

The New Pro-Palestinian Movement in the USA

Dr. Helena Cobban ⁽¹⁾

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Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations, University of Algiers 3

Abstract-In the context of the strong American government's support to Israel, and its human rights violations in Palestine, a new movement of solidarity with Palestinian people has arisen in the United States of America mainly among the youth. It has just started over the past two or three years to shift the discussion about the Israeli Palestinian conflict at the grassroots inside the Democratic Party, and other political institutions. It is a well organised movement involving a large number of young people from several origins.

Conferences

⁽¹⁾ Helena Cobban, writer and researcher on international Relations.

ملخص- في سياق التأييد الأمريكي القوي لإسرائيل وانتهاكاتها المتواصلة لحقوق الإنسان في فلسطين، ظهرت في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية حركة تضامن جديدة مع الشعب الفلسطيني ضمن الفئات الشبانية. بدأت هذه الحركة خلال السنوات الثلاث الأخيرة لتنجح في إعادة النقاش حول الصراع العربي الإسرائيلي إلى جذوره داخل الحزب الديمقراطي ومؤسسات سياسية أخرى. يتعلق الأمر بحركة محكمة التنظيم تستقطب أعدادا هائلة من الشباب من أصول مختلفة.

The situation of the Palestinians on the ground in Palestine and in the diaspora is very difficult. My thoughts go to the Palestinians in Syria today who are stateless and have no protection, while their homes are being destroyed by both sides.

We remember of course the Palestinians in Gaza. I have many friends in Gaza, and I have been able in the past few years to visit it several times, and I have worked closely with colleagues there.

The situation in the West bank is alarming because people are enclosed in walls in small areas, and cannot sustain any kind of economy. The situation in Jerusalem is terrible for the Palestinians. Above all this, the political situation of the Palestinians involves two major organisation movements: The PLO, a secular movement and Hamas, the religious movement. Both of these organisations seem unable to coordinate, allowing the Israelis to profit and to use the classic tactic of divide and rule.

This challenging situation is also a result of the twenty years of the Oslo peace project which was hoped to lead to the end of the occupation of Palestine.

My Palestinian friends say that the purpose of the Oslo peace project was to keep the Palestinians occupied. They use the term occupied in the two senses: The military occupation and also to keep them busy; so they attend conferences and do various negotiations while actually no changes are made.

Without a doubt, the government of the United States has played a key role in allowing this situation to continue. It has allowed Israel to wage its wars and undertake its atrocities and its harsh punishments, without being held to account at all. It has allowed Israel to continue its illegal settlement activity without being held to account. We can say that the political situation at the elite level inside the United States has never been more pro-Israeli than

it is today. Back in the past, there was more of a sense of balance and even handedness.

In the United states, there are three branches of Government but only two are relevant to this policy. One is the president and his administration and the other is very strongly pro-Israel.

The president is almost a strong supporter of Israel, but beyond the political leadership in the country, many other portions of the political elite including cultural leaders and the mainstream media institutions have continued to act in a solitary pro-Israeli and not even-handed way.

This is the context in which the new movement of solidarity with Palestine has arisen mainly among the youth. It has just started over the past two or three years to shift the discussion about Israel and Palestine at the grassroots inside the Democratic Party, and inside some of the political institutions. This new movement is well organised, it is principled and it involves a large number of younger people.

For example, it involves a new generation of Palestinian-Americans. They are American citizens of Palestinian origin who are well educated and well organised.

In addition, other Arab Americans are joining the movement; they are able to unite around the support of Palestinian rights even if they disagree over issues in the Arab world.

Furthermore, there are Muslim Americans from other backgrounds and African Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans committing to this issue. All of these diverse groups have ways of understanding the link between their movement and the Palestinian rights. I also want to mention young Jewish Americans in the movement.

The new movement is most visible on college campuses, where intellectual young people come together from all around the country and exchange ideas.

A Palestinian American girl who was maybe the only Palestinian American in high school would go to college and find others, and they all get together. Between 80 and 100 colleges campuses now have student clubs called "Students for Justice in Palestine" SJP. They do a variety of actions on colleges to draw attention to the human rights abuses that Israel commits against Palestinians. They also do cultural things such as eating Palestinian food and perform Debki dances.

At the political level, they do things on college campuses to illustrate what happens to Palestinians in Palestine. For example, in the West bank, there are high walls that the Israelis built with small checkpoints. It is very difficult for the Palestinian student or mother or businessperson to go through from one side of the wall through the checkpoint. They are subject to long waits and abuse, and of course the Israeli settler can go straight through.

To illustrate these challenges, the SJP groups erect on the college campus what they call a Mock checkpoint. They ask people for their ID and they say "if you're a Jewish settler you can go right through but if you're a Palestinian you have to wait for 3 hours before you can go to your class".

These SJP groups contain people from different backgrounds with whom the Palestinians establish common relationships based on common interest. For example, the Hispanic Americans whose families often come from Mexico or central America face difficulties to come up to the United states. So they know about the walls and checkpoints, it is very similar to them. The Black Americans have been subject to so much oppression for 300 years, they understand also what the Palestinians are calling for. The Native Americans understand very much the problems of settler colonialism on their lands in America. The Palestinians are able to make strong coalitions.

The students in the SJP clubs try to get their university administrations to take certain actions including taking various steps along the program Boycott Divestment and Sanctions BDS.

BDS is a big international movement; it attempts to get institutions to try to understand Israel's actions and to punish Israel for its bad actions. I will give the example of brands of Hummus stocked in university cafeterias. Now, Hummus has become a big food that Americans enjoy eating. The main brands are Israeli owned by persons who support the military, so the SJP groups try to convince people to make their own hummus or buy other brands. They also try to boycott the products of other companies like Hewlett Packard which makes computers that the Israeli military occupation uses to control the Palestinian people. These are the kind of Boycott actions that the SJP students are looking for.

We arrive then at the next level which is called divestment: if you have a lot of investment to a bad company, you should move your money to a better company. Many American colleges are private colleges and they have a lot of money that they have to invest. The SJP students are calling on the university leaders to take their investments out of these companies like HP or others that support the Israeli occupation.

This movement of BDS is something that is well known in American history. For example, the civil rights movement of the 1960, when the black Americans wanted to get their full political rights, used a lot of boycott. Also, the movement of the farm labourers in the 1970 who were Hispanic farm labourers, and then the antiapartheid movement in the 1980s used a lot of BDS.

In this movement of BDS, sanctions can only be used by the government. It is when a government puts economic restrictions on another country. But boycott and divestment are tools that citizens can use, this is important because it is a citizen movement that is being built.

Partly, we want BD actions to have an economic effect on these companies, so they change their behaviour and stop supporting the Israeli occupation. Partly, it is a way to educate the American public about the reality of Israeli occupation, so they understand that these companies are profiting from the oppression.

The role of Palestinian Americans in the leadership of this movement is important. This is a new phenomenon in American political life, to see so many politically engaged Palestinian Americans who have real skills at organising, at communicating and at pushing this movement to a new level. It is wonderful to see Palestinians who have these political skills in America now. The movement also has a significant number of Jewish Americans, and their voice is very important because the movement for justice in Palestine has frequently been attacked, and it continues to be attacked by the very wealthy older Zionist organisations in the United States. They say that whenever people call for Palestinian rights, it is antisemitism, it is against Jewish people, which of course is not the case because people are calling for equal rights for Palestinians and not special rights. But the Zionist organisations have been quite successful in saying that if you call for equal rights, it is anti-Jewish.

The fact that we have young Jewish Americans and some older Jewish Americans is very important because they stand up and say that the movement is not anti-Semitic. "I'm a part of the movement and this movement represents the best in Jewish values". They say that they are the true people of Jewish values, and their presence is very important in the movement.

At the level of the broader society-and the movement has continued for some years now- many have gone out and got jobs in politics at the level of their political organisation. This has started to change the boarder society. I have lived in the United States only since 1982. When I went there, the political situation regarding Palestine was that the Democratic Party was very solidly pro-Israel, and if they were people who criticized Israel, they were

more likely to come from the Republican Party which was a party of business interest and was not much supportive of Israel.

So, there were many people in the broader society who were extremely progressive politically on every issue except Israel. They had this idea that Israel was a civil-rights respecting country which, of course, is false but that is how successful the Israelis were in their propaganda.

Things have changed, and one of the things that have changed is that the Republican Party is much more pro-Israeli, primarily because of the Christian Zionists. Zionists are not just Jewish. In fact, many Jewish people in America are not Zionists. But there are many evangelical Christians who are extremely Zionists. They are more important in numbers than the Jewish Zionists and they vote republican.

Now, the Republican Party has become much more pro-Israeli and this party is very scared of anything Muslim. It is very closely tied with the military-security industrial complex. Israel has become part of the western military-security industrial complex in many ways. That makes it even more important that in the grassroots level in the Democratic Party, we now hear more voices speaking about Palestinian rights.

Although we hope that there will be more support from the Democratic Party for the Palestinian rights over the years ahead, support from anybody would be very good. Actually, this movement of students and that for justice in Palestine are not politicised in the sense of being tied to any party or other side in the US or inside Palestinian politics. The point is to get away from political polarisation regarding Palestinian politics and regarding American politics, and to return to basic principles which are the principles of ending the occupation, ensuring the right of return of Palestinians and to have full equality of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Based on these essential democratic principles which are part of international law, the movement judges which party is serving its interests or not, and escapes from the fractionalisation of politics in the Palestinian arena as well as the American arena.

It is wonderful that Professor Abdelhafid Dib mentioned Rachel Cory and her parents. I have the honour to be a friend of her parents who have been, since Rachel's killing, very engaged in the movement for Palestinian rights. Now with my publishing company, we want to make more space in the American public discourse for the Palestinian point of view and other points of view that are being excluded from the discourse. One of the books that I have published recently is about the Students for justice in Palestine movement.

On a personal note, I should say that it consists of many interviews with activists. One of the students is a young Jewish student who has devoted her life to this cause and she is married to my son.