

# Speaking Against Silence: Examining Social Work's Response to Genocide

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**ABSTRACT** Since October 7, 2023, the world has witnessed Israel's unrelenting mass assault against the people of Gaza, killing more than 37,000 Palestinians. The response to this genocide in most sectors of professional society has largely been one of denial and suppression of solidarity with Palestine, unveiling extremes of the longstanding Palestine exception in progressive politics. This article contextualizes the social work profession's response to Israel's ongoing genocide of Palestinian people after October 7, 2023, including responses from schools of social work, social work agencies and organizations, and academic journals. This examination finds that social work institutions continue to engage in three primary silencing tactics: passive silence, active repression, and the drawing of false equivalences. Despite the profession's pervasive silencing, many of us in social work continue to engage in efforts toward a free Palestine, aligned with the profession's stated values. This article highlights and juxtaposes the grassroots efforts of social workers and social work students for a free Palestine with the repression from our professional institutions. We demonstrate a range of existing and emerging possibilities for sustained solidarity among social workers seeking to end rather than manage state violence, with Palestine as no exception.

**KEYWORDS** repression, genocide, Palestine, values, silence

**SINCE OCTOBER 7, 2023, THE WORLD HAS WITNESSED** Israel's unrelenting mass assault against the people of Gaza. As of June 2024, Israeli military has massacred more than 37,000 Palestinians, with numbers increasing daily (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs [OCHA], 2024). Israeli violence has displaced over 1,700,000 of Gaza's population of 2,300,000 (OCHA, 2024). Bombs and military targeting have damaged and destroyed between 60% and 80% of all commercial and residential businesses and buildings in Gaza (OCHA, 2024). The Israeli military has not spared schools or hospitals. Israel has intentionally attacked over 25 hospitals (OCHA, 2024). Aerial bombardment through tactics known as *scholasticide*,<sup>1</sup> has targeted more

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<sup>1</sup> Scholasticide was first defined by Professor Karma Nabulsi to describe the "systemic destruction of Palestinian education by Israel." This was first described by Professor Nabulsi in 2009 but made reference to the pattern of Israeli violence inflicted on Palestinian scholars, students, and educational institutions since 1948. For more, see "Scholasticide Definition" at <https://scholarsagainstwar.org/toolkit/>.

than 80% of schools and every university in Gaza, along with the intentional destruction of the cultural and intellectual history and ongoing legacy of an entire people (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2024).

Israel's violence is part of a colonial project 100 years in the making, a pattern of brutal displacement of the Palestinian people and the occupation of Palestinian land and property (Dana & Jarbawi, 2017; Khalidi, 2020, Pappé, 2022; Said, 1992). Western powers like the United States and the United Kingdom have long been active partners in Israel's brutality, while other nations, alongside prominent domestic and international human rights organizations, have recognized Israel's occupation of Palestine as apartheid (Amnesty International, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Despite more than 75 years of Israeli occupation through a variety of strategies, never before have acts of genocidal violence been so widely on display.<sup>2</sup> Never before have we experienced such intense repression of support for Palestinian people. Never before have we seen such vilification of those who condemn the actions of Israel, or more specifically, Israeli Zionist acts of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and mass destruction. In alignment with the U.S. government's explicit and implicit support for the ongoing genocide in Palestine, many professions and institutions, including social work, remain silent as the world stands by witnessing the mass slaughter of Palestinians (Ayyash, 2023; Karizamimba, 2024; Newman, 2024).

This paper seeks to understand and contextualize U.S. social work's silence and complicity with Israeli genocide and displacement in Palestine and to illuminate pathways toward sustained solidarity in action for our social work colleagues. It uplifts the unrelenting and courageous efforts of social work students, practitioners, faculty, and others within the profession to uphold the principles of social work in unequivocal support for Palestinian liberation. The paper also outlines a social work platform for Palestinian liberation that articulates our condemnation of U.S.-Israeli state violence and offers clear strategies for solidarity. As abolitionist social workers, the authors of this paper seek to shatter the shameful silence and complicity that remains the norm within our field, with the insistence that it is in every way the imperative of social work to disrupt state violence in all its forms.

## THE PALESTINE EXCEPTION

Palestinian *exceptionalism*, or the stance that Palestinian-American social work scholar Stéphanie Wahab (2024, para. 14) describes as "progressive except for Palestine," pre-dates the violence starting in October 2023. Palestinian exceptionalism characterizes the deliberate omission and denial U.S. liberals and progressives have reserved for solidarity with Palestine or anti-Zionist causes and discourses (Lamont Hill & Plitnick, 2021; Shalhoub-Kevorkian et al., 2022). In their book *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics*, Lamont Hill and Plitnick (2021) observe that "when the topic turns to Palestine, the same people who consistently advocate for freedom and justice fail to live up to their professed ideals" (p. 11). The Palestine exception stems from longstanding and active repression of Palestinian civil society and solidarity through a variety of silencing tactics and racist propaganda, including the false conflation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the criminalizing of advocacy like the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions

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<sup>2</sup> As noted, it is important to acknowledge that although Israeli violence toward Palestinians is now widely on display, the current violence and destruction is part of a pattern of ongoing persecution that has been occurring, often unseen to the West, since the Nakba or "catastrophe" in Arabic in 1948.

(BDS), and the punishment of speech in solidarity with Palestine (Lamont Hill & Plitnick, 2021; Palestine Legal & Center for Constitutional Rights, 2015).

There is a long lineage of U.S. students and faculty facing egregious retaliation and acts of violence for their political speech and actions – firings of faculty aligned and allied with the Black Panther Party, police beatings during the Occupy Movement, and National Guard shootings of students protesting the Vietnam War are examples (Donovan, 2024; Early, 2020; Ferreira, 2018). Suppression and retaliation have also been used for decades on university campuses against faculty and students acting in solidarity with Palestine, at times resulting from long-standing relationships between university presidents and lobbyists from the Anti-Defamation League and others to ensure those voices are suppressed (e.g., Salahi, 2011). However, the Palestine exception, and the forces that make it a reality, have taken on a particularly aggressive tenor in today's political context.

This is especially true on U.S. college and university campuses, including within schools of social work. On university campuses, we have witnessed a dean of a school of social work remove graduate teaching assistants from their positions for providing mental health resources to their Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students (Leffingwell, 2023). University administrators have suspended faculty for social media posts in solidarity with Palestine (Kepner, 2024). Campus organizing efforts in solidarity with Palestine have been criminalized by university administrations (Thompson & Beck, 2024). Students have also been attacked by police with chemical weapons on campus while protesting the U.S.-backed Israeli occupation and the genocide of Palestinians (Thakker, 2024).

The dramatic increase in targeted state and military violence against Palestinians following October 7, 2023 demands that we learn from past legacies, sharpen our analyses, and strengthen our fight for justice yet again. It also requires a more precise understanding of the history and ongoing annihilation of Palestine and Palestinian people, and the forces of complicity in these assaults on Palestinian people. Understanding and acknowledging the long-standing history of violence inflicted by Israel on the people of Palestine is of particular relevance to the profession of social work, whose silence about the ongoing U.S.-Israeli genocide in Palestine is especially pronounced given its professed ethical commitments to dignity and justice for all peoples (Aljawad & Rasmussen, 2021; Karizamimba, 2024; Wahab, 2024).

### **SOCIAL WORK'S RESPONSE TO GENOCIDE: SILENCE, SUPPRESSION, AND FALSE EQUIVALENCE**

In today's struggle for Palestinian lives and liberation, how have social work institutions and leadership responded? To answer this question, we examine responses from schools of social work, professional organizations, and academic journals. Despite what the International Criminal Court (ICC) has declared to be genocidal violence (Burke-White, 2024) and mounting public condemnation of Israel's unceasing military attacks (e.g., Al Jazeera, 2024; Associated Press, 2024), social work institutions continue to actively deny and micro-manage responses to Israel's violence upon Palestine and Palestinian people, rather than advocate for an end to state violence.

We argue that social work institutions have used three tactics to suppress support for Palestinian liberation and condemnation of Israeli mass violence. The first is a more passive use of silence; this tactic involves saying nothing at all or possibly commenting on the violence of October 7th, 2023 without acknowledging the violence enacted upon Palestinians before and after this date. The second

is a more active and aggressive form of repression, including silencing, often under the mantle of concern for antisemitism. This tactic involves punishing or sanctioning students, staff, and faculty for speech and actions in solidarity with Palestine, as well as firing and silencing staff at social work agencies and places of work that employ social workers. The third is the use of false equivalences; this tactic involves equalizing the Hamas violence of October 7, 2023 with the past and ongoing onslaught of the Israeli military on tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, and equating antisemitism (substantiated or not) with anti-Zionism.

Social work organizations, including the leading professional organizations and schools of social work, have largely remained silent on Israel's genocide in Palestine (Karizamimba, 2024). This is in contrast to statements that were made widely after October 7th, 2023 expressing support and concern for the people of Israel (e.g., National Association of Social Workers, 2023). As this paper has made clear, this silence is in part the result of a larger phenomenon of Palestine exceptionalism in otherwise liberal or progressive spaces. While the insidious silence within professional social work has been pervasive, the repression and active silencing of efforts for Palestine solidarity have become increasingly overt and punishing.

Within academic social work, it is social work students who have organized some of the most active support for Palestinian liberation and opposition to the Israeli occupation. Students engaged in demonstrations at social work schools and on university campuses that included teach-ins, sit-ins, and encampments (Negesse & Zuloaga, 2023). School administrators have responded by criminalizing and punishing student attempts to hold demonstrations, teach-ins, encampments, and student organizations in support of Palestinian liberation (Karizamimba, 2024; Patel & Betts, 2023; Pillai & Ticer-Wurr, 2023; Shuler, 2023). Administrative actions have become particularly violent and brutal with the deployment of police to quell student encampments in protest of Israeli violence in Gaza, U.S. military support of genocide, and campus complicity. While such suppression has often been the result of shifting policies mandated by university leadership above the ranks of social work deans and directors, very few schools of social work, if any, have publicly fought such measures or worked to provide visible affirmative support for student engagement with the current massacre of Palestinians in Gaza or its historical antecedents.

Institutional policies and practices of false equivalence often uphold the other two tactics of silence (passive and active). False equivalences have primarily taken two forms in social work institutions. The first form manifests in the equation of Hamas' attacks on October 7th, 2023 to Israel's daily bombardment of Gaza since that time; these false equivalences have accompanied directives by administrators to attack all public mention of Palestine, genocide, or condemnation of Zionism. In a similar fashion, the second form of false equivalence – the equating of anti-Zionism with antisemitism – has also led to fear and silencing on campuses across the United States, including in social work departments (Zunes, 2024). The attempts to obfuscate and equate antisemitism with anti-Zionism have sought to quell dissent and limit Palestine solidarity speech and action (Haber & Figlerowicz, 2024; Zunes, 2024). These false equivalences are reinforced through the manipulative use of historical collective trauma, safety, identity, and human rights/civil rights frameworks that stifle any meaningful analysis, protest, or action (Butler, 2024).

Silence, suppression, and false equivalence have crystallized in particularly brazen forms in social work academic publishing. Within social work journals, the first published piece on Israel and Palestine (Farber & Fram, 2024) appeared in the prominent journal *Social Work*, a journal published by the preeminent professional organization of social work in the United States, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). In a chilling parallel to the conservative white

supremacist backlash against anti-racism in education, the commentary accuses “ideological” voices in support of Palestine’s freedom and sovereignty in social work education of silencing what is described as a more objective and humanitarian pro-Israeli stance. With no mention of Israel’s atrocities against Palestinians nor acknowledgment of Palestinian exceptionalism and the silencing of Palestinian discourse within the academy, the article characterizes the prevailing and hegemonic political climate of U.S. social work as decidedly antisemitic. Despite the wholesale support for Israeli violence at all levels of the U.S. government (and among all leading presidential candidates), the billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars funding the Israeli military machine, and the overarching support for the pro-Israeli position within the U.S. mainstream media, the authors maintain that it is the pro-Israeli perspective that has been silenced and suppressed. Despite the egregious falsehoods contained throughout the paper, the lack of critical thinking, and the use of violent rhetoric against anyone who does not adopt a pro-Israeli stance, the article was reviewed and accepted unilaterally by the journal’s editor-in-chief. A counter-perspective article (Thurber & Kimball, 2024) was only published after active protest from numerous social workers and social work scholars in response to Farber and Fram’s polemic in *Social Work* (Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2024; Social Work for Palestine, 2024a; Social Workers and Social Care Workers for Palestine, 2024).

Social work research on Palestinian families and communities is difficult to find within mainstream social work journals in the United States, reflecting a broader silencing within academia and academic publishing. However, social work researchers working within the occupied Palestinian territories have produced a growing body of important scholarship about the devastating impacts of Israeli settler colonialism on the lives and well-being of Palestinian individuals and families (Abu-Ras & Mohamed, 2018; Rabaia et al., 2014; Saleh et al., 2019). These contributions from social work scholars are commonly overlooked within a research landscape that often neglects to incorporate, amplify, or respond directly to Palestinian voices.

## **SOCIAL WORKERS AND ADVOCACY FOR A FREE PALESTINE**

What would social work look like if it were to act according to its purported values and ethical obligations? Despite the repression from social work institutions and administrators, social workers across various sites and roles within social work and the academy continue to engage in advocacy to de-exceptionalize Palestine, condemn the U.S.-Israeli genocide, and support the rights of Palestinians to be free, to return to their homeland, and to live with self-determination and safety. Alongside this intra-institutional mobilization comes an opportunity to build collective power outside of our professional institutions. Here, we review some of the actions taken by social work students, academics, and practitioners, demonstrating a range of existing and emerging possibilities for sustained action toward a free Palestine among social workers.

Drawing upon foundational social work principles of community organizing and advocacy, students are taking the lead in resisting the complicit status quo. Social work students organized teach-ins, sit-ins, encampments, and letters to university administrators demanding that they speak up against genocide and call for a ceasefire among other school-specific issues like divestment and disclosure of financial ties to Israel. At the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice at the University of Chicago, for example, social work students have advocated for the school to renounce the Crown family name, as the Crown family is the primary shareholder in General Dynamics, a weapons manufacturer with close ties to the Israeli military (Social Workers

Against Genocide, 2024). While some organizing has been specific to social work schools, much of the organizing social work students have engaged in has been part of broader campus coalitional organizing. This has included campus-wide divestment campaigns and, most recently, the Gaza solidarity encampments, which began at Columbia and spread to other campuses, eventually leading to more than 125 encampments globally (e.g., Nawaz et al., 2024; Palestine is Everywhere, 2024). In response, social work administrators (alongside their peers from all academic disciplines) have enacted various forms of repression, including threats of disciplinary action, suspensions, evictions from student housing, failures to protect students from vigilante and organized Zionist and anti-Arab violence, and instigating police violence and mass arrests (New York Times, 2024).

In addition to and often alongside students, social work practitioners have been advocating and organizing for Palestine both inside and outside of their workplaces and professional roles, bridging micro and macro strategies for engaging colleagues and community members in the Palestinian solidarity struggle. Grassroots and abolitionist social work groups like the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work and upEND began to organize for Palestine in October 2023, publishing statements that center the work of Palestinian social workers and organizations and coordinating letter campaigns targeting the NASW and the Biden administration (Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work, 2023a; 2023b; upEND Movement, 2023). The Boston Liberation Health Group was one of the first practice-focused social work organizations to offer political education about Palestine to social workers, hosting a webinar in November 2023 on the violence in Palestine and what social workers needed to know (Boston Liberation Health, 2023). In mid-November, Social Work for Palestine was formed, working alongside upEND, the USA-Palestine Mental Health Network, and the Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work to organize weekly power hours for social workers. These virtual power hours offered political education on a range of issues related to Palestinian freedom and coordinated various collective actions, including calls to pressure elected officials, social work institutions, and the media to support Palestine. Hundreds of social workers from around the world participated.

Many of the efforts in social work have been led by students, faculty, and practitioners who are deeply aligned with the broader abolitionist movement within social work which seeks to dismantle the prison-industrial complex and other forms of the carceral state, while simultaneously ending social work's complicity in the carceral surveillance, control, and punishment of targeted populations. This alignment stems from a decades-long history of abolitionist organizing for Palestinian liberation that recognizes the deep connections between the state violence and oppression inflicted on the Palestinian people by the state of Israel and the state violence enacted by the prison-industrial complex on individuals in the United States and globally. These systems of state violence intersect and coordinate to justify and maintain settler-colonialism and global racial capitalism (Ben-Menachem & Eggert, 2024; Davis, 2016). Abolition is, and always has been, a global movement as we know our goals cannot be achieved without international solidarity in the struggle for liberation. The world we dream of and work for is borderless and ensures freedom and liberation for all.

### **A SOCIAL WORK PLATFORM FOR A FREE PALESTINE**

As social work academics gathered for the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) annual conference in January 2024, scholars made efforts to raise issues of Palestinian freedom in a context

where these concerns were otherwise omitted. These conference-focused efforts included a meeting of the Abolitionist Social Work Special Interest Group focused on Palestine, as well as an organized effort to bring a contingent of SSWR attendees to the national March on Washington for Gaza on January 13, 2024. Around the same time, Social Work for Palestine launched its three-item platform focused on ending the genocide, ending Israeli occupation and apartheid, and ending political repression of Palestinian support (Social Work for Palestine, 2024b).

The first item in the Social Work for Palestine platform, “End the Genocide,” underscores the importance of a social work-specific call to end the targeted violence against Palestinians at the hands of the U.S.-Israeli military and its axis of power. In addition to an immediate ceasefire, this demand calls for an end to all Israeli policies resulting in mass death not only through direct military assault but also the destruction of the means of sustenance for life – that is, access to food, water, medicine, fuel, and other essentials (Pamuk, 2024). The United Nations has appealed for funds to provide aid to 3 million Palestinians as aid workers and civilians struggle against a veritable blockade of Israeli government denials, delays, shootings, and airstrikes (Lederer, 2024; Schmitz & Baba, 2024). Ending genocide also means immediate access to humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people under siege, and the protection of humanitarian aid workers along with mutual aid efforts on the ground.

Further, ending genocide calls for the cessation of all direct and indirect U.S. aid that has supported and sustained the Israeli military machine (Al Jazeera Staff, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). This includes the ongoing U.S.-Israeli coordinated and reciprocal development and deployment of violent tactics and military technology, surveillance strategies, racial profiling, and repressive practices between numerous military and police agencies in the United States and Israel. This “deadly exchange” of military strategies, training, and technologies reflects a shared and deadly disregard for the dignity and worth of human beings at home and abroad (Jewish Voice for Peace, n.d.).

The second item in the Social Work for Palestine platform, “End the Israeli Occupation and Apartheid,” speaks to the ongoing displacement and occupation of Palestine by an expanding Israeli state. Similar to the South African apartheid system, and some argue even worse (Bicer & Cetinkaya, 2024; Chomsky, 2014), the Israeli occupation has created and exacerbated apartheid conditions for the Palestinian people. For 75 years, the Israeli state, established in 1948, has subjected Palestinians to the violation of basic civil and human rights under what is now the Israeli political, social, and economic control of Gaza, the West Bank, and Occupied East Jerusalem (Albanese, 2024). These conditions have worsened under the rapid and violent expansion of Israeli settlements (Hawaleshka, 2024), as brutally demonstrated in the unrelenting genocidal violence in Gaza today. The Israeli government’s mass displacement of Palestinians over multiple generations is compounded by the Israeli government’s refusal to allow Palestinian refugees to return, a violation of international human rights conventions (Frelick, 2024). Given the ongoing assaults on the rights of Palestinian civilians and refugees, we encourage our colleagues to support the movement to boycott, divest from, and sanction (BDS) the political and economic actors upholding the Israeli regime. This includes an economic, academic, and cultural boycott against Israel; financial divestment from Israel; and government sanctions and embargoes against Israel (Kim, 2023).

The third and final item in the Social Work for Palestine platform, “End Political Suppression of Palestinian Support,” is especially prescient for those of us working within social work institutions, including academia. In response to the false equivalences we have outlined, we urge our colleagues to reject the equating of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, the equating of Palestinian

solidarity with antisemitic beliefs, the equivocation of calls for resistance against oppression as calls for violence against Jewish people, and the prioritization of Zionist beliefs over anti-Zionist beliefs. We reject censorship and punishment that purports to be in the name of preventing antisemitism, as this censoring and silencing ultimately serves to justify Israeli genocide, occupation, and apartheid while also harming the fight against the growing concerns posed by true antisemitic sentiment in the United States (Hess, 2024). We are aware that social work employers have been known to systematically silence workers who are engaged in Palestinian solidarity work (Berger & Jabr, 2020) and we are particularly concerned with the censorship and criminalization of social work professors like Professor Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian who was suspended (and reinstated after global protest) from her long-time position at Hebrew University, and who later faced arrest and interrogations (Lloyd, 2024), coupled with the mass arrests of U.S. student protestors at Gaza solidarity encampments. We invite our colleagues to explore the long legacy of anti-Zionist Jewish thought and action (Moser, 2024), and to act in solidarity with colleagues and students around the world who are being censored and falsely accused of antisemitism. To continue producing rigorous critique of oppression in all its forms, we are committed to being precise with our language and our analysis. That requires commitment to calling out censorship and amplifying voices for Palestinian liberation.

## CONCLUSION

As we write this article, the U.S.-Israeli genocide against Palestinians continues at full force. Mainstream social work institutions, particularly within academia, remain complicit in this crisis, continuing to repress and punish organizing and activism from students as well as staff and faculty. As this article demonstrates, social work's support for this genocide has come in three forms: passive silence, active suppression, and false equivalence. Each of these punitive tactics raises critical and pre-existing questions about the will of social work as an institution to align its actions with its professed values. Having offered an introduction to the Social Work for Palestine platform, we call upon the leaders of our professional institutions to take note of the growing support for Palestine among social workers and shift from silence to solidarity.

This article is one of many invitations to our fellow social workers to continue to join us in taking meaningful and tangible actions to demand an end to institutional silence, Palestine exceptionalism, state and colonial violence, apartheid, and genocide. We invite colleagues to engage in truth-telling that centers Palestinian life, accurately names the genocide in Gaza in discussions with students, clients, and colleagues, and seeks opportunities to uphold the principled actions that we are capable of as a profession of dedicated care workers, without the Palestine exception. Actions may include more formalized professional or organizational commitments to the BDS movement, including academic boycotts, providing logistical/emotional/political support to localized Palestinian-led organizing that centers Palestinian freedom and sovereignty, financial support directly to Palestinian aid and relief efforts, and amplifying/protecting/taking lead from the work of Palestinian and Palestinian-allied social workers. As a collective body dedicated to social justice, social workers are capable in this moment of working toward solidarity and liberation. We cannot miss the opportunity to do so.



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