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Imperialist Attempts To Control Protest Narratives

INTRODUCTION

On December 7, 2023, the online edition of *The New York Times* - the much venerated, “paper of record” for American liberals - carried an essay in its Opinion pages titled, “What is Happening at the Columbia School of Social Work?”. The fact that a news platform with mass readership would focus on a School of Social Work’s internal churning seemed rather puzzling, at first. Upon a cursory reading of the essay, though it becomes clear what the intent was; it was to situate Columbia’s Social Work program as a radicalised outlier to a broader American rationality. What was the School’s mistake? In the weeks since Israel’s genocidal war on ordinary Palestinians, the Columbia SSW had taken an ideological stand against Israeli oppression, and worse still for *NYT*, seen the struggle in a larger continuum of oppression of First Nations, Indigenous People, Latino and Black people in America and institutional commitment to “Diversity, Equity, Inclusiveness”.

Despite its clickbait nature, the title of the essay does betray a novel anxiety that has confronted liberal media since October 2023. *What is indeed happening in the US?* How is it that despite decades of laboured complicity, the “Israel Consensus” built by legacy news outlets seems to be crumbling. *NYT* is hardly alone in feeling marooned by its readers; *The Atlantic*, *CNN*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and many other news outlets who had

only recently endeared themselves to a younger audience through some milk-in-water Trump-bashing suddenly had become an object of derision and condemnation for their editorial servility to Israel's goals.¹ Regardless of intent, Hamas has indeed changed the quotidian realities of the world since its audacious military action on October 7, 2023.

The failure of Western media to responsibly report the truth about the genocide has placed a heavy burden on the survivors of this unrelenting slaughter. Palestinians cannot even be given a modicum of pause, privacy, or dignity in their grief and battle for survival, rather, they have had to document, report, and analyse every aspect of the war as they scramble to simply stay alive. Practising journalists like Bisan Owda, Plestia Alaqad, Motaz Azaiza and many others have risen to a charge that should never have been laid on them to begin with. Wael Al-Dahdouh and other journalists have watched their entire families, friends, and communities murdered before their very eyes and continued to set professional standards in the field that the CNN or BBC will never achieve. It is precisely because traditional media (with the exception of Al-Jazeera perhaps) has failed its brief so spectacularly, that social media has now emerged as an important space in first-person reportage and analysis, not just in Palestine, but all over the world where solidarity is shown with Palestinians. While Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are all platforms that are involved in the shaping of this discourse, it is notable that TikTok is at the forefront of running pro-Palestine content. This is striking since among the most widely-used platforms, TikTok is the only one banned in India, and it is therefore pertinent to question whether this app has been somewhat insulated from the particular kinds of disinformation campaigns that have gained traction on other apps. Further, TikTok has also remained largely free of algorithm manipulation in contrast to many other platforms, such as Meta (which includes Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) which has actively attempted to screen and suppress pro-Pales-

tinian content. Online activists have also dedicated their time to finding ways to circumvent the arbitrary “community standards” imposed by these apps, leading to the prevalence of “watermelon content”. Like a delightful Hydra, the black white and green of the Palestinian flag proliferates and dominates social media, taunting the herculean efforts of those scrambling to silence it. “Journalists” in the so-called Global North have begun to sprout spines and consciences, where staff members at outlets like the BBC, CNN, and NYT have been steadily resigning in protest of their employers’ mockery of the field. Social media-driven amplifications of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement have also translated into targeted economic boycotts that have inflicted measurable damage: Disney and McDonalds, two companies vocal in their support for the Zionist entity, have reported that their stocks are down and sales have slowed. Starbucks, which attempted to sue its pro-Palestinian workers union in the US over a solidarity tweet, has similarly reported that its business has been hurt by boycotts.

This article is about these realignments in which our world seems to exist today. The opening gambit regarding American media establishments is emblematic of a larger crisis where traditional estates of representation find themselves abandoned by their constituents, where old discourses and consensus have collapsed and new sites of solidarity and shared sorrow are emerging.

SECTION I: PROTESTING WAR

The degree to which the popular discourse has shifted in favour of Palestine, the sheer scale and spirit of this enormous solidarity, is deliberately obscured and dismissed by those same media houses desperate to uphold a white supremacist colonial world order. However, the US, the UK, Western Europe and Australia have been witnessing astonishing disruptions to everyday civic life. Ordinary people have declared that there will be no business as usual

while the genocide and the illegal occupation continues. At the time of writing this article, the US has voted a *third* time to veto a resolution for a ceasefire at the United Nations Security Council, while the UK has continued to abstain. Meanwhile, since October 7, the city streets of both these countries have been flooded nearly every single day in singular opposition to the Zionist entity. US Congressional staff are openly protesting their own government or handing in their resignations.

1. Peculiar Battlegrounds

We in India know all too well the great threat that fascist states feel when confronted by stone-throwers. Since 2008, the Zionist entity has been using Skunk² water to target and disperse Palestinian protests everywhere in the Occupied Territories. Described as a “malodorant, non-lethal weapon” by the Israeli Occupying Forces and as the ground-up smell of a “rotting corpse from a stagnant sewer” by witnessing journalists,³ Skunk recently travelled abroad for the first time in January to New York City, when ex-Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) agents infiltrated a massive rally on the Columbia university campus to attack students peacefully protesting genocide.⁴

When did North American college campuses become such activated sites? Since October 7, universities in the USA in particular have witnessed an outpouring of internationalist solidarity not seen since the Vietnam War. Student groups at Columbia and Harvard universities have successfully shut down their respective campuses in waves after waves of pro-Palestine demonstrations, gatherings, and mass actions. At Brown university, students went on a week-long hunger strike to demand that the university divest from pro-Israel companies. At the University of California, Davis, the student government on February 16 successfully passed a measure that would prevent any of the ASUDC’s twenty million budget from being spent on the companies named in the BDS list. Resolutions like these come off the back of years of meticulous

pro-Palestine organising in the US by student groups such as the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). University administrations across the country have attempted nearly everything to dispel the momentum of the current protests—from sanctimoniously chastising anti-genocide and anti-occupation positions to suspending pro-Palestine student groups (at Rutgers, Columbia, Brandeis, and George Washington Universities), to arbitrarily changing university doctrines on free speech and expression (that dearly treasured American thing), to establishing specified “Demonstration Areas and Times”, to inviting local police to brutally assault and arrest students on their own campuses.

It is important to note that these university protests are not isolated incidents. Rather, in cities such as New York, activists have been relentless in voicing their opposition to the Zionist entity’s assaults, successfully coordinating major disruptions as they call for an immediate ceasefire. On January 9 2024, pro-Palestinian demonstrators blocked all entrances to the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg bridges across the East River access into the city, as well as the Holland Tunnel connecting the city with New Jersey across the Hudson River. The momentum refuses to dissipate in the wake of violent reprisals by the city police and government. Building on daily rallies, strategic actions, shutdowns, and other disruptions, two “Global Days of Action for Gaza (and Rafah)” have sought to maximise public participation. On January 13 and February 17, thousands took to the streets again in over a hundred cities in more than forty-five countries across the world, prominent among them London, Washington, Berlin, and Paris. All through the old colonial heartland, people are showing that they do not stand with their cowardly governments. They will not wait for the quibbling language of international law to condemn genocide and illegal occupation. A new generation of committed anti-Zionists and anti-imperialists has taken root in the colonial West, a fact that is not lost on Israeli propagandists.

2. The Labour Movement in the US and International Worker Solidarity

Organised labour in the United States is frequently characterised by its extensive diversity both in rank-and-file membership as well as union leadership. Today the labour movement has come to embrace and to a degree even champion racial and gender equality. Nevertheless, labour unions in the United States have historically had a complicated relationship with non-white and non-US workers, the dynamics of which continue to reveal the gap between words and actions with regard to committed internationalist solidarity. Since its organised beginnings, labour has frequently aligned with the foreign military policy objectives of the American government. One of the oldest and largest unions in the US, the United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers, vehemently endorsed “no strike” pledges throughout the length of the Second World War to ensure that the American war effort would not be affected.⁵ Discriminatory white union shops, particularly in the American Federation of Labour (AFL), dominated the organised labour landscape. As late as the 1940s, the African-American historian and activist Rayford Logan affirmed that “the ‘solidarity of labour is another myth as far as the history of American labour is concerned.’”⁶ The majority of unions voted in favour of segregationist policies and organised to immobilise African-American workers in specific sectors of the labour market well into the 1950s and 60s, even as the leadership of the national unions pledged support to the Civil Rights movement. And even though the 1964 Civil Rights Act, particularly its Title VII, finally outlawed discrimination in American workplaces and union ranks, union leadership appeared far from motivated to enforce the spirit or letter of that law in workplaces for fear of losing their popular bases.

Similarly, the anti-war mobilisations in the 1960s and 70s against the American invasion of Vietnam saw a split between labour organisers and union leadership, where anti-war union

organisers were ruthlessly silenced by national representatives such as the dedicated anti-communist George Meaney who headed the then recently-merged AFL-CIO (today another one of the largest unions in the country). It was only as late as 1968-1970 that unions broke with the AFL-CIO to oppose the Vietnam war⁷. Nevertheless, the President of the UAW Leonard Woodcock in 1971 while calling for an end to the war, would declare that it was a “romantic illusion” to expect American workers to strike against their own Government, in response to the daylong work stoppages by British trade unions protesting the UK government’s role in Vietnam.

Local unions once again proved they were ahead of the national leadership in the 1970s and 80s, when workers organised a series of actions in solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, while the AFL-CIO and the UAW dithered and vacillated. In 1984, port workers in San Francisco boycotted loading goods onto South African ships, while AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland worried about the optics of supporting a boycott and divestment campaign against South Africa, fearing that the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela were “too far left.”⁸ During the American invasion of Iraq, union organisers were once again flooding the streets even as the silence from leadership was deafening.

As a graduate student organiser in Columbia between 2014-2021, one could barely get a discussion started about the possibility of our local union adopting a BDS resolution. Instead, we were told it would actively hamper labour organising efforts by “alienating” fellow student-workers. From loudly ignoring the repeated calls to demonstrate solidarity with workers living under colonial occupation in Palestine, the re-emergent labour movement in the USA today has finally seen fit to throw its weight behind the bare minimum of humanitarian action. On December 1, the UAW (our parent union), released a historic ceasefire resolution, followed by other labour unions such as the United Electrical Work-

ers, the American Postal Workers Unions, the Service Employees International Union, and in early February, the AFL-CIO. However, those statements have yet to result in coordinated action by these national organisations. It is deeply frustrating that media alienation, internal divisions, and frequent institutional meddling have thwarted concerted anti-war mobilisation such as work stoppages and strikes despite the stated opposition to the war.

It bears note that while organisations such as the UAW appear to remain conflicted about further demonstrable acts of solidarity so as to put “America(n workers) First”, many other labour organisers and activists in both the US and Canada have put their livelihoods at stake to prevent weapons-carrying shipments bound for the Zionist entity, from leaving the docks. In this heroic determination to disrupt genocidal supply chains everywhere in the world, they have been joined by the Water Transport Workers Federation of India, which has declared that it will not handle weapons shipments to the Zionist entity.

3. The Success of #Shutelbitdown

When has a #hashtag truly changed history? While the authors are loath to enter the murky waters of debating the impact of social (media) movements, this particular one has inspired truly spectacular consequences. Elbit Systems happens to be the Zionist entity’s largest arms company, supplying as it does the occupying military forces with eight-five percent of their drones and eighty-five percent of their land-based equipment.⁹ Elbit’s surveillance equipment monitors Palestinians through drone operations, at border points, and across the apartheid wall. Elbit’s small calibre munitions are used by the IOF to attack, maim, and kill Palestinians, which the company successfully also imports to other countries to consolidate imperialist terror-states elsewhere. The drones have been deployed by British military and border operations, and are the pride of the European Union’s militarised border agency, Frontex. The same technologies outfitting the apartheid

wall are deployed along the US' border wall with Mexico, where they are used to monitor indigenous lands and the movement of people. Jeff Halper's *War Against the People: Israel, the Palestinians, and Global Pacification* lays out in terrifying detail the enmeshed network of cost-effective militarised technology and weapons exchanges between the Zionist entity, and the US, India, China, Poland, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and Sudan, among many others.

Activists with Palestine Action's UK chapter first led the charge in September 2020, when protestors occupied an Elbit factory in Shenstone. Since then, activists have relentlessly targeted Elbit factories across the UK and its headquarters in London, disrupting business by blockading, occupying, and defacing these properties. The unyielding pressure of these disruptive actions has recently led to the permanent closure of the London HQ as well as iO Associates (Elbit's sole recruiters in the UK) cutting ties with that company in December 2023. Following PalAction UK's lead, since October the US chapter has also staged blockades at Elbit's "Innovation Centre" in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Elbit Systems has also been dropped by Japan's Itochu Corp. as of February 2024. PalAction UK has meanwhile trained its sights on Barclays bank as its next target.

The authors note with curiosity and some amusement that had this vehement political roiling occurred anywhere in the so-called Global South—where people flood the city streets every day decrying and protesting their own governments, where citizens mobilise by pledging not to vote for any of the major national parties in the elections—had this churning inflamed the national landscape of anywhere that is not the so-called West, the US allied with the UK would have already announced their intention to stabilise the region via a military occupation. One wonders if any kind of true revolutionary change is possible in North America, or even the Global North more broadly. Perhaps the political terrain is too fragmented, perhaps white supremacy is insurmountable,

perhaps social media activism is too prevalent, perhaps the logic of settler colonisation will always co-opt agitation to domesticate and tame insurgent protest so that the state and its institutions are ultimately preserved, Notwithstanding, it remains the case that the discourse has not simply shifted on Palestine, what we are witnessing is a deep rejection of imperial capitalism and all its apparatus.

SECTION II: WAR AS PROTEST

While the range of protests being coordinated across the United States and Western Europe is significant, attention must also be paid to the corresponding and distinct movements emerging within the geopolitical context of the Middle East and North African (MENA) countries. On the face of it, MENA countries are often seen as *innately* anti-Israel out of a presumed belonging to a historically unified, Islamic *ummah*. It is an implicit argument you will find in much of the western coverage of the protests that not only diminishes the significance of protest gatherings in the MENA but simultaneously, reserves the western-located protests as remarkable for what they may represent about universal values of liberalism and human rights that specifically seek their origins in Anglo-Saxon democracies. There is much to unpack there but for our immediate purposes, we will focus on the following three aspects of protests.

1. *Houthis of Yemen and Scales of Warfare*

The Houthis, or *Ansar Allah*, are mostly familiar to us as an “Iranian proxy militia”, based in Yemen. The Houthis are, in fact, the *de facto* governing political class of much of Yemen, with their stronghold in the North and close strategic ties with Iran. That said, the Houthis maintain an independent political profile and agenda. The series of military attacks within Yemen, carried out by US and the United Kingdom [the official language insists on

calling it a US-UK led *alliance*] since the beginning of 2024 hence ought to be first seen as a punitive military invasion against a sovereign government for having an independent foreign policy, divergent from US interests and detrimental to global capital flows.

Since the beginning of Israel's *latest* war on Gaza in October 2023, the Houthis have been unambiguous in their condemnation of Israel. Much like the BDS movements, Yemen has targeted the economic networks that sustain Israel's military hegemony by specifically disrupting commercial traffic across the Red Sea. The bulk of the trade across this route, that connects Northern Europe to the Indian Ocean, is carried out by private shipping companies, notably *Maersk* and *Mediterranean Shipping Company* – both

European transportation conglomerates. Another company that has been adversely affected by Yemen's actions is the formerly colonial Anglo-Iranian Oil Company or *British Petroleum*, of today.

Houthi military spokesperson, Yahya Saree, has gone on record saying that the purpose of carrying out drone and missile attacks against foreign owned vessels through the Strait of Bab al-Mandab is to singularly debilitate commercial movement to Israeli-held ports. The US and UK government's military retaliation, deemed "barbaric" by the Houthis, is ostensibly to protect "innocent lives" and limit disruptions to global commodity networks.¹⁰

The US and UK deem their actions necessary, citing the need to secure safe passage for consumer goods, though as a recent *S&P Global Market Intelligence Research* pointed out, Houthi actions have been carried out in what is considered to be an "off season" for consumer goods cargo. What is, of course, more alarming is the potential and precedent of threat that the Houthis pose, rather than an *actual* impact on consumer prices.¹¹ It is also important to remind readers that an alternate route, besides the Red Sea route, does exist, if the US-NATO allies were serious about avoiding a larger regional conflict. The alternate route to Suez Canal passage runs through the southern tip of Africa – Cape of Good Hope – and is a route that adds nearly 6,000 km (or 3,400 nautical miles)

in distance and takes nearly 10 days more to complete the journey. As trite as it may seem, the US-UK military retaliations do seem preemptive but are solely in the interests of ensuring that oil prices remain stable. A Europe already reeling from its embargo on Russian crude and refined oil can ill-afford any further vulnerability against oil and liquified natural gas (LNG) prices and the waterways under consideration makes up about 22% of refined oil imported by Europe and North Africa. What adds to the barbarism of US and UK's retaliatory actions is that it is being carried out against a country that the World Food Program considers to be arguably the most "food insecure" nation in the world.

Additionally, while information is scarce about the precision of US-UK strikes in Yemen, these strikes ought to be seen on a longer continuum of colonial and neocolonial interventions in the region. The sea route via the Suez Canal has, in fact, been a theatre of colonial intervention since the second half of the nineteenth century. The right of passage across the Red Sea and determining the fair use of Suez Canal was central to the sovereign claims of decolonizing nations taking control of their own resources at the end of the Second World War and readers familiar with this history, may recall the Tripartite Anglo-French-Israel invasion of Egypt when Gamal Abdel Nasser announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in July 1956. It is quite remarkable that for more than a century, the sovereign claims of Afro-Arab people on the Red Sea-Suez Canal passage continue to be seen as a "terror tactic".

2. *War in the Age of Capitalism*

At the time of writing this essay, the death toll in Gaza alone has surpassed 29,000. While perfunctory words of 'regret' have been doled out by the warmongering US-UK-Israel triad, there is a dire need to also reflect on what has ensured the baffling scale of deaths (in such a short time) as well as demystifying Israel's relentless military campaign, *despite the polite objections* from its

Western allies.¹²

The success of Israeli onslaught in claiming a disproportionate number of lives as well as the Houthi-led government's successes in disrupting business should be seen through an intersection of technology, the legacies of the Cold War and the changing contours of contemporary capitalism. Houthis have deployed anywhere from drones, missiles to well-armed soldiers that have taken over entire vessels. Depending on the volume they are carrying, and the destination they are intended for, giant container ships could be 300 meters long and carry within them up to a million barrels of highly flammable oil. Moreover, Yemeni fighters are targeting the narrower stretches of the Red Sea (the strait of Bab al-Mandab is a little over 30 km wide) which means that even poorer, less-equipped militias can inflict heavy damage without amassing stockpiles of ammunition. Western and other liberal media outlets can't seem to tire themselves of repeating how the Houthis are sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran. There is no denying that the Iranian regime has often emboldened actors such as Hezbollah, Houthis and certain Shia-militias in Iraq to counter the US-Saudi proxy influence in the region. Iran has either transferred technology, or through circuitous landscapes – especially the Omani-Yemeni border zone – exported *Burkan* series ballistic missiles, Quds cruise missiles and the al-Mandab-1 antiship missiles. The fact that the Houthis used Soviet manufactured OTR-21 *Tochka* to inflict casualties on the US-backed Arab coalition during the days of the Civil War, also suggests contacts with the DPRK establishment. Though in truth, Yemen receives a huge cache of its arms from the USA and its primary ally in the region, Saudi Arabia. The latter was supposed to keep the western-aligned, rebel government (headquartered in the southern capital of Sana'a) in place, although since the rebel government has such poor control of its weaponry, the Houthis in the years even prior to the Civil War could organise looting of the munitions and bolster their own stockpile.

Since 2009, the United States has delivered over \$444 billion in arms sales to nearly 170 countries. A major consumer of American weapon merchandise has been the Middle East. Despite serious humanitarian, legal and moral concerns, three successive regimes in the US, Barack Obama, Donald J. Trump and now, Joseph Biden have weaponized some of the most brutal, authoritarian regimes in West Asia including Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In the Yemen conflict alone, since 2015, UAE and Saudi regimes have indiscriminately used US-acquired weaponry that has claimed the lives of 377,000 people. It is worth remarking here that the sharp increase in deaths- in times of conflicts and wars in the last couple of decades- is a direct function of the enhanced weapon technologies being manufactured in, and sold by countries such as the US. Similarly US defence also plays an instrumental role in technological infrastructure and transference that is used for sophisticated surveillance technology such as Project Raven and helps repressive regimes such as the Emirati governments to target civil rights activists, journalists and non-governmental officials.

Until the Arms Trade Treaty became international law in December 2014, there were more international laws regulating trade in bananas than the arms trade. In an incredible remark made by the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban ki Moon indicated that between 1990 and 2005, “23 African countries lost an estimated \$284 billion as a result of armed conflicts, fueled by transfers of ammunition and arms – 95 per cent of which came from outside Africa.” The US under former President Donald Trump “un-signed” the treaty, though notably President Biden has not rescinded the decision. As the world’s largest exporter of lethal weapons, US initiated arms transfers are responsible for some of the gravest episodes in international conflicts. Second, in his executive capacity, President Biden does not even require Congressional approval [the US Congress, by a slim majority is held by the opposing Republican Party] to re-enter the ATT agreements. However, since the US itself relies on a range of pri-

vate manufacturers to meet its own defence needs as well as the military aid it gives out to NATO and non-NATO allies, these American manufacturers cleverly lobby levers of power in Washington DC to earn regulatory oversight in their operations.

Lockheed Martin, RTX Corp, Northrop Grumman, Boeing and General Dynamics – all US based Companies – also happen to be 5 of the world’s 6 biggest defence companies by revenue. Interestingly, two European companies that aren’t typically associated with defence manufacture- Rolls Royce and Airbus- also get 20% of their revenue from manufacturing defence components and engines for combat naval and aircraft use. In 2019, the Amnesty International found that, over the course of the “Yemen conflict”, Boeing, BAE Systems, Raytheon and Lockheed Martin were “supplying, servicing and arming a fleet of combat aircraft that has [sic] repeatedly struck civilian objects, including residential areas, schools, hospitals and marketplaces.” This same report continued to argue that while ATT and other domestic legislations called upon states to regulate international arms trade, private companies [in the supply of military goods and services] were often violating these regulations with seeming impunity and state complicity. Lockheed Martin has made a total contribution of \$ 1.67 millions to both the primary parties in the American system including \$ 126,581 to Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in 2022. Similarly, Raytheon Tech had raised over \$ 4.25 millions up until 2019-2020 as contributions to various Political Action Committees [or PACs, which are tax-exempt organisations that pool campaign contributions and donate those funds to campaigns for or against candidates, ballot initiatives, or legislation]. In its own disclosure, Raytheon Tech [publicly traded as RTX Corp] contributed over 1.86 million to federal candidates for the 2020 elections, split 48.2% : 51.5% between Democrats and Republicans respectively. For its part, Boeing Co. has not even made its political contributions public and for this reason, the *American Democracy Scorecard*, a platform that tracks political spending and corporate values in the US, has rated all three cor-

porations named above an “F” grade.

The point is rather simple, as it is age old. While the Houthis-led Yemen Government’s actions are highly significant, they do not pose a grave threat to international trading networks. There are alternatives that the US and UK can exercise and commission but instead, they have chosen to pound an already battered country with its expensive bombs. Second, the “Axis of Resistance” represented by Iran, Hezbollah, Houthis and some other non-state actors, are often blamed for expanding the war regionally. However, long-standing trends show that there is a direct correlation between arms sale by the US to the region and deepening of conflicts while also leading to increased human loss.

3. Diplomacy and Democracy, or Lack Thereof

The FIFA World Cup in Qatar, 2022 was a spectacle of grandiose scale. And yet, to most western commentators, the event could only be seen from the familiar lens of lacks, absences and of course, orientalism. But far away from the scorn and longing for a pub or a beer to watch the games was an unfolding of Arab public spheres. The surprise run of the Moroccan National Team at the event was the most exhilarating episode from that edition of the tournament, until Lionel Messi claimed for himself the title that had long eluded him. However, the Moroccan Team’s dream run became an unanticipated site of pan-Arab solidarity as well as voicing support for the Palestinian cause. It was reported that the Qatar edition of the tournament saw the highest congregation of Palestinians at any modern World Cup. Unlike the previous edition in Russia, where there were reports of ground security prohibiting any political banners or flags, including the Palestinian cause, so overwhelming was the support for Palestine during the Qatar edition that *+972 Magazine*, a joint Palestinian-Israeli journalistic platform, emotively called it “The first Palestinian World Cup”. Every successive stage that the Moroccan national team seemed to be clearing would become a reason for an even bigger congregation at the al-Aqsa mosque or just the streets of

Gaza, West Bank or East Jerusalem. At each instance of these burgeoning congregations, in an apparent response to the widespread rebuke Israeli sports journalists were receiving in Qatar, Israeli police and armed forces would violently and needlessly disperse the celebrating crowd.

It is no secret that many regimes in West Asia have built their power on extractive capitalism and simultaneous disenfranchisement of its own citizenry as well as exploitation of immigrant labour. At the same time, Israel which has long fashioned itself as a democratic *jazirah* (if you will) in the region has not had any compunctions signing “normalisation” treaties with many such regimes under the Abrahamic Accords.¹³ Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, Morocco and Sudan have now conferred some form of diplomatic recognition on to Israel while the latter continues to sell some of its most advanced weaponry and agricultural modernization technologies (including artificial fertilisers) to many countries in Africa.¹⁴ However, as polls conducted in many of these countries found out, respondents to surveys enquiring after the approval of the Abrahamic Accords declared a near unanimous rejection of their respective governments initiatives to normalise relations with Israel. Furthermore, in a survey conducted by a Washington DC based Institute, only 16% of Saudi respondents were in favour of Hamas accepting a two-state solution. As Israel’s war has raged on since Hamas’ audacious military actions, cities small and big, across the region have reinvested their common cause with Palestine. Of course, unlike in the West where the growing support for Palestine is truly a novel moment, the common cause with Palestinians amongst MENA people is a long-standing issue. As many commentators have remarked, the numbers of those gathering, sloganeering and marching in many instances is the first instance of large scale mobilisation since the heady days of the “Arab Spring” (with perhaps the exception of Iran, where recent protests against the Morality Police after the mysterious death of Mahsa Amini in police custody saw huge numbers of anti-government protestors).

The mass killing in Gaza has been such an emotive issue that even those regimes in the region which are scarcely tolerant of any mass gathering in their territories have had to capitulate and allowed people to express their opinion on this particular matter; howsoever at variance it may be from the government's official position. Bahrain, which has banned all forms of public protest gatherings since 2011, was rocked by large pro-Palestinian gatherings, that included images of the Bahrain Monarch shaking hands with Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Since November 2023, Bahrain became the first co-signatory of the Abrahamic Accords to suspend economic ties with Israel while also recalling its Ambassador from Tel Aviv.

Given how the US, Israel and their allies in UK, France and Canada have worked hard in emboldening authoritarian figures such as the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, the October protests at Tahrir Square – the site of Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring – ought to be seen as being significant. While the protests were largely condoned by the President, the rogue sloganeering of “Bread, Freedom, Justice” (the rallying cry of Arab Spring protests) portends as a gateway for the oppression in Palestine becoming a larger metaphor. In one instance after another, the fate of Gazans is further deepening the protest ethic in many other authoritarian societies and expansion of public spheres under the guise of Palestinian solidarity. This is not the place or the time to forecast a Second Arab Spring. It is quite unlikely any meaningful political transformation is possible just on the question of Palestinian liberation. Instead, it would be more productive to reflect on how, at the very precise moment, when in western democracies the mainstream media is completely out-of-step from its demographically diverse electorate [thereby producing a crisis of representation], countries across the MENA region are seeing a growing correspondence between people's preferences their government's official positions.¹⁵ In other words, the war in Gaza has produced an unanticipated inflection point for *not just* postcolonial societies but Western democracies, themselves.

So in light of these conversations, a final point needs to be made; why has Israel's response been so indiscriminate? A potential answer requires us to turn to a different location; the vast Sonoran Desert that runs across the US-Mexico Border. The Southern border of the US has always been a lightning rod for politics of a certain kind in American discourse. It would be unfair to call it by a partisan name—Republican— because the Democratic Party too has very strong elements where the 'spectre of immigrants' overwhelming American life has found popular support. Whether it is New York Mayor Eric Adams or even the US President more recently, who is asking the House of Representatives to award him executive powers to "close down" the borders, a xenophobic strand runs across the basic political divide in the US. Aiding US efforts to apprehend "illegal" migrants and using devastating powers of technology to deter them is Israel's Elbit Systems. From the *Hermes* drones (used since 2004, and particularly in the 2008 and 2014 assaults on Gaza) or the \$145 million contract to construct integrated fixed towers system in Nogales, Arizona, Elbit Systems and its American subsidiaries [as well as those of Israel Aerospace Industries] have been in the forefront of US' pervasive anti-immigration war. But defence and building contractors need to have opportunities to exhibit their prowess and efficacy. The "precision" through which Israel gets to raze Gaza to ground provides an excellent opportunity for Israeli firms to show to the world why they are leaders in defence manufacture and contractors. In the same way, the Spanish Civil War became the dress rehearsal for emergent warfare technology of the 1930s, Palestine today is the ground zero for weaponry and surveillance technology. Anthony Lowenstein has written a persuasive book, *The Palestine Laboratory*, where he traces the machinations through which Israel exports its terror and in turn, makes democracies and despots complicit in its crime.¹⁶ Gaza, nay Palestinians, are the "perfect laboratory for the Israeli techno-military complex". The support for Israel in European nations – Germany especially but Italy, Greece et al – is not merely a nation atoning

for its history of anti-Jew hate and purges. It is not a strategic investment in keeping the Middle East volatile for its own strategic purposes either. It is also the corpse of Alan Kurdi; the 2-year old Kurdish-Syrian boy whose body washed up on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, after drowning in those treacherous waters. The technology to survey waters and the discretion to deliberately let refugees drown instead of rescuing them is devised in Israel's war in Palestine.

CONCLUSION

On January 26, 2024 judges of the ICJ gave a provisional verdict on South Africa's case against Israel's genocidal intent in Gaza. The interim verdict mattered precious little. People have long known that international law carries tacit impunity for Western Countries and their savagery. Israel cynically decried South Africa's case as an electoral ploy by the ruling ANC to distract the electorate from its own failings, as a party of proposition. It was a deceitful assessment that Israeli authorities are quite adept at but still, they admitted to a larger truth. The fate of Palestine matters to people around the world. It has the ability to forge real political alliances and consequent electoral fortunes.

The web of entanglements in which the suffering of Gazans today sits is both simultaneously complex and easy to follow. There is nothing more to illustrate than merely to remind that for global flows of capital and labour to serve the interests of Global North is premised on imperialism being co-constitutive of capitalism. The death of a Palestinian in Gaza or West Bank is deeply linked to the terrifying tribulations of Central Americans trying to cross the Darfén Gap, the Syrian boat on the verge of drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, the Thai labourer collapsing under the weight of debts accrued in his labour building apartment complexes in Tel Aviv, the murder of Reuters journalists, or the gradual rise of right-wing authoritarianism creeping up on us. The only

difference is that we do not have an SOS signal to send to anyone that can come and rescue us. We have to rise to the occasion.

NOTES

- 1 In its Podcast episode aired on October 11, 2023 the show, *The Daily*, the host of the show, Michael Barbaro sat down with *NYT's* former Jerusalem bureau chief, Steven Erlanger and the two rehearsed what potential strategies would allow Israel's defence forces to inflict maximum harm on Palestinian territories. The *WSJ* went so far as to declare the City of Dearborn, Michigan to be the "Jihad Capital of America" due to its high concentration of Arab Americans. *NYT's* star contributor wrote an article in which he compared Iranians, Palestinians and Lebanon Arabs to worms and vermin, without as much as a single moment of hesitation. *The Atlantic* has carried unapologetic pieces using deeply dehumanising and Islamophobic language against people of the region, while also publishing polemical pieces intolerant of any view divergent from what Israeli authorities wish to disseminate.
- 2 Skunk water is a liquid compound with an overpowering odour similar to the smell of sewage mixed with rotting corpses. Used as a crowd control weapon it is named after the cat-sized American mammal of the weasel family, which when threatened squirts a foul-smelling irritant liquid from its anal glands towards its attacker.
- 3 Noah Browning, 'Israeli "skunk" fouls West Bank protests,' Reuters September 3, 2012.
- 4 It bears mentioning that in 2017 the Zionist entity attempted to sell the weapon to the Indian government for use in Kashmir. It was ultimately not approved for use since control tests in Delhi found that the Indian test subjects could tolerate the smell.
- 5 See Arthur Herman *Freedom's Forge: How American Business Produced Victory in World War II* (2012).
- 6 Rayford Logan, "The Negro Wants First-Class Citizenship," in Rayford W. Logan, ed., *What the Negro Wants* (1944).
- 7 See in particular Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (1999)
- 8 See Jeff Schuhrke, *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold Story of US Labour's Global Anticommunist Crusade* (2024).
- 9 Elbit systems: company profile, on Corporate Watch.
- 10 Though of their own admission, and from latest reports (as of February 19, 2024) regarding Belize-bound cargo ship *Rubymar* and another vessel contacting for British rescue mission (185 km off Aden), the US-led strikes have done nothing to deter the Yemeni government's resolve to continue

their operations. When US President, Joseph Biden was asked on January 18, 2024 (outside the White House) if the strikes against the Yemenis were working, he said “When you say working, are they stopping the Houthis, no. Are they going to continue, yes.”

- 11 That said, the Swedish home goods store, *Ikea* and American automobile manufacturer, *Tesla* have both reported that their distribution networks have been affected since the Yemeni action began.
- 12 The most damaging rebuke to have come from the US was on February 8, 2024, when President Biden called “[Israel’s]conduct of the response” in Gaza to be “over the top”. It is also at this press conference that President Biden claimed that he was [singularly] responsible for “Mexican President Sisi” allowing limited aid to filter through to southern Gaza. President Biden, whose cognitive abilities have been recently called into question, seems to be referring to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi who is the President of Egypt. At the time of writing this article, Gaza did not yet share borders with Mexico.
- 13 To be sure, Israel itself employs nearly 120,000 migrant labourers (predominantly in construction and farm jobs), most of whom come from Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Rumania, and Moldova. Since the Second *Intifada*, it has been a deliberate attempt by Israeli authorities and private contractors (with transnational linkages to coercive labour markets in China and elsewhere) to replace their Arab residents and employing foreign workers under conditions, which by a recent Report commissioned by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (UN OCHA), that are akin to modern-day slave labour conditions. There is rampant evidence of holding workers captive by confiscating their passports and a big portion of their wages is handed over to the labour contractors and touts that brought them to Israel, in the first place. It is for this reason that Construction Workers Federation of India (CWFII) decision to oppose conscription of daily wage labourers in the states of Haryana and Uttarakhand is significant.
- 14 The case of Uganda is a good example. Julia Sebutinde of Uganda, the first African woman to sit on the ICJ, was the only judge to have voted against every single measure brought by the South African legal team in their case against Israel. While the government of Uganda distanced itself from Sebutinde’s judgement, reaffirming its own position through a recently adopted resolution at the Non-Aligned Summit in Kampala, others were curious to look into Uganda-Israel relations. Over the last couple of decades, the strategic and defense relations between the two countries have grown closer, with MoUs on defense and cooperation signed back in 2022. Emblematic of this proximity was, a *New York Times* investigative journalism piece revealed that Israeli-owned company, Cellebrite sold espionage and hacking software to Uganda’s police force that was used

for purposes of extreme surveillance amid news of human rights abuses, arbitrary detention and torture against opposition and human rights activists.

- 15 Just one example should suffice. Faisal bin Farhan, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, on February 18, 2024 officially said that a Palestinian statehood [through a two-state solution] is a "prerequisite" for any normalisation of relations with Israel; a sharp *volte face* for its previous diplomatic engagements with Israel where no such precondition was asked for.
- 16 Antony Loewenstein, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* (2023).

