

## Palestine as a Measure of Justice: An Interview with Professor Karim Danna



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Palestine is no longer confined to a geographic context or reduced to a seasonal media issue; it has become a mirror reflecting internal contradictions in American society around the concepts of freedom and equality.

While mechanisms of repression accelerate to silence this shift, the circles of understanding and solidarity continue to expand—reframing Palestine as a defining marker in the global struggle over values.

Though this presence is increasing, it still confronts deeply entrenched political, media, and cultural barriers that aim to criminalize, distort, or marginalize it.

In this in-depth interview, we follow Professor Karim Danna through a wide-ranging analysis of public opinion shifts in the U.S. regarding the Palestinian cause, the role of the diaspora in reshaping resistance frameworks, the structural dimension of the Nakba, and the challenges faced by Palestinian students in

universities.

We also reflect on the central paradox: how, despite persistent efforts to erase and marginalize it, Palestine has become inseparable from America's internal battles over freedom and equality.

Karim Danna is a Palestinian-American academic and currently holds the Alison MacGregor Chair for Excellence and Transformative Research. He is also the founding director of the American Muslim Research Institute at the University of Washington Bothell.

Danna was born and raised in the city of Hebron in the West Bank before moving to the United States in the late 1990s. There, he pursued his academic career and earned a PhD in political science, focusing on comparative politics and Middle East studies.

His research centers on intersecting topics such as Islamophobia and discriminatory policies in the U.S., intersections of religion, race, and politics, Palestinian resistance in the diaspora and transnational narratives, public opinion shifts on Palestine in the U.S., social justice, and cross-minority solidarity.

In his 2025 book, "Standing with Palestine: Transnational Resistance and Political Transformation in the United States," Danna offers a profound examination of the evolving discourse on Palestine within American society and illustrates how Palestinian activists in the diaspora have helped build a powerful solidarity movement despite political marginalization.



What motivated you to write this book, and what message do you hope readers will take from it?

First, I'm Palestinian—I was born and raised in Palestine, and then I migrated to the United States in the late 1990s. I noticed that Palestine, Palestinians, and their suffering were not well understood by Americans.

I've always found it odd that Americans failed to grasp the essence of the Palestinian issue, and that the pursuit of justice in Palestine was not seen as inherently legitimate.

So, I began to ask: why? That question was one of the main motivations behind this book. Writing it took a long time and was both a personal reflection and a scholarly endeavor.

Another reason is that I observed a shift in how Palestine and Palestinian suffering were being addressed in the U.S., particularly over the last 15 to 20 years. That shift has gained momentum, and I felt it was something worth analyzing and documenting.

Professionally, I study Arab Americans and how they are racialized within the American context—whether Arab or Muslim—which gave me insight into the U.S. political and social landscape. It helped me consider how Palestinians, often viewed through a racialized or problematic national lens, are perceived.

So those were the overlapping motivations. As for what I hope readers gain from the book: I think I provide answers to questions many people are asking—Why didn't Americans understand the Palestinian issue before? Why is that changing now? And what exactly has changed? In the book, I offer a comprehensive analysis and a set of deep, guiding questions around these issues.

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In your view, what is the most misunderstood aspect of the Palestinian narrative?

What’s striking is that American culture, broadly speaking, celebrates the idea of standing with the underdog—the person who rises from nothing. Americans are proud of this idea; it’s woven into their national mythos. You see it in Hollywood films, where audiences are drawn to protagonists who lack power but fight against all odds.

But I always felt that this narrative never really applied when it came to Palestinians. And the question is: why? There are many reasons, but fundamentally, I believe it has to do with the concept of Orientalism—as described by Edward Said in 1978–1979.

Orientalism is a lens through which the West views the Arab and Muslim world, including Palestinians, and it produces deeply rooted stereotypes and distorted representations.

This lens has made Palestinians some of the most misunderstood people. And it's not just academic theory—it plays out in media and public discourse every day. What's baffling is that if you replace the word "Palestinian" with almost any other nationality in a context involving justice, you'll likely find empathy.

But when it comes to Palestine, regardless of political affiliation—right or left—the response is often negative. This is what we call the "Palestinian exception."

Many scholars have pointed to this phenomenon: one can be progressive on every issue—human rights, anti-colonialism, social justice—except Palestine. There are countless examples of how Palestinians are portrayed and how their struggle is distorted, and how anyone who supports them is quickly branded a terrorist.

I've always believed that if people truly knew the facts—if they saw the history as it is—they would sympathize more with Palestinians. Because what Palestinians are asking for is simple: equal rights and to be treated with dignity.

And I believe these are values that resonate deeply with American ideals. Of course, there's a complex political context that makes it difficult, but I am convinced that if Americans better understood the daily realities Palestinians endure, their perspective would change.

A striking example is that most Americans know who Jesus is, right? They know his story—but they don't know that Bethlehem, his birthplace, is in Palestine, and that it is a Palestinian Arab Christian city. That part of the story is completely absent from the American imagination about Palestinians. And that's a powerful kind of erasure.

It's astonishing to build your identity around a central religious narrative and yet completely erase a crucial piece of it. How is it that Americans empathize with Christians around the world but not with Palestinian Christians? That, too, is puzzling.

So yes, many factors converge here. But ultimately, Americans want to see themselves as "good people." At the level of government, it's a different story.

But among people, the lack of empathy has long been a major issue. And I think that's one of the biggest misunderstandings still present today.

You discussed in your book the shift in the narrative surrounding Palestine and "Israel" in the United States over the last two decades. Can you pinpoint the specific changes you've observed?

Yes, the first noticeable change is that, in the past, whenever Palestine was mentioned, it was largely ignored or stripped of legitimacy. It wasn't taken seriously in any meaningful way. Any harm done to Palestinians was often justified or presented as legitimate.

For instance, claims that Palestinians had a right to the land were dismissed out of hand, with the narrative asserting that the land belonged to "the Jewish people," without even entertaining the idea that others—Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike—had lived there for centuries and maintained deep historical and cultural ties to it.

What's changed is that empathy toward Palestinians has started to emerge, particularly over the last 15 to 20 years. Though this shift began taking shape about 25 years ago, we're now seeing a broader transformation in how Palestine is discussed in the American public sphere.

A significant indicator of this is the erosion of the rigid stereotype that Palestinians are inherently terrorists whose narratives are never legitimate. That's a profound change. There's now a growing willingness to understand Palestinian suffering and resistance through the lens of other oppressed peoples' struggles—a perspective that's increasingly resonant in American culture.

It's not that movements like Black liberation in the U.S. never considered Palestine before—they certainly did—but their expressions weren't as visible in the mainstream discourse as they are now.

So, the major transformation has been less in official policy and more in public discourse and popular culture, where alternative narratives about Palestine have become more common and empathetic.

Interestingly, the more people attempt to erase "Palestine" by replacing it with "Israel" in the public discourse, the more they actually spotlight Palestine. It's a paradox: trying to legitimize one side by erasing the other ends up amplifying the very thing you aim to suppress.

Essentially, how we define Israel and its legitimacy directly shapes how Palestine is either acknowledged or denied. Whether we like it or not, they are two sides of the same coin.

That binary has now entered public discussion, and we're seeing "Palestine"

spoken of more frequently and more positively, particularly on social media—which, over the past 25 years, has played a pivotal role in generating these conversations.

Palestine has increasingly become part of mainstream debate in many circles and is now at the heart of American political and cultural discussions.

I've long maintained that many issues in American politics are deeply tied to the question of Palestine. People are only now beginning to realize this, even though the connection has existed for a long time. If you're serious about addressing topics like freedom of speech or legal justice in the U.S., you'll inevitably encounter the Palestine question.

We're also witnessing significant changes in academic discourse. Today, there are far more voices writing and teaching about Palestine than there were 20 years ago. Back then, merely mentioning "Palestine" in a university setting could raise suspicions. Now, it's increasingly associated with human rights advocacy and humanitarian concerns.

So yes, the narrative is shifting. The way people talk about the issue is changing. There's a deeper understanding of what Zionism is and a growing awareness of its implications. This shift is evident across multiple arenas, but the clearest sign is the more positive, more frequent presence of Palestine in public discourse—a remarkable and important development.

So you're saying that much of this shift is rooted in empathy?

Yes, empathy plays a role—but it's also tied to rising awareness and education. That, in fact, is at the heart of my book. Let me break it down clearly. My book revolves around four pillars that I believe explain the transformation in the narrative around Palestine:

First, Palestinians themselves redefined their understanding of their struggle. After the Second Intifada, and during it, they endured extreme violence and repression. It became clear that traditional warfare or direct military confrontation would not bring victory.

From that realization emerged initiatives like the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, launched by Palestinian civil society groups. It was a call to the world saying: "We can't win this alone. We need the help of people of conscience. We need your support in advocating for Palestinian rights."

Second, Palestinians in the diaspora played a crucial role in changing the narrative. There are now generations of Palestinians living in countries like the U.S. who have become active in shaping public opinion. We're now into the second, third, and even fourth generation of Palestinians in America.

They're articulate, engaged, and capable of telling their story in compelling ways—something previous generations, especially under conditions of displacement, found difficult to do.

These diaspora communities have brought Palestine into the broader political, social, and cultural fabric of their societies. They've made Palestine visible and relevant far beyond its geographic confines.

Third is the internet. While a global factor, it has been transformative. The internet didn't just create new content; it created new ways for people to find each other, organize, and form communities. Early on, the content was sparse or hard to access.

But then search engines improved, followed by the rise of social media—which allowed people to create virtual communities and amplify Palestinian voices.

Fourth is the American domestic context itself. There have been internal shifts—like growing awareness around police brutality and the militarization of police forces, which became evident during protests like those at the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle.

That protest marked a turning point. The state's violent response shocked many people and led to growing skepticism of state power. Even before that, during the civil rights era, there were critiques of police violence.

But after Seattle, the scale of state force became impossible to ignore—and that opened space for broader critiques, including of U.S. foreign policy and Palestine.

All these factors have converged to create a new climate where Palestine can finally be seen through the lens of justice. And that has made all the difference.

Alongside movements like Black Lives Matter and other activist communities in the United States, how have these intersections fostered broader solidarity with Palestine—particularly from American Jewish activists?

Yes, this is a very important point. I explore it in depth in the book. In the 1990s, the emergence of what came to be known as the “New Historians” in Israel—Israeli scholars with access to declassified archives—began to challenge the official Israeli narrative of the 1948 war and the Nakba.

These historians published works that shed new light on the events surrounding Israel's founding, including the forced displacement of Palestinians.

At the same time, within the American context, a growing number of Jewish American voices also began to speak critically about Israel's policies and express solidarity with Palestinian rights. This number has continued to grow—among academics, activists, and even some rabbis.

This increasing visibility has created a clear split within the American Jewish community: one camp seeks to preserve unconditional support for Israel, while another insists that being Jewish does not equate to endorsing Zionism or the Israeli government's actions. These voices emphasize that their Jewish identity compels them to stand against oppression, including the oppression of Palestinians.

Organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now have emerged from this movement, advocating for Palestinian rights from within the Jewish community. Their presence has been vital in reshaping the discourse and offering an alternative Jewish perspective that is rooted in justice and human rights.

This shift is also tied to broader cultural transformations in the U.S., including greater acceptance of diversity and critical engagement with race, power, and identity. It has opened up space for reimagining what solidarity can look like—across ethnic, religious, and ideological lines.

Younger generations of American Jews are especially driving this change. They are more likely to question the traditional narratives and to empathize with the Palestinian cause, particularly when they see parallels with other struggles for justice around the world.

So yes, the intersection of movements like Black Lives Matter with Palestinian solidarity, combined with the efforts of progressive Jewish organizations, has created a broader and more inclusive coalition. This coalition not only challenges Israeli policies but also redefines what it means to advocate for justice in the 21st century.

This is a significant transformation that will likely continue to grow in influence, especially as younger generations take on more leadership roles in both political and cultural institutions in the U.S.

When do you think we might see a Palestinian lobby strong enough to rival the power of the pro-Israel lobby in the United States?

That's an interesting question—and one I've thought about a lot. Does it all come down to lobbying? Is political pressure the only tool that matters? Certainly, having a lobby is important. But if you're lobbying for a narrative that people fundamentally don't understand or relate to, then you're not going to get very far.

Part of what makes the pro-Israel narrative effective is that it resonates with many dominant elements of American cultural identity—particularly with the notion of shared Judeo-Christian values. That narrative fits into an already familiar frame. But much of the Palestinian experience has been racialized and marginalized, making it easier to dismiss or ignore.

So, when will there be a Palestinian lobby strong enough to shift policy? I don't know. That's a hard thing to predict. And lobbying alone might not be the answer. But I do believe that public opinion drives policy in the long run. When people begin to change their views, policy tends to follow.

Just recently, for the first time in history, polls showed that more Americans sympathize with Palestinians than with Israelis. That's a historic shift. If elected officials don't respond to that shift, they will eventually be replaced by those who do. That's how representative democracy works.

Also, when we talk about lobbying, we often limit our thinking to Capitol Hill and formal policy influence. But there are many other forms of advocacy—like storytelling, cultural engagement, and public education—that can be just as powerful. Speaking out for Palestinian rights and equality is itself a kind of pressure.

High-profile public figures like Gigi Hadid, Bella Hadid, and their father Mohamed Hadid have played a meaningful role in reshaping public opinion through their advocacy. I'm not saying everyone has to be a celebrity to make a difference—but when people with no direct ties to Palestine hear the story honestly, they're often moved. That changes things.

So, to the question of “when?”—I can't give a specific date. But I believe justice for Palestinians will come. And I hope it comes through peaceful means, grounded in equality—not privilege or supremacy.

We need to build a world where everyone is treated fairly, where no group is dominant over another. That's the vision. And I believe we're on that path. Justice can't be postponed forever. History teaches us that.

In one of your lectures, you mentioned that both the Nakba and the Oslo Accords were attempts to dismantle Palestinian society—but that they ultimately failed. Can you elaborate on how and why Palestinian society has endured, and whether the current genocide in Gaza will leave a lasting, perhaps even transformative, mark?

Yes, I believe this is at the heart of the conversation. The Nakba in 1948 was a deliberate, systematic effort to dismantle Palestinian society—uprooting between 750,000 to 900,000 people, not just from land, but from institutions, communities, futures. Oslo, decades later, while framed as a peace process, created deep internal divisions—geographical, political, psychological.

Yet, what's remarkable is that despite those ruptures, Palestinians remain connected. There's an identity, a collective memory, and a political consciousness that has endured—and even grown stronger—across generations

and continents. The refugee became not just a symbol of loss, but also of resilience.

And Gaza today? Gaza has become both a site of unimaginable suffering and extraordinary steadfastness. The genocide, which has been unfolding with terrifying clarity and visibility, will leave deep scars—but it is also forging new connections. Palestinians in Gaza are not alone. The world is watching. Solidarity networks are expanding.

This moment is revealing the structural racism of the global system and forcing people to ask uncomfortable questions about power, life, and who counts as fully human. In that way, Gaza may end up transforming not just Palestinian identity, but global ideas about justice and who gets to speak and survive.

Turning to the Trump administration's campaign against universities, how do you view the arrest of Palestinian student Mahmoud Khalil, particularly from your perspective as a university professor? What aspects of his case—and the broader trend of suspending or revoking student visas—trouble you the most?

This issue is a core component of today's broader debate. For decades, American universities have been vital spaces for free expression, often at the forefront of driving social change. But when it comes to targeting Palestinian activists or their supporters, the situation has become alarming. The university has long been seen as a safe space for the exchange of ideas and open debate.

Yet now, any call for Palestinian equality is being reduced to an accusation of inciting violence against Jews. That's deeply troubling.

The problem is multilayered. First, we must ask: What is the distinction between anti-Semitism and criticism of Zionism? Is it possible to oppose Zionism or Israeli policies without being accused of hating Jews?

This is not just about Mahmoud Khalil or the students who have had their visas revoked. It's a broader question about the extent to which society allows dialogue and the expression of differing viewpoints based on facts and logic. Can people still disagree freely, or is that no longer tolerated?

This is a question of free speech—and as we know, freedom of expression is one of the most sacred values in American culture. If that value is lost, we are facing a true crisis. And I'd add: If we want to preserve free speech in the U.S.

Today, we must fundamentally rethink how we talk about Palestine—how it is addressed in universities, in newspapers, in the media, and in popular culture.

There's another critical dimension here: These measures are designed to intimidate and instill fear. And they have very real consequences—students losing their education, their jobs, even their homes.

Their lives are being upended. I'm not downplaying the severity of the crisis. But I do want to emphasize that there are ongoing efforts to resist it, both legally and within communities.

In my view, these policies advanced by the Trump administration—policies aligned with the far-right—are now facing growing pushback. However, the core issue in America today is the extreme polarization between Republicans and Democrats. And sadly, the Democratic Party has done very little when it comes to Palestine or the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

That said, I believe a shift is underway. Legal challenges are emerging. There is grassroots mobilization. Does that give me hope? I feel both pessimistic and optimistic at once—a contradictory feeling, but a realistic one. Because, simply put, nothing will change until we reach a breaking point. And that's a painful truth.

There's a famous saying: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." What's happening today on American campuses is the third stage—resistance and aggressive pushback—which means the Palestinian movement is starting to have real impact. That explains the rise of entities like "Democrats for Israel"—a reaction to growing pro-Palestine pressure within the Democratic Party, prompting some to establish a faction specifically to defend Israel within the party itself.

This indicates a genuine shift in public opinion. And it's the youth—as we've seen time and again—who change the world. That's nothing new. It happened during the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter, and more. Palestine is no exception.

In truth, the Palestinian cause has become central to American political discourse and to American values. So it's no longer possible to speak of justice or American ideals without placing justice for Palestinians at the heart of that conversation—both in the U.S. and beyond.

Do you believe the problem is limited to the Trump administration, or have Democratic Party policies, particularly under President Biden, played a role in worsening the situation?

They absolutely bear responsibility. What I mean is this: Weapons are still being supplied to Israel, ammunition is still being delivered. Whether it's the Democratic or Republican Party—unfortunately, for Palestinians, that reality hasn't changed.

We're talking here about politics—about political entities operating within the machinery of the state. But when we speak about the people as part of the

political space, real change will come from them, not from policy. Policy will eventually catch up, but the spark must come from the public.

As for whether the Palestinian issue began with Trump—the answer is clearly no. Gaza has been bombed five times before. The Palestinian people have endured repeated wars, despite being unarmed. The occupation has lasted for decades, and Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship still face glaring discrimination in access to resources.

There is also the system of military checkpoints, the ID card regime, the labyrinth of permit regulations—all of it has been in place for years. And yet, Palestinians continue to speak out for their rights, while the U.S. has done precious little in response.

The Palestinian cause, left unresolved, only deepens and expands as a global threat. That's where we are today. Palestine has become a central issue in global politics, in American politics, and in regional and geopolitical dynamics.

If it is not addressed with seriousness—if it is not resolved based on justice and equality—then we are all in trouble.

Any value we claim to uphold—democracy, human rights, women's rights, equality—will be meaningless unless applied to Palestinians.

And the truth, as it stands today, is that these values have ceased to mean anything. So if we want to preserve even a shred of those ideals, Palestine must be at the center of our demands for justice and equality.

To conclude—what message would you offer to Palestinians, and to all those struggling for justice around the world?

I would say this: solidarity is real, and it is growing. The work that so many people are doing—whether in the streets, in classrooms, in community spaces, in courtrooms, or in online platforms—it matters. Every conversation, every protest, every petition, every vote of conscience is building something.

To Palestinians, I say: your perseverance, your creativity, your unbreakable commitment to justice continue to inspire people across the world. I know it often feels like your pain is invisible or your voice is silenced. But I assure you—it's not. Millions are listening. Millions are learning. And many are standing with you.

And to all those working for justice, I say: do not be discouraged by the enormity of the challenge. No empire, no matter how powerful, can erase the truth forever. And justice, though delayed, always finds its way forward.

Stay principled. Stay grounded. Build coalitions. Practice compassion. And never



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lose sight of the humanity at the heart of the struggle.

Because in the end, the measure of our justice is how we respond to injustice—not just when it affects us, but when it affects others. That’s the moral test of our time. And Palestine, for better or worse, has become the defining site of that test.

Let us not fail it.

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