issue, in no small part because of the American nervous breakdown over “race” and the unprecedented, indeed, calamitous, ineptitude of the still new Biden administration.

The aging rump leadership of the Democrats typified by President Biden himself and House speaker Rep. Nancy Pelosi have expressed traditional concerns over Israel’s security and understanding of what might be called causality and proportion: Hamas attacked Israeli civilians and the Jewish state

is using proportionate means necessary to eliminate the threat - but not so much as to cause excessive civilian casualties. A few scattered younger elected officials such as Rep. Ritchie Torres have bucked the progressive wave along with Jewish Democrats. Republicans on the other hand are nearly uniform in expressing their vocal commitment to Israel.

But the progressive wing of the Democrats has taken center stage. In a recent display on the floor of the House, one progressive member after another rose to condemn Israel and President Biden's support, and to draw breathless and hyperbolic analogies between Gaza and the American scene. Firebrand Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez attacked Biden and implicitly defended Hamas, saying "The president stated that Israel has a right to self-defense. Do Palestinians have a right to survive?"

Islamist Rep. Ilhan Omar went further and deemed Israel an "apartheid government" while Rep. Ayanna Pressley stated "As a black woman in America, I am no stranger to police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. We have been criminalized for the very way we show up in the world... Palestinians are being told the same thing as black folks in America: there is no acceptable form of resistance." [Rep. Cori Bush](#) made the claim plain on social media: "The fight for Black lives and the fight for Palestinian liberation are interconnected. We oppose our money going to fund militarized policing, occupation, and systems of violent oppression and trauma. We are anti-war. We are anti-occupation. And we are anti-apartheid. Period."

The question that remains is how to understand the future of the Democratic Party. Some insight is yielded by a look at the British Labour Party. Since its takeover by the now ousted Momentum faction led by Jeremy Corbyn, Labour has been fully transformed from a traditional social democratic working class party into a far left party that represents disaffected urban middle class whites and even angrier ethnic minorities - BAME ("black, Asian, minority ethnic"), meaning primarily Muslims. Neither are shy about their antipathy towards the Conservative Party, the existing social and economic structures of the country, and British history, which they reduce to colonialism and imperialism. They are more contemptuous still of Israel and Jews, which they regard as the epitome of imperial beneficiaries and tribal capitalist exploiters, prejudices overlaid over traditional British antisemitism.

In this respect, the massive Muslim immigration engineered by Labour under Tony Blair in the 1990s fundamentally transformed British society. In the 21st century, Corbyn built his coalition to capitalize on economic inequality and ethnic resentment, precisely the themes motivating progressive Democrats today. One of the features of this, by design, was using Israel as a whipping

boy to motivate the electorate at all levels, from university clubs and local councils adopting BDS motions, to national politicians pondering boycotts and impugning the loyalties of British Jews. Famously reticent, British Jews were finally moved by this abuse and called out Labour, their traditional home, demanding investigations that uncovered shocking behavior and attitudes from Corbyn's inner circle. In response, Corbyn and his coterie accused Israel of a conspiracy to undermine them. And in the meantime, the sometimes comical but often canny figure of Boris Johnson engineered the exit from the European Union, a clumsy but effective coronavirus response, and the beginnings of an economic recovery.

Many of these same features exist in the US. New York and [Chicago](#) have seen huge outpourings of anger at Israel and the US over Gaza, precisely from the alliance of far left middle class whites (including disaffected Jews who act as showpieces) backed up by Muslims and, to a still lesser extent, African Americans. This should be regarded as a parallel to the Black Lives Matters and antifa streams that have riled American cities for over a year, once again with the blessings of progressive politicians. Meanwhile Israel as an issue has penetrated deeply into local politics. New York City's mayoral candidates have been interrogated, criticized and threatened over their expressions of support for the Jewish state. And the anti-Israel cabal in Congress continues to work tirelessly to equate Palestinians and "brown and black communities" in the US. This racist and antisemitic rabble-rousing is, again, sadly familiar from Britain and elsewhere, not least of all the "Arab street."

In a larger sense, [many](#) have pointed to an especially ominous trend - the [tribalization of the US](#) along racial and ethnic lines in the context of a reigning minoritarian ideology that privileges those claiming to be victims. The polyglot nature of American society makes sorting out these features extremely different except along crudely reductive "racial" lines. The generational aspects are somewhat easier to understand; a lost generation of poorly educated college graduates with few discernable quantitative or analytical skills but a healthy sense of entitlement as well as large debts has proven fertile ground for juvenile narratives of victimhood and socialism. Coupled to this is the now corporate-supported moral panic over race in which "equity" in the sense of equal outcomes is rapidly replacing merit as the basis for education and other outcomes.

Facile perceptions are thus being forced into narratives of Israel and the Palestinians: white versus black, winners versus losers, powerful versus the powerless. This type of American cognitive or categorical imperialism is immensely destructive but has been promulgated widely through social media, particularly by "celebrities" like the model Bella Hadid, who

communicated to [her 42 million Instagram followers](#) that Israel is a group of “settlers who are colonizing Palestine,” literally using a cartoon.

But the ethnic dimension, as America’s Muslim presence grows, is a particular danger. The growing verbal and physical harassment of Jews in New York, Miami and Los Angeles by young Muslims is precisely what has long been seen in European contexts. The sense of impunity and license provided by elected leaders like Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib is also redolent of Islamist parties in Europe. Whether this radicalization will turn into further terrorism, or full-scale pogroms, remains to be seen.

But European analogies are not entirely hopeless. Official criticism of Israel’s operations against Hamas from European leaders has thus far been slightly muted. While hardly right wing, confronted by intensifying Islamic terrorism, violence, and separatism, as well as persistent economic crises exacerbated by the pandemic, European leaders and perhaps the societies at large have moved somewhat to the right. This is also noticeable in Britain itself, where Labour, led by Keir Starmer, has been neutered by its own ineptitude over lockdowns and economic recovery, and the dogging problem of antisemitism.

Whether the Democratic Party will do the same to itself will be clear only after the 2022 mid-term elections. Certainly economic issues – high unemployment, quickly rising inflation, shortages of goods, rising taxes and immense deficits – will take center stage. A reckoning over these issues is likely, but it will be tied to cultural issues, namely the overreach regarding “racism” that has impugned a largely color-blind society. Antisemitism and Israel, illegal immigration, ethnic separatism and much more, will all play a role. The backlashes emerging against the holy trinity of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” and “Critical race theory,” all of which denigrate Jews and vilify Israel, are growing but still nascent.

In the meantime, the danger persists, particularly in the absence of effective leadership from Biden and his mysterious circle of advisors. The most immediate effect, thus far only clarifying rather than decisive, is overt civil war between Biden and the progressives over Israel.

In the interim, the damage being done to the legitimacy of US governing institutions, much less any notion of a “bipartisan consensus” about Israel, is vast. How the former can be repaired is a paramount question that any presidential candidate, Democrat or Republican, should be considering now, long before the 2024 elections. With the rise of ethnic politics in the US, how the latter can be reestablished is another question altogether.

Alex Joffe is a senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center.