



US foreign policy in Israel, Palestine hits close to home

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While they live thousands of miles from their homes in Israel and Palestine, some students have found their lives and the lives of loved ones affected by U.S. intervention in the region's ongoing conflict.

The Israeli-Palestinian territorial conflict, which began with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, is one of the longest running conflicts in the world today. While many geopolitical factors influence the fluctuating levels of violence, peace and stability in the region, U.S. foreign policy has historically had a significant impact.

Waleed Hijazi, a graduate student who grew up in Hebron in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, said he thinks it is obvious that the U.S. sides with Israel in the conflict. Hijazi thinks U.S. provision of military and financial aid to Israel, and failure to prevent the spread of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, proves where U.S. loyalties lie, he said.

The U.N. considers the settlements in the West Bank to be in violation of international law, but in November, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reversed the U.S.'s historically similar position.

Hijazi thinks this is disheartening because the settlements, which occupy

prime Palestinian land, further reinforce existing ethnic divisions, he said.

"Even when we travel, we have different roads," Hijazi said. "It's like apartheid. You don't see (the Israeli settlers), it's impossible. If you even approach like miles of (a settlement), you would be shot."

Etamar Bhastekar, a junior who grew up in Mizpe Ramon, near Tel Aviv, Israel, does not support the expansion of Israeli settlements but thinks most of the current settlements have existed for so long that they should remain, he said.

"I think that if we are there for such a long time, I think we have the right to own this land," Bhastekar said. "Especially after the '67 war, I don't think it's fair to give back the land."

While Hijazi thinks U.S. policy has been consistently pro-Israel and anti-Palestine, he thinks moves made by the Trump administration, like relocating the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, have been especially inflammatory, he said.

"Whenever the great powers like the U.S. come out with an executive order, that would just upset the Palestinians, and they'd just go out, they take it to the streets, they protest," Hijazi said. "Especially the Trump orders, like those that have to do with Jerusalem."

Hijazi said that although the West Bank does not see shelling and other severe violence like in Gaza, the conflict has still taken its toll on his family, friends and homeland as a whole. Several of his friends and loved ones were injured or killed in clashes with the Israeli Defense Forces, and his brother was jailed for five years at 16 on charges of building bombs, Hijazi said.

Bhastekar, who was enlisted in the IDF for three years, is pleased with most of the policy moves the Trump administration has made so far, particularly the embassy relocation, he said.

Bhastekar thinks strong support from allies like the U.S. is necessary to keep the

"The Jewish people always suffered from discrimination and racism and bloodshed."

Mohammed Abdalhadhi, a doctoral student from Gaza, has spent the past 19 years working in human rights and obtaining two master's degrees and a doctorate degree, returning to Gaza when he can,

Israeli rocket landing in his apartment's kitchen while he was out, he said.

Abdelhadhi thinks Trump's policies in the region, especially his reduction of funding for UNRWA and cutting of all United States Agency for International Development projects in

have lost humanitarian aid and jobs due to these cuts, he said.

While they disagree on whether U.S. foreign policy should change, there is one thing Hijazi, Bhastekar and Abdelhadhi all agree on: coming to a peaceful resolution will require Jews and Arabs in the region, particularly the younger generations, to interact more with one another. Hijazi thinks restricted freedom of movement between the Palestinian territories and Israel, which prevents most Palestinians from ever meeting an Israeli, holds back the peace process, he said. When Israelis and Palestinian Arabs, some of whom live and work together inside Israel, are able to grow up side by side, mutual understanding, respect and discourse can be developed, Hijazi said. Bhastekar agrees.

"I was not exposed (to Arabs)," Bhastekar said. "Which may be the problem, too. We are not mixed."

Abdelhadhi, whose views on Jews changed drastically when he traveled to Europe for school and met Jewish people, thinks the power lies in the hands of the people who are able to seek the same kind of exposure he did, he said.

"If the conflict was left to the people, maybe the problem would be solved more than the government," Abdelhadhi said. "The lack of communication, this is the problem."



Heidi Kirk Staff Photographer

Waleed Hijazi, a graduate student who grew up in the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, said he thinks the U.S. has always leaned pro-Israel and anti-Palestine.

Jewish state safe from violence perpetrated by the military wing of Hamas, the political party that governs the Gaza strip, he said. The U.S. and the EU and consider Hamas a terrorist organization.

"I think the question about peace is important, but more important is the question about Jewish land," Bhastekar said.

he said. Abdalhadhi said life in Gaza is very difficult, especially since an Israeli blockade was instituted in response to the election of Hamas in 2007.

Abdelhadhi was in Gaza working for the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine when the 2008 Gaza War broke out, and he witnessed immense devastation, including an

Palestine have made an already-dire situation much worse, he said.

UNRWA provides support for Palestinian refugees displaced by the decades-long conflict, and USAID funds job-creating economic development projects. Many of Abdelhadhi's family members and family friends

Australians grieve, protest as destructive wildfires sweep continent

Miranda Stith & Sarah Komar
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Massive fires have raged across Australia since Sept. 2019, leading some in Fayetteville to worry for their friends and family and grieve for the widespread loss of life, property and biodiversity in their home country.

The 2019-20 bushfire season in Australia has been the worst in decades, and 2019 was Australia's hottest and driest year on record, according to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology.

The fires have killed 27 people nationwide and destroyed or damaged over 2,000 homes, primarily in the state of New South Wales, as of Jan. 14. Firefighters across the country are struggling to contain the blazes, which have burned 11.2 million hectares of land, an area approximately equivalent to the state of Mississippi.

Zoe Naylor, a political science lecturer, was raised in suburban Sydney, and most of her family and friends still live in Australia. Although none of Naylor's loved ones have had property damage, they have been affected by the smoke that has blanketed the southeastern portion of the country, Naylor said. Naylor's relatives in Canberra, the Australian capital, have been especially hard-hit.

"I have cousins who won't let their kids go play outside when the smoke is particularly bad," Naylor said. "That's, I think, the more direct impact for

more Australians. It's just the inability to breathe, and the real danger of smoke inhalation everywhere."

Ranil Wickramasinghe, a UA chemical engineering professor who grew up in Australia, visited his family in Melbourne over winter break. Although the wildfires are not near Melbourne, Wickramasinghe said the air was hazier than usual.

Wildfire smoke can irritate the eyes and respiratory system, and worsen chronic heart and lung diseases, according to the CDC. It affects children and the elderly most severely.

Wickramasinghe said there were wildfires when he was growing up, but not at the same frequency and intensity as the fires are today.

"In Australia, it's really difficult because you never quite know if the winds suddenly change, in which direction the fire will go, and then people who thought they were safe, are not."

Naylor, whose childhood home lay at the edge of the bush, also said wildfires never reached her house when she was growing up thanks to backburning, a process of controlled burns intended to prevent accidental fires.

Naylor and her relatives think the government has not undertaken enough backburning and other fire prevention measures in recent years, making it partially responsible for the severity of the blazes, Naylor said. Naylor thinks part of the reason for the inaction

is the government's refusal to recognize the severity of climate change, she said.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Dec. 12 that climate change has influenced the severity of this wildfire season, but he continues to defend his country's environmental policies. Morrison's approval rating fell 19 points from December 2019 to January, according to the most recent poll, published Sunday.

Thousands of protesters marched in several major cities across the country Jan. 10, including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth, calling for the government to act on climate change.

Christopher Dickman, a professor of terrestrial ecology

at the University of Sydney, estimates that up to one billion animals have died so far across the country.

Naylor thinks the loss of animal life is especially heartbreaking for Australia because Australians take a particular pride in the diversity and uniqueness of the

continent's wildlife, she said. Naylor hopes the losses from these fires will serve as a wakeup call about environmental policy and fire preparedness in Australia, she said.

"I think that when these animals are lost, then it is really sad for the whole country," Naylor said. "I think for everyone it's very sad for all these animals to be killed in a fire that is not the animals' fault."

