

ISLAMOPHOBIC TROPES IN THE PALESTINE ISRAEL DISCOURSE

ISSUE BRIEF



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Presumptively Antisemitic Islamophobic Tropes in the Palestine-Israel Discourseⁱ

The fifteen months since October 8, 2023 have been the deadliest on record for Palestinians in Gaza. The Israeli military has killed over 55,000 Palestinians (including 20,000 children) and injured more than 100,000 Palestinians.ⁱⁱ Severe restrictions on the entry of humanitarian aid for over a year have caused mass starvation among Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, leading genocide scholars, experts in international law, and respected human rights organizations have concluded that Israel's disproportionately violent response to the Hamas October 7th unlawful attacks amounts to war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and an unfolding genocide in Gaza.^{iv}

Yet when Americans advocate for a ceasefire in Gaza, they are vilified as hateful toward Jews—especially when the speakers are Muslim, Palestinian, or Arab. False allegations of antisemitism are weaponized to silence and discredit advocates who humanize Palestinians.

The political objective is clear: censor discussions on university campuses and in media that put into context the decades-long Israeli military occupation of Palestinians, the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands in 1948, and the consequent inter-generational trauma experienced by Palestinians.^v

Anti-Palestinian Censorship in Higher Education

When seeking to learn and teach about Palestine on college campuses, students and faculty face aggressive harassment, intimidation, and smear campaigns from pro-Israeli student groups, parents, and external special interest groups.^{vi} University administrators enable or directly participate in these concerted attacks by canceling events, restricting free speech activities on campus, and ignoring anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia experienced by their Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students and faculty.

Pro-Israeli groups also abuse university administrative processes and anti-discrimination laws to quash on-campus political discussions or activism critical of Israel, notwithstanding that American taxpayers' payment of \$18 billion in foreign aid to Israel since October 2023 makes this a matter of public importance.^{vii}

The success of these concerted censorship campaigns relies on the internalization among university administrators and elected officials of false stereotypes that Muslims and Arabs are presumptively antisemitic and terrorist supporters.^{viii} One need only look to the robust, open conversations in the U.S. surrounding the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a glaring contrast to the hostile crackdown on political conversations surrounding Israel's protracted military assault on Gaza. Viewpoint discrimination and bias against Palestinians explain these disparate realities.



Equality and Dignity for All

Government officials and mainstream media rightly treat Israelis as human beings deserving of dignity and human rights. In stark contrast, however, elected officials, university administrators, and media coverage internalize racist stereotypes that Palestinians are inferior, dangerous people undeserving of the same dignity and human rights accorded to Israelis. This disparity in treatment is evident in the censorship of Palestinian perspectives in universities and the criminalization of advocacy in defense of Palestinians' right to self-determination, even as Israeli government officials regularly use degrading and dehumanizing rhetoric toward Palestinians to justify the destruction of schools, universities, hospitals, and entire residential neighborhoods in Gaza.^{ix}

Pro-Israel Lobbying, Islamophobic Networks, and Anti-Palestinian Racism

An Islamophobia network of organizations and demagogues propagate Islamophobic tropes that Muslims and Arabs are presumptively antisemitic, especially those who defend Palestinians' human rights. Significant funding is directed at a wide array of projects that vilify Muslims as antisemitic if they demand enforcement of human rights for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These anti-Palestinian groups cloak their racist intentions by claiming to combat antisemitism, despite that advocacy for human rights is centered on stopping the killing of Palestinians in Gaza and numerous Jewish American organizations have demanded a ceasefire.^x

Pro-Israeli special interest groups concertedly lobby state legislatures to pass a definition of antisemitism that encompasses criticizing the laws, policies, and practices of the nation-state of Israel and the political ideology of Zionism, essentializing America's over 6 million Jews as monolithically pro-Israeli and Zionist. Their definition of choice is the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which effectively denies Palestinians the right to speak, advocate, write, or protest what they believe are racist policies enforced by the Israeli government and military. The perverse result is that Palestinians and Muslims must forfeit their civil rights in the United States so that pro-Israeli Jews do not feel offended by opposing political viewpoints.

Undermining the Real Struggle Against Antisemitism

Conflating criticism of the state of Israel and the political ideology of Zionism with antisemitism diverts attention away from genuine violations of Jews' civil rights. It also essentializes America's over six million Jewish population as blindly supporting Israel's human rights violations in Gaza. If similar reasoning were to apply to Iran, a self-avowed Islamic nation, then people who criticize Iran's state practices are presumptively Islamophobic—an absurd claim on its face. Accusing Jewish Americans opposed to Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza as antisemitic is equally absurd. Jews and Muslims working together in support of Palestinian human rights and opposition to both Islamophobia and antisemitism is an increasingly familiar sight. The attempt to paint Muslims as presumptively antisemitic based on the erroneous IHRA definition, however, undermines this growing interfaith solidarity.

Policy Recommendations

- (1) Congress, state legislatures, and local governments should reject flawed definitions of antisemitism, including the IHRA definition, that infringe on the free speech and academic freedom rights of tens of millions of Americans (including Jewish Americans), legitimize anti-Palestinian racism, and coercively impose pro-Israeli political views in universities, public policy, and the media. The legitimate goal of combating bigotry against Jews should not be confused with criticism of the nation-state of Israel or the political ideology of Zionism.
- (2) University administrators must preserve the integrity of American higher education by refusing demands by pro-Israeli groups, within or outside the university, to erode academic freedom or infringe on the free speech rights of their faculty, students, and staff. Universities should be spaces where members of the intellectual community can learn, speak, and teach about Palestine and Israel in ways that incorporate the diverse perspectives, analyses, and experiences of Palestinians without fear of being disciplined, expelled, or harassed.
- (3) Congress should include the experiences and perspectives of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim American communities in U.S. foreign policy development. One-sided input exclusively by pro-Israeli special interest groups, elected officials, and analysts has predictably dehumanized Palestinians, exempted Israel from accountability for human rights violations, and damaged the United States' reputation globally.

ⁱ This issue brief is based on the report “*Presumptively Antisemitic: Islamophobic Tropes in the Palestine Israel Discourse*” published by the Rutgers Law Center for Security, Race and Rights and authored by Mitchell Plitnick and Professor Sahar Aziz (November 2023), <https://csrr.rutgers.edu/issues/presumptively-antisemitic/>

ⁱⁱ Associated Press, *Death Toll in Gaza Strip from Israel-Hamas War Tops 45,000, Health Officials Say*, USA News and World Report, December 16, 2024, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2024-12-16/israeli-strikes-in-gaza-kill-at-least-10-people-including-a-family-palestinian-officials-say>. An additional 10,000 Palestinians are presumed dead under the rubble of buildings bombed by Israel since October 8, 2023. *10,000 People Feared Buried Under the Rubble in Gaza*, United Nations News, May 2, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/05/1149256>

ⁱⁱⁱ Human Rights Watch, *Gaza: Israel's Imposed Starvation Deadly for Children*, April 9, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/09/gaza-israels-imposed-starvation-deadly-children>

^{iv} Statement of Scholars in Holocaust and Genocide Studies on Mass Violence in Israel and Palestine since 7 October (Dec. 9, 2023), <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/statement-of-scholars-7-october/>

^v Rutgers University AAUP-AFT, *Academic Freedom Under Attack*, October 23, 2024, <https://youtu.be/4mzcyDZI4b0?si=v-QutobfoMxQ775c>

^{vi} Palestine Legal, *Reverberations of October 7: Mobilization of Against Genocide Undeterred by Peak Anti-Palestinian Repression* (May 2024), <https://palestinelegal.org/news/2024/5/23/new-report-analyzes-crackdown-on-palestine-solidarity-in-the-usnbsp>

^{vii} Ellen Knickmeyer, *US Spends a Record \$17.9 billion on military aid to Israel since last Oct. 7*, Associated Press, October 7, 2024.

^{viii} Sahar Aziz, *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom* (University of California 2022), <https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-us-military-spending-8e6e5033f7a1334bf6e35f86e7040e14>

^{ix} Tia Goldenberg, *Harsh Israeli rhetoric against Palestinians becomes central to South Africa's genocide case*, Associated Press, January, 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-south-africa-genocide-hate-speech-97a9e4a84a3a6bebeddfb80f8a030724>.

^x Alex Seitz-Wald, *Hundreds of Jewish organization staffers call for White House to back Gaza cease-fire*, NBC News, December 7, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/hundreds-jewish-organization-staffers-call-white-house-back-gaza-cease-rcna128465>