



Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023–2024

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ABSTRACT

From 7 October 2023 to 7 June 2024, the Crowd Counting Consortium recorded nearly 12,400 pro-Palestine protests and over 2,000 pro-Israel protests in the United States. Since January 2017, when CCC first started counting protest events and their crowd sizes, the current pro-Palestine protest wave involves the largest, most sustained US protests sparked by a foreign event. We hypothesize three possible reasons for the size of the pro-Palestine mobilization: casualties and suffering motivate protestors and the Palestinian casualties have been much higher; protestors react to the US government's position, which in this case strongly favors Israel; and protestors are driven by emotional outrage at Israeli policy and the resultant Palestinian suffering. By looking at property damage and police injuries, we also conclude that this pro-Palestine movement has not been violent. That is true of both the national protest wave in general and of the student encampments in spring 2024 in particular. The rhetorical core of this pro-Palestine movement has not been a call for violence against Jews, but rather a call for freedom for Palestinians and an end to violence being inflicted upon them. To substantiate this point, we considered two sources of evidence: 1) the banners, signs, and chants seen or heard at pro-Palestine events; 2) the demands issued by organizers of over 100 student encampments. One caveat: Although we use the terms pro-Israel and pro-Palestine as shorthand, we acknowledge that these binary terms are unsatisfying and misleading.


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The latest escalation of the Israel-Palestinian conflict since 7 October 2023 has sparked both pro-Israel and, especially, pro-Palestine protests in the United States. In this profile, we characterize those movements using data from the Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC), an ongoing project that has tracked protests on all issues in the United States since 2017. We hypothesize why the pro-Palestine movement has been larger, quantify how the pro-Palestine movement has developed at schools, colleges, and universities, and show that, by CCC measures, the movement has been largely non-violent. We then look at the core demands of the pro-Palestine movement by studying the rhetoric of protest

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participants and by looking at over 100 lists of demands from university encampments.

Although we use the terms pro-Israel and pro-Palestine as shorthand, we acknowledge that these binary terms are unsatisfying and misleading. The terms make it seem like the conflict has only two sides, obscuring the multiple parties with varied views. At a minimum, Hamas and the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority or the Israeli government and the Knesset's center-left opposition do not have the same goals for their respective societies. Were Fatah in control of Gaza or the Israeli center-left running the State of Israel, they might well pursue a different policy pathway from Hamas and the Likud-led Israeli government, respectively. And that is before we even consider civil society actors, and the broad range of diverse views, backgrounds, and demands of those participating in these movements, within Israel and Palestine and abroad.

In addition, analysts disagree about what policies best advance Palestinian or Israeli national interests (Dalalsha, 2024; Novik, 2024). If protestors call their event pro-Israel, but many analysts think those same policies the protestors support harm Israel's national security, the term 'pro-Israel' doesn't capture that contrast between self-designation and likely outcomes. Or, if protestors call their event pro-Palestine but analysts think their policy demands reduce the possibility of Palestinians achieving freedom and dignity, the term 'pro-Palestine' doesn't capture that complexity (Howidy, 2024). Such terms also struggle to accurately characterize some anti-war, joint Israeli-Palestinian, or 'middle of the road' protests.

That said, there are even less satisfying characterizations of these movements as either anti-Israel or anti-Palestinian. It is empirically incorrect to characterize the entire pro-Palestinian movement as anti-Israel, as some pundits and interest groups have begun to do. Referring to the movement as such flattens a wide range of views and policy preferences among those calling for an end to violence against Palestinians in Gaza. Similarly, it is empirically inaccurate to call the entire pro-Israel movement anti-Palestinian, as much liberal pro-Israel activism has at its core a claim that Israel has the right to exist, not necessarily to the exclusion of Palestinians' rights to their own state, and that Jewish Israelis have a right to security and safety, not necessarily to the exclusion of Palestinians' rights to the same.

Hence, we do not see an obvious alternative to the terms pro-Israel and pro-Palestine as a way to capture the dominant valence of the mobilization's claims, and so we utilize them in our analysis, with the various caveats mentioned above.

The Crowd Counting Consortium (CCC), a collaboration between the University of Connecticut and the Nonviolent Action Lab at Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, is a public-interest and scholarly project that has been making structured data on U.S. protest activity (including political rallies and marches) using traditional media and social media sources. We record a range of information about each event including date, location, crowd size, claim(s), arrests, police presence, and violence. We also share links to the sources we used. The data are made freely

available through our GitHub repository, and the data-making process, including the sources we use, is described in detail in our coding guidelines.

The mobilization in the United States against the ongoing Israeli war in Gaza has been massive, with nearly 12,400 events and at least 1.5 million participants in the eight months from 7 October 2023 to 7 June 2024¹ (See [Figure 1](#)). Foreign policy events rarely spark such broad and lasting protest waves in the United States, nor do they tend to dominate public opinion polling over extended periods of time (Powlick & Katz, 1998). Thinking back to the start of this century – almost two decades before the CCC began – the two moments that stand out are the protests against the Iraq war in 2002–03 and the immigration protests on 1 May 2006, immigration being one of those issues that bridges domestic and international dimensions (Bada et al., 2006). Since January 2017, when CCC first started counting protest events and their crowd sizes, the current protest wave involves the largest, most sustained US protests sparked by a foreign event. The other comparable moments of massive protests in the last seven plus years were domestically driven, including the Women’s March (2017), the March for Our Lives and the National Student Walkout.²

By contrast, U.S. protest activity in support of Israel since 7 October has been much smaller in scale, although still sizable for a foreign policy matter as well. CCC has recorded 2,031 pro-Israel events in the U.S. with about 425,000 participants between 7 October 2023 and 7 June 2024³ (See [Figure 2](#)). Roughly one-quarter of the pro-Israel events recorded by CCC came in the first month after

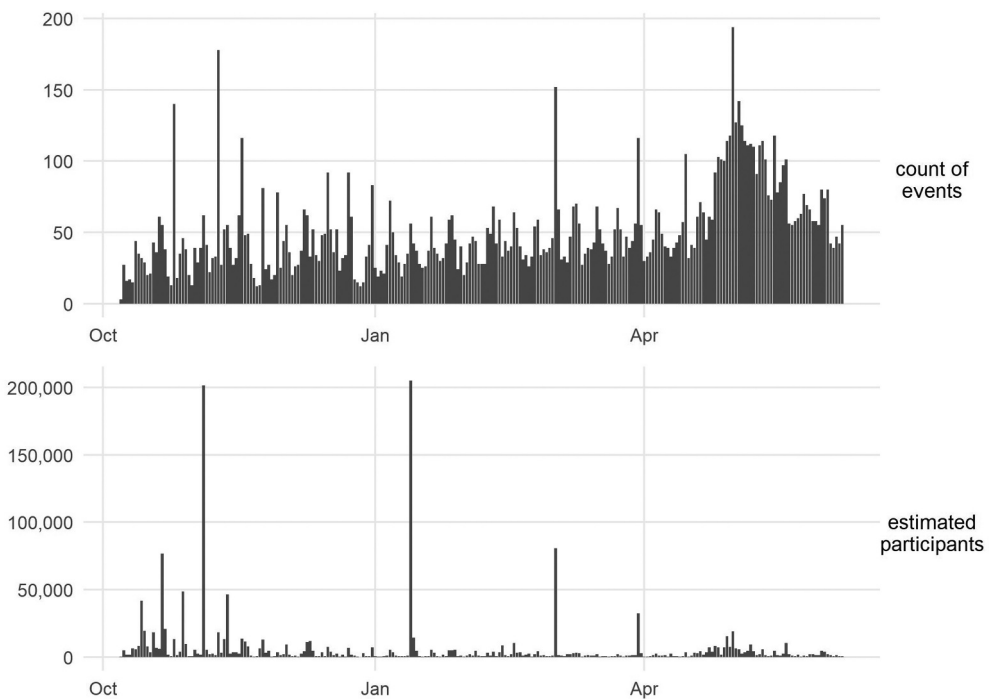


Figure 1. Daily tallies of U.S. pro-Palestine protests, 7 October 2023–7 June 2024.

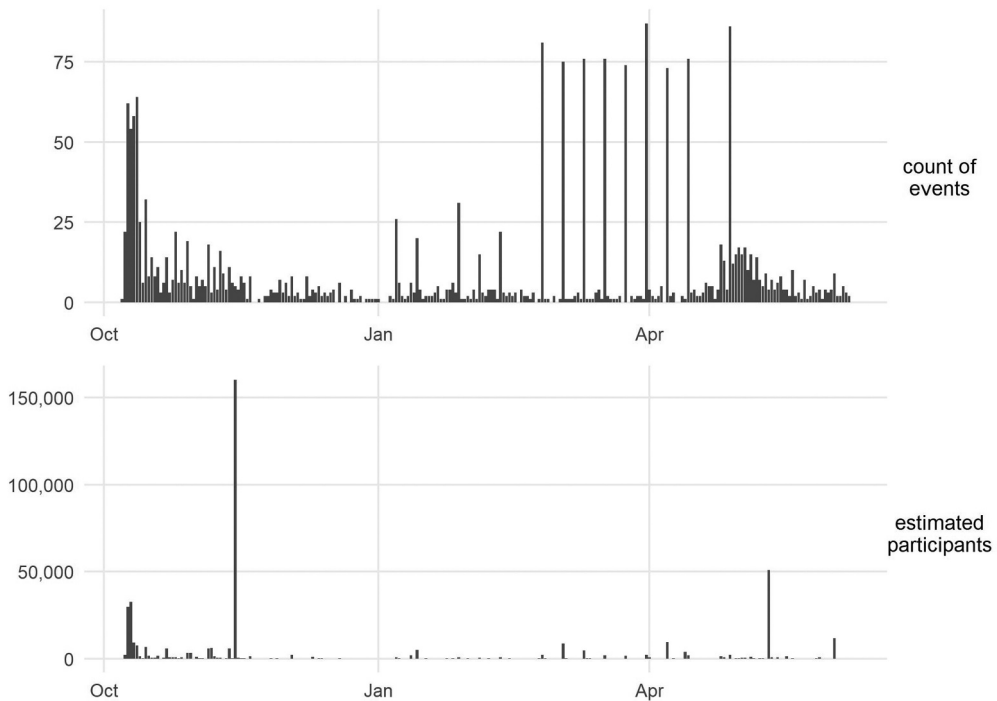


Figure 2. Daily tallies of U.S. pro-Israel protests, 7 October 2023–7 June 2024.

the 7 October attack, many of them vigils memorializing the attack’s victims and demanding the release of hostages. Another 38% of all the pro-Israel actions recorded by CCC since 7 October, or nearly 770 events, have been weekly gatherings of Run for Their Lives chapters on Sundays in 2024, with crowd sizes typically ranging from a handful to several score. Finally, 631 of those 2,031 pro-Israel events (31%) have been direct counter-protests against pro-Palestine actions.⁴

What explains the difference in scale between pro-Palestine and pro-Israel protests in the United States? One explanation has to do with the chronology of the violence and suffering. Let us assume that witnessing recent suffering, death, and destruction has motivated many participants in all of the events referenced so far. Israelis intensely suffered on 7 October 2023. That produced an immediate wave of global sympathy and events embodying that sympathy. With the Israeli military counterinsurgency campaign, however, nearly every day since has been focused on the loss of life and damage Israel has inflicted on Palestinians in Gaza and on the infrastructure therein. Every day, people around the world can see pictures and videos and read and hear testimonials that show or describe Israeli military action or its impact in minute detail.

A second explanation is that the structure of the situation in the United States may explain the difference in scale. Protest is an extra-institutional political channel that those whose grievances are insufficiently addressed by the political establishment can use to demand action. As Chenoweth (2021, p. 3) notes, ‘civil resistance involves *noninstitutional actions*.’ The United States government is a strong ally and top arms supplier of the

Government of Israel. The US government does not act as a primary advocate for Palestinian dignity and self-determination. It sees Hamas as an enemy and has no direct leverage over Hamas. For the most part, US-based advocates for Israel have little to complain about in terms of US policy. President Joseph Biden and most members of Congress are more sympathetic to Israel.⁵ They might say the political system is working to represent their policy preferences. In contrast, US-based advocates for Palestine have much to complain about in terms of US policy, including the US supplying much of the weaponry that has killed Palestinians in Gaza. The US political establishment has not been focused on Palestinian needs, so protest is a path to press for change in US policy (e.g. stop the US flow of weapons to Israel; press the US government to press the Government of Israel to agree to a ceasefire).⁶

In short, we posit that pro-Israel activists have turned to protest less frequently because US policy generally favors their viewpoint. Pro-Palestine activists have turned to protest more frequently because US policy generally does not support their viewpoint, and perhaps because of the torment caused by the ongoing violence inflicted on Palestinians in Gaza. Even Israel's staunch ally, the United States, has declared that Israeli society is now secure from a recurrence of 7 October, making continued attacks on Gaza appear to be both unnecessary and intentionally cruel (Barnes et al., 2024).

A third possible explanation for the difference in protest scale is focused upon emotional reactions rather than strategic or policy calculations.⁷ Witnessing Israel's destruction of Gaza generates collective outrage – a mobilizing emotion. Some protestors probably don't expect to change policy and are more interested in expressing their feelings and communing with other people who feel the same way. The same could be said for the initial pro-Israel vigils, where the emotion of grief might have played an important role for those who attended.

Until April 2024, the pro-Palestine movement included many students, but it was not centered on campuses. That changed in April and May 2024, however, when Palestine solidarity encampments mushroomed at colleges and universities across the country, and news media and elected officials focused attention on them. By early June, CCC had observed encampments at 138 different U.S. schools, most of them launched following the New York Police Department's clearing of the initial pro-Palestine encampment at Columbia University on 18 April. From 7 October 2023 through 17 April 2024, only 19% of U.S. pro-Palestine protest protests (1,560 of 8,217) seen by CCC happened at colleges, universities, and other schools. From 18 April through 7 June 2024, however, that figure grew to 55% (2,315 of 4,242).

The same is true of arrests made at these events. Of the 9,295 arrests CCC logged at pro-Palestinian protests nationally from 7 October 2023 to 7 June 2024, nearly 60% of them (5,524) occurred at off-campus actions. In other words, more people have been arrested while participating in this movement away from schools than at them.

One element of the movement driving this pattern is the spread and staying power of routinized actions – demonstrations or vigils that recur monthly, weekly, or even daily.⁸ At this point, our project is tracking scores of those nationwide, and they add up to hundreds of events each week. These repetitive actions typically draw little media

attention, but they are an important indication of a movement's salience and staying power. Some of these regular events take place outside the offices of elected officials. In doing so, they are pressing officials – especially members of the US Congress – to change US policy. The last time we saw routinized demonstrations emerge and persist at this scale was in 2020, after the murder of George Floyd. These actions typically involve small numbers of people, but, as organizers and participants will tell you, they can have outsized impacts on local and regional politics that persist for years (Ulfelder, 2024).

The first two figures also suggest, especially with the pro-Palestine movement, that the number of events has grown even as the number of participants has declined. This numerical pattern could be due to normal attrition in movement participation over time. Some people get excited when the issue is new but choose not to keep coming back. Another possibility is media fatigue. Media attention chases new things, so we see less press coverage of events comprising this movement as it drags on, and less coverage means fewer reports on crowd size. Lastly, the number of routinized events has grown but the media rarely cover routinized events and organizers often do not post reports, pictures, or videos from each iteration, either. So, we wind up with a growing share of events in the data that we know are occurring, but about which do not have any ex post information on crowd size or claims.

By looking at property damage and police injuries, we also conclude that this pro-Palestine movement has not been violent. That is true of both the national protest wave in general and of the student encampments in spring 2024 in particular.

The CCC tracks several features of protest events that might be construed as indicators of protester violence, including property damage caused by protesters and injuries to police present at the event. In the nearly 12,400 pro-Palestine events, we recorded from 7 October to 7 June, we have only seen reports of property damage at 167 of them and police injuries at 18. Most of the instances of property damage involved graffiti or similar defacement of property, and virtually all the police injuries occurred while the police officers were making arrests. If we narrow our view to the 3,875 protests at colleges and universities and other schools, the incidence of property damage is 46 and of police injuries is 9, with similar caveats about the what and the how.

Some scholars might read the high arrest count as an indicator of violence (Mooijman et al., 2018). In fact, as [Figure 3](#) below shows, the vast majority of arrests have occurred during acts of civil disobedience or direct action that may have disrupted traffic but did not target any people or property for harm. Early on, many protestors were arrested in Washington, DC, e.g., at the US Capitol, as they targeted the US government and its pro-Israeli government policies like sending weapons and blocking UNSC resolutions. Most of the recent arrests have happened on campuses, but these have generally come in response to concerns about the camp's purported disruptions to academic life, not any physical injuries they have caused to other people. The wide variation across campuses in what was considered disruptive and how administrations responded merits further study.⁹

In fact, we've seen far more violence directed at people protesting for Palestinian liberation or against genocide than we've seen from them. The pre-dawn mass assault on

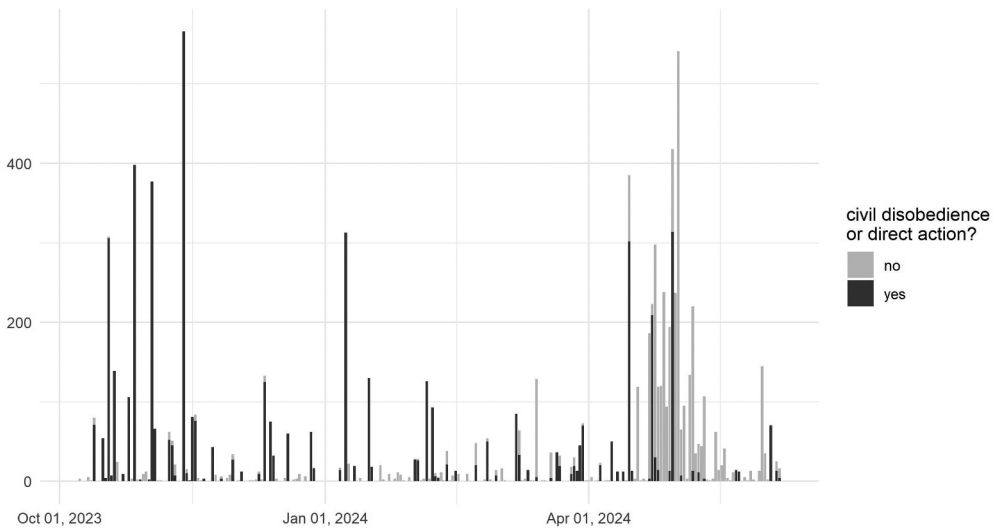


Figure 3. Daily arrest totals at U.S. pro-Palestine protests by protest type, 7 October 2023–7 June 2024.

the student encampment at UCLA is the most glaring example, but hardly the only one (Hamilton, 2024). Just in one week in early May, we saw people drive cars through crowds of pro-Palestinian or anti-genocide protesters four times, at least one of them causing injury (Comrade Camera, 2024; Driver clashes 2024; Legzisierung, 2024; Venkat, 2024); a counter-protester wearing brass knuckles push and slap medical students gathering to walk to a rally (Healthcare Workers 2024); a counter-protester brandish a knife at students (Students for Justice 2024); a trio of flag-wearing counter-protesters arrive at an encampment before dawn to heckle and verbally threaten students there (Penn Freedom 2024). Moreover, this list does not include the scores of uncounted injuries suffered by protesters during police sweeps of campus encampments in places like St. Louis, Los Angeles, and Washington DC (65-Year-Old Man 2024; Live coverage, 2024; Sheets et al., 2024).

Staying with the question of violence, the rhetorical core of this movement has not been a call for violence against Jews, but rather a call for freedom for Palestinians and an end to violence being inflicted upon them. To substantiate this point, we considered two sources of evidence: 1) the banners, signs, and chants seen or heard at pro-Palestine events; and 2) the demands issued by organizers of student encampments.

Since 2022, the CCC has been capturing verbatim as many slogans from protesters signs and banners and chants and shouts from protest participants as we can as a way to let protesters describe for themselves what the events in our dataset were about. For any given event, we only record any unique phrase (e.g., ‘free Palestine’) once, so it is more of a representative sample of protest claims or ideas than a full capture of protest rhetoric. And, of course, we can’t record chants and phrases we don’t see or hear in the coverage our process tracks – including statements or phrases that individual participants might use outside of a protest event.

The second type of evidence we considered are the lists of student demands issued in April and May 2024 to their university administrations. We collected 102 such lists, and one author categorized the demands. Most of the list of demands were posted on Instagram, but we also collected a few from X (twitter), within news articles, or posted on other websites. In a handful of cases, the posting was a photo of a placard at the encampment. While most of the demands were tied to encampments, some of the lists pre-dated the establishment of the encampment. In other words, some students have been making demands of their schools for months. A few of the lists were tied to an encampment at another school. The largest example of that was in the DC/Maryland/Virginia area where American University, Gallaudet University, George Mason University, George Washington University (GWU), Georgetown University, Howard University, and the University of Maryland (College Park and Baltimore County) each had their own lists of demands, but all supported the encampment at GWU rather than each setting up tents on their own campus.

What were the demands? On 93% of the lists, students called upon their university to divest, commonly from US military manufacturers who supply weapons and military technology to Israel and/or from Israeli companies. On 14 lists, the demand was framed more broadly than only the Israel-Palestine case, such as at the University of Texas at Dallas: ‘divest from corporations complicit and directly facilitating war, occupation, policing, militarism, and death in Palestine and around the world.’ The latter framing suggests that for some students, the concern about Israel-Palestine is part of a larger concern about the central US corporate role in global militarism.

Consistent with divestment, a second demand was for universities to be transparent about their investments, budgets, or donations (on 71% of lists). In what are university endowments invested? For some organizations, transparency logically precedes divestment. Students need to know what investments their university holds in order to make actionable claims about which ones they think should be discarded. At the University of Notre Dame, students asked for divestment or ‘a written statement clarifying the University does not invest in the specified companies mentioned above.’

Two other demands were close behind, each appearing on about two-thirds of the lists. First, students called for an ‘academic boycott of Israel,’ meaning ending exchanges, study abroad, research ties, and the like with Israeli universities (or, in the words of Syracuse University students, ‘[a]ny Israeli universities with ties to the genocidal apparatus, [or] who collaborate with the Israeli government to suppress critiques of Israeli settler colonialism’). Many of the lists called out relationships and agreements that were specific to their own university, such as the call at the University of California at Riverside to end academic collaborations including ‘the Education Abroad University of Haifa Israel Program, and [the] School of Business Israeli Residency Program.’ In making this demand, some lists explicitly invoked the 20-year-old Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).

The other demand on two-thirds of the lists was a call for universities to issue statements about the current crisis. This might include calling for a ceasefire, naming Israeli military action in Gaza as genocide, mourning the Palestinian loss of life, or demanding an end to the Israeli military occupation. We encourage further research to ascertain the extent to which student demands for statements were, in part, a response to earlier statements by their university president or administrators that had expressed

sympathy for the Israeli loss of life on 7 October and/or had avoided words like Palestine or Palestinian.

Another set of demands focused on the ability of pro-Palestinian student demonstrators to speak out freely and without being punished for their opinions. They called for better protection of free speech rights on campus (44%), amnesty for students or others who had been arrested or faced university disciplinary processes (35%), and/or protection for Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students from discrimination on campus (25%). In the last category, the exact definition of who needed protection from discrimination on campus varied a bit by college.

Some schools (18% of the lists) sought resources to invest in Palestinian matters on campus such as new centers, courses, or faculty. A few schools asked for scholarships to enroll Palestinian students from Gaza. At Indiana University at Indianapolis, students asked for both a Muslim Cultural Center and a Middle East Cultural Center. Harvard University students phrased their ask more broadly, asking that divested funds be reinvested in 'Palestinian academic initiatives, communities, and culture.' Future research might assess whether such demands were more common at schools that already had a center for Israel studies or at least an Israel studies curriculum in place.

Other demands that appeared on at least three of the lists: abolish a certain police department or bar them from campus; prevent military companies from recruiting on campus; cut ties with the US armed forces or the US Department of Defense; invest the divested resources in other issues; cease the local expansion of the university campus; create a decision-making structure that regularly involves students in investment decisions; and remove a university president (demand they resign) or a scheduled commencement speaker.

What was omitted? Students mostly were not calling for changes in US government policy though pressuring and criticizing Washington would have been consistent with other demands. One exception was Vassar College, where protesters wanted a university-issued statement to call for ending US government aid to Israel. But most lists of demands did not target the US government. Interviews with students might shed some light on why the US government was largely absent from their lists. Perhaps it was seen as beyond their control. Perhaps they first wanted to take care of 'local' business – their own university's policies – before they focused on Washington DC and its primary industry. Given that the university was right there in front of them, maybe it seemed like a more tangible target. They were suggesting actionable agendas closest to home. Many of the students equated their struggle with and took inspiration from that of the anti-Apartheid movement against the South African government in the 1980s.

They also were not trying to outline in detail where they stood on the issues that divide Palestinians and Israelis. Only two of the lists made mention of the Palestinian position on the core issues. We considered that the *thawabit* – a summary of core Palestinian stances on issues like Jerusalem, refugees, statehood, and the Palestinian right to resistance – might be present on a number of lists, but it was not.

In this short article, we did not cover many issues that will be of great interest to scholars of social movements. For example, the pro-Palestine movement has drawn on organizations we might expect to mobilize around Palestine, such as American Muslims for Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, Palestinian Youth Movement, and Students for Justice in Palestine. At the same time, it has also reflected intersectional solidarity, with

many actions involving national organizations such as Alliance Against Racist & Political Repression, Black Alliance for Peace, Mennonite Action, Party for Socialism and Liberation, Pax Christi, and Students for a Democratic Society, and many others led by local or regional organizations such as Central Florida Queers for Palestine, SoCal Uprising, and Montana for Palestine. Or, we do think a comprehensive assessment of encampment outcomes will be of great value. Thus far, we have seen a range of reactions including police suppression and removal (e.g., Columbia University, UCLA, the University of Connecticut), negotiated outcomes (e.g., Brown University, Evergreen State College, Rutgers University New Brunswick), and approaches that used a combination of administrative carrots and sticks (e.g., Harvard University). As of this writing in early June 2024, a handful of encampments are ongoing.

We recognize that the subject of this article is evolving. The pro-Palestine mobilization in particular shows no signs of slowing down as of this writing, and one could withhold evaluations until the movement cools again. Given the press attention and global interest in Israel-Palestine and US views and policy, however, we felt a preliminary assessment would put useful information about protests into the scholarly and public discussion.

Notes

1. When events span multiple days, as many of the recent student encampments have, we create a separate entry for each day, so we can properly record variation over time in the size and behavior of those actions, and so we properly represent the time and energy associated with them. Technically, then, our overall count is of protest-days rather than separate events, but in the vast majority of cases the two are the same. Regarding total protest participants, our estimate is an extremely conservative one. We only have information on crowd size for 4,856 (39%) of the nearly 12,400 pro-Palestine events from October 7 to June 7. When we have no information, we treat the value as 0 in this summation. When we do have information, we use the midpoint between the lowest and highest reported estimates. When crowd sizes are reported with words (e.g., ‘dozens’, ‘hundreds’), we use the lowest implied numerical value (e.g., 24, 200).
2. Though the racial justice protests did have a major global component, the protests inside the United States were not framed around that global dimension (Pressman & Devin, 2023).
3. See Note 1 on how we (conservatively) estimate crowd sizes. In the case of the pro-Israel events, we have information on crowd size for 1,603 (79%) of them.
4. Only 81 of the pro-Palestine events, or less than 1%, were direct counter-protests to pro-Israel actions.
5. One can see this dynamic in terms of the number of pro-Israel and pro-Palestine protests that had an elected official participate. There were 125 pro-Israel events (6.2%) with an elected official compared with 87 (0.7%) pro-Palestine ones.
6. On 31 May 2024, US President Biden publicly advocated for an Israeli ceasefire plan that would possibly end the war (Singh, 2024).
7. On emotions, see Gould (2009) and Jasper (2018).
8. On daily protests, see FreePalestineAZ (2024).
9. For example, see Roth (2024).
10. For this word cloud, we only included words that appeared at least 10 times in the 36,579 verbatim claims we have captured from pro-Palestine events between 7 October 2023, and 7 June 2024. Those verbatim claims included 6,224 unique terms (excluding stop words and terms only 1–2 characters in length).

11. On protestors' use of the term, see Munayyer (2021). For an example of an Israeli official's use, see Israeli Minister Cohen (2024). For the debate over the term in Germany, see Kuras (2024).

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