Polarization of Israel-Palestine conflict and calls for peace in UNH Community

“We need to embrace humanity in each other and oppose any acts that strip people of their freedom, regardless of their religion, race, or nationality,” stated Adena Ahsan.

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On November 15 University of New Hampshire (UNH) students sat in room 352 of Dimond library with paints and a scroll of paper with the names of those who had been killed in the Palestinian territories since the conflict between Israel and Hamas that occurred on October 7. Students chatted and brainstormed about what to put on their signs to show and the next day’s demonstration for Palestine. Third year student Sean Lafond wrote ‘Goths for Gaza,’ on his sign while his friend shared his plans for quoting a message he stated was written on a whiteboard in a Gaza hospital. The message stated “Whoever stays until the end will tell the story we did what we could. Remember us.”

Second-year Master’s student Adeena Ahsan gathered paints, cardboard boxes, markers and whatever else she could find for the art build that she described as a grassroots community building event. The goal of the build was to make posters, songs, and poetry to present at the second peaceful demonstration for Palestine on Thompson Hall (T-Hall) Lawn. Ahsan stated that it is important to hold demonstrations for Palestine on the UNH campus to spread awareness and education about the impact of colonialism and apartheid to a community that is mostly white. Ahsan stated that misinformation about the conflict between Israel and Hamas has fed into misconceptions about Arab people. She expressed that the conflict is not religious but concerns the effects of colonialism, specifically in Palestinian territories.

“Every 10 minutes, a child is bombed and killed in Gaza. This needs to stop, and our taxes are funding this genocide. I hope that we can also create space on campus for students and others in the community to come together and learn about what’s going on and have a moment of solidarity and support for each other,” said Ahsan.

“The last thing I want is for someone to go after my family,” said a University of New Hampshire (UNH) student during an art build for Palestine that occurred on November 15 in Dimond library. The student has chosen to stay anonymous and expressed that many students on college campuses across the country have been getting doxxed because of their participation in pro-Palestine rallies and protests.
Details about various students, professors, professionals, and organizations have been uploaded to a website called Canary. The profiles of students on the site contain their image along with sensitive information such as where they go to school and their full legal name. The website states that it is “motivated by a desire to combat the rise in anti-Semitism on college campuses.”

On October 7 Hamas, a militant nationalist and Islamist movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip led surprise attacks on towns, a music festival, army bases, and other locations in Israel, as reported by the New York Times. Israel has since bombed and launched a ground invasion in Gaza. Hamas’ initial attack resulted in the death of 1,200 people, and 240 hostages. Since Israel’s campaign began 11,000 Palestinians have been killed according to Gaza’s health ministry. The U.S is the biggest supplier of military aid to Israel. Since October 7 President Biden has requested an additional 14.3 billion dollars in aid be given to Israel to aid in military and economic costs.

On the UNH campus there have been recurring demonstrations related to the conflict on Thompson Hall (T-Hall) Lawn. There was a vigil for peace held on October 18 hosted by the UNH Federation of College Republicans (NHFCR). The vigil was held to “honor the lives lost during the horrific attacks by Hamas and to condemn acts of terror” as stated on the event’s flier. At the event student leaders and religious leaders such as Rabbi Berel Slavatiki, with the Seacoast Chabad Jewish Community Center spoke.

“We have to remember that this is not an attack against Jewish people. This is an attack against humanity. This is good versus evil,” said Slavatiki.

From November 9 to the end of the fall semester there were peaceful demonstrations for Palestine each Thursday that called for President Joe Biden to advocate for an immediate ceasefire, and for the occupation of Palestine to end. The UNH demonstrations for Palestine were organized by multiple student groups including the UNH NH Youth Movement (NHYM), Muslim Student Association (MSA), and Graduate Student Senate.

The demonstrations for Palestine have received backlash from UNH College Republicans and other campus organizations. They referred to the first demonstration as an “anti-Israel rally” in their petition for UNH President James Dean to condemn the actions of the attendants as antisemitic. Among the organizations who signed the petition were UNH Jewish organizations Chabad and Hillel.

“We are very grateful that UNH Hillel has not been directly affected by the conflict like some other universities with a higher Jewish population,” Hillel said in a joint statement to The New Hampshire (TNH).

Members of NHFCR took photographs and video of demonstrators at the Palestine event which were featured in an article by ABC WMUR9. The video has garnered 43.9k views on the platform X, formerly known as Twitter. Among the 43 commenters was Lily Tang Williams who is a 2024 Republican candidate for one of NH’s seats in the US House of Representatives. Williams commented under the video: “I hope they learn the real history soon and fate of Red Guards in China. I would like to speak to them with your [NHFCR] help about growing up under Mao.”

The phrase demonstrators used in the video, ‘from the river to the sea Palestine will be free,’ was the basis of the petitioners’ claim that the protest was anti-semitic. The phrase, ‘from the river to the sea...’ refers to the area between the West Bank on the river to the Gaza Strip on the sea. Conflicting interpretations of the phrase have evolved over time. A history for the phrase can be found here.

The person in the video leading the chant was UNH Graduate and PhD student Amanda Daly.

“I, a Jewish person, was standing in front of the crowd holding a Star of David sign reading ‘Not in My Name.’ At the beginning of the speeches I openly announced myself to be from a Jewish background and shared the story of my Jewish ancestors. I received only love and solidarity from the crowd and I felt completely safe,” said Daly.

Daly stated that she was very disappointed that UNH Chabad and Hillel signed a letter claiming the pro-Palestine demonstration at UNH was antisemitic.

“I want to be clear that these two organizations do not speak for all Jews on campus, and they certainly do not speak for me,” she said. “The demonstration was for peace and unity among all parties involved.”

Hillel stated that the phrase, ‘from the river to the sea’ was very disheartening to hear as it symbolizes the eradication of Jewish people. Hillel stated that they encourage students to learn the history of the chant.
“While freedom of speech is an irrevocable right, hate speech is not acceptable on a college campus. We signed the letter not to have President Dean end the gathering, but to state that hate speech is unacceptable on the UNH campus. We feel that action should be taken against any hate speech towards any targeted group,” said Hillel.

UNH PhD student Jed Siebert expressed that he as a Jewish person also felt safe while demonstrating for Palestine.

“I know many Muslim and Arab students at UNH who have expressed feeling discomfort on campus with the rise of Islamophobia in the wake of the recent escalation of violence against the Palestinian people,” said Siebert. “I won't feel comfortable at UNH if I know members of my community feel unwelcome because of their identities. These demonstrations are important because they add voices to the global call for a ceasefire, and they are a public display of support for students and community members who are affected by the ongoing struggle,” he said.

Another participant in the UNH demonstration for Palestine was graduate worker Maryam Asaad from MSA.

“I speak for everyone at that demonstration when I say that antisemitism has no place in our communities. As we see a sharp rise in both antisemitism and Islamophobia, especially within the scope of UNH, we have to be firm in denouncing all of these actions,” she said.

There has been disagreement with the way the UNH administration has addressed the Israel-Hamas war. UNH President James Dean sent an email on October 10 in response to the violence in Israel and Gaza. In his email Dean stated: “my heart goes out to the residents of Israel and Jewish people worldwide impacted by the acts of terrorism by Hamas that began on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath and the Simchat Torah holiday. The violence has already taken the lives of thousands and imperiled many, many more innocent people in Israel and in Gaza, where millions face the threat of a war with limited options for refuge or escape.”

Second year student Kaitlyn DaSilva who attended the UNH vigil for peace expressed that she understands the importance of bringing awareness to students on the conflict but also the difficulty of addressing the issue in a neutral manner. She said she believed UNH has shown an effort in bringing awareness of the conflict to the students.

“All perspectives are important to understand in order to move forward. All we can hope for is change and peace,” said DaSilva.

Johnnie Hughes who also attended the vigil for peace expressed that he thought it was appropriate of Dean to email the UNH community, but wished Dean mentioned the event.
“Supporting Israel does not mean people aren't supporting Palestine. The government in Israel has been bad but that does not mean that the people in Israel are bad people,” said Hughes.

Daly expressed that she was disappointed in the way Dean addressed the conflict to the UNH community. She and other community members met with Dean privately after his email on October 10.

“The last time I saw specific public comment about how UNH will not tolerate antisemitism, it was 2017, and the message came from former President Huddleston. I question why President Dean would remain silent for five years of up-surging white nationalism and antisemitism right here in New Hampshire, only to release a statement now about a conflict far from here,” she said.

Daly said that in the meeting Dean apologized for the way he had addressed the conflict in his October 10 email, offered to attend a Jumma prayer, and possibly sponsor a social event for the Muslim and Jewish communities to unite. Daly expressed she felt Dean's gestures would not be enough to fight islamophobia and anti-Palestinian and anti-Arab sentiment on campus.

“Public action must be taken. While these are nice gestures, they are unlikely to be noticed by the majority of UNH students, faculty, or staff, and therefore will do little to redress the administration’s previous mistakes,” said Daly.

TNH reached out to President Dean for comment pertaining to his meeting with Daly. Tania deLuzuriaga, a representative for Dean, confirmed the meeting. DeLuzuriaga stated that Dean's plans to fund an event to bring together Muslim and Jewish communities, and attend the events Daly described are currently in the works.

President Dean responded to the petition calling for him to condemn the actions of the pro-Palestine demonstrators in a private email to the chairman of NFHR, Harrison Spalthoff. In his email Dean expressed UNH's view on free speech. Dean stated that “the remedy for speech that some may find objectionable is not for the university to choose sides. Instead the university should support more speech and opportunities to understand different perspectives.” Siebert expressed that he appreciated the university defending his right to free speech on campus.

Hillel stated that Dean's email to Spalthoff recognized freedom of speech while reminding students of UNH's code of conduct that prohibits harassment. The organization expects that if there is a violation of student conduct, it will be dealt with appropriately by UNH. “We stand for freedom of speech, so long as that speech is not hateful. You can boost your cause without bringing another down. Several members have family and friends in Israel. We are not asking you to pick sides or change your opinion. All we ask is for you to be kind. We are still the same students, peers, teachers, and friends that we were before the attack on October 7,” stated Hillel.

The groups demonstrating for Palestine asked that people pay attention to the difference between anti-zionism and antisemitism. Antisemitism is hostility or prejudice towards Jewish people. An Instagram account titled the Palestine Solidarity Coalition (PSC) at UNH, created in the wake of the Israel-Hamas war, has a highlight dedicated to the differences between anti-zionism and antisemitism. The definition of anti-zionism is the opposition to the establishment or support of the state of Israel. The PSC page expressed that anti-zionism is the belief that there should not be a nation state such as Israel with exclusive rights for Jews above all others in the land.

“The coalition of students organizing these demonstrations is diverse, representing Muslims, Jewish, Arabs, Christians, and other students from diverse backgrounds coming together under the similar umbrella of showing solidarity with a decolonial struggle for liberation and freedom,” said Ahsan. “We need to embrace humanity in each other and oppose any acts that strip people of their freedom, regardless of their religion, race, or nationality,” she said.

Ahsan stated that she welcomes dialogue towards any group that would like to learn more about the message of the pro-Palestine demonstrations and events happening at UNH.