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Western crackdown on free speech: *An overview*

Social Desk

Western countries have long claimed that the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech are basic tenets of their societies. They have also developed a habit of making a big deal out of it when their brand of free speech offends other people around the world, accusing them of being intolerant or enemies of basic human rights.

Yet, at every turn, Western governments have acted in marked contrast to their trumpeted values when it comes to criticisms of Israel and defending the Palestinian cause. The recent Israeli military operation in retaliation of Hamas' Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, once again, has brought to the fore the hypocritical nature of free speech as defined and defended by the West. Ironically, this time around, it's the Westerners themselves who are experiencing the dangers of double standards of freedom of speech. From threatening American college students to the expulsion of football players in Europe, there is a massive crackdown in the West on pro-Palestinian expression.

US

For decades now, Palestinians have been victims of more than constant aerial bombardments and suppression of their basic rights by Israel. They have also fallen victim to the American news media, in which misrepresentations of their history, their struggle, and their narrative have been the norm. Showcasing a blatant bias toward Israel in their coverage of the conflict, the American media, more often than not, refuse to use the term occupation, which is a reality experienced by the Palestinians on a daily basis. Then again, they seem resolute to

create some sort of parity between the oppressor and the oppressed, as if a country named Israel is fighting a country named Palestine.

Even amid such bias and distortion, the Western apparatus seemed unable to tolerate just one voice in the American media (that of Jon Stewart, a Jew himself), who tried to bring some long-lost balance to discussion on the Palestinian question. All he did was attempts to humanize Palestinians and level the debate.

Since October 7, Israel has been relentlessly bombarding Gaza, killing women and children in an act that could be precisely described as genocide. Meanwhile, US officials have not only refused to take action to stop Israel's carpet bombing of the enclave - which is funded in the billions by American taxpayers -, but also they have intensified efforts to suppress free speech, expand surveillance, and criminalize the activism of Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, and their allies across the US.

This crackdown against pro-Palestine voices has created an environment of fear, designed to suppress the growing pro-Palestine movement. The rise in familiar Islamophobic, anti-Arab rhetoric has not only manufactured consent for the relentless killing of Palestinians in Palestine, but it has also led to the tragic murder of Palestinians in the United States.

On October 14, Wadea Al-Fayoume, a six-year-old Palestinian-American boy was murdered in a hate crime. He was stabbed 26 times by his landlord, a man whom he previously viewed as a trusted adult figure. In a week, the man who had once built the young child a tree house had become his killer, radicalized by the rhetoric that is once again making its

way from news screens into public life.

And yet, the war on free speech does not seem to be limited to the American media, as Republican politicians have targeted Israel's critics at universities, going as far as threatening to withhold federal funds if campus administrators do not contain Palestinian rights activism. A US senator even introduced legislation to cancel federal education funding for colleges and universities that "peddle anti-Semitism". The politician cited a Palestinian literature festival at the University of Pennsylvania as an example.

The issue also dominated an Iowa campaign event a couple of weeks ago, where several GOP presidential candidates competed to see who could promise the harshest possible crackdown on pro-Palestine protesters at US colleges and universities. During the campaign, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis bemoaned demonstrations in support of Palestine "in his country," reminding his audience that "Some of them are foreigners." He went on to promise that were he elected president, he would cancel the visas of pro-Palestine students.

Moreover, former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley raised the possibility of cutting or conditioning state funding to higher education. Calling pro-Palestine demonstrations expressions of "hate," she said, "When you do that, you are threatening someone's life. That's not freedom of speech." It never is with them, when it comes to supporting innocent Palestinians.

UK

As Israel is keeping the Gaza Strip under ceaseless fire, killing innocent civilians in thousands, the suppression of pro-Palestine

voices in UK is fairly similar to that of the United States. Suella Braverman, the British home secretary, described pro-Palestine protesters as "hate marchers" and accused the country's police of double standards, as London witnessed massive demonstrations over the past month. Tens of thousands of people took to London streets to denounce Israel's relentless bombing campaign in Gaza and demanded the United Kingdom government call for a ceasefire.

"I do not believe that these marches are merely a cry for help for Gaza," Braverman wrote in an article published by the Times newspaper.

"They are an assertion of primacy by certain groups - particularly Islamists - of the kind we are more used to seeing in Northern Ireland." The Islamophobic nature of Braverman's letter clearly

indicates the mindset behind calls for crackdown on pro-Palestine demonstrations in the UK, asking them to "use the full force of law" against displays of support for Gazans.

Although British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak backed down from his earlier assessments, he showed his true disposition when he asked London's Metropolitan Police commissioner Mark Rowley to consider the protests planned for Armistice Day as "a clear and present risk."

He reminded Sir Mark that the police can apply to the government to prevent the marches from taking place for reasons like not having enough staff to ensure safety.

France

As the intensity of the worldwide demonstrations against the Israeli military response in Gaza grew, France banned rallies and vigils in support of the Palestinians. French authorities even went so far as to fine people for wearing the keffiyeh, a traditional Palestinian scarf.

All this came while Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant used genocidal language and ordered mass war crimes in the Gaza Strip and marches in solidarity with Israel were permitted to proceed in Paris.

Many Palestinians residing in Europe say their governments' lockstep support for Israel opens up their communities to attacks.

A Palestinian-French mother said, "I'm scared for my children, so I always take them to school and bring them back, even though they are teenagers." Her son was beaten and accused of being a "terrorism apologist" at school for speaking about the Palestinian death toll and the Israeli blockade of Gaza.

Also, the French Football club Nice suspended Youcef Atal, an Algerian Muslim footballer for reposting an allegedly anti-Jewish message on social media related to the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

The move came after French prosecutors launched a preliminary investigation into Atal on suspicion of "glorifying terrorism", following complaints filed by local politicians.

Germany

The response in Germany hardly differed from France, as the country's Palestinian community

came under attack with their rallies and flags being banned and they faced arrest and police profiling.

Described as "a complete censorship of Palestinian voices," the German reaction to pro-Palestinian sentiment has been harsh, while authorities showed their solidarity with Israel early on as Berlin's Brandenburg Gate was lit up in the blue and white colors of the Israeli flag.

The German suppression of free speech in support of Palestine was so jarring that one of its football clubs, Mainz 05, terminated the contract of Anwar El Ghazi over social media posts related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, setting a continent-wide trend.

Prior to El Ghazi's termination, German prosecutors accused him of "disturbing public peace by condoning criminal acts in conjunction with incitement to hatred" through his social media posts.

However, after his termination El Ghazi stated in a social media post that it's imperative to "Stand for what is right, even if it means standing alone."

He pointed out that the loss of his livelihood is "nothing when compared to the hell being unleashed on the innocent and vulnerable in Gaza."



Anwar El Ghazi

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
 Cartoonist

