

# The Boomerang Comes Back

How the U.S.-backed war on Palestine is expanding authoritarianism at home—from Project Esther to violence at the border.

**Noura Erakat**

Elections, Israel and Palestine, Trump



February 5, 2025

*This essay is part of an Election Chronicle series in our Winter 2025 issue, Trump's Return.*

*Subscribe to get a copy.*

**I**n the fallout of the election, a stream of social media content—some from passionate Harris supporters, some from lesser-evil Democratic voters, and some, presumably, from people simply lashing out, horrified and distraught at Trump's win—took to blaming Palestinians for the outcome.

My initial fury at these statements eventually gave way to analysis. How could so many people be so callous and so wrong? The tendency to scapegoat in moments of crisis, along with pervasive anti-Palestinian racism, are surely factors, but there are larger forces at work as well. Many had seen Palestinians protesting the Democratic Party, but thanks to widespread censorship and media bias, most of them also almost certainly had not seen the stream of atrocities in Gaza that had been taking place for over a year: five-year-old Hind Rajab begging for someone to save her; the body of Sidra Hassouna split in two and hanging on a beam of a destroyed building; Sha'ban al-Dalou burned to death while attached to an IV drip in a hospital; a civilian crew in Gaza tearing through heavy stones with their bare hands to reach a young girl, wearing white tennis shoes and a green sweatsuit that her parents must have been proud to dress her in, trapped under the rubble of a bombed-out building for fifteen hours, only for her to die before they reach her.

But beyond a lack of awareness of the vast devastation, many Americans also haven't

**In order to resist**

heard what it has to do with the United States, and with the Democratic Party in particular: the fact that, in the year following October 7, the Biden administration sent nearly \$23 billion to Israel with no red lines; that it vetoed four UN Security Council resolutions demanding a ceasefire; that Secretary of State Antony

Blinken ignored the U.S. government's own determination that Israel was blocking humanitarian aid to Gaza when he delivered a statement under oath to Congress last May; that the United States has violated its own laws—including the Arms Export Control Act, Section 620i of the Foreign Assistance Act, and National Security Memorandum-20—conditioning U.S. military aid to state belligerents on their compliance with U.S. and international laws of war; that the United States has undermined the authority of both the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC); and that 107 members of Congress sent a letter to the United Nations two weeks before the election threatening to withdraw U.S. funding and support for the organization if it allowed its members to unseat Israel, as the General Assembly had done with the South African apartheid regime in 1974.

Simply put, most people have no idea to what extent this genocide is being perpetrated not only by Israel but also by the United States. For a solid majority of the center-left, what is happening in Gaza is tragic but ultimately less important than the most significant existential threat: the ascendance of Trump. During the run-up to the election, the argument goes, we Palestinian and Arab Americans should have understood that resisting fascism in the United States is the primary goal and gotten in line accordingly.

But resisting fascism *is* our collective goal. We just know that in order to resist it, we have to fight it on two fronts of U.S. state violence: at home and abroad. Because if the United States, together with Israel, manages to disembowel the ICJ, the ICC, the UN, and a broader global order built after the Holocaust and World War II, no one is safe. The fact that Israel has committed genocide, turned humans into walking bombs in its pager attack in Lebanon, and decimated countries while the UN Security Council watches passively should concern all of us. As Colombian President Gustavo Petro warned back in December 2023, “What we are seeing in Gaza is a rehearsal of the future.”

**fascism, we have to  
fight it on two fronts  
of U.S. state  
violence: at home  
and abroad.**

If only more people in the United States had taken his words seriously. During the election, the work of several initiatives, such as the Uncommitted movement and Not Another Bomb, emphasized the centrality of ending U.S. warmaking to a progressive agenda. Other efforts, like Abandon Biden/Harris, went further, highlighting the similarity between right-wing fascism and “authoritarian liberalism.” All labored to make the entwinement of domestic and foreign policy visible—but that message was drowned out by the dehumanization of Palestinians, itself underwritten by the War on Terror’s racialization of Arabs and Muslims as presumptively guilty terrorists.

It was thus unsurprising that throughout the election cycle, nearly all the mainstream liberal pundits sounding the alarm about white supremacy, jingoism, xenophobia, and political violence failed to connect these things to U.S. imperial violence. What if, rather than blaming Palestinians, Arab Americans, and American Muslims, these pundits had seen their treatment—under Biden and for decades before him—as central to the Trump-led repression looming before us?

---

In his searing 1950 polemic *Discourse on Colonialism*, Martinican writer Aimé Césaire wrote of the “boomerang effect,” whereby violence in the colonial periphery manifests itself in the colonial metropole. Hitler’s genocide of European Jews, he noted, was modeled after European rule over African and Asian colonies. (He may have had in mind the German extermination of the Nama and Herero people in Namibia during their period of colonial rule from 1884 and 1915—a period of brutality that scarcely registered in Europe while it was taking place.) Some seventy-five years later, Césaire’s point has been borne out many times over: there is no clear dividing line between a colonial power’s imperial geography and its metropole.

In the early twentieth century, when the U.S. army in the Philippines reoriented itself to address counterinsurgency and cement colonial rule over its newly conquered territories and peoples, law enforcement at home transformed itself in its image. Drawing on the new military model, police reformers revamped their departments to feature professional academies, mounted police units, surveillance, racial profiling, anticipatory policing, mapping, and weapons training. Counterinsurgency in Vietnam further militarized U.S. police, ushering SWAT teams, military-grade weapons, and a willingness to deploy

disproportionate force into urban policing. At the turn of the century, the so-called War on Terror expanded presidential authority, severely curtailed civil rights, and made a mockery of the Constitution just as quickly as it did international law.

Today we are living out the latest chapter of this story, and this time the boomerang has come hurtling back with astonishing speed.

Already, the genocide has expanded authoritarianism—its U.S. architects ignoring the 84 percent of Democrats who supported a ceasefire, censoring the media, and suppressing academic freedom—as well as increased police power, with snipers on university rooftops training their weapons at unarmed protesters a frequent occurrence.

**Conservative  
agendas continue to  
use Palestine as a  
Trojan horse.**

This might have been a galvanizing moment. The entwinement between state and military violence could have made more vivid how Islamophobic and anti-Palestinian racism in the United States fuels endless war abroad, and how, in turn, this endless war continues to villainize Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims. But for most, that moment of recognition has not come. Instead, abuse against Palestinians has been normalized, and harmful precedents have been established that make other vulnerable communities less safe as well.

---

Consider the repression that Palestinians and their allies have endured in the United States over the last year. Palestine Legal reports that in the five months after October 7, the organization received over 1,500 reports of harassment, abuse, doxing, and loss of employment—a seven-fold increase over the whole of 2020. The Council on American-Islamic Relations likewise reports that in the final quarter of 2023, it received a 178 percent increase in reports compared to the same period in 2022. And all this is to say nothing of outright violence against Palestinians, including the shooting of three Palestinian American college students in Burlington, Vermont, who were targeted for wearing keffiyehs and speaking Arabic (and which left twenty-year-old Brown University student Hisham Awartani paralyzed), and the killing of six-year-old Wadea Al-Fayoume, who was stabbed twenty-six times in his home by his seventy-one-year-old landlord.

While these crimes were not state sponsored, they are the direct fallout of the U.S. government's complicity in ongoing genocide and its decades-old anti-terrorism laws, which, as Darryl Li has highlighted, have been constructed specifically to target Palestinians. From the first mention of terrorism in a federal statute in 1969 to the introduction of a government terrorism blacklist and the first immigration law to include terrorism as grounds for exclusion and deportation, all of these efforts historically targeted Palestinians and the Palestinian struggle for liberation more generally.

In 2001, the Bush administration shut down the Holy Land Foundation (HLF), a humanitarian organization that built orphanages, distributed food, supported schools, and provided health care to Palestinians under Israeli rule, as well as in refugee camps. The administration charged its founders with working “on behalf of Hamas” under the Patriot Act, despite the fact that the recipients of the Foundation’s grants, such as municipal Zakat committees in Hebron, Tulkarm, and Nablus had also received U.S. government aid. During the spurious 2008 trial, an anonymous witness—who turned out to be an Israeli intelligence officer—used “secret evidence” on the stand for the first time in a U.S. criminal court, a clear violation of the Sixth Amendment. He knew the HLF had terror affiliations, he argued on the stand, because he could “smell Hamas” on them—which was enough to sentence the five cofounders of the Foundation to between fifteen and sixty-five years in prison.

Once established, however, these repressive measures have had impacts far beyond Palestinians. By March 2023, Georgia police had arrested and charged forty-two activists protesting the expansion of Cop City, a \$90 million militarized police training facility that requires the clear-cutting of Atlanta’s largest clear space, charging them with domestic terrorism. Six months later, Georgia’s attorney general charged five of the activists with terrorism and three of the bail fund organizers with money laundering—expanding the list of targets to include those providing the protesters legal and financial support. And in May 2024, the state legislature in Tennessee adopted HB 2348/SB 2610, which allowed the state to target other social movements with terrorism charges—primarily environmental ones, as well as those who, like Black Lives Matter, declare their solidarity with Palestinians.

In similar fashion, attacks on free speech that target Palestinians empower the right-wing agenda against discourses and programs on racial justice. In the fall of 2023, Elise Stefanik



became the supposed champion against antisemitism during congressional hearings that grilled university presidents for failing to do enough to end what she called the threat of genocide of Jews by students who were protesting an actual genocide of Palestinians. Ultimately, the hearings compelled two presidents to resign, their feverish attempts to repress and punish students ultimately falling short of Stefanik's mark.

When students took it upon themselves to pressure their institutions to divest from weapons manufacturers and other industries sustaining this violence—which includes scholasticide, the killing of teachers and students and the destruction of educational infrastructure—some university presidents called on police to brutalize their students while others, like the president of UCLA, allowed outside mobs to violently attack students while the police watched. A year later, universities have hired private security firms to repress their student protests and to limit speech so much on campus as to be tantamount to theater, with free speech as the right to be heard, but not to challenge power. So far, three tenured faculty—all American citizens—have been fired or put on leave for criticizing Israel: Maura Finkelstein, Steven Thrasher, and Jodi Dean. These harsh punishments normalized the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's precedent-setting revocation of a tenure offer to Palestinian professor Steven Salaita in 2014 for his tweets criticizing Israel during its fifty-one-day onslaught of Gaza.

**All of this has cleared a neat path for the Trump administration, which will be all too happy to intensify the repression.**

In January, Columbia Law Professor Katherine Franke resigned after twenty-five years of an illustrious academic career because of institutional harassment and scrutiny she endured for pointing out—correctly—that Israeli students who complete their military service and come to Columbia have “been known to harass Palestinians and other students” on campus. Most recently, NYU established that Zionism, a political ideology, is a protected class within the meaning of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—further restricting political agency and speech. Nine universities have suspended their chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine; in Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis has tried to ban the group altogether.

All of this has cleared a neat path for the second Trump administration, which will be all too happy to intensify the securitization of Palestinians and the Palestinian liberation struggle for the sake of expanding police power and government repression. Even while taking credit for the ceasefire in Gaza, Trump's national security advisor, Michael Waltz, expressed alignment with the Biden administration's murderous Middle East policy, described the pager attack in Lebanon as movie-worthy, and framed the college protests—which Biden had condemned at every turn—as wind under Hamas's sails:

Every time [Hamas] got the news of these antisemitic protests on our college campuses, and that Hezbollah could be coming in, and seeing calls for regime change against the democratically elected Israeli government, they thought they were winning and could continue to sacrifice their own people to turn world opinion against the Israelis.

Congress already seems to be in lockstep with this new trajectory. Weeks after Trump's election win, a majority of the House—including fifteen Democrats—approved HR 9495, an amendment that would give Congress the authority to revoke the tax-exempt status of any nonprofit organization it accuses of having terrorist affinities, without access to the evidence or the right to due process. Robust support for the bill is predicated on its stated purpose of targeting Palestine-related activity, yet if it is adopted by the Senate, it will be used to quash broad swaths of civil society—particularly those in opposition to Trump. The bill's ally outside of government is Project Esther, a Heritage Foundation initiative that seeks to combat antisemitism by targeting groups it identifies as part of a "Hamas Support Network," including organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace and Students for Justice in Palestine. The initiative manifests the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, which includes protest of Israel and Israeli policy, at its full and most dangerous potential.

By now, it should be clear that conservative agendas continue to use Palestine as a Trojan horse. Yet the liberal establishment has not

**"Operation Wrath of Zion" pledges to use**

raised the alarms. Worse, they have often served as the right's complicit partner, oblivious to the precedents that Trump is now inheriting: broader police power, unaccountable presidential power, generalized repression, and

**AI technology to identify masked protesters.**

gross restrictions on speech. The vicious culture of anti-Palestinian racism they have helped normalize strengthens Trump's insidious narrative of migrants as terrorist threats, all as part of a massive push to facilitate deportations, ramp up surveillance, and further militarize the border. Among the flurry of executive orders he signed on Inauguration Day is one promising to deport foreign nationals who "provide aid, advocacy, or support for foreign terrorists." Just two days later, a pro-Israel group submitted a list of 100 students and 20 faculty with visas in the United States to the Trump administration urging their deportation. The administration then issued another executive order encouraging faculty, students, and administrators to surveil one another and report students who participate in pro-Palestinian protest, threatening to deport protesters who are in the United States on a visa. Meanwhile, a New York-based national defense and cyber intelligence company, Stellar Technologies, pledged to use its AI technology to help identify masked protesters—an effort it calls "Operation Wrath of Zion."

For all these reasons, Trump's second coming can't be understood without turning our gaze outward, toward a broader geography of U.S. state violence. In November 2023, in between rounds of U.S.-made bombs raining down on Al Shifa Hospital, Palestinian children in Gaza organized a press conference in front of the hospital, entreating us to do what we can to save them: "We come now to shout and invite you to protect us; we want to live, we want peace. . . . we want to live as the other children live." Under what conditions did children have to organize a press conference asking us not to let them be slaughtered? And should we be surprised that, after such gruesome crimes have been committed in our name, fascism has found fertile ground here at home? For fifteen months, Palestinians and their allies protested relentlessly and, at times, heroically, not only to stop a genocide but to salvage and preserve core humanitarian principles governing life within the United States, insisting that genocide is suicide. Surviving this next chapter demands that we see ourselves as the rest of the world sees us too.

*Independent and nonprofit, Boston Review relies on reader funding. To support work like this, please [donate here](#).*