Israel-Palestine Conflict: Historically, Currently and its effect on UNH

Trigger warning: This article contains discussion of violence, war, the Israel-Palestine conflict and mentions anti-semitism and Islamophobia.

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Amidst Durham's first snow of the season, a group of students stood in freezing rain holding signs in support of the people in Gaza. The students of the pro-Palestinian demonstration were only a small percentage of a greater global movement demanding freedom for Palestine amid a nearly 76-year conflict against Israel.

On October 7 of this year, a Palestinian resistance group and the current governing authority of the Gaza Strip since 2007 known as Hamas carried out a surprise attack, storming Israeli towns near the border with Gaza killing approximately 1,200 people and taking 240 hostages. The attack was carried out in retaliation against several decades of Israeli occupation of the land.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has experienced bouts of violence since World War II, but the size and unprecedented nature of this attack have sparked global awareness. Israel launched air strikes and later a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, vowing to eradicate Hamas.

Since the attacks of October 7th, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have struck at least 15,000 targets in retaliation. The Palestinian death toll is contested across sources but reported by AP News to be 13,300 as of Nov. 29, with the majority of casualties being women and children.

In 1993, Israel and Palestine signed The Oslo Accords, an agreement that separated the West Bank into 3 separate zones: Area A, Palestinian cities governed by Palestinian Authority, Area B, which included a mix of Israeli-governed towns or settlements with Palestinian-governed towns or settlements, and Area C, West Bank (Palestinian) territory administered by Israel.

Dr. Jeannie Sowers, Professor and Chair of the Political Science and International Affairs Department at the University of New Hampshire, lived in the Israeli-Palestinian village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al-Salam on a fellowship for field research with the Ford Foundation when she was in college at Harvard University. This village was an experiment in coexistence, with bilingual schooling in Hebrew and Arabic and shared governance by Palestinian and Israeli residents. Right before the COVID pandemic, she was conducting interviews in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Tel Aviv with human rights and humanitarian aid providers.
“Most of the West Bank is not under Palestinian control,” said Sowers. “The Palestinian Authority only controls small urban enclaves as a result of the Oslo Accords.”

Sowers said the United Nations observed that the IDF has been conducting searches of the small amounts of humanitarian aid allowed into Gaza from Egypt. The significant delays in aid are partially due to the fact that this is a task usually performed by the United Nations. She also noted that allowing humanitarian aid is an improvement from the complete siege over the past weeks, during which water, food and fuel supplies were not allowed in.

“It is illegal [under international humanitarian law] to massacre civilians, which is what Hamas did,” said Sowers, “It’s also illegal under international humanitarian law to deprive a civilian population of the things it needs for its survival.”

Dr. Sowers noted that universities have a special responsibility to foster and respect a diversity of views, support students from diverse backgrounds equally, and hold accountable anyone engaging in acts of hate or violence.

The conflict is notable for the struggle to find a solution– Israel has been attempting to claim the land as religious right since Britain gave up it’s mandate on Palestine in 1948, while Palestinians refuse to leave their home behind.

On Wednesday, October 18, the University of New Hampshire’s College Republicans hosted a candlelit vigil for the lives that had been lost on October 7, in an effort to bring awareness and the community together on Thompson Hall Lawn. Harrison Spalthoff, a sophomore at UNH and the state chair for the organization, said he thought the Vigil for Peace was a success.

“The primary objective was not to delve into the complexities of the Israel-Palestine conflict,” said Spalthoff. “Instead, we wanted to unequivocally condemn terrorism and honor the lives tragically lost and pray for those who are being held hostage to this day.”

The vigil included statements from Governor Chris Sununu and Senator Maggie Hassan, among many other New Hampshire political officials. Spalthoff also described a run in with a student who recognized him from the vigil, “shouting accusations of me supporting genocide and ethnic cleansing.”

“Such claims are baseless and grossly misrepresent our event's intent, and I feel sorry for those who refuse to come together for peace,” said Spalthoff.
On November 13, New Hampshire College Republicans sent a letter to University President James Dean, asking him to publicly “condemn the recent acts of anti-Semitism on campus.” The letter was co-signed by 50 other fellow students and organizations. In a private response to Spalthoff, President Dean insisted on his and the university’s dedication to ensuring every student felt safe and protected, and that if any students faced any sort of bias in any capacity to report it to the Civil Rights and Equity Office.

“Despite the geopolitical unrest of the last few weeks, we have not experienced increased reports of threats or harassment from community members,” said President Dean.

According to the letter, there was a report of a swastika drawn in a campus building shared online. In President Dean’s response, he reassured the incident was investigated immediately but the symbol had already been rid of by the time they made it to the unspecified dorm in question, but if anyone knew anything to contact campus authorities immediately.

Spalthoff said in a statement about the letter, “I want to make it clear that the intent behind our letter is not to take a stance on the conflict in the Middle East but to address the specific issue of antisemitism at our university and the administration’s lack of response. Our university has long been recognized for fostering an inclusive environment, but recent events have led me to be worried the atmosphere may be changing.”

On November 22nd however, President Dean sent out an email with an update on safety on campus, saying: “Unfortunately, we have received reports of antisemitism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and racism on our campus, including a disturbing incident last weekend in which Hitchcock Hall was vandalized with words and symbols of hate.”

On Thursday, November 9, students and non-students alike came together once again in front of Thompson Hall to “Speak Out for Palestine” in a peaceful demonstration organized by the New Hampshire Youth Movement and several other students.

Jed Siebert, a graduate student at the university, said why he joined the demonstration. “As a Jewish person, I am deeply affected by this issue, and the accusations of anti-Semitism against the group of people at the rally are upsetting and, to me, completely false and defamatory.”

In an interview with WMUR, one student said that many of the chants, one of which was “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” a chant that the international Jewish advocacy group the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and other official Jewish organizations have deemed anti-Semitic, made the student feel unsafe on campus. Organizers wanted to stress, however, that the phrase is not a call for genocide, but one in hope for peace.

The organizers called for an immediate ceasefire, holding signs that included phrases such as “I refuse to fund a genocide” and one that resembled the Israeli flag stating: “Not in my name.”

Yussra Ebrahim, a UNH alum from Iraq, said the phrase has been misconstrued.

“It’s freedom from oppression,” she said. “Palestine will be free, they are oppressed, they will be freed from that.”

Ebrahim states that her experience with the war on terror and being from Iraq resembles the current political climate in many ways. She remembers the paranoia and anger people felt, “justifiably so,” but she also remembers the misconstruing of words and the displaced anger at innocent people in the Middle East. She said she’s seen similar Islamophobic rhetoric now that she saw then, especially when pro-Palestinian organizers are asked the question: “do you support Hamas?”

“They’re saying, okay, look at all this evil stuff that was done. Are you pro-evil? Like, why are you asking me that? I’m here to stop a genocide,” said Ebrahim.

Another organizer of the demonstration, graduate worker Maryam Aswad of the Muslim Student Association at UNH, stressed the fact that anti-Semitism played no role.

“I think I speak for everyone at that demonstration when I say that anti-Semitism has no place in our communities,” she said.

On Nov. 25, three Palestinian college students were shot in Burlington, Vermont, by a white man. Whether this was a hate crime or related to the Israel-Palestine conflict is still under investigation at this time.
The Israel-Hamas ceasefire ended on Dec. 1, 2023.