

Palestinians: Victims of ‘Cancel Culture’

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In the very month in which I read articles condemning the “cancel culture,” which some apply exclusively to the “left’s efforts to silence or shame views with which they disagree,” several disturbing incidents caught my attention.

A Palestinian American Congresswoman was called an anti-Semite because she greeted the announcement of President-elect Biden’s pick for Secretary of State with the hope that her right to support the movement to Boycott, Divest or Sanction Israel (BDS) would be recognised. An accomplished Arab American woman, of Palestinian descent, appointed to a position in Biden’s White House was condemned for an observation she made as a student, two decades ago, in which she pointed out how it must have been despair that drove young Palestinians to become suicide bombers. The California Board of Education removed Arab American studies from a model ethnic studies curriculum and eliminated any mention of Palestine. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the State Department will adopt a definition of anti-Semitism that conflates criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. As a result, he will designate the BDS movement as an anti-Semitic “cancer” and may also sanction respected human rights organisations because of their criticism of Israeli policies.

Though these incidents are different, they are examples of the pervasive “cancel culture” working to silence voices that are critical of Israel or supportive of Palestinian rights. Collectively, they raise several important concerns.

In the first place, silencing Palestinians and their supporters is born of bigotry. Denying Palestinians their fundamental right to express pain and to protest is to deny their very humanity.

Compounding this is the unprecedented use of state authority silence Arab Americans and those who advocate for Palestine. While it is shameful for the US State Department to consistently ignore Israel’s systematic violations of Palestinian human rights, it is beyond shameful to now seek to call Palestinians and their supporters anti-Semites for speaking out against these violations or calling for a non-violent boycott.

This is a violation of Palestinian human rights, the right to freely speak out and to act against injustice. But then, if the US officials in question can only see Israeli humanity and do not see Palestinians or Arabs as full human beings, then it follows that Palestinian rights should be subordinated to the concern that Israel be protected from criticism.

There is a clear double standard being applied here.

When Baruch Goldstein, an extremist Israeli settler, massacred 29 Palestinian worshipers in

a mosque in Hebron, The Washington Post carried a feature article asking the question, "What happened to drive this Jewish doctor to do what he did?" There was no mention of the Palestinian victims. Nor were there interviews with the victims' families or those who survived the mass murder. Goldstein, a troubled man, was the subject of the story. His victims were mere objects, an abstract body count, a number to be noted and then dismissed.

But when a 20-year-old Palestinian American attempted to understand why a young Palestinian would be in such despair that he would commit suicide in an act of terror, she is condemned today. She was no more justifying the Palestinian's act than The Washington Post was justifying Goldstein's. Her's was an effort to understand what could have led any young person to commit such an atrocity. That this involved speaking about a Palestinian as a person, albeit one who was deeply disturbed, was deemed unpardonable.

It is also important to note that many groups who are quickest to denounce Arabs as anti-Semitic for legitimately condemning Israeli policies are the very ones who will accept the view of Palestinians and Arabs as prone to violence because of their culture or religion. This, without question, is also bigotry.

What is equally disturbing about the effort to silence criticism of Israel by conflating it with anti-Semitism is the damage it does to the battle waged against real anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism is bigotry. It is hatred of or prejudice against Jews based on stereotypes that portray Jewish people, not as individuals, but part of a collective, sharing the same attributes, physical or cultural, or participating in nefarious activity because of their "Jewishness".

Since the 1970s, however, some pro-Israel groups have been campaigning to equate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. They argue that since, as they see it, Israel is the "Jewish State", then excessive criticism of Israel is by extension an attack on all Jews, as a group.

To be sure, there are instances where criticism of Israel can be anti-Semitic, when it attributes Israeli behaviours to negative stereotypes of Jews, as a collective.

But to go from this to seeing all criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic not only strains logic, it distorts the meaning of the word. It is also a crude effort to shield Israel from criticism, while at the same time rendering people powerless to oppose the crimes Israel commits daily against the Palestinian people.

To rebut this charge, advocates of this expansion of the definition of anti-Semitism say that they will allow for "legitimate criticism." What concerns them, they say, are critics who focus exclusively on Israel or those whose criticism is "excessive".

That same degree of discernment is necessary when one considers critics of Israel and its policies. Otherwise, the blanket determination that criticism of Israel or its policies as anti-Semitism should be seen as nothing more than a crude effort to silence such criticism.

The expanded definition of anti-Semitism includes those who condemn the injustice to the Palestinians resulting from the foundation of the State of Israel. But when we rightly welcome a discussion of the injustices done to the indigenous peoples of America or the crimes of slavery and Jim Crow, how can we deny Palestinians the right to protest their

expulsion and dispossession? And if we entertain a discussion about compensation to Native Americans or African Americans, why would we deem it anti-Semitic for Palestinians to demand repatriation and compensation? Unless, of course, we view Palestinians as less worthy of rights or inherently dangerous.

Even before this current campaign to conflate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, some major Jewish organisations made a determined effort to silence Arab Americans. Groups like the Anti-Defamation League, AIPAC and the American Jewish Committee published reports warning of the danger posed by “pro-Palestinian” or “Arab propagandists”. As a result of this campaign, Arab Americans, myself included, were denied jobs, harassed, had speaking engagements cancelled and received threats of violence. Much the same is being done today by the likes Canary Mission and Campus Watch.

In other words, “cancel culture” is nothing new. It has been around for decades, with Arab Americans and Palestinian human rights supporters as the main victims. And now with over 30 states passing legislation criminalising support for BDS, the Departments of State and Education adopting the conflation of criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, the effort to silence pro-Palestinian voices is escalating.

Caution and discernment are required when we speak about Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs. Thoughtful proponents of reasoned discourse, in particular among progressive Arab Americans and American Jews, must make a determined effort to convene a respectful conversation to challenge this dangerous slide toward repression and incivility.

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