

## We Are Not Going Away

Introduction to a special issue of *Democratic Communiqué*: Freedom of Expression, Campus Politics, Academic Freedom, and the War on Gaza

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The impetus for this special issue of *Democratic Communiqué* began with an angry voice in an auditorium at the University of Pennsylvania. At the opening plenary session of the 2023 Union for Democratic Communications conference on October 13, two scholars addressed the horrific events in Israel and Gaza that had unfolded less than a week before.

Despite the fact that both speakers acknowledged the horrors of October 7 in their remarks, an attendee rose during the subsequent discussion and angrily denounced Paula Chakravartty and Deepa Kumar for purportedly being insensitive to the deaths of Israeli civilians.

I was in the audience that day and, at first, I was taken aback by the hostile pushback because of the context it occurred in. UDC is an organization that, for its entire existence, has been devoted to leftist-oriented critical analysis of media, communication and politics. If this kind of lashing out against criticism of Israel and support for Palestinians could take place here, then what did that portend for mainstream public discourse?

Of course, this is not really a surprise. As Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick documented in *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics*, this has long been a tendency in both liberal and left circles. As they say: “the American political left has normalized a world in which it is acceptable, through words and policies, to embrace the ethical and political contradiction of being ‘progressive except for Palestine’” (2022, p. 10).

Sitting in the auditorium that fall day, knowing this history, I could feel the burden of identity on my shoulders, and the compulsion to say something in response to the other attendee. I stood to point out that his criticism was inaccurate because both speakers *had indeed* acknowledged the brutality of the October 7 attacks during their remarks. In fact, they first mentioned the victims, referred to Hamas’s actions as a war crime, and only then began to explore the larger context and conditions in Gaza prior to that day, quoting from an Israeli news source, *Haaretz*. Despite all this, I felt compelled to start my response with

the cliché of “as an American Jew, I...” I felt I had to begin with those words in order to squelch the inevitable accusations of antisemitism that are regularly directed at critics of Israel. Of course, this identity marker really provides no insurance, since it is continuously met with the epithet of “self-loathing Jew.”

As Sara Roy pointed out in a 2026 interview:

The weaponization of antisemitism in this way is particularly painful and offensive to me as a child of Holocaust survivors. What is the crime for which we are being silenced? Speaking out against the genocide of the Palestinian people (a genocide acknowledged by the International Association of Genocide Scholars, the United Nations Human Rights Council, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, B'tselem, and Physicians for Human Rights–Israel, among others)? Against carnage? Against racism?

The 2023 UDC conference proceeded without further incident, to the best of my knowledge. But in the coming weeks and months, I continued to dwell on that moment as I read daily accounts of the censoring of critics of Israel and the punishment, including firings, physical assaults, arrests, and deportations, of those who dared to advocate for Palestine in the public spheres of academia, journalism, social media, the arts, and more. This is what led me to approach the UDC steering committee (I should disclose that I sit on that committee), with the idea for this special issue.

In this introduction I want to briefly point out that multiple things can be true at the same time. First, it is absolutely true that suppression of the voices of Palestinians and their allies is nothing new in academia, journalism, or the wider sphere of public discourse. However, this censorship has grown even more explicit, severe, and wide-ranging after the violence of October 7, 2023, and Israel’s subsequent genocidal devastation of Gaza. But what is also true is that it is now becoming more difficult to continue to silence critics of Israel as the extent of that nation’s savage aggression becomes ever more obvious to the world community.

It is also true that the suppression of language and imagery, critical commentary and discourse, doesn’t even approach the horrors, misery, destruction, and death constantly inflicted on the Palestinian people by Israel and its global allies, especially the United States, both before and after 2023. History did not start or end on October 7. There is a reason Rashid Khalidi (2020) called his comprehensive account, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*. Obviously, symbolic violence through discursive misrepresentation and silencing, and brutal physical violence are not one and the same. But they are related, as scholars of communication, media, and culture have long pointed out. Perhaps the definitive and most relevant statement on this articulation was offered by Edward Said in his foundational book, *Orientalism*:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage-and even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, *militarily*, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (1978, p.3, emphasis added).

Thus, the material violence of empires, both then and now, is always accompanied by an ideological project, a project of discursive control and propaganda. More recently, writing about the backlash against anti-Zionism, Darryl Li (2024) notes:

The endless scroll of open letters, doxxing campaigns, canceled events, and firings can feel trivial compared with the genocidal carnage Israel has unleashed on Palestinians in Gaza, and indeed these culture war skirmishes partly function as a distraction. But the struggle on the ground in Palestine and the struggle *over* Palestine in the imperial core are intertwined.

To put it plainly: Communication matters. As Sarah Aziza (2024) argues, while it may seem futile amid devastating violence, ultimately bearing witness matters: “Rather than a feeling, witness is a position. It insists on embodiment, on sacrifice, mourning and resisting what is seen. The world after genocide must not, cannot, be the same. The witness is the one who holds the line of reality, identifying and refusing the lie of normalcy. Broken by what we see, we become rupture incarnate.”

In an attempt to respond to the latest resurgence of backlash against critics of Israel and advocates for the Palestinian people, we have brought together three research articles, two interviews, and two reviews, all focused on the censorship, shaming, and silencing of those who dare to dissent against hegemonic Western support of Israel, even as innocent Palestinians continue to be killed in Gaza, the West Bank, and beyond.

This special issue is meant to stand as a response to those who would shout us down. As generations of social movement activists have insisted over, and over, and over: We will not be silenced.

I would like to thank all who contributed to and supported this special issue of *Democratic Communiqué*: The UDC Steering Committee, the anonymous manuscript reviewers, the researchers and authors, the interviewees, and my personal friends and colleagues who provide energy and encouragement in the endless battle for recognition and justice. Special thanks to Aaron Heresco who was instrumental in getting this special issue over the finish line. Much gratitude.

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