

‘We Know Occupation’: The Long History of Black Americans’ Solidarity with Palestinians

Why the Black Lives Matter movement might help shift the conversation about a conflict thousands of miles away.



Demonstrators wave the Palestinian flag and chant slogans during a march by various groups, including Black Lives Matter and & Shut Down Trump and the RNC ahead of the 2016 Republican convention in Cleveland. | Adrees Latif via Reuters

By SAM KLUG
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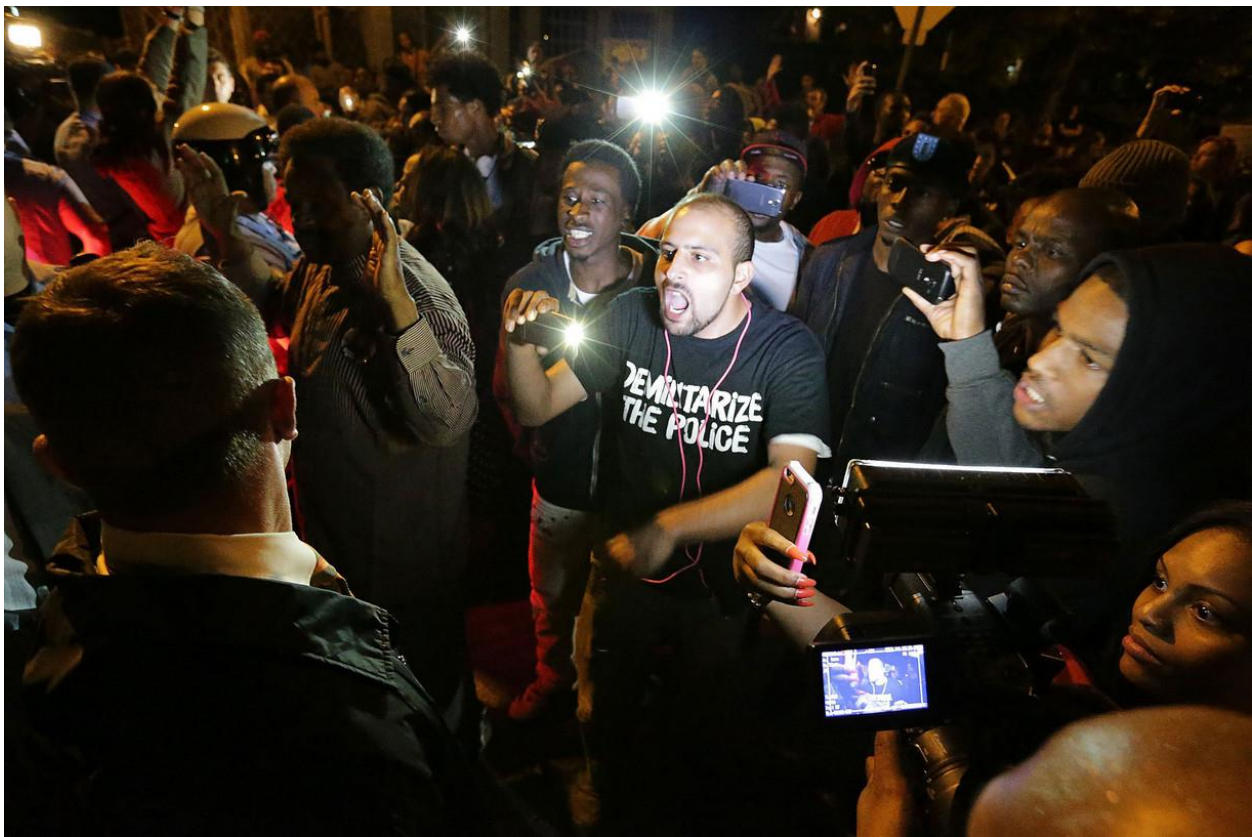
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“Bassem was one of us. He showed up ready.”

That is how Rep. Cori Bush (D-Mo.) described the late Bassem Masri, a Palestinian-American activist from St. Louis, on the House floor on May 13. On a day when the headlines [called attention](#) to Israel’s escalating airstrikes on Gaza, which ultimately killed over 200 Palestinians in an 11-day period, Bush’s speech linked the Palestinian

cause with events closer to home. Masri, who died in 2018, was one of several Palestinians on the front lines of protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 after the death of Michael Brown.

“As a Palestinian,” Bush went on, Masri “was ready to resist, to rebel, to rise up with us” to fight for “an end to the militarized police occupations of our communities.” The violence that erupted in Israel and Palestine this spring has activated a powerful sense of solidarity among many African-Americans. Well-known Black public figures, from Brooklyn Nets point guard [Kyrie Irving](#) to actress [Viola Davis](#), have been outspoken in support of Palestinians. Black Lives Matter activists have played an [active role](#) organizing and promoting pro-Palestinian protests all over the [country](#). A Black Lives Matter organizer in New Jersey [summarized the movement’s sentiments](#) by saying, “we know occupation, we know colonization, we know police brutality.”



Bassem Masri, a Palestinian-American activist, is pictured in October 2014 confronting a St. Louis police officer at the scene of a fatal police officer-involved shooting. | David Carson/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/Tribune News Service via Getty Images

This spring’s rise in violence came amid a notable shift in American public opinion. According to a February [Gallup poll](#), a majority of Democrats now believe the United States should put more pressure on Israel than on the Palestinians to resolve the conflict—the highest level of support for pressuring Israel since Gallup began tracking this question in 2007. Part of that change, according to commentators who both [celebrate](#) and [lament](#) it, may owe to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has

encouraged Americans to view the Israel-Palestine situation through the prism of racial justice. While Israelis and U.S. supporters of Israel's government have challenged this framing, identifying Israel's bombing of Gaza as a legitimate response to a terrorist threat, it is clear that many Americans are seeing the conflict differently.

This shift in public sentiment may portend a new phase in the decades-long history of Black Americans' solidarity with the Palestinian cause—a history that has been poorly understood, in part, because its effects on national debate have thus far been limited. In years past, Black activists have drawn other social movements' attention to the Palestinian cause, and Black politicians have advocated for it in U.S. foreign policy debates. But rarely have these two forms of influence operated simultaneously. Today, there appears to be a connected effort by grassroots organizers and lawmakers with activist roots to push national opinion and U.S. policy toward a stance more friendly to Palestinians. Shared experiences of state violence and oppression have always animated Black-Palestinian solidarity. If the Black Lives Matter movement continues to shape debates about racial injustice in the United States as it has over the past year, it may also help transform Americans' approach to the question of Palestine.

For much of the twentieth century, many African-American activists expressed admiration for the Zionist cause, seeing it as an allied struggle of another oppressed minority in the Western world. The participation of many American Jews, some of whom sacrificed their lives in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, seemed only to solidify this support.



Top: Palestinian children and adults without homes as a result of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Bottom Left: Egyptian prisoners of the 1967 war. Bottom Right: Egyptian troops hold back Palestinian refugees as they stage an anti-American demonstration in the Gaza Strip in 1967. | AP Photos

But then came the June 1967 War, when Israel conquered the West Bank and Gaza, two regions of the former British Mandate of Palestine that were under the control of Jordan and Egypt, respectively. The conflict captured Black activists' attention at a time when the Vietnam War was already prompting them to condemn what they saw as U.S. imperialism abroad. Many in the Black freedom movement saw Israel's conquest of Palestinian lands, like the U.S. war in Vietnam, as an imperial parallel to the racialized violence African-Americans experienced at home. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee [published](#) a primer on the "Palestine problem" describing Zionism as an

imperial project upheld by the “white western colonial governments” of the United States and Europe.

The Black Panther Party, meanwhile, expressed its support for the Palestinian resistance that emerged in the war’s aftermath, portraying al-Fatah and the Panthers as engaged in a “joint struggle” against “racism, Zionism, and imperialism.” For these groups, African-Americans were an “internally colonized” people, whose position in the United States was analogous to the status of “Third World” peoples globally—Palestinians included.

The 1967 war also provoked a wave of activism from Arab-Americans, who built bridges with Black activists and politicians throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. The Organization of Arab Students invited Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael to speak at their national convention in 1968, where he delivered a fiery call for Black support of the Palestinian revolution. “The Palestinians have a right to Palestine,” Carmichael declared. Working in a different register, members of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates highlighted the economic and military ties between Israel and apartheid South Africa to lawmakers in the Congressional Black Caucus, and lobbied Shirley Chisholm during her 1972 presidential run.



Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael is pictured with aides. In the late 1960s, Carmichael delivered a fiery call for Black support of the Palestinian revolution. Ollie Noonan, Jr./The Boston Globe via Getty Images

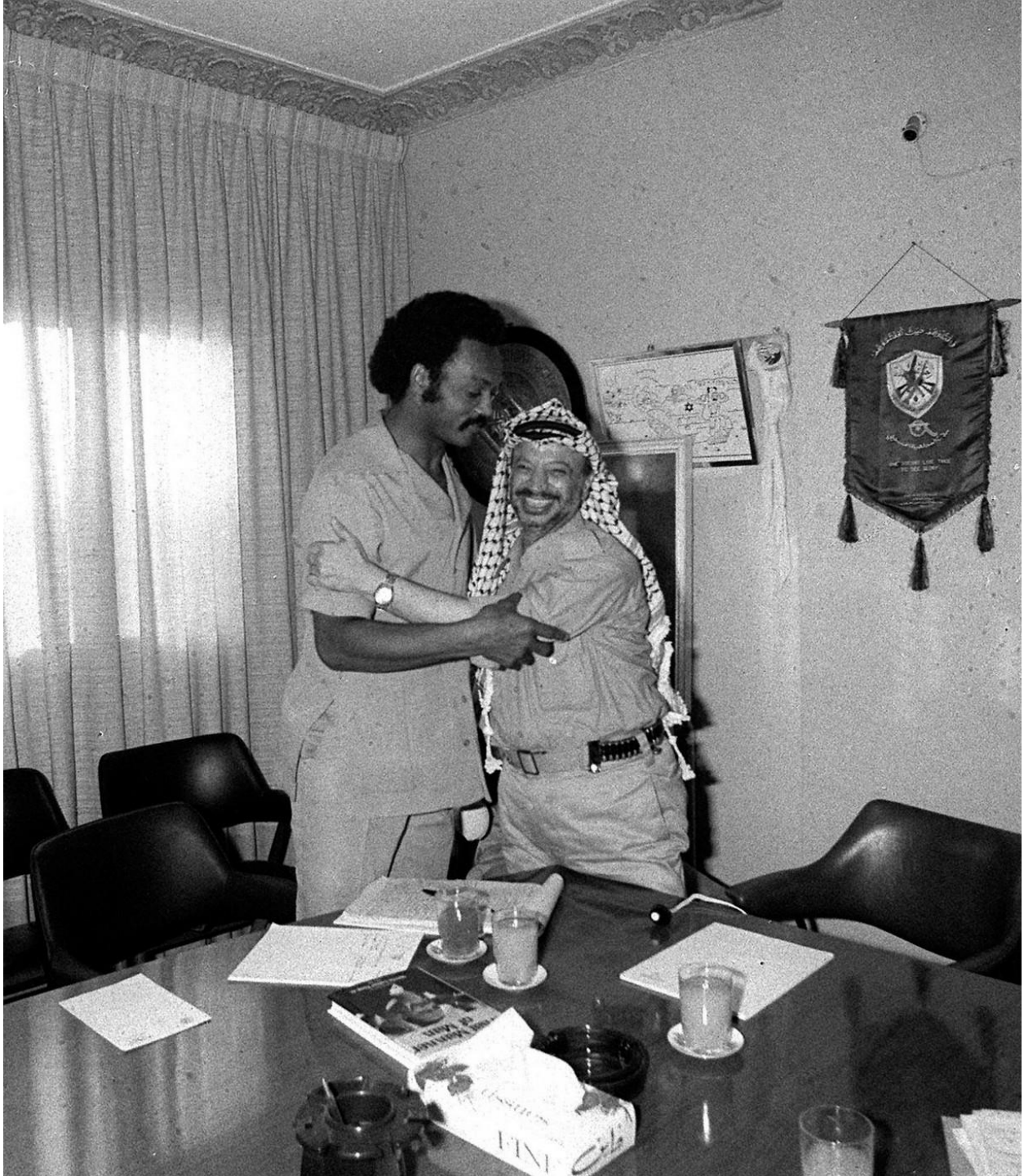
In the labor movement, Arab-American organizers in Michigan’s auto plants formed an Arab Workers’ Caucus in 1973, which they modeled explicitly on a set of radical Black caucuses that had formed to challenge racist practices in the auto companies and the United Auto Workers. With some Black workers’ support, the Arab Workers’ Caucus

successfully [pressured](#) their union local to divest from Israeli state bonds. This wave of Black and Arab-American activism crested alongside mass anti-Vietnam War protests and Black uprisings in cities across the country, placing the Palestinian issue on the agenda for the social movements of the U.S. left—but rarely making an impact in the realm of high politics.

By 1980, this ferment of Black-Palestinian solidarity activism had dissipated. Like so many institutions of the 1960s left, the groups incubating these connections fell into disarray: many were riven by leadership conflicts and ideological divisions, or worn down by government surveillance and repression. Institutional decline was matched by the diminishing allure of a “Third World” political identification. As the decolonization movements of the mid-twentieth-century receded, many African-American activists stopped seeing the fight for racial equality in the United States as part of a unified global struggle.

But several Black politicians took up the mantle of advancing the Palestinian cause. Working at the highest levels of U.S. diplomacy and the Democratic Party, these figures eschewed earlier Black radicals’ support for a militant Palestinian revolution against Israeli occupation. Rather, they sought a diplomatically negotiated settlement that would grant Palestinians greater autonomy. In 1979, U.N. Ambassador and former civil rights leader Andrew Young was pressured to resign after he secretly met with a representative of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The battles in the press after Young’s resignation focused on declining Black-Jewish relations domestically, but they also enabled a more pro-Palestinian viewpoint to find a place in the national debate.

One of Young’s most vigorous defenders was Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jackson led a delegation to the Middle East immediately after the Young affair, meeting with both Israeli officials and PLO representatives, including Yasser Arafat. Jackson [pushed](#) for the United States to negotiate directly with the PLO, even as he hinted at the parallels between the Palestinians’ struggle and that of African-Americans: “We understand the cycle of terror, the cycle of pain,” he said, “and yet if America is free to talk, perhaps it can seek reconciliation.”



Yasser Arafat, right, and Rev. Jesse Jackson embrace in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1979. | AP Photos

Jackson would make his deepest imprint on American views of Israel-Palestine almost a decade later, in his 1988 presidential campaign. His campaign worked with the Arab American Institute to [pass](#) resolutions endorsing a two-state solution at eleven state Democratic Party conventions. At the 1988 Democratic National Convention, Jackson delegates passed out Palestinian flags and T-shirts as part of an attempt to insert a

similar plank in the party platform. Although the campaign ultimately dropped the platform fight, Jackson's refusal to shy away from the issue opened what historian Nikhil Pal Singh has [called](#) "the first significant U.S. public debate on the idea of a two-state solution in the Middle East."

Jackson would occasionally deploy the image of a shared anticolonial struggle that animated Black-Palestinian solidarity in the 1960s, [stating](#) at one point, "we understand life under occupation because we've been occupied." Overall, though, his rhetoric was more muted, even when he highlighted the extensive ties between Israel and apartheid South Africa. Rather than endorsing the Palestinian revolution, as Carmichael had two decades earlier, Jackson insisted that the United States should serve as an "honest broker" between Israel and the PLO to negotiate a resolution to the conflict. By focusing on U.S. foreign policy, Jackson's campaigns represented a tactical shift from the radical activism of the 1960s and 1970s. While earlier efforts focused on building pressure from below, Jackson and Young sought to influence the policymaking process directly.

Today, there are signs that African-American advocates for Palestine are renewing both strategies simultaneously—with grassroots Black Lives Matter activists reinforcing legislative action by Black politicians. In 2017, 11 members of the Congressional Black Caucus cosponsored Rep. Betty McCollum's (D-Minn.) [bill](#) to prohibit U.S. aid to Israel from being used to detain Palestinian children. Newer Black representatives whose campaigns drew strength from Black Lives Matter organizing—most notably Ilhan Omar, Cori Bush, Ayanna Pressley and Jamaal Bowman—have taken more forceful pro-Palestinian stands than most of their CBC colleagues, including by [cosponsoring](#) the recent joint resolution disapproving of a \$735 million U.S. arms sale to Israel.



Supporters hold up flags and posters during a May 2021 rally in Chicago in response to ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. | Anthony Vazquez/Chicago Sun-Times via AP

For Black Lives Matter activists advocating for Palestinians, the Democratic Party still has a long way to go. But lawmakers' [departure](#) in the past few weeks from an unvarnished pro-Israel stance may suggest that even moderate Democrats are responding to changes in public opinion. These changes are particularly pronounced among younger Jewish-Americans, who [take](#) a critical stance toward Israel and are overwhelmingly Democratic voters. Lawmakers including Bush and Rashida Tlaib, the sole Palestinian-American in Congress, have taken advantage of the shifting climate to bring their perspective on Palestine to the forefront of intraparty debates. Outspoken support for Palestinians on the House floor and a symbolic resolution against a single arms sale hardly mark a sea change in U.S. policy. But they suggest that movement politics and institutional politics are reinforcing each other in a way that neither Jackson nor Carmichael experienced.



People walk past a mural showing the face of George Floyd painted on a section of Israel's controversial separation barrier in the city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. | EMMANUEL DUNAND/AFP via Getty Images

Recent expressions of Black-Palestinian solidarity have emphasized a shared experience of enduring violence at the hands of security forces. Earlier this month, as an Israeli soldier held his knee on the neck of a Palestinian protester in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, the man [was recorded](#) saying, “I can’t breathe.” At a rally in Brooklyn on the anniversary of George Floyd’s death, chants of “Free Palestine” broke out. As long as activists continue to mobilize around the state violence that hangs over both African-American and Palestinian life, the revived politics of Black-Palestinian solidarity—and its influence on the wider debate—has every reason to grow.