

The long, complicated history of Black solidarity with Palestinians and Jews

How Black support for Zionism morphed into support for Palestine.

By Fabiola Cineas

As violence and reprisals in **Israel** and Gaza have intensified since **Hamas's** attack on October 7, reactions (or non-reactions) from **Black Lives Matter** and related groups in the US have come in for particular scrutiny.

Black Lives Matter Chicago was heavily criticized for a **since-deleted graphic** that seemingly celebrated Hamas's killing of Israelis, featuring a paraglider with the Palestinian flag, and the words "I stand with Palestine." (The group later said it "was not proud of" the image, adding "We stand with Palestine & the people who will do what they must to live free.")

Comedian Amy Schumer **reshared** a **video** from former NBA star Amar'e Stoudemire, now an Israeli citizen, in which he criticized Black Lives Matter for its silence on Israel. "I woke up this morning with some disturbing news out of Israel — Hamas kidnapping children, putting them in cages, killing women, killing the elderly. That's some coward shit. That's cowardly," he said. "And for all y'all Black Lives Matter [supporters] who ain't saying nothing — 'Well let me figure out exactly what's happening before I say anything' — f*** you."

In a now-deleted post on X, which was reposted more than 1,000 times, writer Daniella Greenbaum Davis wrote, "Jews marched in Selma. Jews marched for George Floyd. Jews showed up for Black Lives Matter. BLM is a disgrace. We will all still be there for you guys next time. Because that's who we are. But now we know who you are."

Behind the uproar is a rich history of links between Black American and Palestinian activists — connections that go back to Israel's founding but have deepened over the last decade, as activists for both issues have come to see their causes as related or even explicitly linked.

Israel and Hamas are at war. How did we get here? Vox offers clarity.

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- **A timeline of Israel and Palestine's complicated history**
- **What does the US-Israel relationship mean for the war?**
- **Occupation, annexation, and other terms you should know**
- **What history reveals about the Israeli hostage crisis**

In 2014, only a few weeks separated the Gaza war that year from protests over Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson, Missouri; Palestinians tweeted advice to the protesters on dealing with tear gas. One of the most vocal activists in Ferguson, **Bassem Masri**, who died in 2018, was Palestinian American. In the wake of the protests, activists **traveled to occupied territories**, and in 2015, Black activists and leaders **publicly declared their solidarity with Palestine**.

By 2020, when the murder of George Floyd led to massive nationwide protests in the US, "People were **painting George Floyd murals in Palestine**. Palestinians were being attacked by Israeli security services, and saying, 'I can't breathe,'" said **Sam Klug**, an assistant teaching professor of African American History at Loyola University Maryland. "Over time, African Americans have looked at the Palestinian circumstance and Palestinians have also looked at what is going on in the United States."

I talked to Klug about this history — about what Black and Palestinian and Black and Jewish relations have looked like over time. We discussed what it means for allyship, protest movements, public opinion, and the future of Palestine and Israel. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Fabiola Cineas

Before we get into the history of Black and Palestinian solidarity, I'd like to talk about Black support for the Zionist cause, which came earlier. What's the brief history there?

Sam Klug

That history goes back to the 19th century. Many Black nationalist thinkers and activists, people like David Walker, Martin Delany, Henry McNeal Turner, really drew a lot of inspiration from the Exodus story in the Hebrew Bible.

In that story, Jews in bondage in Egypt and their resistance and eventual emancipation became a touchstone of African American politics and thought, in the struggle for abolition in the United States, and in 19th-century visions of a potential Black homeland for the African diaspora in the Americas.

The idea of an oppressed people, who have been oppressed throughout the West and are seeking a homeland that has a connection to their ancestral community and establishing a political community there, is not dissimilar from a lot of Black nationalist visions of self-determination based in land for Black people.

[Marcus] Garvey saw a model in the emerging Zionist movement and so did W.E.B. Du Bois, one of his main antagonists. Du Bois was quite supportive of the Zionist idea up through the establishment of the state of Israel.

And then, of course, you have important connections between Jewish Americans and African Americans in the mid-century civil rights movement and the important role that Jewish Americans played in advancing that movement and providing support for it. For example, there's the **martyrdom of Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman**, who were killed [by the KKK] in Mississippi in 1964 after registering Black voters.

Fabiola Cineas

But after the state of Israel was established, some Black leaders began to express dissent. Can you talk about that?

Sam Klug

The establishment of Israel in 1948 was celebrated by many corners of African American political life by organizations including the NAACP. At the time of the establishment, there was still much less awareness in African American communities of the **Nakba** and of the Palestinian dispossession that occurred as a result.

But **others began to express dissent**. Interestingly, **Ralph Bunche** — who was an African American diplomat and the UN mediator who actually helped to negotiate the treaty between Egypt and Israel after the 1948 war — expressed a lot of reservations about how the establishment of Israel would dispossess Palestinian people. There were other dissenting voices surrounding Israel-Palestine, particularly in the **Nation of Islam**, which had leaders who made explicitly antisemitic statements.

But there were [members], including Malcolm X, who were wrestling with the complexities of the geopolitical situation.

During the 1956 Suez Crisis, in which Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, Nasser emerged as a crucial anti-colonial leader on the global stage since Egypt fought against Israel and its European colonial powers of Britain and France. Different corners of the African American community began to identify with Nasser as a global anti-colonial leader. Du Bois wrote a **poem** about Nasser, glorifying him, which signaled that he was starting to think about Israel in a different way.

Then later, when Malcolm X broke from the Nation of Islam in 1964 and traveled abroad, visiting Mecca and meeting Said Ramadan, one of the founders and leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, he articulated a consciousness of the Arabic population in historical Palestine as being dispossessed and as being a people under colonial occupation. These are important precursors to the 1967 [Six-Day] War, which is really a crucial turning point in the way that Black activists think about this.

Fabiola Cineas

Why is the 1967 War, also known as the Six-Day War, a turning point?

Sam Klug

It's a very short military conflict in which Israel takes the West Bank and Gaza and begins occupying those spaces within Palestine. There's a lot going on at this time. There's the US war in Vietnam; there's the rise of the Black Power movement within the broader Black freedom movement in the United States. And it's really the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, that articulates a powerful pro-Palestinian response to the 1967 War. They print in their **newsletter** a Palestine primer that articulates an understanding of the June 1967 War as a war of colonial occupation and identifies Palestinians as part of a global anti-colonial struggle.

This is, of course, not unopposed in the African American community. Roy Wilkins at the NAACP, Bayard Rustin, one of the organizers of the March on Washington, were very critical of this statement by SNCC. But SNCC's statement came at a time when SNCC itself was reconsidering its own role. It was starting to identify as a Black Power organization and identify African Americans as part of a global Third World. The SNCC statement sparked a shift in more radical strands of the Black Freedom Movement toward greater identification with the Palestinian cause.

There was a rising understanding of racial oppression in the United States as part of a global system of hierarchy, as part of a world order founded on white supremacy. That brings about an identification with anti-imperial struggles as natural allies of the African American struggle.

The analysis of the African American struggle for freedom in the United States as analogous to anti-colonial struggles abroad really reaches its apex in this moment, with not only a group like SNCC embracing this analysis related to Vietnam and Palestine, but with the emergence of the Black Panther Party, which also takes a very pro-Palestinian position with the emergence of Stokely Carmichael who also speaks out in favor of the Palestinian cause.

Fabiola Cineas

How did the Black Power movement position itself around what was happening in the Middle East?

Sam Klug

As we move toward 1970, the Black Panther Party, under the intellectual direction of Huey Newton, began to articulate an ideology that they called intercommunalism. It essentially identified a series of communal hubs around the world engaged in struggle against a world system of white hegemony and colonial power. Palestine was an important node in that imagery. This was even evident in the imagery that the Panthers used. They used the image of **Leila Khaled**, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine fighter, a woman fighter carrying a gun.

Fabiola Cineas

How did Black and Arab people in the United States make connections in their everyday lives during this period?

Sam Klug

This is a really important part of this story that gets overlooked. The Black Power movement was diverse and diffuse geographically and ideologically. But one of the most important nodes was the Detroit area because it was a center of [one of] the largest Arab American communities and the key organizations in the movement there was a series of Black caucuses within the United Auto Workers. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers worked alongside Arab American workers in these auto plants and made on-the-ground connections. Arab American workers took inspiration from Black workers caucuses and formed an **Arab Workers Caucus in 1973 and then pressured their local union** to divest from Israeli state bonds after the 1973 the Yom Kippur War.

Fabiola Cineas

It seems like Black political leaders also started to make Palestine a part of their platforms around this time.

Sam Klug

[Shirley] Chisholm ran for president in 1972 and recommended direct Israeli-Arab negotiations to settle the conflict in Israel and Palestine. At that moment, that stance was not the predominant position of the Democratic Party or of American political elites more generally. She brought that perspective into the realm of presidential politics, which was an important step even though she didn't win the nomination or the presidency. Previous presidential candidates of both parties had taken very strong pro-Israel stances.

Fabiola Cineas

So what was happening to Black and Jewish relations in the latter part of the 20th century? How did Black communities respond to Israel during that time?

Sam Klug

Andrew Young, a former civil rights leader who was Jimmy Carter's UN ambassador, was found out to have **held a secret meeting** with a representative of [Palestine Liberation Organization] in 1979. Once the press caught wind of this, Young was pressured to resign and it became an ugly conversation. The press focused on this meeting as a signal of declining Black-Jewish relations domestically. Many in the mainstream press believed that any signal of a willingness to bring forward a more pro-Palestinian standpoint in American politics was a betrayal of the historic Black Jewish alliance or of American Jews more generally.

It's important, again, to highlight that there were people in the civil rights and Black freedom movements who opposed the turn by some Black radicals toward a more pro-Palestinian posture. In

1975, Bayard Rustin along with A. Philip Randolph, **formed a committee called Black Americans to Support Israel Committee (BASIC)**. This was geared, in part, toward refuting the turn in the Black Power Movement toward a more pro-Palestinian stance in the late '60s and early '70s. But it was also geared toward a sense that one way to keep the Black Jewish alliance alive is through articulating Black American support for Israel.

Fabiola Cineas

Another connection I can't help but think of is apartheid South Africa, which began in 1948 and didn't end until the 1990s. How did Black Americans make connections between the Middle East, what was happening in the States, and also South Africa?

Sam Klug

Absolutely. Like the Vietnam War in the late '60s, this other geopolitical situation really can't be underestimated in terms of how it shaped African American views on Israel-Palestine. I think the best example of this is actually the 1984 and 1988 **presidential campaigns of Jesse Jackson**. Jackson was a civil rights leader in the 1960s, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

In 1979, he led a **delegation to the Middle East** and met with both Israeli officials and representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization, PLO, including Yasser Arafat. He pushed for direct negotiations between the United States and the PLO. In his two campaigns, especially in his 1988 one, he highlighted the ties between Israel and apartheid South Africa — the economic ties, the flow of aid — and he articulated parallels that have since become much more common between South African apartheid and Israeli treatment of Palestinians. He tried to draw attention to specific geopolitical ties between the state of Israel and apartheid South Africa. In the legacy of Chisholm, he brought these issues to the stage of a presidential campaign.

The Jackson 1988 campaign was the high-water mark for pro-Palestinian support in Black politics as well as American politics. Continuing activism occurred throughout the '90s and 2000s. After Jackson's loss, and the channeling of a lot of conversations about Israel and Palestine into the framework of the "peace process," it reduced the overall energy that was put into those issues.

Fabiola Cineas

You have argued that Black Lives Matter uprisings have helped shift public opinion on Palestine. After the conflict in 2021, a **Gallup poll** showed that a majority of Democrats believed that the United States should put more pressure on Israel than on Palestine to find a resolution. Can you say more about this in connection to the recent violence?

Sam Klug

The shift in 2021 happened in part due to the George Floyd uprising. This uprising, and the longer-term Black Lives Matter movement of which it was a part, influenced many Americans, especially young people, to begin viewing the situation in Israel-Palestine in terms of structural violence, occupation, and colonial oppression. Of course, it wasn't the only cause of this shift, but it was significant.

It remains to be seen how public opinion, including Black public opinion, is going to respond to this October's events, whether the horrific violence on civilians inflicted by Hamas or the astonishingly brutal Israeli assault on Gaza, which has been justified in a language that UN human rights experts and many activists are calling genocidal. Predictably, the **Biden administration**, most of the political

class, and most mainstream media have rallied behind the Israeli state and offered relatively unqualified support for its response, even in its most violent forms.

It's hard to say where public opinion will go, but I think we are already seeing some effects of the shift in opinion that took place in 2020-21, with a number of large-scale protests against the Israeli offensive, including many led by Jewish Americans opposed to the occupation, already happening. The fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has also changed in the intervening years since 2020 will also affect its ability to mobilize and shape the conversation around these issues going forward.

Fabiola Cineas

With all of this history you've recounted, why do you think people are trying to tug Black people in various directions when it comes to the latest eruption of violence?

Sam Klug

There is a long history in the United States of other groups seeking to mobilize the example of the Black freedom struggle in support of whatever their cause might be. The totemic power of the mid-century civil rights movement has formed the basis of what a lot of Americans' understandings of what fights against oppression are and should be in all times and places.

One of the unfortunate consequences of that has been that white Americans and Americans fighting for all sorts of different causes then believe that they can lay claim to that struggle, and believe that if Black people in the present are not supporting their positions or what they view as their righteous struggle against some form of oppression or another, that Black people in the present are betraying the legacy of that totemic mid-century civil rights struggle.

A lot of this has to do with the way the historical memory of the mid-20th century civil rights movement has been mobilized. This is connected to anti-Blackness in the sense that it presumes that Black people in the present day should or must act in a certain way. And you see that in how anger is directed at Black Americans maybe more so than other Americans for the positions they are or are not taking related to any number of issues and today the issue is what's going on in Israel and Palestine.

Fabiola Cineas

There's a sense in this moment that people are keeping some kind of score when it comes to allyship and solidarity. It seems like people are ignoring various atrocities based on allegiances.

Sam Klug

I think there is something that is a little disturbing about the premise of "we were there for you so you must be there for us." Historian Robin D. G. Kelley has this great line: "Solidarity is not a market exchange." I feel like that really applies to this moment and to a lot of these questions.

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