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ARTICLE

A Comparative Framework Approach for Teaching and Talking about Palestine/Israel

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Abstract

How can we expand our conversations about Palestine/Israel to include a fuller range of student perspectives? In this article, I propose a "comparative framework approach" to help educators, facilitators, and administrators foster better conversations in classrooms, on campuses, and beyond. In contrast to approaches that center identity as sources of friction to be transcended, I argue that focusing on frameworks more effectively includes the perspectives of pro-Palestine students who center decolonization in their ethical worldviews. Drawing on insights from critical religious literacy, I outline three frameworks—peace through surrender, peace through dialogue, and justice through liberation—that have shaped discourse on Palestine/Israel in the United States. I then show how different frameworks have developed historically and have informed interreligious encounters, including during the 2024 student encampments. Last, I suggest ways to incorporate the comparative framework approach to ensure that all students are supported in their intellectual, personal, and ethical journeys.

Keywords

Palestine/Israel, comparative frameworks, interreligious encounters, critical religious literacy, student encampments, colonialism, decolonization

On April 17, 2024, 50 Columbia University students set up a "Gaza Solidarity Encampment" on their campus lawn. Six months had passed since the October 7th Hamas-led attack on Israel, and the Israeli bombing campaign and ground invasion of Gaza were still ongoing. Five days later, Jewish students at the encampment hosted a "Gaza Liberation Seder," reading passages from a Passover *Haggadah* written just for the occasion. The student leading the ceremony welcomed supporters from all faiths saying, "As we move through this seder, we will be exploring what it means to celebrate Passover during an ongoing genocide, what it means to tell stories of Jewish displacement and persecution as the Palestinian people have their land colonized in the name of 'Jewish safety.'"[1]

The seder was one of hundreds of interreligious solidarity activities that were held at over 100 Gaza solidarity encampments on US campuses between April 17 and June 7, 2024.[2] Indeed, interreligious solidarity activities, in which members of Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and other faith groups partook in each other's religious rituals and learned about each other's beliefs, were a major feature in many of the pro-Palestine student activities that spring. As a student journalist at The Ohio State University reported, "the protests mostly consist of chanting, praying and singing."[3]

Meanwhile, several longstanding interfaith dialogue programs crumbled. "It's set us back at least 20 years," one interfaith leader lamented. "It's changed everything."[4] Observers noticed a particular "cooling" in Muslim-Jewish interfaith activities as programs were cancelled and friendships grew strained.[5] Some leaders who had spent decades building programs dedicated to interfaith dialogue tried to revive such efforts, but the results were

The author thanks Lauren Cohen, Scott Lucas, Atalia Omer, Mezna Qato, Barry Trachtenberg, and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

1 Alisa Solomon, "Celebrating Seder at Columbia's Gaza Solidarity Encampment," *Hyperallergic*, May 7, 2024, https://hyperallergic.com/912288/celebrating-seder-at-columbia-gaza-solidarity-encampment/.

2 Erica Chenoweth, Soha Hammam, Jeremy Pressman, and Jay Ulfelder, "Protests in the United States on Palestine and Israel, 2023–2024," *Social Movement Studies* 25, no. 2 (2024): 1–14.

3 Catherine Kim, "What's Really Happening on College Campuses, According to Student Journalists," *Politico*, May 3, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/05/03/college-campus-protests-israel-gaza-student-journalists-00155672.

4 Ken Chitwood, "'It's Changed Everything': Interfaith Dialogue in the Wake of October 7, 2023," *Interfaith America*, October 3, 2024, https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/interfaith-dialogue-october-7/.

5 Tom Gjelten, "A Cooling: Jewish-Muslim Interfaith Work after October 7 and Gaza," *Moment Magazine*, February 23, 2024, https://momentmag.com/interfaith-

generally anemic.[6] Likewise, across college and university campuses friendships frayed and social maps were redrawn over disagreements on how to what was happening in Gaza, Israel, and the region.[7]

What accounts for such contrasting scenes of interreligious relations? I contend that one major factor was the encampment participants' embrace of a shared anticolonial *justice framework* that stressed Israeli settler-colonial structures of oppression, rather than religious difference, as the main source of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.[8] According to this justice framework, the religious identities of students were not sources of division to be transcended. Rather, they were part of a shared spiritual nourishment that helped them support each other as they worked to dismantle those structures of oppression and to envision a system that upholds human rights and dignity for all.

I contend further that this approach challenged the assumptions of more commonly held identity-based *peace frameworks*. Such frameworks tend to assume an *a priori* correlation between ethno-religious identities and certain sets of political beliefs. The hope is that through interfaith dialogue, moderates from different faiths can "transcend" their ethno-religious identities, build personal friendships across the divide, and marginalize their respective extremists in ways that will eventually lead to peace.[9] Yet as Atalia Omer has shown, many interfaith dialogue activities rest on Western epistemologies of religion that ignore the colonial roots of most so-called religious conflicts and prioritize creating a veneer of intercommunal peace over achieving real political justice.[10]

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jews-muslims-after-october-7-gaza/?srsltid=AfmBOoqDMW7M8UfgWpA6-3Digu8EOp7G1TCtORvzhqRDebjIfyi2nsdq.

6 Chitwood, "'It's Changed Everything.'"

7 Eitan Hersh and Dahlia Lyss, "A Year of Campus Conflict and Growth: An Over-Time Study of the Impact of the Israeli-Hamas War on the U.S.," *Jim Joseph Foundation*, September 2024, https://jimjosephfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Hersh_Final_Report_Campus_Conflict_and_Growth.pdf, 52–54.

8 In doing so, they drew on an extensive body of scholarship that documents and explains why the settler colonial framework is applicable to the Palestinian/Israeli context. A useful overview of this literature can be found in Areej Sabbagh-Khoury, *Colonizing Palestine: The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba* (Stanford University Press, 2023), 9–18.

9 Cameron Howes and James Walters, "Identity Transcendence as a Response to Religious Conflict: Understanding Effective Student Engagement with Israel and Palestine," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 46 (2025): 30–51.

10 Atalia Omer, *Decolonizing Religion and Peace-Building* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Atalia Omer, *Days of Awe: Reimagining Jewishness in Solidarity with Palestinians*

In this article, I argue that adopting a "comparative framework approach"—one that takes seriously the perspectives of justice-oriented students—is urgently needed in the post-October 7th higher education landscape. Doing so, I maintain, not only ameliorates imbalances found in many interfaith encounters on college campuses, but also helps facilitate more robust classroom discussions and more inclusive campus programming on Palestine/Israel.[11] In particular, I show how the comparative framework approach better accounts for the perspectives of students who are firmly committed to the idea of Palestinian liberation. As anthropologists Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar have shown, those perspectives have historically been marginalized or silenced on North American college and university campuses.[12] As a result, many students—particularly from Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian backgrounds—have felt isolated, besieged, and attacked by their own universities.[13]

I argue further that the comparative framework approach can ameliorate some of the blind spots that educators and facilitators of interreligious encounters may have when they manage student conversations about Palestine/Israel. While much attention is paid to how such debates intersect with antisemitism, little if any attention is paid to the ways in which discussions of Palestine/Israel intersect with anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racism.[14] As Rev. Canon C. Denise Yarbrough, Director of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Rochester, noted about an earlier campus episode, "Palestinian students and their allies struggle to have their stories heard in an American culture that knows the Israeli Jewish narrative best. They also struggle to be heard when these conflicts erupt, in

(University of Chicago Press, 2019).

11 I use the term "Palestine/Israel" throughout this article to signify a shared and contested geography, while deliberately foregrounding Palestinian histories and experiences. The slash marks both the entanglement and tension between these entities, without collapsing them into a single narrative.

12 Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, "Resistance to Repression and Back Again: The Movement for Palestinian Liberation in US Academia," *Middle East Critique* 33, no. 3 (2024): 313–34.

13 "Rupture and Repair: A Report by the Stanford Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian Communities," *Stanford University*, May 2024, https://news.stanford.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0031/156586/MAP-final-report-2024.pdf; "Final Report of the Presidential Task Force on Combating Anti-Muslim, Anti-Arab, and Anti-Palestinian Bias," *Harvard University*, April 29, 2025, https://www.harvard.edu/task-force-on-anti-muslim-and-anti-arab-bias/.

14 For a recent example of this tendency, see Rachel Mikva, *Interreligious Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 176–208.

part because they simply do not have the influential allies and communal resources that are available to Jewish students" who support Israel.[15]

Such blind spots stem in part from the colonial legacies that continue to shape interreligious encounters. As religious studies scholar Adil Hussain Khan explains, the civilizational assumptions and biases that shaped interreligious encounters during the colonial period now find expression in determinations of who can participate in interreligious encounters and what topics are deemed worthy of discussion.[16] As I show below, these colonial legacies often shape interreligious encounters as they relate to Palestine/Israel, both by assuming religious identities and political viewpoints to be co-constitutive and by pre-determining the participants, parameters, and outcomes of such encounters. Atalia Omer, Diane Moore, and Hilary Rantisi have offered a helpful path forward. They propose fostering a *decolonial religious literacy* that seeks to "undo conceptually and sociologically the colonial reduction of communities to their presumed religious belonging." This approach supports students as they explore a wider array of perspectives that include examining colonialism's ongoing impact on current events.[17] Whereas the program discussed by Omer et. al. involved taking students to the region, in this article I present a pedagogical tool that can be used on our own campuses. As I outline below, students at the encampments offered us innovative ways to think about how interfaith activities intersect with broader moral and political worldviews, challenging us to rethink the goals and parameters of interreligious encounters as they relate to Palestine/Israel.

I come to this analysis as the Palestinian-American-Muslim daughter of refugees who were expelled from their homeland in 1948. I also approach this work as a scholar specializing in Palestinian and Israeli history; as an educator with nearly three decades of experience teaching history and religion in secondary, post-secondary, and professional settings; and as a community leader who has led interreligious activities in mosques, churches, synagogues, and civic spaces. My academic, educational, professional, and community-based experiences have led me to create an original three-part

15 C. Denise Yarbrough, "Antisemitism and Israel: Tales from the Interreligious Dialogical Minefield," in *With the Best of Intentions: Interreligious Missteps and Mistakes*, ed. Lucinda Mosher, Elinor J. Pierce, and Or N. Rose (Orbis Books, 2023), 205.

16 Adil Hussain Khan, "Theorizing Interreligious Relations," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 92 (Fall 2024): 16–36.

17 Atalia Omer, Diane L. Moore, and Hilary Rantisi, "Touring Absences, Erasures, and Futures in the Unholy Land: A Religiously Literate Diasporic Reading of Palestine/Israel," *Palestine/Israel Review* 1, no. 2 (2024): 313–42.

typology that, I contend, better captures the varied perspectives and assumptions as they relate to Palestine/Israel. By helping my students understand the explicit and implicit assumptions that inform these three frameworks, I not only help them articulate their own worldviews and ethical commitments. I also help them engage more constructively with those who hold divergent worldviews, regardless of their identity.

In the pages that follow, I first define and trace the development of three conceptual frameworks—*peace through surrender*, *peace through dialogue*, and *justice through liberation*—that capture the wide range of perspectives on Palestine/Israel. Next, I explain how the peace frameworks became the dominant ones in the United States, how the justice framework was historically marginalized, and why it has gained traction in recent years. I then contrast interreligious encounters that privilege the peace frameworks with those that emanate from the justice framework, focusing on the spring 2024 pro-Palestine student encampments. Last, I offer some practical ways to apply the comparative framework approach to create more inclusive and supportive classroom and campus environments.

Defining the Three Frameworks

Given how much Palestine/Israel is part of US media and political discourse, many American young adults have already formed some basic opinions around this topic prior to reaching us.[18] The comparative framework approach invites them to reflect on the conceptual frameworks that undergird their opinions and those of others. A *conceptual framework* is a system of interconnected beliefs and experiences that structure how we understand the world around us. When we want to learn about something, conceptual frameworks help us frame our questions, decide which data points are relevant, and interpret our findings.[19]

When introducing this concept to my students, I invite them to think of a picture frame that directs our focus to what is inside the frame rather than what is outside it. Our frameworks are informed by our: 1) values, beliefs and assumptions; 2) lived experiences and personal connections; and 3) choice and interpretation of data points. No single frame can contain all the assumptions, experiences, and data points that exist on a given topic; we

18 This trend predates October 7th. See Lydia Saad, "Young Adults' View on Middle East Changing Most," *Gallup News*, March 24, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/472796/young-adults-views-middle-east-changing.aspx.

19 Yosef Jabareen, "Building a Conceptual Framework: Philosophy, Definitions, and Procedure," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no. 4 (2009): 49–62.

necessarily choose what to emphasize and what to de-emphasize. The goal of a comparative framework analysis is not to prove one framework "right" and another one "wrong." Rather, the aim is to reflect on what is included in—and excluded from—each frame.

I introduced my framework approach in fall 2021 during a public lecture I gave on the topic of compassion. My aim was to explain how and why US public opinion had shifted in recent years from showing more compassion for Israelis than for Palestinians to showing increased compassion for Palestinians.[20] I articulated two frameworks, a peace framework and a justice framework, and I explained how personal stories can inform and shift people's selection of frameworks. I soon realized that a single peace framework did not adequately capture the range of views within it, leading me to add a third framework. Since 2022, I have used the comparative framework approach in my introductory undergraduate course on modern Middle Eastern history and my co-convened undergraduate-graduate course on the "History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict." I have also introduced the comparative framework approach in over two dozen presentations to students, educators, university administrators, faith leaders, policy experts, and general audiences.

I find that taking a framework-based approach, rather than an identity-based approach, is useful in facilitating constructive conversations because it allows participants to ponder other frameworks without feeling like they are betraying their own identities. This approach also helps us avoid reductive assumptions about particular religious identities correlating with certain political views. In recent years we have seen members of many faith groups, including American evangelicals and Jewish Americans, increasingly divided over questions related to Israel.[21] Therefore, the three frameworks I lay out below are defined by their respective outlooks, rather than by the predominant religious identities of their respective adherents.

The first framework is what I call the "peace through surrender" framework. This framework posits Zionism as a core element of Jewish identity, grounded in the belief that the Jewish people have an absolute right

20 Maha Nassar, "Compassion for Whom: Shifting U.S. Conversations about Palestinians and Israelis," SBS Downtown Lecture Series, University of Arizona, October 20, 2021, 1 hr. and 23 min., available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwY5fP9-8PI&t=1125s.

21 These divides are often (though not always) along generational lines. See Jordan Muchnick and Elaine Kamarack, "The Generation Gap in Opinions Toward Israel," *Brookings*, November 9, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-generation-gap-in-opinions-toward-israel/.

to establish, maintain, and defend a Jewish state in their ancestral homeland.[22] This framework sees the modern state of Israel as an expression of that right, made necessary by the long history of antisemitism that culminated in the ravages of the Holocaust.[23] Circulating widely within the Israeli and American right, this framework tends to downplay or ignore Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim personal and religious connections to the land, and the legitimacy of their national aspirations within it.[24] It often attributes criticism of Israel to antisemitism, which it deems to be endemic not only in the west, but also in Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian societies.[25] It draws heavily on the logic of Revisionist Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky who wrote in 1923 that "both peoples can live together in peace" only when Palestinians accept that they "can make no breach in the iron wall."[26] Thus, according to this framework, only when Palestinians *surrender* to Israel's military and political domination can *peace* take hold.

The second framework is what I call the "peace through dialogue" framework. It shares with the first framework a belief that Zionism is a core element of Jewish identity, and that Israel is a legitimate expression of that identity. Mindful of the long history of antisemitism and the legacies of the Holocaust, this framework also insists on the necessity of Israel's existence to safeguard the future of the Jewish people. But unlike the first framework, it also holds that Palestinian ethno-national and religious claims to the land should be accommodated, albeit not at the expense of Israel's security and character as a Jewish state.[27] While it, too, holds that peace is the final goal, this framework tends to hold extremists on both sides as primarily responsible for the ongoing conflict.[28] According to this framework, *peace* can

22 See David Novak, *Zionism and Judaism: A New Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Yitzhak Conforti, *Zionism and Jewish Culture: A Study in the Origins of a National Movement*, trans. Jessica Setbon (Academic Studies Press, 2024).

23 See, for example, Alexander Yakobson and Amnon Rubenstein, *Israel and the Family of Nations: The Jewish Nation-State and Human Rights* (Routledge, 2009).

24 See, for example, Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf, *The War of Return: How Western Indulgence of the Palestinian Dream Has Obstructed the Path to Peace* (All Points Books, 2020).

25 See, for example, Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (Random House, 2010).

26 Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall (*Rasswjet*)," originally published in *Deutsches Heft*, November 4, 1925 [1923], https://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/item/?itemId=158379.

27 See, for example, Ruth Gavison, "The Jews' Right to Statehood: A Defense," *Azure* 15 (2003): 70–108.

28 See, for example, Marc Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

only be achieved through *dialogue* and negotiations in which moderates on both sides make painful compromises and marginalize their respective extremists. Popular in American, Western and Israeli liberal circles, this framework informs most traditional interfaith dialogue efforts, "people-to-people" programs, and calls for a two-state solution.[29]

The third framework is what I call the "justice through liberation" framework. This framework downplays the identitarian aspects of Zionism and instead adopts a structure-based analysis. It understands Zionism as a settler-colonial ideology and political project that undergirds the state of Israel.[30] It further holds that Israel's colonial structures—that is, the laws and policies that privilege Jews over non-Jews and restrict Palestinian freedom—are the core drivers of violence.[31] This framework shares with other anticolonial frameworks the belief that colonialism is the defining feature of the twentieth century, not only for Palestine, but for most of the world's population.[32] While it does not oppose peace as a worthwhile goal, this framework insists that a prerequisite for peace is *justice*, achieved through Palestinian *liberation* from settler-colonial domination. As such, it tends to be critical of the so-called two-state solution and offers alternative paths for thinking about possible solutions.[33]

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29 Recent expressions of this framework include Raja Khouri and Jeffrey Wilkinson, *The Wall Between: What Jews and Palestinians Don't Want to Know About Each Other* (Olive Branch Press, 2023); Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP), "About ALLMEP," *Alliance for Middle East Peace*, last updated 2025, https://www.allmep.org/about-us-allmep/; and Omar M. Dajani and Limor Yehuda, "A Two-State Solution That Can Work: The Case for an Israeli-Palestinian Confederation," *Foreign Affairs*, September 19, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/two-state-solution-can-work.

30 Fayez Sayigh's foundational 1965 work, *Zionist Colonialism in Palestine*, Palestine Monographs 1 (Research center Palestine Liberation Organization, 1965) available at: https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC12_scans/12.zionist.colonialism.palestine.1965.pdf.

31 Tariq Dana and Ali Jarbawi, "A Century of Settler Colonialism in Palestine: Zionism's Entangled Project," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2017): 1–23; Elia Zureik, *Israel's Colonial Project in Palestine: Brutal Pursuit* (Routledge, 2016).

32 Nader Hashemi, "Palestine and the Politics of Muslim Identity," in *The Promise of Sharīʿa: Studies in Honor of Professor Khaled Abou El Fadl*, ed. Rami Koujah and Josef Linnhoff (De Gruyter, 2025), 185–209; Pankaj Mishra, *The World After Gaza: A History* (Penguin Random House, 2025), 15.

33 Leila Farsakh, ed., *Rethinking Statehood in Palestine: Self-Determination and Decolonization Beyond Partition* (University of California Press, 2021); The Palestinian Technical Working Group, "A Palestinian Armistice Plan: Charting a Rights-Based Transition for Palestinian-Israeli Peace, *Cambridge Initiative on Peace Settlements*, June 2025, https://cambridgepeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Palestinian-Armistice-Plan.pdf.

"Religion" occupies different positions in each of these frameworks. The peace-through-surrender framework emphasizes the role of political Islam as a whole, while the peace-through-dialogue framework tends to cast blame on Muslim and Jewish extremists.[34] In contrast, the justice framework rejects the notion that religion, religious identity, or even religious extremism are to blame in and of themselves. It argues against what it perceives as a false equivalency between Jewish religious movements that seek to further entrench Israel's colonization of Palestine, and Muslim religious movements that seek to end Israeli colonialization.[35] This framework further holds that defining the "Palestinian-Israeli conflict" as one driven by religious difference erases the rich history of Jewish anti-Zionism and obscures the settler-colonial contours of the Zionist political project.[36] Such religion-based understandings of the conflict also erase the perspectives of Palestinian Christians who adopt the justice framework and who see Christian Zionism as anathema to their own religious beliefs.[37]

Likewise, the three frameworks hold different understandings of "violence." The peace-through-surrender framework insists that peace will only come to the region when Palestinians surrender to a decisively victorious Israel.[38] The peace-through-dialogue framework typically emphasizes the need to eliminate hostility on both sides through education, dialogue and mutual understanding.[39] By contrast, the justice framework foregrounds Israeli colonial, structural, and epistemic violence that harms

34 See, respectively, Mordechai Kedar, "The Central Obstacle to Peace Between Israel and the Palestinians Isn't Politics," *Mosaic*, October 3, 2025, https://ideas.tikvah.org/mosaic/essays/responses/the-central-obstacle-to-peace-between-israel-and-the-palestinians-isn-t-just-poli; and Ron Kronish, "The Role of Religion and Interreligious Dialogue in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," in *Routledge Companion to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, ed. Asaf Siniver (Routledge, 2022), 276–87.

35 Khaled Hroub, "Religion and Palestinian Nationalism," *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Nationalism*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (Routledge, 2025), 291–309.

36 Anne de Jong, "Zionist Hegemony, the Settler Colonial Conquest of Palestine and the Problem with Conflict: A Critical Genealogy of the Notion of Binary Conflict," *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2018): 364–383; Nadim N. Rouhana, "Religious Claims and Nationalism in Zionism: Obscuring Settler Colonialism," *When Politics Are Sacralized: Comparative Perspectives on Religious Claims and Nationalism*, ed. Nadim N. Rouhana and Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 54–87.

37 See, for example, Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible* (Orbis Books, 2023); and Munther Isaac, *Christ in the Rubble: Faith, the Bible, and Genocide in Gaza* (Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 2025).

38 Daniel Pipes, *Israel Victory: How Zionists Win Acceptance and Palestinians Get Liberated* (Wicked Son, 2024).

39 Gopin, *Holy War, Holy Peace,* 144–85.

Palestinians every day. Like other epistemologies that stem from the global south, the justice framework sees anticolonial resistance as a response to—and an attempt to dismantle—the far more pervasive violence of colonial domination itself.[40]

Some may object that defining frameworks in this way neither accounts for how notions of justice inform Zionist thought, nor addresses the myriad perceived shortcomings of settler colonial theory.[41] To clarify, these frameworks do not fully encompass the varied approaches to thinking about these topics. The comparative framework approach does not seek to pigeonhole a person's views or to insist that one framework has a monopoly on truth. Rather, the goal is to help students' and participants' dominant framework leads them to prioritize certain values, experiences, and data points, and to interpret them within a larger set of shared understandings.

This approach builds on elements of the "dual narrative" pedagogy that many instructors of Palestine/Israeli adopt in their classrooms.[42] It aims to bring elements of this pedagogy to interreligious encounters, but without pre-setting the parameters of acceptable discourse, assuming that ethnicities and frameworks are coterminous, or occluding students' justice-oriented worldviews. As we interrogate our own frameworks and learn more about the frameworks of others, the hope is that we can more effectively include the perspectives of students whose frameworks are often overlooked during interreligious encounters.

The first step in this process is understanding how these frameworks have emerged, to which we now turn.

Historical Emergence and Salience of the Three Frameworks

Most mainstream discourse in the United States on Palestine/Israel is essentially a debate between the two peace frameworks.[43] The justice

40 Hashemi, "Palestine, 190–94."

41 See, respectively, Chaim Gans, *A Just Zionism: On the Morality of the Jewish State* (Oxford University Press, 2008) and Adam Kirsch, *On Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence, and Justice* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2024).

42 See Rachel S. Harris, ed., *Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Wayne State University Press, 2019); and Aaron Hahn Tapper and Mira Sucharov, eds. *Social Justice and Israel/Palestine: Foundational and Contemporary Debates* (University of Toronto Press, 2019).

43 Amy Kaplan, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

framework—and pro-Palestinian viewpoints more broadly—have been largely dismissed, marginalized, and often criminalized, including within nominally progressive circles.[44] A brief historical overview traces how the peace frameworks became so deeply embedded in Western discourse and why the justice framework has recently gained traction, especially among young people.

Medieval European writers often depicted Islam as an existential threat to Christianity, a tendency that informed—and was exacerbated by—the Crusades, the Reconquista, and the Inquisition.[45] During the colonial period, Orientalist portrayals of Muslim and Arab societies as exotic, backward, and dangerous served to justify the conquest and plunder of their lands. Muslims and Arabs who fought against colonial rule were frequently portrayed as threats to Western civilization.[46]

In the United States, histories of religious prejudice, immigration, and foreign policy likewise marginalized the justice framework. For decades, Muslims were not considered to be "free white men" and were therefore largely barred from obtaining US citizenship. Changes in US immigration law in 1965 facilitated a larger number of people from Muslim-majority countries to immigrate, often to seek higher education and employment opportunities. Yet, as legal scholar Sahar Aziz shows, Muslim Americans were often racialized as "other," inferior, and threatening. She points to four factors that contributed to this racialization, including: "(1) White Protestant supremacy, (2) xenophobia arising from coercive assimilation into Western European cultural norms, (3) Orientalism, and (4) American empire in Muslim-majority countries."[47] These structures of domination contributed to the marginalization of Muslim American perspectives—which often align with the justice framework—in American public discourse.

The post-1965 waves of immigration also included growing numbers of Palestinians. Some were refugees who had been expelled from Palestine in 1948; others left behind families who were suffering under Israeli military occupation. They understood how America's military and diplomatic support for Israel directly harmed their people, yet many were also struck by

44 Khaled Elgindy, *Blind Spot: America and the Palestinians from Balfour to Trump* (Bloomsbury, 2019); Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick, *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* (The New Press, 2021).

45 Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [2004]), 21–37.

46 Lockman, *Contending Visions*, 66–99.

47 Sahar F. Aziz, *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom* (University of California Press, 2022), 4–5.

the widespread ignorance in the United States about the realities that Palestinians faced. Some Palestinians launched efforts to raise public awareness. They hoped that teaching Americans about Israel's violations of Palestinian human rights would convince the American public (and politicians) that unconditional US support for Israel ran afoul of America's self-proclaimed image as a champion of peace and human rights in the world.[48] Some activists tapped into more radical orientations of New Left and Black nationalist groups, drawing "parallels between Palestinian freedom fighters and other Third World revolutionaries in a strategy to gain broader support."[49]

But that justice framework—which portrayed the conflict as stemming from colonial oppression, rather than from religious difference—ran counter to the peace-through-surrender framework that was then dominant in the United States. The latter framework, popularized by the bestselling 1958 novel, *Exodus*, and the 1960 blockbuster movie of the same name, celebrated Israel's independence as a heroic culmination of Jewish religious yearning and as a modernizing project akin to that of the United States. This framework centered the Holocaust—not decolonization—as the central event of the twentieth century, and it depicted Palestinian resistance to Zionist colonialism as being rooted in animus against Jews, rather than in anticolonialism.[50]

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Palestinians formed alliances with other peoples from the global south and drew on a shared language of decolonization. In the United States, Palestinians were active in the movement to end apartheid, and anti-apartheid activists supported the Palestinian cause. As South African anti-apartheid leader Nelson Mandela explained in 1990, he identified with Palestinians because "just like ourselves they are fighting for the right of self-determination."[51]

48 Pamela E. Pennock, *The Rise of the Arab American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight Against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s–1980s* (Univeristy of North Carolina Press, 2017).

49 Pennock, *Rise*, 59.

50 Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 58-93; Maha Nassar, "Exodus, Nakba Denialism, and the Mobilization of Anti-Arab Racism," *Critical Sociology* 49, no. 6 (2023): 1037–1051. To see how this history is filtered through a peace-through-surrender framework, see Walter Russell Mead, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People* (Knopf, 2022).

51 Huthifa Fayyad, "Nelson Mandela and Palestine: In His Own Words," *Middle East Eye*, February 11, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/nelson-mandela-30-years-palestine.

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the US as the sole remaining superpower, the language of decolonization waned. Palestinians began calling for a truncated state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip instead. As global calls for a two-state solution grew louder, the peace-through-dialogue framework gained salience. During the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations known as the Oslo peace process (1993–2000), the US cast itself as an honest broker between two groups of roughly equal power, urging each side to make painful concessions and marginalize their respective extremists. Palestinians were now reframed as potential partners for peace, but only if they engaged in dialogue and discarded their calls for full national liberation.[52]

The peace-through-dialogue framework proved frustrating to Palestinians. Those living under Israeli occupation continued to face interrogations at militarized checkpoints, late-night army raids on their homes, arbitrary arrest and detention, incarceration without trial, and state-inflicted physical and sexual torture.[53] These well-worn tools of colonial domination impacted the daily lives of all Palestinians living under Israeli military rule (and continue today).[54]

But the impact of this colonial violence was largely ignored by both peace frameworks. Instead, they focused on instances of Palestinian violence, most notably suicide bombings, decoupling this phenomenon from its broader colonial context.[55] The peace-through-surrender framework cited such instances of Palestinian violence to advance the claim that Palestinians as a whole were uninterested in achieving a negotiated peace.[56] Meanwhile, the peace-through-dialogue framework tended to set up a "good Palestinian/bad Palestinian" binary: Palestinians who embraced the Oslo process were

52 Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (Macmillan, 2005). For a critical assessment of the US role in Israel-Palestinian negotiations, see, Rashid Khalidi, *Brokers of Deceit: How the US Has Undermined Peace in the Middle East* (Beacon Press, 2013).

53 Amnesty International, "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians: Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity," *Amnesty International*, February 1, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/5141/2022/en/.

54 Rania Muhareb, et. al., "Israeli Apartheid: Tool of Zionist Settler Colonialism," *Al-Haq*, November 29, 2022, https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/12/22/israeli-apartheid-web-final-1-page-view-1671712165.pdf.

55 On the relationship between suicide bombings and colonial violence, see Nasser Abufarha, *The Making of a Human Bomb: Ethnography of Palestinian Resistance* (North Carolina University Press, 2009).

56 See, for example, Kenneth Levin, *The Oslo Syndrome: Delusions of a People Under Siege* (Smith and Kraus, 2005).

hailed as pragmatic moderates while critics were denounced as anti-peace extremists.[57]

Meanwhile in the United States, Muslims, Arabs, and especially Palestinians continued to be racialized as a threat. This resulted in increased government persecution, often done in the name of "combating terrorism."[58] Government persecution intensified in the wake of the Second Intifada (2000–2005), the September 11th attacks, and the so-called Global War on Terror. Law enforcement officials conducted sweeping raids of homes, offices, and mosques, and they arrested, detained, and deported thousands of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians, sometimes relying on secret evidence to do so.[59]

As a result, throughout the 2000s, members of these communities—and their allies—were subjected to two hegemonic peace frameworks that proved difficult to overcome. The peace-through-surrender framework cast Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians as inherently threatening, while the peace-through-dialogue framework set up political litmus tests (such as "condemning terrorism") for them to be conditionally accepted as moderates. Meanwhile, Israeli colonial violence—and Palestinians' experiences of that violence—continued to be erased in news coverage, K-12 curricula, and wide swaths of academia. [60] Those erasures further entrenched the peace frameworks in American discourse while marginalizing the justice framework.

Despite these structural barriers, over the past two decades, the justice framework has gained traction, especially among young people. Young Americans are generally more diverse and more interested in enacting social and political change, while new media and social media platforms allow them to learn (often from other young people) how different structures of power intersect with one another.[61] The rise of other justice-oriented

57 I draw here on Mamdani's "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Harmony, 2005). For an example of this framework, see Ross, *The Missing Peace*. On how Palestinians contended with these discursive constraints, see Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (Vintage, 2007).

58 Aziz, *The Racial Muslim*, 113–32.

59 Aziz, *The Racial Muslim*, 169–89; Khaled Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (University of California Press, 2019).

60 Evelyn Alsultany, Arabs and *Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York University Press, 2012); Antero Garcia, Rubén A. González, Kristen Jackson, and Nicole Mirra, "Teaching About Palestine in US Schools From the 1980s to Present Day: A Systematic Review of Research," *Educational Researcher* (2025): DOI: 0013189X251365922; Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar, *Anthropology's Politics: Disciplining the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2020).

61 "Americans Under 30 Now About Equally Likely to Trust Information from

movements, including racial justice, climate justice, and gender justice movements, has further normalized critiques of structural violence while foregrounding the need to dismantle oppressive systems.[62]

For many young people whose families hail from the global south, the legacies of colonialism—coupled with their news consumption habits—deeply impact their views on Palestine. They often follow social media accounts of young Palestinians living under occupation, allowing them to see firsthand (and in very visceral ways) Israel's discrimination, dehumanization, and killing of Palestinians. Those images often echo their own families' painful stories of colonial violence, leading them to develop of deep sense of connectedness with Palestinians. Muslims in particular are pained that Israel's restrictions on praying at the Aqsa Mosque (Islam's third holiest site) and desecration of Muslim holy sites continue unabated.[63] These policies, along with the exhaustively documented Israeli abuses of Palestinians human rights, "serve as a constant reminder for Muslims [and their allies] that colonialism is alive and well."[64]

In response, young people in the US have begun revisiting the tools of decolonization that helped earlier movements end formal colonial rule. In 2005, they began mobilizing around the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, modeled on the South African campaign that helped end apartheid there.[65] On college and university campuses, student activists worked across broad coalitions to pass BDS resolutions at their respective institutions.[66] Such campaigns, coupled with a broad range of transnational

National News Outlets, Social Media," *Pew Research Center*, October 29, 2025, available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/29/how-americans-trust-in-information-from-news-organizations-and-social-media-sites-has-changed-over-time/sr_25-10-29_trust-in-info_2/.

62 Melissa Deckman, "The Power of Diverse Networks among Young Americans," *Public Religion Research Institute* (*PRRI*), January 30, 2024, https://prri.org/spotlight/the-power-of-diverse-networks-among-young-americans/; "The Gen Z Activism Survey," *United Way of the National Capital Area*, March 5, 2024, https://unitedwaynca.org/blog/gen-z-activism-survey/.

63 Amnesty International, "Israel's Apartheid," 176; US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, "West Bank and Gaza 2023 International Religious Freedom Report," *US Department of State*, 2024, https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/west-bank-and-gaza/.

64 Hashemi, "Palestine," 200.

65 For more on the BDS movement, see "BDS Call," *BDS Movement*, 2025, https://bdsmovement.net/bds-call.

66 For a list of successful BDS campaigns, including on college campuses, see "US BDS Victories," *US Campaign for Palestinian Rights*, published July 25, 2022, last

pro-Palestine activism, ushered in a profound shift in US public opinion on Palestine.[67]

Seeking to quell the pro-Palestine student movement and the BDS campaign, pro-Israel advocacy organizations have sought to label them as antisemitic. Canary Mission, founded in 2015, targets hundreds of pro-Palestine students and professors by posting their photos, dossiers, and personal information online to dox them and to jeopardize their employment.[68] Such campaigns, in line with the peace-through-surrender framework, often draw on anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racist tropes in an effort to silence pro-Palestine speech.[69]

In the face of these intimidation tactics, university leaders have frequently been caught flat-footed in the face of campaigns that seek to demonize Palestinian and pro-Palestine students. While administrators often issue statements affirming students' right to free speech, they tend to simultaneously disavow "hate speech." Yet by characterizing calls for Palestinian liberation as hate speech, such statements unwittingly adopt elements of the peace frameworks while delegitimizing the justice framework. In doing so, such statements can perpetuate anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian racist tropes, even as universities try to incorporate these groups into their diversity initiatives.[70]

With this understanding of the three frameworks, their history, and their salience, we next examine how these frameworks have shaped interreligious encounters.

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updated March 14, 2025, https://uscpr.org/activist-resource/boycott-divestment-and-sanctions/bdswins/.

67 Karam Dana, *To Stand with Palestine: Transnational Resistance and Political Evolution in the United States* (Columbia University Press, 2025). Regarding the shift in US public opinion over the past two decades, see "Less Than Half in U.S. Now Sympathetic Toward Israelis," *Gallup*, March 6, 2025, https://news.gallup.com/poll/657404/less-half-sympathetic-toward-israelis.aspx.

68 Middle East Studies Association Committee on Academic Freedom, "Exposing Canary Mission: A Resource for College and University Leaders," *Middle East Studies Association*, April 18, 2018, https://mesana.org/pdf/Exposing_Canary_Mission.pdf.

69 Omar Zahzah, "The New McCarthyism: On Canary Mission's Toxic Blacklisting of Pro-Palestinian Sentiment," *Literary Hub*, September 24, 2025, https://lithub.com/the-new-mccarthyism-on-canary-missions-toxic-blacklisting-of-pro-palestinian-sentiment/.

70 Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken: The Failed Promise of Muslim Inclusion* (New York University Press, 2022), 193–207. For more on anti-Palestinian racism, see "Anti-Palestinian Racism: One-Page Summary," *The Institute for the Understanding of Anti-Palestinian Racism*, last updated 2025, https://antipalestinianracism.org/anti-palestinian-racism-one-page-summary/.

Interreligious Encounters through the Peace and Justice Frameworks

The peace-through-surrender framework, which often casts Islam and Muslims as being inherently hostile to Jews and the West, tends to show little interest in interreligious encounters. As a result, most traditional interfaith dialogue programs emanate from the peace-through-dialogue framework. Yet by utilizing religion as "a depoliticizing peacebuilding instrument, a 'soft power' deployed in reconfiguring realities of domination," such programs can end up reproducing systems of hierarchy and control that marginalize those who adopt the justice framework.[71]

We see such marginalization in otherwise well-meaning programs that seek to facilitate interfaith dialogue. For example, published training manuals for interreligious encounters on US college campuses tend to center Zionist students' personal attachments to Israel while downplaying or ignoring the personal attachments and ethical commitments that Palestinian students and their allies have toward Palestine. In a recent handbook aimed at helping student affairs staff navigate religious difference, the three chapters that discuss Palestine/Israel all highlight Zionist Jewish students' feelings and connections to Israel. But they do not contain any discussion of how Palestinians and their allies personally relate to Palestine, whether as a homeland, a holy land, or an ethical calling. The pro-Palestine perspective is only offered within the context of abstract political debates.[72] Practitioners are therefore left with a myopic view of how students personally engage with Palestine/Israel.

Such presentations also ignore how colonial legacies shape students' worldviews. Centering Jewish attachments to Israel can erase the ways in which Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students, along with their allies, deeply believe that their moral, ethical and religious commitments to combat oppression in all its forms require them to stand publicly for Palestinian liberation. And students frequently do so despite the physical and professional risks they face. As the Muslim Law Student Association at the University of Michigan explained in 2021, "[p]rofessional retaliation for

71 Omer et al., "Touring Absences," 318.

72 Kathleen M. Goodman, Mary Ellen Giess, and Eboo Patel, eds. *Educating about Religious Diversity and Interfaith Engagement: A Handbook for Student Affairs* (Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2019). The three chapters are: Megan Lane, "When Causes Collide: Exploring Intersectionality and the Middle East Conflict," 187–93; Megan Lane, "Engaging with Religious Diversity on a Regular Basis," 194–99; and Sheila Katz and Josh Feigelson, "Understanding Jewish Students on Campus," 246–60.

Palestine related work is not a Muslim-specific issue, however, it impacts the Muslim community in disparate ways." Yet, they insisted, they would remain steadfast in their work because "the shared trauma Muslims experience by witnessing the destruction of Palestinian communities, the desecration of revered Islamic holy sites, and the Islamophobic language often surrounding the issue is undeniable."[73]

Despite their deep personal, spiritual, and ethical commitments to Palestinian liberation, all too often Muslims are expected to downplay those commitments during interfaith gatherings. Foregrounding Palestinian experiences in interfaith settings is often portrayed as "partisan" and a violation of the supposed "neutral, apolitical space" of interfaith dialogue.[74] Muslims also worry that their efforts to make Palestinian experiences more visible will result in them being labeled antisemitic.[75] In recent years, the term "faithwashing" has emerged to describe how interreligious gatherings are set up in ways that foreclose discussions of Palestinians' experiences and the moral stakes of affirming clearly their right to live freely in their homeland. The result has been a growing discomfort among Muslims to engage in interreligious activities.[76]

October 7th and the Genocide in Gaza: Institutional Responses and Student Encampments

The consequences of these longstanding asymmetries became apparent in the aftermath of the October 7th attack and the subsequent genocide in Gaza.[77] Presidential statements sent in the days immediately following

73 Cited in Evelyn Alsultany, *Broken*, 202.

74 See for example, Yehezkel Landau, "Adaptive Facilitation: A Requirement for Interfaith Discussions on Israel/Palestine," in Mosher, et. al., eds., *With the Best*, 116.

75 Sahar Aziz and Mitchell Plitnick, "Presumptively Antisemitic: Islamophobic Tropes in the Palestine-Israel Discourse," *Rutgers Law School's Center for Security, Race and Rights*, November 2023, https://csrr.rutgers.edu/issues/presumptively-antisemitic/, 48–50.

76 Sunaina Maira, "Muslim American Youth and Post-9/11 Islamophobia: Interfaith Activism and the Limits of Religious Multiculturalism," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Islamophobia*, ed. Irene Zempi (Routledge, 2019), 379–95.

77 Raz Segal was the first genocide scholar to publicly state that Israel was committing a genocide in Gaza. See Raz Segal, "A Textbook Case of Genocide," *Jewish Currents*, October 13, 2023, https://jewishcurrents.org/a-textbook-case-of-genocide. Since then, numerous other scholars and international bodies have concluded that Israel is conducting a genocide in Gaza. See, for example, United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry, "Legal Analysis of the Conduct of

October 7th frequently adopted one-sided, pro-Israel framings.[78] In some cases, presidential statements made Palestinian and pro-Palestine students feel directly attacked.[79] In other cases, vague wording left them unsure about where they stood with their institutional leadership.

Within the first few weeks alone, Israel's bombing of camps, hospitals, and other civilian targets in Gaza had killed nearly 9,000 Palestinians, mainly civilians.[80] Justice-oriented students followed the news through direct reporting from friends and local journalists in Gaza. Reports included horrific firsthand accounts of civilian deaths and stomach-churning images of maimed and charred Palestinian bodies. Moved by their personal connections and ethical commitments to the people of Gaza, and building on years of transnational solidarity activism, student activists decided to do what they could to choke off the seemingly endless supply of US aid and weapons to Israel. To that end, they sought to uncover their universities' financial ties to companies that profited from the genocide in Gaza and to urge them to divest.[81] Most administrators refused to disclose, let alone divest from, their universities' investments. The refusals spurred an unprecedented wave of student protests demanding an immediate ceasefire, that universities disclose their financial investments, and that they divest from companies that profit from genocide.[82]

Israel in Gaza Pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment for the Crime of Genocide," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, September 16, 2025, https://www.un.org/unispal/document/commission-of-inquiry-report-genocide-in-gaza-a-hrc-60-crp-3/.

78 Hilary Houlette, "Amid the Fray: A Thematic Discourse Analysis of Presidential Statements Issued in Response to the 2023 War in Israel and Palestine," *Innovative Higher Education* 49, no. 5 (2024): 927–952.

79 Paola Rodriguez, "Pro-Palestine Protest Canceled Following UA President Statement," *Arizona Public Media*, October 12, 2023, https://news.azpm.org/p/azpmnews/2023/10/12/217767-pro-palestine-protest-canceled-following-ua-president-statement/; Mariam Hawatmeh, "Belonging Through Collective Forbearance: A Case Study of Resilience, Campus Climate and the Experiences of Arabic-Speaking International Students at the University of Arizona" (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2025).

80 "Israel-Palestine Crisis: Gaza's North Cut Off from Aid; Death Toll Rising," *UN News*, November 2, 2023, https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/11/1143107.

81 Derek Seidman, "Using Research to Uncover Campus Complicity in Genocide," *Jacobin*, September 29, 2024, https://jacobin.com/2024/09/power-research-universities-palestine-1968.

82 On the size of the protests, see "Israel/Palestine Protest Data Dashboards," Crowd-Counting Consortium, February 26, 2024, https://ash.harvard.edu/articles/crowd-counting-blog-israel-palestine-protest-data-dashboards/. On protesters' demands, see "'Divest from Israel': Decoding the Gaza Protest Call Shaking US Campuses," Aljazeera, April 30, 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/

Instead, several universities convened interfaith dialogues. But such events proved unsatisfactory to justice-oriented students because they did not see religion as the source of the problem to begin with. As one Muslim student at the University of Michigan explained, "You can't have your chaplains meet up for so-called authentic, respectful dialogue in a sanitized setting when students feel so deeply about their university being complicit in a genocide."[83] Students expressed frustration that their chaplains were misdiagnosing the problem, and in doing so, failing to provide students with the tools they needed to confront what they saw as the most pressing moral and spiritual challenge of their lives.

Other universities launched campus events on "Islamophobia and Antisemitism." But these, too, left justice-oriented students feeling alienated. By framing Israel's war in Gaza—and its reverberations on US college campuses—as a conflict rooted in religious animus, university leaders actively privileged the peace frameworks over the justice framework. Moreover, using the term "Islamophobia" further erased Palestinians' unique experiences as well as the political and military contexts that justice-oriented students saw as the core driver of conflict.[84] Likewise, pairing the term "Islamophobia" with "antisemitism" erased the experiences of anti-Zionist Jews and reinforced stereotypes about Arabs, Muslims, and Palestinians being inherently antisemitic.[85] Thus, framing university-led conversations in this way narrowed the range of permissible viewpoints and eroded these students' trust that their universities were spaces for critical inquiry and moral courage.

By April 2024, the genocide in Gaza had passed the six-month mark with no end in sight. International organizations issued grim reports: over 32,000 Palestinians killed, 75% of the population displaced, 84% of health facilities damaged or destroyed, and a collapsed education system.[86] Student

news/2024/4/30/divest-from-israel-breaking-down-the-us-student-protesters-demands.

83 Dilshad D. Ali, "After Spring Protests and Encampments: How Chaplains are Caring for Student Spiritual Health," *Interfaith America*, October 10, 2024, https://www.interfaithamerica.org/article/chaplains-caring-student-spiritual-health/.

84 Evelyn Alsultany, "Antisemitism and Islamophobia: The University's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Response to October 7, 2023," Journal of Palestine Studies 53, no. 4 (2024): 8–24, 11.

85 Alsultany, "Antisemitism"; Aziz and Plitnick, "Presumptively Antisemitic."

86 "Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel: Flash Update # 149, *United Nations OCHA*, April 3, 2024, https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-149#:~:text=Between%207%20October%202023%20and, according%20to%20MoH%20in%20Gaza; "Gaza Strip Interim Damage

activists saw their universities' refusal to disclose and divest as a function of outside pressures from donors, parents, alumni, trustees, and politicians. In response, some students decided to ratchet up their counterpressure. As a Columbia encampment spokesperson explained, "We have tried referendums, we have tried peacefully protesting—at every turn, they [university officials] have violated their own policies to crack down, and so we decided that an escalation was necessary because we refuse to have this [genocide] go on for any longer."[87]

Student protesters reported that the encampments were some of the only places on campus where they felt empowered to channel their personal pain into a movement for broader change. As one student from Middlebury College explained, the encampment "was really a community collectively doing what we feel like we could to influence the ongoing genocide but also challenge the systems of domination that are furthering the genocide, the same systems that are doing so much bad."[88] For many students, the encampments were not just about supporting the Palestinians, but about challenging broader structures of injustice, including on their own campuses.

In a bid to force the encampments to disband, administrators at several schools cut student protesters off from institutional access, including access to chaplains. In response, student protesters began to lead their own interreligious encounters in ways that reflected their shared justice framework. At the Harvard encampment, students jointly offered Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Indigenous, and Jewish blessings. In contrast to traditional interfaith services, the student protesters saw their shared religious rituals as being in service to—not in place of—collective work toward Palestinian liberation. As Harvard Divinity School graduate student Shir Lovett-Graff explained, "It was a really incredible opportunity to redefine what multifaith gathering could look like … to share ritual traditions with

Assessment," *The World Bank*, Summary Note, March 29, 2024, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/14e309cd34e04e40b90eb19afa7b5d15-0280012024/original/Gaza-Interim-Damage-Assessment-032924-Final.pdf.

87 Instagram post, NYCPYM, April 17, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C54bO1gNkqq/?hl=en. See also Anna Rajagopal and Kaitlyn Cook, "Columbia's Gaza Solidarity Encampment: A Timeline," *Institute for Palestine Studies* blog, May 4, 2024, https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655523.

88 "Anonymous Gaza Solidarity Encampment Oral History Transcript," *Middlebury College Special Collections*, 2025, https://archive.org/details/moh_c181_2025-encampment-senior-student_002.

people not from those traditions, and to re-create those traditions within a Palestine justice framework."[89]

Student protesters also saw interfaith gatherings as a means of mutual protection. At the University of California, Berkeley, Muslims at the encampment there gathered for Friday communal prayers while allies formed a protective cordon around them, ensuring that worshippers would not be attacked by police or counter-protesters. Together they listened to sermons about Muslims' duty to protect the weak and to stand up to tyranny, highlighting the intersections between Islamic teachings and the justice framework.[90]

These types of gatherings were especially meaningful for students who felt under attack by their own universities. Columbia University student Serena Rasoul reported feeling isolated on her campus as a Palestinian American, especially in the weeks following October 7th. For her, the encampment "was just such a joyful experience" because it "was the only place that we felt safe and could fully be our authentic selves." That authenticity was enhanced by being in community with people from different religions. Rasoul explained, "We had Buddhist meditation circles early in the morning, we had Shabbat dinner on Fridays, we had a Seder dinner for Passover, we had salah [Muslim prayers] throughout the day on Sunday."[91]

Jewish protesters in the encampments often undertook the additional hermeneutical move of decoupling Judaism from Zionism, thereby reorienting their historical and religious traditions toward what they saw as a more inclusive understanding of liberation.[92] With the Columbia encampment falling on Passover, graduate student Jared Kannel explained how he rejected an identity-centered understanding of the holiday, observing it instead within a broader justice framework: "Passover is the story of our escape from slavery in the land of Egypt, and I think we need to recognize

89 Quoted in Chloë-Arizona Fodor, "'The protest is a ritual': How faith found a place in Palestine solidarity encampments," *Religion News Service*, June 13, 2024, https://religionnews.com/2024/06/13/encampment-ritual/.

90 Hatem Bazian, "Juma at UC Berkeley's Solidarity Camp," posted April 26, 2024, YouTube, 1hr. and 19 min., https://www.youtube.com/live/V64QlRPDfN0?si=fk6eVABHzqF4c-W3.

91 Kholood Eid, "The Beauty of the Gaza Encampment at Columbia," *Hammer & Hope* 4, Summer 2024, https://hammerandhope.org/article/columbia-encampment-gaza.

92 In doing so, they were drawing on a larger tradition of Jewish anti-Zionist praxis. See Omer, *Days of Awe*.

that on Passover it's important to stand up for oppressed people everywhere, whether they're Jewish or not."[93]

In other words, far from seeing religious difference as a source of friction that needed to be transcended for the sake of achieving peace, students at the encampments treated each other's religious traditions as a shared source of spiritual nourishment as they worked together toward achieving justice. In doing so, they developed their own decolonial religious literacy that centered on their belief that the liberation of all people is interdependent.

Within a few weeks, these interreligious solidarity activities were quashed, along with the encampments themselves. On several campuses, administrators sent in police to break up the gatherings, issued suspensions to student leaders, and withheld diplomas from those about to graduate.[94] Such actions further reinforced the stereotype that pro-Palestine activists – and the justice framework they espoused – were inherently dangerous. The results were a chilling of speech and a reluctance among students of various political beliefs to talk about Palestine/Israel.[95] Palestinian students and their allies were hit especially hard. Studies conducted by Stanford and Harvard universities reported that longstanding institutional biases, coupled with university responses to student protests paved the way for pro-Palestine students to be harassed, doxed, and attacked on and off campus, as well as online.[96] These narratives and policies also served as the political scaffolding that the Trump administration later used to arrest and try to deport pro-Palestine students.[97]

93 "Inside the Seder Dinner on Columbia's Gaza Protest Encampment," *CNN*, April 23, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/23/us/video/seder-passover-columbia-university-protests-ny-digvid.

94 Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and College Pulse, "2024 Student Encampment Protests Report," 2024, https://reports.collegepulse.com/hubfs/Student_Encampment_Protests.pdf?hsLang=en.

95 "2025 College Free Speech Rankings Expose Threats to First Amendment Rights on Campus," *FIRE*, September 5, 2024, https://www.thefire.org/news/2025-college-free-speech-rankings-expose-threats-first-amendment-rights-campus.

96 Stanford University, "Rupture and Repair;" Harvard University, "Final Report."

97 American Association of University Professors (AAUP), "Crackdowns on Campus Protest," *AAUP*, December 2024, https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/AAUP_Campus_Protests.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com; "Trump and Project Esther Seek to Dismantle Campus Advocacy for Palestinian Rights," *Institute for Middle East Understanding Policy Project*, Policy Project Memo, 2025, https://www.imeupolicyproject.org/memos/trump-and-project-esther-seek-to-dismantle-campus-advocacy-for-palestinian-rights.

Looking Ahead: Addressing Imbalances on Campus and Beyond

Thus far, we have discussed cases of interreligious encounters in which participants generally share the same framework. Looking ahead, the challenge for colleges and universities will be to foster more inclusive campus programming that engages people across different frameworks. The good news is that interreligious studies scholars, educators, and practitioners—working together with subject matter experts—are well-positioned to contribute to this effort.

To be sure, college and university campuses face differing levels of pressure—both internal and external—that will inform what types of activities can be undertaken. Likewise, many facilitators may be uncomfortable wading into what they see as risky political territory. Yet, as we have seen above, efforts to strip interreligious encounters from their broader political context can end up silencing those students whose perspectives and lived experiences do not allow for such segmentation.

Below I offer six suggestions to begin ameliorating some of the current imbalances on campus and beyond.

1. *Undertake self-reflection*. Each of us has a primary framework that shapes how we approach conversations about Palestine/Israel. Those who claim to be "neutral" or say they see "both sides of the conflict" are likely operating from the peace-through-dialogue framework. The goal here is to critically reflect on how we acquired our primary framework and begin learning more about other frameworks. Ask yourself: What underlying values and assumptions inform how I see the world? What lived experiences, personal connections, and media selections shape my worldview? Which frameworks are less familiar to me? How can I learn more about those frameworks?

2. *Encourage comparative framework analyses*. When facilitating interactions, whether during interreligious encounters, class meetings, or campus events, encourage participants to compare their own primary framework with those of others. A comparative framework analysis—in which participants compare texts, pictures, media stories, etc. and discuss their underlying assumptions—can help them process different worldviews in ways that are not directly tied to their identity. Be sure the justice framework is included: Efforts to discourage the use of terms like "settler colonialism," "apartheid," and "genocide" in discussions of Palestine/Israel effectively try to

delegitimize the justice framework. While these terms may offend some people, they are central to any analysis of structural power in Palestine/Israel. Avoiding them would further exclude the justice framework.

3. *Center frameworks over feelings*. As students encounter unfamiliar frameworks, they may experience discomfort and even feel aggrieved. Such feelings are normal, especially if they feel their identity is being attacked. Teachers can create "spaces of repair" in their classrooms to help students move through discussions of controversial topics.[98] It is also imperative that facilitators help students recognize the difference "feeling unsafe" and "being unsafe." This is especially urgent given the ways in which the IHRA definition of antisemitism and allegations of Jewish unsafety have been used by outside groups to demonize and silence pro-Palestine students.[99] To be sure, we must confront instances of antisemitism when they occur, but we should do so as part of our shared commitment to ending all forms of discrimination.[100]

4. *Host series, not dialogues.* Single events that purport to present "both sides" of a topic related to Palestine/Israel are usually ineffective. Conversations in which all participants share a peace-through-dialogue framework tend to minimize the role of colonial violence as a central driver of conflict. Events in which speakers come from different frameworks frequently devolve into heated debates that provide little educational value. Rather than "one-and-done" events, consider hosting a series of talks, film screenings, and art exhibits that include the justice framework. Ensure the histories, analyses, and experiences of colonialism and decolonization are well represented.

98 Lisa Dillinger, "A Duty to Repair: Navigating the Context and Complexity of Discussing Controversial Issues," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 44, no. 4 (2025): 377–394.

99 AAUP and Middle East Studies Association (MESA), "Discriminating Against Dissent: The Weaponization of Civil Rights Law to Repress Campus Speech on Palestine," November 2025, https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/2025-11/Discriminating-Against-Dissent_0.pdf.

100 See Shane Burley and Ben Lorber, *Safety Through Solidarity: A Radical Guide to Fighting Antisemitism* (Melville House, 2024); and "Curriculum on Antisemitism from a Framework of Collective Liberation," *PARCEO*, https://www.antisemitismcurriculum.org.

5. *Resist outside pressure campaigns*. Expanding campus programming in this way may lead to accusations of platforming antisemitic viewpoints. Recognize that such accusations are often intended to shut down more inclusive conversations about Palestine/Israel.[101] It is imperative that universities stand firm in their commitment to free speech and academic freedom while also rejecting efforts to link expressions of the justice framework to antisemitism. The same holds for campus protests. To be sure, universities have a responsibility to set time, place, and manner rules and to maintain firm norms against harassment and personal attacks. But the rules must be applied equally, fairly, and transparently.

6. *Learn from student protesters.* The field of interreligious studies awaits further research into the interfaith solidarity activities that were held at the encampments. Scholars should work with organizers to collect and archive encampment ephemera (scriptures, reading lists, social media posts, etc.) and undertake in-depth textual analyses. In addition, more surveys, interviews, and longitudinal studies of encampment participants are sorely needed. They can help us better understand how the spiritual nourishment participants received from their peers has impacted them over time.

In sum, using a comparative framework analysis in discussions of Palestine/Israel incorporates a wider range of experiences and perspectives than traditional dialogue formats allow. This is especially needed given the historic exclusion of those whose lived experiences and ethical worldviews lead them to adopt the justice framework. While this approach does not claim to have all the answers, it can help us ask better questions, engage more student perspectives, and create more inclusive campus climates. Similar comparative framework analyses can also be used to facilitate discussions of other controversial topics. As we face a range of forces that seek to silence dissident voices in the United States and around the world, doing this work is more important than ever.

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A previous version of this article appeared on June 24, 2026, and was replaced by a new version on October 28, 2026. The new version contains a correction to footnote 76; no other edits were made.

101 AAUP and MESA, "Discriminating Against Dissent."

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