

DEMILITARIZE! DURHAM 2 PALESTINE: UPENDING CIRCUITS OF STATE VIOLENCE

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Abstract: Between 2016 and 2018, Black, Palestinian and Jewish organizations, under the banner of the Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine coalition, led a campaign in Durham, North Carolina, that successfully passed a City Council resolution prohibiting US police exchanges with Israel. Based on direct interviews with the activists who led the campaign, this article sets out to trace the history of the Demilitarize! Effort, detailing its chronological developments with an eye on highlighting how Black–Palestinian solidarity continues to function as an anti-imperial analytic. Particularly, it illuminates how settler colonialism unsettles the demarcation between foreign and domestic frontiers thus entwining military and police force expressed in transnational state violence against racialized communities. In doing so, the article will offer and preserve a movement archive developed by activists in Durham. The Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine coalition is built upon a rich legacy of local Palestine solidarity activism and its coalitionary efforts focused on a narrative of racialized state violence that directly connected militarized US law enforcement to trainings in Israel thus illuminating the local manifestations of US empire. This article also seeks to use the movement archive to consider how seemingly formidable circuits of state violence that undergird imperial domination are simultaneously vulnerable to attack and dismantlement.

Keywords: Black; Palestinian; Jewish; Zionism; militarization; police; imperialism; abolition; Israel; Palestine; solidarity.

I won't bother you with all the stories about the IDF storming my village since I was twelve years old when I had to wake up at the sounds of dogs barking outside

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my house, at the scene of my father being beaten down to the ground, at the scene of my mother and my siblings being pushed around and shouted at. . . (Durham City Council 2018)

So began Mohammed Eid, a Palestinian student at the University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, who was born and raised in the Gaza Strip. Eid was the first speaker to address the Durham City Council hearing on International Police Exchanges on 16 April 2018. The hearing took place in the first month of the Gaza March of Return, weekly civil society protests featuring 30–40,000 Palestinians, mostly refugees, contesting Israel’s militarized perimeter separating them from their original homes and relegating them to forced exile and siege (Erakat 2019). Israeli troops responded to the tremendous popular showing with cruel and indiscriminate force. Snipers, stationed at a 300-metre distance, lethally shot men, women, children, medics and disabled protestors who posed no threat to Israeli civilians, troops, nor even to military infrastructure (Khoury et al. 2018). Eid warned the packed hearing that these were the lessons to be learned by US police who received training in Israel. He asked the audience to do their own research to see for themselves what he meant,

. . .w]atch and watch and think of what you will be bringing back to the place you call home because once your home is ruined, you will never enjoy life anywhere else. For that reason, I support the policy statement against the Israeli police exchange, and I support the Demilitarize Durham 2 Palestine campaign. (ibid.)

The City Council was set to vote on a statement that would prohibit the Durham Police Department (DPD) from participating in any “international exchanges with any country in which Durham officers receive military style training” (Durham City Council 2018) Though the statement issued a general prohibition on such exchanges, it also made a passing reference to Israel since it was the only country in which the DPD chief of police had been trained. The final statement, authored by Durham’s mayor, reflected a political compromise as the original petition and the campaign that propelled it featured a textured analysis about the legacies of US and Israeli racialized state violence. Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine, a tight-knit coalition of Black, Palestinian and Jewish organizers drafted the original petition and led the two-year campaign to end DPD trainings in Israel culminating in the 2018 hearing. Their local effort confronted a national phenomenon and a matter of global concern.

US law enforcement exchanges to Israel have taken place since 1981 under the auspices of enhancing the capacity to respond to extremist threats and terrorism (Jewish Institute for National Security of America n.d.).¹ They expanded

dramatically after al-Qaeda's 2001 attacks on the United States (Hoffman and Stoil 2006). By 2016, thousands of US law enforcement officials from over a dozen states had received training in Israel and/or, from Israeli officials in the United States (Garwood 2016).² Israel, which ranks 12th in arms exports globally, has increased its selling power of military and carceral technologies by "testing" them on its captive Palestinian population (Shani 2015; Uni 2018; IndexMundi n.d.). Palestinians, who constituted 95 per cent of the population at the start of the British Mandate, pose an existential threat to Zionist settler sovereignty because of their claims to self-determination and their refusal to disappear (Erakat 2019). Since its establishment in 1948, the state has marked Palestinians for removal in pursuit of its settler colonial ambitions and racialized them as "always-already-guilty" of terrorism even when they pose no actual risk to Israeli civilians, soldiers, officers or even infrastructure (Ferreira da Silva 2014). Israel has expanded its military and carceral weapons and technologies arsenal in the service of native elimination and territorial consolidation, which it frames as a defensive force earning it the moniker, "the Harvard of anti-terrorism" by US officials (Horwitz 2005).

The United States, a white settler colony established by similar means of native elimination together with a chattel slave economy, supports Israel's expansionist project through the provision of unequivocal diplomatic, military, and financial aid. It is the most significant military in the world, with over 750 military bases, and also has the largest prison population. Ruth Wilson Gilmore highlights that broad acceptance of punitive carceral regimes among Americans is rooted in nationalist military culture forged in "state aggression," as well as deputized American settlers, against indigenous peoples and rebellious slaves (Wilson Gilmore 2002; K-Sue Park 2014). After conquering the Western frontier, the United States continued its imperial expansion beyond the Western frontier, and across blue waters, in the Spanish–American War. Julian Go demonstrates how the 1896 victory compelled the transformation of the US armed forces into an imperial-military regime with the ability to expand and protect its colonial holdings. The transformation corresponded with the reformist movement of US law enforcement, which dramatically recreated itself in the image of the military including a hierarchical chain of command, training academies, as well as operational and tactical methods featuring surveillance, mapping, anticipatory policing and weapons training (Go 2020).

The imbrication of the imperial-military and police also shaped the perception of racialized minorities as threats among military veterans who returned to serve as police chiefs and officers (*ibid.*: 1211–1212). They viewed "large or rising numbers of minorities" as internal colonies and therefore, as sites of potential insurgency (*ibid.*). Militarized responses to contemporary Black uprisings reflect the historical securitization of indigenous, Black, and other racialized

communities. And when the US Department of Homeland Security established an office in Israel to formalize police exchanges in 2003, it was continuing a long and rich legacy of militarized policing in the service of imperial expansion and settler colonial domination.

US militarized policing, and the police exchange programmes in particular, gained national attention in the summer of 2014, also known as the Gaza–Ferguson moment. Then, Israel bombarded the densely populated coastal enclave with advanced weapons technologies for 51 days. Simultaneously, US law enforcement occupied Ferguson, Missouri, following the police murder of Mike Brown, featuring armoured tanks, tear gas and mounted police units (Bailey 2015; Naber 2017; Erakat 2020). In the midst of the gruesome details of Israel’s aerial and ground offensive against besieged Palestinians, Ferguson activists discovered that the St Louis County Police Chief had travelled to Israel for a week-long counter-terrorism training only three years before (Ebony 2014). In this context, Palestinian and Black activists began drawing vivid connections between US and Israeli state violence.

In 2015, Durham activists, who were similarly mobilized during the summer 2014 uprisings, discovered that their outgoing police chief received training in Israel and that their incoming chief had coordinated such exchange programmes during her tenure as deputy chief of police in Atlanta, Georgia. The Durham 2 Palestine coalition began to congeal in early 2015 following Durham’s successful effort to end a municipal contract with G4S, a global private security company. The coalition’s formation preceded the launch of the campaign to end police exchanges with Israel, which would prove to be a critical element of its success. By 2018, Durham 2 Palestine’s effort prevailed in a unanimous City Council vote and precedent-setting victory. To date, Durham remains the only successful municipal campaign in the United States to issue a general ban on military-style training with any foreign military or police, including Israel, and is an exemplar of the localization of anti-imperialist struggle.

This article sets out to understand what made the Durham campaign successful, how the organizers achieved that success, and why their strategy worked. To answer these questions, I interviewed ten of the leading Black, Jewish and Palestinian organizers and activists involved with the Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine campaign. They each recounted their experiences and provided acute analyses that shaped the campaign’s strategic approach as well as its grounding political framework. Using their interviews, together with doctrinal research, this article traces the campaign’s chronological developments from inception to victory. In doing so, the article offers a movement archive developed by activists in Durham. Drawing on that historical narrative, the article also identifies several salient factors undergirding the campaign’s success.

To chronicle the history of the Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine campaign while drawing out the elements underscoring its success and emphasizing its anti-imperialist nature, this article will detail how the context of the Gaza–Ferguson moment together with the mixed victory of the G4S campaign compelled the Jewish Voice for Peace, Triangle North Carolina chapter organizers to reevaluate how to be in ethical solidarity with Black and Palestinian communities. The following section will trace the steady and systematic effort to build an intersectional coalition based on relational organizing as well as the key events that forged the campaign. The article will then examine how Durham organizers successfully captured power in the City Council rooted in, and reinforced by, a history of internationalism in Durham, leading to the campaign’s official launch. The penultimate section will examine the relationship between abolition, Zionism and antisemitism with an emphasis on how the coalition overcame accusations of antisemitism culminating in the unanimous support to abolish DPD trainings in Israel. The article will conclude with an overview of the blowback to the campaign as well as an analysis of the elements that shaped its success.

Durham Drop G4S: a Mixed Victory

In November 2014, a group of Durham-based organizations successfully terminated a County contract with G4S. G4S, a global private security company, had a million-dollar contract in Durham County for over ten years, servicing libraries as well as several municipal buildings (Kane 2014). The company held several nefarious contracts including one for US \$118 million dollars in Guantanamo Bay and its role in the Israeli occupation, particularly at military checkpoints and Israeli prisons, had made it a global BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) target (Jewish Voice for Peace 2014). The Durham County victory was the first of its kind to boycott a company for its role in facilitating the abuse of Palestinians in the United States.

Activists developed the campaign during the Gaza–Ferguson moment. Zaina Alsous, a leading Palestinian organizer in Durham at the time, explains that this was a time of “. . .the Ferguson rebellion and the Baltimore rebellion. . .[when] everyone was in the streets in protest of the state-sanctioned murder of Black people. It was our responsibility to be in explicit opposition to state violence.” (2021) Ajamu Dillahunt, only a high school junior then adds “[e]very time there was an action against police violence, Palestine was raised and at Palestine solidarity rallies, the Black struggle was raised.” (2021) Notwithstanding his young age, Dillahunt was primed to connect Black and Palestinian liberation struggles thanks to the work of his grandparents, long-time Black labour organizers in Durham, Ajamu Dillahunt Senior and Rukiya Dillahunt. Rukiya who explicitly made the

connections between Black and Palestinian struggles in the summer of 2014 was doing similar work in the 1980s as part of the Women's Commission and in the course of a fervent anti-apartheid movement that featured speakers from Nicaragua, Palestine and South Africa. Such internationalism that "linked the struggles" was a "key part of [the Durham activists'] analysis," explains Dillahunt (*ibid.*).

Durham's diverse racial make-up as well as its political history has nurtured a vibrant activist spirit (DeMarco and Hunt 2018). Following the Civil War, formerly enslaved Black residents, established the Hayti community where they built businesses and a nationally acclaimed residential district which became an emblematic site of Black prosperity (Discover Durham n.d.). In 1910, Black residents established what became North Carolina Central University (NCCU), the first publicly supported liberal arts college for Black students (Rashied-Henry 2020). Jim Crow, aggressive zoning policies and outright violence directly targeting Black life made Durham an ongoing site of highly organized resistance as well. These efforts included high-impact litigation cases challenging the "separate but equal" doctrine (Duke University Libraries (a)), a campaign against urban renewal, a merchant boycott, creation of the Local 77 Labor Union (The Durham Civil Rights Heritage Project n.d.) and the establishment of Malcolm X University among a litany of initiatives constituting a rich tradition of organized protest (Duke University Libraries (b)).

These legacies also shaped the BDS activists targeting G4S. Convened under the title, *Durham Drop G4S*, the organizers ultimately registered the unprecedented campaign victory with mixed feelings. Despite being a tremendous BDS victory, none of the media covering the effort mentioned Palestine, referencing only the private security company's role in Guantanamo Bay. More, after suspending the contract, the County brought in alternative private security firms to replace the G4S personnel. The erasure of Palestine and the perpetuation of violence propelled the organizers into deep reflection.

Beth Bruch, a leading organizer with Jewish Voice for Peace, Triangle chapter (Triangle JVP), which spearheaded the G4S effort, comments that they wanted "to avoid a similar messaging mistake." (2022) Bruch continues, "getting the local press to write Palestine in a headline," as opposed to dropping a BDS target quietly, "became a very big deal." (*ibid.*) The organizers also realized that they had achieved "a very reformist victory and not an abolitionist victory," which had become acute in the context of Black uprisings (*ibid.*).

Black uprisings against racialized state violence had catalyzed a conversation about the enduring role of white supremacy in policing and helped to mainstream abolitionist concepts aimed at dismantling the criminal justice system. Black activists highlighted how modern-day policing continued legacies of slavery and settler colonial expansion as their earliest iterations were established to squash rebellion,

discipline enslaved labour and capture runaway enslaved Africans (NAACP n.d.) Books, like Michele Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, showed how the "War on Drugs" together with sentencing laws resulted in the incarceration of a greater number of Black men in the early 2000s than those enslaved in pre-emancipation America in 1850 (Alexander 2010). Activists demonstrated how criminality operated far more as a racial stigma associated with Blackness than it did as a juridical concept equivalent to lawbreaking (Purnell 2021). While still others demonstrated how constitutional protections intended to achieve racial equality, as embodied in the 13th and 14th amendments, had been so thoroughly manipulated and defanged as to be inept if not counterproductive (DuVernay 2016). The Black Lives Matter movement illuminated the co-constitutive structure of racism and colonialism and advocated for abolitionist futures captured in the hashtag, #DefundThePolice. Abolition, advocates explained, did not merely seek to destroy police and prisons but to create life-affirming conditions through the redistribution of wealth and the creation of a significant welfare state that would make police and prisons obsolete (Davis 2003; Aptheker 1971; Gilmore 2007; Kaba 2021).

Abolition was not central to the Triangle JVP chapter when its members established it in late 2012. They intended it to be a Jewish study space among queer and anti-Zionist Jews who felt alienated in traditional synagogues. The group also "felt it was important to be actively involved in Palestine solidarity," shares Noah Rubin-Blöse, a Jewish trans activist and rabbinical student, which is what led to the launch of the G4S campaign. While they had not originally intended for the campaign to be abolitionist in nature, however, throughout the course of the Ferguson–Gaza moment they came to identify as both abolitionists and BDS activists and now "wanted to make space for both of those things." (2022)

Slow-Cooking an Intersectional Coalition

Mindful of the shortcomings of the G4S campaign, the Triangle JVP chapter initiated a months-long listening process to advance abolitionist and BDS goals in ethical solidarity with Black and Palestinian communities. Aware of their identity as "predominantly white Jews [who] were not the most impacted community," Bruch adds that JVP now sought out Black and Palestinian leaders to build a robust coalition from the bottom up to avoid those mistakes again (2022).

The listening campaign, which began in early 2015, was rigorous and thorough. Sandra Korn, then a recent university graduate and among JVP's newest members, recalls that she became "so impatient" with the listening process adding perhaps it was "because she was from the north." (2022) Korn was right to emphasize geography. Bruch who identifies as a southerner where "relational organizing is big" explains that is how "Southerners get things done." (2022) Relational organizing

means building trust among people by becoming a part of their lives, “picking up one another’s kids from school, celebrating birthdays, dancing together. . .organizers become an extended family” so that the relationships last beyond the movement campaign itself (ibid.). “Capitalism wants you to move fast and wants you to be transactional,” Bruch continues, but the purpose of the listening campaign was to build a tight-knit coalition that de-centred efficiency (ibid.). The idea was to build a like-minded political community based on love because “if you didn’t love the world, there’s plenty of reasons not to try to change the world.” (ibid.)

The effort yielded a multi-racial and multi-faith coalition of 11 organizations and several associated groups that had not historically worked together: Jewish Voice for Peace, Abrahamic Initiative on the Middle East (AIME), Coalition for Peace with Justice, Black Youth Project 100 (Durham Chapter), Democratic Socialists of America (Durham Chapter), Durham for All, Jewish Voice for Peace (Triangle NC), Muslim Affairs Public Affairs Council, Students for Justice in Palestine–Duke University, Students for Justice in Palestine (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Muslims for Social Justice, and Migrant Roots Media. Korn notes that the trust among the coalition members was so resolute that they could “come to consensus on a decision in two hours.” (Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine n.d.a)

The coalition used a divest/invest framework similar to the one that The Movement for Black Lives would use in its 2016 policy platform. The M4BL policy platform advanced a critique of US imperial war-making that included interventions on the African continent as well as unequivocal support for Israel, juxtaposed alongside anaemic support for domestic welfare programmes (The Movement for Black Lives n.d.). Similarly, the Durham coalition urged divestment from “manifestations of colonialism, cis-heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism” and investment in “collective resources and energy in the health, education and well-being of our communities, especially the most marginalized and disenfranchised members of our communities” (Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine n.d.b).

The coalition was a goal unto itself. Bruch comments that the coalition, and the solidarity it represented, was “a big threat.” (2022) The coalescence of “Black folks, Palestinian folks, and Jewish folks,” defies the status quo which “wants us separate and in silos” so when these communities come together, it is a “threat in a beautiful way.” (ibid.) As JVP fastidiously built the coalition, it simultaneously sought to identify a movement goal. Several vectors shaped that outcome.

The most notable of those factors involved the leadership change within Durham’s police department. Jose Lopez had been the police chief since 2007 and became the target of intense community protests beginning in 2013 when Jesus Huerta, a 17-year-old Latino immigrant, was killed by a gunshot wound to the head while in police custody. Durham police claimed that he shot himself while he

was handcuffed in the back of a patrol car and no criminal charges were ever brought against any officers (WRAL 2014). Activists amplified their objections during the summer of 2014 when Durham’s policing response to BLM protests was vividly militarized. Dillahunt recounts that Chief Lopez “used tear gas and rubber bullets” against protestors earning him the title of “wild Chief,” (2021) Durham activists successfully forced Lopez to resign in late 2015 (Martinez 2015).

The public process to replace Lopez came down to two candidates, including the frontrunner, Cerelyn “CJ” Davis, a Black woman, the deputy police chief of the Atlanta police department (Durham Magazine 2016). The circulation of the candidates’ resumes revealed that Davis had run the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE), an international law enforcement peer-to-peer exchange programme with Israel, housed at Georgia State University, and established in 1982 (GILEE n.d.). As Korn sums it up, it was a “Black woman from a Black city that ran GILEE,” (2022) further complicating the narrative of racialized policing. Only after the city hired Davis did activists realize that Lopez had received counter-terrorism training in Israel on a delegation organized by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in 2008, a year after he had become Durham’s chief of police (Jewish Voice for Peace 2018).

Triangle JVP, on behalf of their nascent coalition, centred Chief Lopez’s training in Israel in their ongoing listening campaign that included conversations with JVP National, which had yet to launch its Deadly Exchange campaign, targeting police exchanges. Sijal Nasralla, a Palestinian-American electoral organizer with Mpower Change, comments that JVP members conducted interviews “with every community stakeholder, they went to the local base-building organizations, the queer led-, the abolitionist organizations, they did interviews with all of the movement stakeholders and even City Council members and candidates for City Council.” (Deadly Exchange n.d.a)

Capturing Power and Launching the Campaign

These City Council candidates included Jillian Johnson, a Black, queer, woman, and a self-identified internationalist who had travelled to Palestine with the International Solidarity Movement “the year after Rachel Corrie was killed,” as she put it (2022). She also helped organize the 2004 Students for Justice in Palestine conference at Duke University and continues to identify as a BDS supporter. In addition to Palestine, Johnson also joined a labour delegation to El Salvador that visited maquiladoras, opposed sweatshop labour on her campus as a university student and protested the Iraq War in 2003. She attributes her internationalism to a rooted tradition in Durham where her movement elders and mentors combined “the local and the international” (ibid.) in their work.

Durham's seasoned activists included Burhan Ghanayem, a Palestinian-American who moved to Durham to begin his professional career in the early 1980s. Ghanayem describes Durham "as the most progressive town in America." (2022) He fell in love with it because of its significant racial diversity and he was "convinced that to succeed as Palestinians, we need to be hand in hand with African Americans, Latinos, and progressive Jews." (ibid.) Ghanayem soon joined the Rainbow Coalition, Reverend Jesse Jackson's 1984 popular campaign bid for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, where he met Dillahun Senior, Dillahun's grandfather. Their collaboration and friendship deepened, including within Black Workers for Justice, and would continue for several decades to come. Ghanayem later helped send several students to Palestine, including Dillahun, supported the establishment of Triangle JVP, worked on the G4S campaign, and co-founded the AIME, one of the coalition's 11 organizational members. Upon reflection, he exclaims, "I dare to say yes, that that groundwork helped," shape Durham's fertile environment for an internationalist campaign (ibid.).

Johnson's internationalism informed her understanding of the United States as a colony. As a country "created through genocide and built with slave labor," (Johnson 2022) the colonial legacies are ever-present. However, she observes, "You can't see it because you're in it, you can't see the soup because we're in the soup!" (ibid.) According to Johnson, illuminating the "soup" in the United States requires "connecting marginalized people across the world." (ibid.)

Johnson won the 2015 City Council election and assumed office in 2016. Though she still "wonders how she ended up in office," (ibid.) she initially ran at the request of movement leaders who sought "to build power in municipal government." (ibid.) Nasralla comments that Johnson's campaign "shook up the progressive movement." (2022) For at least a decade, a Black liberal establishment had a tight grip on local politics and Johnson overturned their reign by uniting "hundreds of progressives, which people resented." (ibid.) In particular, Nasralla continues, "The capitalists, liberals, and Zionists don't like her." (ibid.) Despite their disdain, Johnson was appointed to Mayor Pro-Tempore in 2017 and re-elected to the City Council in 2019 (City of Durham n.d.).

Durham's approach to municipal politics was inspired by Cooperation Jackson, where organizers, in explicit pursuit of Black self-determination and decolonization of Mississippi, and ultimately the United States, sought to capture power and place the means of production into the hands of "the Black working class of Jackson, [Mississippi]." (Akuno 2017) The campaign featured a bid for mayoral office which Chowke Lumumba, an attorney and long-time leader with the New Afrika Republic, secured in 2013 with only a fraction of his opponent's budget. Nasralla recalls that when "Lumumba won the mayoral campaign and chanted,

‘Free the Land’ at the victory rally” it was an inspiration to Durham organizers who similarly sought to combat oppression by capturing power (2022).

In her capacity as a City Council member, Johnson was unsure of her potential because she was among a political minority but she knew she could “create a bridge from local government to the community” (2022) to empower movement activists “to insert themselves at the level of city government.” (ibid.) In that context, the JVP organizers asked her what is possible in regard to advancing Palestinian and Black freedom and they came up with the municipal campaign to abolish DPD’s training programmes in Israel. That was just the beginning of the process.

The organizers discovered a 1986 Durham City Council resolution condemning apartheid in South Africa and affirming “the equality of all humanity, the inherent right to human dignity, and the entitlement of all persons to equal treatment under the law.” (Alsous and Hanf 2021) Using Durham’s legacy of international boycott together with the contemporary political momentum, Bruch drafted a petition demanding the cessation of law enforcement trainings in Israel. JVP organizers then began a “temperature check” with other coalition members. Their endorsement process featured a collective editing effort and several working drafts until they finalized the petition with the support and signature of every coalition member.

The coalition sought to explicitly scrutinize “the ways in which militarization and occupation of Palestine was materially connected to the militarization and occupation of Black and Brown communities in Durham,” explains Korn (2022). The petition called on the City of Durham to “immediately halt any partnerships that the Durham Police Department has or might enter into with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and/or the Israeli police.” (Demilitarize Durham 2 Palestine n.d.c) The petition continued that Israeli forces “have a long history of violence and harm against Palestinians and Jews of color” just as “policing in the US has a long history of violence and harm against Black and Brown communities.” (ibid.) The petition was careful not to attribute racist US policing to Israel but to emphasize that trainings in Israel “further militarize US police forces” and “exacerbates” harm inflicted by US law enforcement (ibid.)—a topic that would become an analytical lightning rod during the campaign. The document concludes with an appeal to “Divest from war and occupation from Durham to Palestine! Divest from racism and militarization—invest in Black and Brown communities.” (ibid)

The coalition proceeded to collect signatures on the petition with the primary intention of achieving “a material win,” as put by Rubin-Blöse (2022), marked by the successful political education of Durham’s residents. The “petition was about public perception,” he explains, “to shift how the Durham community understands

Palestine and also understand US and Israeli state violence.” (ibid.) This work involved public art installations, teach-ins on the imbrication of US and Israeli state violence, as well as petition drives in public spaces. In addition to Black and Palestinian communities, the effort also incorporated US state violence against Latinx communities at the US-Mexican border, through surveillance, and prolonged detention. The coalition also worked to individually lobby and educate each member.

Abolition, Zionism and Antisemitism

The campaign’s prospects took a significant turn in 2017 when Durham elected Steven Schewel, a self-identified Jewish liberal Zionist, “who believes in the existence of a Jewish state. . .[and] fear[s] for its survival,” to be its mayor (Rashied-Henry 2020). The election expanded the progressive hold on the City Council and despite his support for Israel, Johnson explains (2022), Schewel “was very much in support of ending paramilitary training in Israel,” as were the other Council members (ibid.). While they lacked experience in Palestine solidarity organizing, and even less in the punishment associated with it, Johnson’s colleagues remained supportive of the resolution because they “kept the focus on policing and their training.” (ibid.)

Within that framework, Schewel revised the Coalition’s petition and drafted a statement for the Council’s consideration. The new statement removed all reference to Palestinian suffering as well as to the parallels between US and Israeli state violence. The sole remaining reference to Israel was a declaration from Chief CJ Davis to Durham’s City Manager stating that “there has been no effort while I have served as chief of police to initiate or participate in any exchange to Israel, nor do I have any intention to do so.” (Official Durham City Council YouTube 2018) In no other place does the statement address the training programmes in Israel. It generally states the Council’s opposition to “international exchanges with any country in which Durham officers receive military-style training since such exchanges do not support the kind of policing we want here in the City of Durham.” (Durham City Council 2018) The Council also recognizes and shares “the deep concern about militarization of police forces around the country.” (ibid.) The rest of the statement focuses on racialized policing in the US and boldly seeks to transform Durham into a community “beyond policing” through the provision of gainful employment, housing, and “excellent health care.” (ibid.)

Although the Fraternal Order of Police Durham County Lodge #2 opposed the City Council statement, the greatest opposition to it came from the Jewish Zionist community (Durham County Lodge #2, Fraternal Order of Police 2018). The significantly diluted statement did not mitigate their coordinated accusations of

antisemitism. Opponents of the statement framed any critique of Zionism as an attack on Jews and Jewish futures. Johnson recalls (2022) that opponents went so far as to compare Schewel to a “Nazi collaborator.” Their primary arguments were two-fold. First, the statement singled out Israel because it mentioned no other foreign military. Second, the linkage between US racialized and militarized policing to trainings in Israel suggested that it was Israeli training that made the US police “violent and anti-black.” (2022)

Ahmed Amireh (2022), a Palestinian undergraduate student and among Duke’s SJP leaders, explains that the coalition never suggested that Israel was teaching US officers racism, but that Israeli officers were operating in a context where racially militarized violence against Palestinians is so normalized as to constitute a “fantasy” for US officers who “envied” the ease with which Israelis operated. Amireh was in Palestine immediately before the launch of the Demilitarize campaign (ibid.). He recalls that he joined a demonstration in Bethlehem against the Trump administration’s Jerusalem declaration when a soldier from a tower shot a Palestinian man in the chest with a rubber bullet and he “was surprised but no one flinched.” (ibid.) As he ran to escape the tear gas, the person running alongside him chuckled at Amireh’s panic, indicating how Palestinians “have become so accustomed to militarization.” (ibid.) Testimony of GILEE participants noted the same thing but in contrast to Amireh’s horror, were struck by how easy it was to profile “an Arab” and “how controversial it would have been to do so in the United States.” (2022) As if, Amireh commented, it would “be cool if everyone in the US just cooled down and accepted oppression.” (2022)

This nuance was lost on, if not rejected by, the campaign’s opponents. The Jewish community seemed to fracture along Zionist fault lines that corresponded to abolitionist ones. Jewish opponents to the City Council statement were in fervent support of Israel—a barricaded nuclear power in alignment with a global superpower—as a necessary safe haven for Jews. In contrast, Jewish advocates of the resolution self-identified as anti-Zionists and abolitionists and understood their safety and future as inextricable from that of other targeted communities. For the latter, more policing, higher walls, and greater violence were not the source of their survival, instead, they pursued an abolitionist future where provision for their collective well-being would create a safe haven for all.

Lara Haft, a self-described “Torah observing Jew who prays three times a day” had been an abolitionist and joined the Demilitarize campaign in the last two years of their undergraduate studies at Duke (2022). They explain that “even though the press tried to make it seem like we were blaming Israel for US police violence, we were very clear that the US was an imperial power trying to create an outpost in the Middle East for geopolitical purposes.” (ibid.) However, because the statement

“was watered down to military training of police is bad,” that anti-imperial analysis fell out of the bottom (*ibid.*).

Haft’s analysis regarding the campaign, and Zionism had crystallized through an abolitionist framework. They recall when neo-Nazis distributed pamphlets attacking Blacks, Muslims, and Jews, their rabbi’s response was to grow stronger in his opposition to the City Council statement and in favour of greater FBI involvement to combat antisemitism. Haft thought “this was nuts because one-third of the campaign was Jewish, and the neo-Nazis targeted all of us.” (*ibid.*) More, for them, greater safety meant getting police “out of [their] schuls” in order to protect “Jews of colour” and “to be in community with Black and Muslim folks” who were explicitly targeted by the FBI (*ibid.*).

Korn (2022) had a similar experience when she heard neo-Nazis marching on Charlotte chanting, “Jews will not replace us.” The resurgence of white nationalism illuminated that antisemitism continued to operate as a theory of overinflated Jewish financial and political power. In discussing appropriate responses with her synagogue’s fellow board members, she found herself in a minority that opposed greater law enforcement involvement (*ibid.*). The majority of the board wanted to get an armed officer to patrol their place of worship and enhance their collaboration with local and federal law enforcement (*ibid.*). Korn believed that they could only achieve “safety through solidarity” because “abolition was not just something for Black people but something necessary for [her]self as a queer Jew and made me transform from a solidarity activist for Palestine to understanding my own stake in the struggle.” (*ibid.*)

Haft and Korn were both subject to a severe doxing campaign due to their involvement with the Demilitarize! campaign. Similarly, opponents to the resolution attempted to get Bruch fired from her job, to rescind Amireh’s university scholarship, and even place a phone call to the FBI to investigate Dillahunt’s connection to terrorism in response to a report back he gave after his trip to Palestine. Bruch (2022) shares that despite their best efforts to use their white Jewish privilege to “take the heat” on behalf of the Coalition, the greatest disdain was reserved for Black women who publicly championed the cause, like Jazmyne Williams and, particularly, Johnson.

Despite the intimidation and harassment, Johnson (2022) explains that the anti-semitic accusations “didn’t land” with the Council members for three primary reasons. For one, Jewish involvement in the campaign, including the mayor’s authorship of the statement, neutralized the narrative that this was against the Jewish community (*ibid.*). Second, Johnson continues, the Council members “know and trust” the coalition of activists leading the campaign, they “were very serious activists who had been doing this work for a long time and [the antisemitic claims] didn’t make sense.” (*ibid.*) Similar to the trust that sutured the Durham 2 Palestine coalition, the coalition intentionally built trust with the Council members

meeting with each of them several times, including three times with Mayor Schewel. Schewel himself publicly rebuked the opposition's talking points when he explained that the City Council was not singling out Israel (Official Durham City Council YouTube 2018). The statement, he explained, only mentioned training in Israel because the DPD chief had not trained with any other foreign army or police (ibid.). As to the issue of racism, he declared, "[i]t isn't training with Israel that has created a racialized policing in America, we have done that damn thing on our own." (ibid.) Finally, the campaign itself was not being waged in isolation but as part of a broader abolitionist ecosystem that, according to Dillahunt (2021), included "immigration, policing, education, housing, culture, and the environment," and could not be disentangled from an abolitionist framework.

By the time the statement came up for a vote on 16 April 2018, the coalition had secured the endorsement of all of the City Council's seven members. The meeting was nevertheless contentious and lasted for a little over two hours featuring Durham residents to speak for and against the statement in two minutes or less (Official Durham City Council YouTube 2018). An overwhelming number of speakers spoke on behalf of the statement because, Ghanayem (2022) explains, its proponents "had flooded City Hall." Moreover, although Mayor Schewel's revised statement emphasized the issue of local policing at the expense of a more robust analysis regarding circuits of Israeli and US violence, the hearing was nonetheless a referendum on the question of Palestine. The attendees seemed to be in consensus against police militarization but vehemently disagreed over whether to mention Israel in the statement at all. At the close of the public comments, each of the Council members explained their support of the statement and several directly responded to the claims of antisemitism. Agitated Zionists, aware of imminent defeat and in seeming desperation, disrupted the proceedings with sneers and accusations that the Council members were "lying" they were not singling out Israel (Official Durham City Council YouTube 2018: 3:00.33–3:01). At three hours and 17 minutes, the City Council endorsed the statement without amendment in a unanimous vote of six to zero and one absent (ibid.).

Conclusion

The unanimous Durham City Council vote made Durham the first successful municipal campaign to abolish police exchanges with Israel. The magnitude of this victory has not been lost on its adversaries who have filed three unsuccessful lawsuits against the city (Eyal and Livneh v. City of Durham and C. J. Davis 2018; Friedman v. Durham City Council et al. 2018; North Carolina Coalition for Israel v. City of Durham et al. 2019). In addition, Voices 4 Israel and the Durham Chapel Hill Jewish Federation submitted a complaint to the

Durham Human Relations Commission requesting it to strike the reference to Israel in the statement. The Commission declined and, to date, the Durham City Council statement remains intact and binding (Reitzes 2019). While other campaigns have successfully targeted Israeli military and carceral technologies Durham remains the only city to issue a general ban on military-style training with any foreign police or military for its law enforcement (Seattle Deadly Exchange n.d.).

Durham's success is predicated on several overlapping factors. Most significant, perhaps, is the city's racial make-up and history of organized resistance. Organizers, born and raised in Durham, as well as those that had moved there later, were all absorbed into an abolitionist ecosystem that readily drew connections between the local and the global and understood US state violence within an anti-imperialist framework. Opponents of anti-black and militarized police violence had long connected this phenomenon to US imperial domination, particularly during the apex of the Third World Revolt wherein radical Black communities understood themselves as an internal colony within the United States. It was thus not a tremendous leap, particularly amid the Gaza–Ferguson moment, to connect the drive for police abolition to a broader phenomenon of a bloated US military budget, a grotesque arms industry, perpetual destabilization and war in the Middle East, and an analysis that situated Israel as an extension of US domination rather than as a model of national liberation. This socio-political context also underpinned two other critical elements of success.

The Durham 2 Palestine coalition was deeply rooted in Durham's community and shaped by its legacies. The emphasis on relational organizing prioritized interpersonal relationships, process, and accountability while decentering efficiency, organizational structure, and other concepts perpetuated by professional foundations (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2017). The coalition's formation, sutured by trust-building over a long period of time, was a movement victory unto itself and forged new political grounds in Durham with deep roots across several communities. The intersectional coalition was able to centre ethical solidarity with the most impacted communities of police exchange programmes and therefore readily embraced abolition and BDS as grounding principles. More, the JVP-led coalition based its campaign on a deep study of the material conditions of the historical moment. As put by Alsous (2021), notwithstanding an internationalist commitment, and the intersectional nature of the coalition "JVP did the research of what was material, grounded, and winnable," thus reminding activists that they "must study practice; the boring mundane order of practice."

Durham's capture of power of local government was exemplary of such practice. Organizers in Durham set their sight on City Council, a seeming contradiction alongside their anti-imperialist ambitions and radical political vision.

However, not only was their electoral model in line with other radical efforts nationally, like Cooperation Jackson, but they were fundamental to Durham 2 Palestine's success. Haft (2022) explains that Durham's municipal victory would not have been possible without the supportive City Council. "The people running the show in Durham were Black abolitionist organizers," they add, "[JVP] had nothing to do with making the City Council look like it did." Nasralla (2022), who was a part of the electoral organizing work, admits he did not think the campaign was going to be difficult in light of how "the City Council was stacked." He continues, "[a]s an electoral organizer, if you get the right people elected you can win."

Indeed, a mainstay of the Durham victory was its mayor's Jewish identity. Mayor Schewel not only supported the campaign but also authored the statement submitted to the City Council. His support, together with JVP's leadership in the coalition, worked to neutralize and deflect the most noxious antisemitic accusations. This crucial benefit also had the unintended consequence of framing the campaign as an intra-Jewish conflict. In his closing statement at the Council hearing, Mayor Schewel said he wanted to "speak to the Jews in the room, [his] fellow Jews" and then proceeded to address Jewish activists on opposing sides of the campaign thereby erasing the Black and Palestinian members of the coalition (Official Durham City Council YouTube 2018). Schewel chastised both JVP and Voices 4 Israel for "lying" and went so far as to suggest that JVP's analysis about the international exchange programme fit in the same harmful trope of lies that were a "prelude to the Holocaust." (ibid.) Schewel seemed to exalt his own liberal Zionist position as the happy medium on the spectrum of Jewish relationships to Zionism when he explained that "the survival of the Jewish state is dependent on doing justice to the Palestinians," which they had yet to achieve (ibid.). While his position is certainly not representative of the coalition's political framework, its liberal resonance seems to have been an element of the campaign's success.

Two years after the campaign's triumphant victory, a leaked ADL memo suggested that the organization suspend its law enforcement exchange programme in Israel. Despite the ADL's virulent accusations that critique of the exchange programmes is antisemitic, the memo's authors ask why "American police, enforcing American laws, would need to meet with members of the Israeli military. We must ask ourselves if, upon returning home, those we train are more likely to use force." (Kane and Levin 2022) Such critical introspection on the national level is the direct result of powerful, grassroots efforts like, Demilitarize! Durham 2 Palestine. Although imperialism embodies the daunting entwinements of state violence and global capital, its many manifestations are also local and within reach. The Durham 2 Palestine campaign exemplifies how to target such local manifestations of the US empire while its success demonstrates how seemingly

formidable circuits of state violence are simultaneously vulnerable. At the root of this understated campaign—anchored by profound trust—is a commitment to communal interdependence rather than individual self-preservation thus indicating how the most critical elements of abolition and decolonization are in fact latent, conspicuous, and abundantly available. Durham 2 Palestine reveals what safety through solidarity means in practice and provides an inspiring model of how it can be achieved one city at a time.

Notes

1. This is a companion piece to my article, Erakat, N. (2023) “Extrajudicial Executions from the United States to Palestine” in M. Sirleaf ed. *Race and National Security*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, and a more thorough discussion of the entwinements of military and law enforcement can be read there.
2. See, e.g. Cramer, P. (2022) “ADL Considered Scrapping its US Police Training Trips to Israel, Decided Not to,” *The Times of Israel*, 18 March. Available online at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/adl-considered-scrapping-its-us-police-training-trips-to-israel-but-decided-not-to/> (accessed 12 August 2022); See also Deadly Exchange (n.d.b) “Frequently Asked Questions About the Deadly Exchange.” Available online at: <https://deadlyexchange.org/frequently-asked-questions-deadly-exchange/> (accessed 12 August 2022).

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