Palestine and the Western "street"

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Abstract: Support for Palestine is now widespread in parts of Western public opinion, to an extent that feels unprecedented. What led to this? We argue that a new openness to Palestinian perspectives in the West began slowly in the late 1990s to mid-2000s, likely initiated by the advent of the internet and the resulting greater accessibility of information from a wide range of perspectives. We also argue that the trend has accelerated since then, due to solidarity among social justice movements, changes in scholarly discourse, and, most recently, social media discussion of the war in Gaza. Thus, although the degree of support for Palestine in parts of the West feels new, we argue it is the culmination of a decades-long cultural change.

The ongoing war in Gaza has brought out a sharp division within Western society. Most Western governments, with the US in the lead, have consistently supported Israel's war in Gaza, arguing that Hamas' attack on October 7 necessitated such an Israeli response. These governments have paid little beyond lip service to the disastrous consequences for Palestinian civilian life. At the same time, there is a substantial segment of public opinion within the West that takes those consequences very seriously, and that has come out in opposition to the war, in support of an immediate ceasefire, and more generally in support of a just resolution to the Palestine question. This *double-headedness* — near-complete disregard for Palestinian concerns on the part of the state and establishment figures and institutions, coupled with insistent and emphatic support for those same concerns on the part of a significant part of public opinion — is a major characteristic of the modern Western environment as it concerns Palestine and Palestinians.

We leave to others the analysis of governmental policy. We are interested primarily in the other head of this double-headed schema: the oppositional segment of Western public opinion, or what might be termed the Western "street," by analogy with the so-called "Arab street."[1] This name is motivated in part by the current prominence of street demonstrations in the West (and elsewhere), and by the suggestion that the street metaphor in its political sense denotes "public opinion that is constituted outside official frames or outside the mechanisms of authority."[2] The street so defined is of course only part of Western public opinion, much of which is more closely aligned with Western governmental views — but the existence of the Western street is real and felt. We have written previously on the expression "the Arab street," and are very aware of the

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[1] We here place quotation marks around the two words "Arab street" because the two words taken together constitute a well-established and recognizable expression. In contrast, we place quotation marks around only the word "street" when referring to the Western "street", because the "Western street" is not a well-established and recognizable expression. Finally, we place quotation marks around an entire expression such as "the Western street" when referencing the full expression itself, rather than the segment of public opinion it designates.

[2] Larbi Choueikha, as quoted in "'Al-shari' al-'Arabi' mustalah 'ilmi!" ["'The Arab street' is a scholarly term!"], *Al-Akhbar* (Beirut, Lebanon), November 17, 2006, p. 13; cited as fn. 22 in our earlier article on the "Arab street", Regier, T., & Khalidi, M. A. (2009). The Arab street: Tracking a political metaphor. *Middle East Journal*, *63*(1), 11-29.

often dismissive and disparaging use of that term in the West.[3] For these reasons, we initially hesitated to apply the street metaphor to a segment of Western public opinion whose views are marginalized and sometimes vilified in the corridors of power. But by using the expressions "the Western street" and "the American street," we mean to deliberately subvert the usual association of "the street" with an attitude of contemptuous dismissal of "the mob," and intend to reclaim and revalorize what has often been a term of derision. In this sense, we feel that the shoe fits: the Western street is often negatively viewed – yet like the Arab street before it, it views itself very differently: as a legitimate and principled oppositional force. After all, a central animating principle for the Western street is that human life is precious, and that civilians in particular should be protected — a principle that will apply regardless of whether the civilians in question are Israeli, Palestinian, or of another background.

The existence of counter-mainstream, oppositional trends in Western public opinion concerning the Middle East is of course nothing new. Yet things feel qualitatively different this time. One thing that is new is the seriousness of the situation. This includes the enormous casualty figures, the scale of the horror more generally, and the suddenness with which the political situation has changed, both in the Middle East and in the West. Another thing that seems to be new, and important, was highlighted by Tony Karon and Daniel Levy:[4]

> Across the Global South and in the cities of the West, Palestine now occupies a symbolic place as an avatar of rebellion against Western hypocrisy and an unjust postcolonial order.

Thus, it is not novel that there are protests. It is not novel that they concern the question of Palestine. What may be novel is the symbolic centrality of the Palestine question to a larger set of concerns within the West that echo those of the Global South. Here, we seek to understand how this has happened: how the Palestine issue has come to assume a position of salience within Western oppositional or counter-mainstream movements. We argue that precursors to this situation can be traced back to at least the late 1990s and early 2000s, and that this development is part of a more general cultural shift in attitudes toward Palestine and Palestinians in the Anglophone West over the past two decades.

Immediate precursors

Given the enormity of the events of the past six months, and the starkness and sensitivity of the double-headed situation we have sketched above, it is easy to overlook the fact that much the same sort of double-headedness existed prior to October 7. In July 2023, it was argued that "[t]he American public's views on Israel are undergoing a profound shift. Washington hasn't caught up."[5] A May 2021 headline announced: "Tens of thousands attend largest pro-Palestine

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[3] For a discussion of this term and its uses in the West, see for example Asef Bayat, "The 'street' and the politics of dissent in the Arab world," *Middle East Report, Vol. 226* (2003).

[4] Karon, T., & Levy, D. Israel is losing this war. *The Nation*, December 8, 2023.

[5] Serhan, Y. The American public's views on Israel are undergoing a profound shift. Washington hasn't caught up. *Time*, July 19, 2023.

[march in British history.](#)"[6] It is also the case, more anecdotally, that there were and are things regularly said about the Palestine question in non-governmental (including academic) discourse over the past few years that would have been simply unsayable a few decades ago. Examples include increased reference to the [Nakba](#) (Arabic for "catastrophe", denoting the destruction of Palestinian society in Palestine in 1948), and to Israeli apartheid. These changes in language use suggest a change in Anglophone culture, toward an attitude that is more open to and accepting of Palestinian perspectives. At the same time, US government positions did not and do not suggest a similar openness.

We have emphasized a particular sort of double-headedness, in which clear pro-Palestinian sentiments are found in certain places (e.g. some segments of Western public opinion), while indifference or hostility to Palestinians is found in others (e.g. US government pronouncements). However, there are also other sorts of double-headedness, which can be interesting and revealing: sometimes pro- and anti-Palestinian sentiments will emerge at the same time and from the same source, suggesting a conflicted attitude behind a single voice. This was exemplified by a 2020 New York Times article on "[The Rise of Palestinian Food.](#)"[7] The article sympathetically noted that Palestinian "[c]ookbook authors and chefs are arguing for their place at the table — to chronicle recipes, safeguard ingredients and assert a sense of humanity." Yet the article illustrated its topic not with the sorts of appetizing sights that many Palestinians would associate with their families' dinner tables, but instead with a rather bleak still life featuring uncooked squabs tossed onto a rugged slab of rock. The overall visual effect is unflattering, unappetizing, and unappealing — in contrast to the supportive wording of the article itself.

Still, double-headedness is better than monolithic negative portrayal, which we both remember from not very long ago. Here we ask: What exactly has changed, culturally? When did this change begin? How did it develop? What brought us to this double-headed cultural moment?

What has changed?

A natural starting point is growing American awareness of the Nakba. One of us (TR) remembers an exchange with an American not of Palestinian descent, in the mid-2000s, in which the other person said something like: "I imagine you probably knew about the Nakba all along – we're just hearing about it now." This suggests an increase in prominence of the Nakba in the US around that time. While this is just a single anecdote, a more firmly grounded image can be captured by probing a large database of historical language use, such as the [Google Books corpus](#), which is based on the texts of millions of books, published in several languages from the 1500s to 2019.[8] The following graph shows the relative frequency of the phrase "the Nakba" in English in this

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[6] Ullah, A. Tens of thousands attend largest pro-Palestine march in British history. *Middle East Eye*. May 22 2021.
[7] Mishan, L. The rise of Palestinian food. *The New York Times Style Magazine*. February 12, 2020.
[8] To address possible concerns about idiosyncrasies of this corpus, we also searched the [Corpus of Historical American English (COHA)](#), and obtained relative frequency traces over time for the search terms "Palestinian" and "the Nakba." We found that the relative frequency traces over time for these 2 terms were roughly similar across the Google Books and COHA corpora.

corpus, over the years 1940 to 2019 (see also [here](#)). The solid red line marks the year of the event itself, 1948, and the dotted red line marks 50 years after that event, the year 1998.
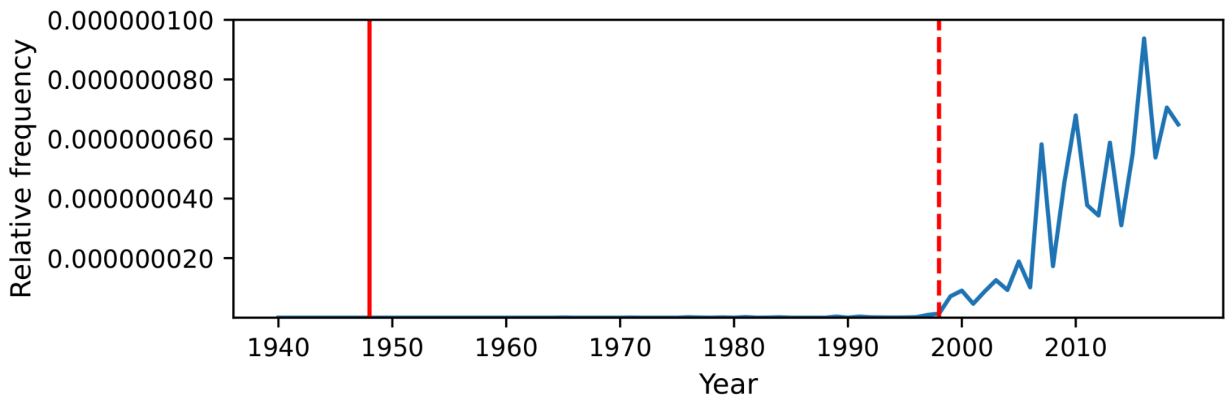
There are essentially no occurrences of the phrase "the Nakba" in this corpus up until 50 years after the event, in 1998 — and usage increases substantially after that, especially in the mid-to-late 2000s, consistent with the anecdote above. A [previous study](#)[9] has also documented this increase in usage of "the Nakba", and has shown that it correlates with increases in usage of words related to the Internet (e.g. "website", "Google"), and in usage of words related to the so-called "war on terror." This correlation suggests (but, of course, does not demonstrate) possible causes for the increase in usage of "the Nakba" in English: elevated attention to the Middle East generally, coupled with access to a wide variety of Web-based information. This could lead naturally to previously marginalized perspectives concerning the Middle East starting to receive greater exposure than they had before.

This gives some evidence for a cultural shift, and "the Nakba" seems an especially relevant phrase to begin with, given its centrality to Palestinian history, and given that Israeli officials have openly characterized the current war as a "[Gaza Nakba.](#)"[10] Still, it is just a single phrase, even if an important one. We were interested in exploring the use of a broader set of words or phrases, to get a fuller sense of which Palestine-related ideas have increased in prominence over the past few decades, and when.

To do this, we compared language usage in the period 1948-1997 (which we call 'then') to usage in the more recent period 2015-2019 (which we loosely call 'now'; the corpus extends only up to 2019). We did not specify a set of target words in advance, but instead let words emerge from the data based on their frequency of use over time, and looked for temporal and semantic patterns in the results. Concretely, we retrieved all words X that appeared in the corpus in the phrase "Palestinian X," and determined which such words X appeared disproportionately more

[9] Regier, T. (2016). Perceptions of Palestine: The view from large linguistic datasets. *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. XLV, No. 2.

[10] Tov, M.H. 'We're rolling out Nakba 2023,' Israeli minister says on northern Gaza Strip evacuation. *Haaretz*. November 12, 2023.

often 'now,' compared with 'then.'[11] We also asked when each of those words began to emerge into prominence, i.e. to substantially increase in frequency.[12] For example, when applied to the underlying data reflected in "the Nakba" graph above, the method we used determined that "the Nakba" began to emerge into prominence in 2005, which seems compatible with intuition based on viewing the data in that graph.

The results of these analyses are shown below. Each word is shown associated with the year of its emergence into prominence, and the modifier "Palestinian" is left implicit. For example, the entry "1997: imams" indicates that the phrase "Palestinian imams" is more frequent in the recent past compared to the more distant past, and that it began rising into prominence in the year 1997. We restricted attention to nouns beginning with lower-case letters. The table below contains those 50 such nouns that showed the strongest association with the 'now' period, i.e. with the recent rather than the distant past. These can be thought of as words that are newly prominent in a Palestinian context.

1997	imams
1998	sumud, hackers, textbook
1999	polling, imam, nakba
2000	cleric, patriation, jihadists, testimonies, colonial
2001	coordinator, gays, spouses, corruption, custodianship, cinemas
2002	shahid, website, intifadas, practitioners
2003	filmmaking, websites, mobility, campaigners, jihadi, jihadist, stakeholders, rappers, modernity
2004	victimhood, telecommunications, commemoration, cartoon, keffiyeh, restaurants
2005	masculinity, spaces, space
2006	rap, subjectivity, football, rapper, internet
2007	hip
2008	queers
2009	bid, indigeneity
2012	accession

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[11] Specifically, we retrieved the usage frequency for each 2-word phrase in the Google Books English corpus of the form "Palestinian X," where "Palestinian" was an adjective and X was a noun, for each year over the time period 1948-2019. We ended with 2019 because that is the last year for which data are available. Our "then" time period covers the years 1948-1997, i.e. from the time of the Nakba itself up until the time when the Nakba began to be referred to in English; our "now" period covers the years 2015-2019, which was chosen because it is a substantial period of time that reaches up until the last year covered by the corpus. We applied add-one smoothing to these frequencies. We then asked which phrases of the form "Palestinian X" were represented disproportionately more often "now" than "then." For each word X, we took, as a measure of strength of association with the "now" period, the ratio of the relative frequency of "Palestinian X" now to the relative frequency of "Palestinian X" then, following a proposal (see their equation 1) that has been applied to related ideas.

[12] Specifically, we used the change point detection method described here (supplementary material for this article), with the exception that we assumed a linear rather than quadratic function to model rising cumulative frequency, as this yielded results, for these data, that more closely matched intuition when viewing the data visually.

Several general points emerge. One has to do with timing: many of these "newly-Palestinian" words emerged around the early-to-mid 2000s – much like "the Nakba" in the graph above – suggesting a general shift in views about Palestinians beginning around then. This is compatible with the suggestion above: that increased attention to the Middle East at that time, together with the advent of the internet which allowed increased access to points of view that had previously been less prominent, initiated a general cultural change in the perception of Palestine and Palestinians. It is also the case that several of these newly-Palestinian words suggest a new Anglophone openness to Palestinian ideas and experiences: e.g. 'nakba' and 'keffiyeh.' Some reflect the oppositional, counter-cultural theme that is our central focus and that has today become more prominent: e.g. 'sumud' (steadfastness in Arabic), 'rapper,' 'hip' (presumably as the first word of 'hip hop'), and arguably 'indigeneity.' Unsurprisingly, some words in the table have become prominent in the recent past in general, not only with respect to Palestinians, e.g. 'queers,' 'gays,' and (as suggested above) 'internet' and 'website.' And there are other themes as well, such as political Islam ('imam,' 'jihadi'). An interesting theme of (only recent) *normalcy* is suggested by words conveying ordinary everyday notions, e.g. 'restaurants,' 'testimonies,' 'football,' 'subjectivity,' 'filmmaking,' and 'cinemas.' The fact that these innocuous, uncharged concepts are on the above list means that they have appeared only recently in association with Palestinians. This suggests in turn that a part of the recent Anglophone cultural shift involves newly viewing Palestinians as having normal concerns such as restaurants, football, and cinemas. One might similarly say that the presence of the terms 'subjectivity' and 'testimonies' indicates a growing attunement to the fact that Palestinians have subjective experiences about which one might give testimony, and that the Palestinian perspective is being taken more seriously. It is unfortunate that the inclusion of Palestinians in such baseline human concerns has had to wait so long.

Overall, we see evidence for a cultural shift in Western language use concerning Palestinians starting in the early to mid-2000s. And while oppositional "street"-related notions are represented in that shift, they are part of a larger picture that also includes an apparent theme of normalcy — something unfortunately novel in Western views of Palestinians.

How did we get here?

If there has been such a shift in Anglophone discourse on Palestine over the last couple of decades, we should expect that young people, primarily those in their 20s and 30s, who have had their consciousness shaped during this period, would tend to view the question of Palestine differently than older generations. This is precisely what is captured in recent polls and surveys, many of which demonstrate a gaping generational divide on the issue. A New York Times/Siena College poll[13] in December 2023 asked US voters whether they sympathize more with Israel or the Palestinians, and while 46% of 18-29-year-olds said they sympathized more with Palestinians, this dropped to only 13% for those 45-64 years of age. In the same poll, 74% of younger respondents said that Israel is not taking enough precautions to avoid civilian casualties

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[13] Cross-Tabs: December 2023 Times/Siena poll of registered voters nationwide. *The New York Times*. Dec. 19, 2023.

in its war on Gaza, while around half that percentage said the same in the over 65 age bracket. The generational gap is also in evidence among American Jews. In a [survey of US Jewish registered voters](#)[14] taken in June-July 2021, 38% of 18-40-year-olds agreed with the statement "Israel is an apartheid state" (as compared with 13% of those 65 and older), and 33% in that age bracket agreed that "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians" (as compared with 15% of those 65 and older). This was over two years before the start of Israel's current war on Gaza.

So what accounts for the shift in discourse and the difference in attitudes? Why does the Western street see Palestine so differently from the Western boardroom? We have already hinted at some contributing causes, but we think three factors are most relevant. The first is the increased tendency among protest movements, which are dominated by (but of course not restricted to) younger people, to emphasize intersectionality and commonalities among various struggles. Of course, it bears emphasizing that camaraderie among radical groups is not a new phenomenon, and the Palestinian cause has been embraced by a variety of progressive movements in the West and elsewhere at least since 1948. But in the past couple of decades, there has been increased solidarity among feminist, anti-racist, and other social justice movements, and a heightened awareness of both structural similarities and material links between these movements. When it comes to Palestine advocacy, [the summer of 2014 is often taken to be a turning point](#).[15] Amidst the co-occurrence of deadly police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, and a massive military onslaught against civilians in Gaza, there was a growing realization of the similarities between the condition of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories and the state of Black Americans, as well as the history of apartheid South Africa and Jim Crow USA. Moreover, the emphasized links were not just structural but also material, given the levels of US-Israeli cooperation and collusion when it comes to mechanisms of policing and surveillance, as well as overall methods of repression (see, for example, the "[Deadly Exchange](#)" campaign of Jewish Voice for Peace). Another important and natural locus of Palestine solidarity within the US and Canada is among Native Americans. There is a [long history](#)[16] of solidarity between Palestinians and Native Americans, rooted in their common experience, as indigenous people, of settler colonialism. This solidarity has continued through the current Gaza war, as exemplified by the Indigenous Peoples Sunrise Gathering on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay last November that [drew parallels](#)[17] between Native American and Palestinian experiences.

A second factor has to do with the power of the internet, particularly the recent growth of social media and the rise of citizen journalism. The image of Israel as a bastion of liberal democracy and an outpost of enlightenment and civilization in a sea of bigotry and

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[14] Jewish Electorate Institute, National survey of Jewish voters. July 2021.

[15] Erakat, N. & Hill, M.L. (2019). Black-Palestinian transnational solidarity: Renewals, returns, and practice. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol.48 No. 4.

[16] Kawas, M. Solidarity between Palestinians and Indigenous activists has deep roots. *The Palestine Chronicle*. February 18, 2020.

[17] Lamb, J.O. Indigenous sunrise gathering on Alcatraz links Native American struggles and the Palestinian story. *The San Francisco Standard*. November 23, 2023.

uncomprehending intransigence has been the dominant one in popular culture and mainstream media in the US since 1948. That image has been difficult to shake despite a preponderance of evidence that undermines it – perhaps because that evidence has often been hard to access for the American public, and even when accessible can be easy to ignore since it does not sit well with the dominant perceptions of Israel. However, in the words of Palestinian-American photographer Adam Rouhana, "Social media is circumventing the traditional flows of information and providing space for more accurate representations to form in the Western imagination."[18] Though social media is sometimes overused as a catchall explanation for just about any cultural and social phenomenon in the twenty-first century, outlets such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and more recently Instagram and TikTok have been instrumental in disseminating information from Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. This information has either previously been inaccessible or considered too "sensitive" by mainstream media outlets in the West. As Israeli restrictions on media, including the killings[19] of journalists, have become endemic in the occupied territories, enterprising Palestinians with cellphones and internet connections have been effective in circulating images of brutal violence, demolition of homes, confiscation of land, and everyday subjugation, to Western audiences that have been habituated to see Israel as the "good guy." The consumers of this information on social media are disproportionately young people, who tend to eschew legacy media outlets favored by their elders, such as the *New York Times*, National Public Radio, or Fox News.

A third reason for the divide on Palestine, which may be more directly related to the data in the Google Books corpus, concerns the changing nature of academic discourse on the question. Beginning around the 1990s, academic writing on Israel and Palestine started to undergo a significant shift. More concretely, it began to be shaped by the Nakba, through a belated realization of the historic injustice represented by the campaign of ethnic cleansing and dispossession of the Palestinian people that led to, and was the prerequisite for, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. Though the truth about the Nakba has been well known by Palestinians since it occurred, as well as in some academic circles, it was mainstreamed in the West by the so-called Israeli "new historians"[20] in the late 1980s and 1990s. Earlier work by Palestinian historians had catalogued the premeditated ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, but that work was widely ignored in a classic instance of "epistemic injustice."[21] By contrast, the later work by Israeli scholars, which criticised the founding myths of the state of Israel based partly on newly released Israeli archival material, made it more acceptable for Western scholars

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[18] Rouhana, A. The subversive act of photographing Palestinian life. *The New York Times*. January 19, 2024.

[19] Journalist casualties in the Israel-Gaza war. Committee to Protect Journalists.

[20] Pappe, I. (1998). Fifty years through the eyes of "New Historians" in Israel. *Middle East Report* 207.

[21] The notion of "epistemic injustice" was introduced into philosophical discourse by Miranda Fricker, whose book of that title argued that there is a distinctively epistemic form of injustice that is exercised against certain individuals and groups, whereby their testimony is discounted and their version of events dismissed, due entirely to their marginalized status. In this case, the work by Palestinian historians and others had documented the Nakba, based in part on Israeli sources such as the *Sefer Toldot Hahaganah* [History of the Haganah], as well as oral testimony from Palestinian refugees. See, for example, the following sources in English: Walid Khalidi, "Why Did the Palestinians Leave?" *Middle East Forum,* July 1959; "The Fall of Haifa," *Middle East Forum*, December 1959; "Plan Dalet," *Middle East Forum*, November 1961; Nafez Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee* (Institute for Palestine Studies, 1978).

to acknowledge the Nakba. Consequently, Westerners who went to college in the past couple of decades have studied a different Middle East than that of their parents and grandparents. Many of them conceive of Israel not so much in terms of the triumphal return of an ancient people to their homeland, but as a settler colonial project that has dispossessed the indigenous inhabitants of their native land.

Although we have emphasized the late 1990s - early 2000s as a major cultural inflection point, several important prior developments set the stage for the changes we have described. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) pushed the academy to more critical engagement with Western perceptions of the Middle East; progressive Arab-American activism following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war can be seen as a foreshadowing of today's activism; and in general the 1970s brought about increased U.S. engagement with, and awareness of, the Arab world.[22] In addition, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the first Palestinian Intifada, which began in December 1987, both tarnished Israel's image in western media, as millions of people watched video of Israeli military assaults on civilian populations on their television screens. These prior developments can be seen as preparing the groundwork for the subsequent cultural changes we have described here.

Both new and old

The times we live in represent, in part, a rupture with the recent past.[23] Nothing like Hamas' attack of October 7 2023 had happened before in the Israel-Palestine context, and nothing of the scale of the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza has happened previously. Similarly, never before have the repercussions been as serious and widespread - from street protests in many cities worldwide, to Israel being forced to defend itself against the charge of genocide in the Hague, to the unsettled and unsettling climate in US higher education,[24] to implications for the global balance of power.[25] But despite the suddenness, the severity, and the general sense that we have entered a fundamentally new era, this moment has origins in our recent past. We have argued that our present double-headed era, and the Palestine solidarity that is increasingly apparent in the Western "street," are continuous with trends that have been growing over the past two decades. In this sense, the current cultural/political moment in the West concerning Palestine can be seen as an abrupt amplification of pre-existing tendencies that had previously been slowly but steadily growing.

In this overall picture, the internet is an important point of connection between the old and the new. We have argued that a cultural shift began in the late 1990s to mid-2000s, characterized by greater Western openness to Palestinian perspectives, and that this cultural shift was likely facilitated by the advent of the internet and the resulting availability of a wider range of

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[22] See e.g. Zachary Lockman, 2004, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*; Pamela Pennock, 2017, *The Rise of the Arab American Left*; and Salim Yaqub, 2016, *Imperfect Strangers*.

[23] Rabbani, M. (2024). "Gaza Apocalypse," Security in Context Policy Paper 24-03. January 2024, *Security in Context*.

[24] Nwanevu, O. The campus Gaza controversies are another right-wing distraction. *The New Republic*. December 28, 2023.

[25] Cobban, H. Shockwaves in the global order. *Boston Review*. February 15, 2024.

information. With respect to the present moment, social media may now play the same role that the advent of the internet did previously: bringing an even wider range of perspectives, now including images, videos, and personal narratives, into Western awareness to an unprecedented extent, providing a source of information and motivation for the Western "street."

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