

Why Did Generation Z Turn Against Israel?



Protesters gather during a march for Gaza at Freedom Plaza in Washington, on Saturday, January 13, 2024. (Photo: Jose Luis Magana / Associated Press)

The moment the October 7 events erupted and the ensuing brutal campaign of extermination unlike any in contemporary history began the United States found itself facing a deep chasm in public opinion on its most significant foreign policy issue: the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

Although this generational gulf, shaped by what’s known as “Generation Z” those born roughly between 1996 and 2010 did not emerge overnight, it represented an alarming rupture for Washington policymakers who had long relied on a broad pro-Israel consensus.

What are the key manifestations of this gap? How did it evolve over the years? What are its roots? Is this a turning point in the prevailing Israeli narrative and its popular backing in the U.S., or merely a youthful flare? And what are its prospective consequences? This article seeks to answer these questions and more.

Shocking Figures

Even before Generation Z, generational shifts were revealing a decline in U.S. sympathy toward Israel. Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) favored Israel over Palestinians by over 46%, and Generation X (1965–1979) by 32%. But with Millennials (1980–2000), the gap reversed to –2% for the first time.

Polling by the Pew Research Center (2019–2022) deepened the divide: among 18–29-year-olds, 61% sympathized with Palestinians versus 56% with Israelis. In the 30–49 bracket, 65% favored Israel and 55% the Palestinians; in the 50–64 group, 68% for Palestinians versus 45% for Israelis; and among those 65+, 78% supported Israel compared to 47% for Palestinians.

A separate Pew survey in 2022 found 41% of 18–29-year-olds supported Israel, against 69% of those 65+. Gallup polling from just before October 7 revealed that nearly half of young Democrats (49%) empathized with Palestinians, compared to 38% favoring Israel.

American Jews reflected this generational divide as well; in a 2020 Pew survey, 67% of Jewish Americans aged 65+ felt closely connected to Israel, versus 48% of those aged 18–29.

But the gap extends beyond simple empathy. It includes how younger generations characterize Israeli policies—as war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the belief that perpetrators must be held accountable, reflecting an informed understanding of the conflict contrary to Zionist portrayals of youthful ignorance.

A 2021 survey by Jewish Democratic Forward (JDF) revealed that among Jews under 40:

43% saw Israel's treatment of Palestinians as akin to U.S. racial segregation, compared to 27% aged 65+;

38% considered Israel an apartheid state, versus 13% of the older group;

33% believed Israel was committing genocide, compared to 15% of those 65+, and shockingly,

20% said Israel doesn't deserve to exist.

Within a month of the war's outbreak, a Quinnipiac University poll showed 65% of American youth strongly opposed sending arms or military aid to Israel—compared to 69% support among those 65+.

Two years into Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza, the generational divide remains pronounced. In a late-August poll by the Harris-Harvard and Harris-X groups, 60% of Gen-Z (ages 18–24) favored Hamas over Israel. Support for Israel rose consistently with age: 65% among 25–34-year-olds; 70% among 35–44; 74% among 45–54; 84% among 55–64; and 89% for those 65+.

Notably, the poll asked specifically about Hamas vs. Israel.

Despite this, half of all respondents described Israel's military effort as genocide, attributing their criticism to Israel's human rights violations, not antisemitism.

Student Rebellion: History's Lessons Paying Off

In spring 2024, Generation-Z led landmark campus protests across U.S. universities to oppose Israel's genocide in Gaza and to challenge what they saw as their institutions' complicity. Students halted campus operations for weeks, forcing administrations to end partnerships with Israeli institutions. Official responses by university leadership and the U.S. government were forceful, signaling the threat such activism posed.

Over the summer, universities and Zionist lobbying groups recalibrated: they imposed strict protest restrictions, expelled or suspended student leaders, and heightened campus security. The government leveraged federal funding and regulatory influence to coerce universities back toward pro-Israel narratives.

Graduates who had taken part in protests faced workplace retaliation, ranging from job denial to dismissal, yet these measures failed to extinguish the fervor of Gen-Z, many now fully supporting slogans like "From the River to the Sea" and armed resistance forms of dissent that mainstream Israel interprets as calls for its destruction.

Understanding the Gap: Years of Evolution

Jordan Muchnik, managing editor at VoxGov, argues that graphic images from Gaza including bloodshed witnessed by young Americans shocked Generation Z, many of whom hold broadly anti-colonial views that even align with Hamas's goal of Israel's elimination. Meanwhile, younger Jewish Americans have grown distant from founding narratives of Zionism and are less attached to the Holocaust-based ethos that bound older generations to Israel.

Adam Thal, professor of political science at Loyola Marymount University, says the Middle East conflict symbolizes for Gen Z a quintessential struggle of oppression and settler colonialism, making it resonate deeper than, say, conflicts in Ukraine or Sudan. Generation Z came of age amid Islamophobia following 9/11 and its hateful consequences.

They gravitated instead toward social justice and anti-racist movements, guided by widespread Muslim and Palestinian advocacy in legal, legislative, and community spheres over the past two decades.

Meanwhile, changing U.S. demographics rising diversity, immigrant and multiracial youth—dismantled the centrality of the white experience, forging a generation more attuned to the marginalized and resistant to imperialist narratives.

Outsmarting the Propaganda: Tech and Media Literacy

Generation Z and Millennials inherited and sharpened digital tools especially during the pandemic—that made them highly adept at detecting propaganda. Raised in the age of open internet and cultural pluralism, they treat mainstream media as service providers to be questioned, not trusted.

Israeli disinformation from the false rape narrative to claims about hospitals was deconstructed by digitally savvy youth who exposed AI-generated fabrications, flawed translations, and security-driven manipulation. Social media channels especially Palestinian voices offered raw, unfiltered visuals and human stories, captivating online youth and steering them toward the Palestinian perspective.

TikTok, used by over half of users under 30, became a powerful platform: #FreePalestine garnered over 31 billion views, versus 590 million for #IStandWithIsrael. These metrics underscore TikTok's role in defining Gen Z's worldview, especially amid reports of algorithmic suppression of Palestinian content on other platforms.

Lawmakers even considered banning TikTok, fearing its sway over youth; former presidential candidate Nikki Haley criticized it for instilling anti-Israel sentiment in 17% of its users. The platform's humor, personal clips, and protest tags turned into viral resistance—shaping discourse beyond institutional control.

Youth Flare or Historical Inflection?

Generation Z holds the keys to America's future: its eldest members are already eligible for Congress, and within a decade, for the presidency. They constitute around 20% of U.S. voters, and in key states, have swayed congressional, municipal, and state-wide outcomes elevating figures like Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, and electing Zahrah Mamdani in New York, a stronghold of Zionist influence.

They dominate university embodiment—from flagship institutions to community colleges—and are laying the groundwork for tomorrow's economy: opposing partnerships with entities complicit in genocide and apartheid, and challenging the entangled U.S.–Israel capitalist nexus.

This politically awakened generation has already participated in three presidential elections, matured under the shadows of the War on Terror, the rise of China–Russia tensions, the Ukraine war, and the Gaza genocide. They engage global challenges without racist or supremacist assumptions—a generational political identity in formation.

According to research by American religious studies groups, Generation Z is distinguished by its openness to diversity, awareness of U.S. colonial influence, empathy toward human suffering, and civic engagement—characteristics that will shape U.S. domestic and foreign policy in years to come.

Perhaps the most pointed summary comes from Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, who captured it succinctly: the real challenge is not “right versus left,” but “young versus old.”