

## Should a Climate Activist Stand up for Gaza?

Article by Joost de Moor

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Israel's war on Gaza has sparked discussion within the climate movement. Some activists argue against taking political positions on the conflict, while others believe fighting climate change demands addressing underlying political injustice.

In recent months, Israel's assault in Gaza has generated intense debate over the extent to which climate movements, for whom matters of war are typically not a central concern, should become involved in efforts to end it. On one side are the likes of Greta Thunberg. At a protest in Leipzig in Germany, she told a crowd that "To stand with Palestine is to be human", and that there should be "no silence on genocide in Palestine", even – or perhaps especially – from the climate movement. On the other side are activists and commentators who feel that speaking out on Gaza is a distraction from the climate movement's core imperative of stopping global warming. They also fear that addressing this topic creates unnecessary division in the movement and undermines the public support it needs.

Most recently Andreas Malm, a prominent figure in the climate movement, took a controversial stance on the conflict, writing of "cries of jubilation" in reaction to the 7 October attacks. Such explicit support for Hamas's actions from within the movement is a clearly distinct radicalisation compared to previous expressions of support for Palestine, and will likely spark further discussion about the position climate activists should take on the issue.

### Science not politics?

While the tensions surrounding the war in Gaza have been particularly pronounced in Germany – Thunberg's stance has divided the German branch of Fridays For Future – it isn't the only place where the question over the climate movement's public position on the war has surfaced. In November 2023, at another climate rally in Amsterdam where Thunberg was speaking, a man walked onto the stage, seized the microphone, and declared, "I come here for a climate demonstration, not a political view."

This rejection of "political views" in the climate movement speaks to a longstanding debate over the extent to which the movement is, or should be, outspokenly "political". Should it simply demand that those in power "listen to the science", hoping that in neutralising its message, neither Left nor Right will be offended, and the climate struggle will not be stalled by polarisation? Or should the climate crisis be recognised as inherently political, by underlining the need to address systemic drivers of climate change? And if such a radical political analysis is to be embraced, does that automatically mean the climate movement should address other excesses produced by the system responsible for driving climate change?

These questions point to several fundamental issues that make the climate movement, like most other movements, a space of internal contention. Understanding those issues clarifies the more general question at stake in the debate over its position on Gaza. Indeed, it reveals that while such tension may be challenging, it does not necessarily undermine the movement, and can even be productive.

## Internal contestation

Climate activists disagree on why it is important to combat climate change in the first place. For some, like the man who intervened at the Amsterdam rally, addressing climate change is about addressing a major existential threat. It is not (at least explicitly) informed by a broader political agenda. Others, however, perceive climate change as just one driver of broader global injustices, such that isolating climate action from these other issues will leave the struggle for justice incomplete.

One key implication is that the first position tends to be quite agnostic when it comes to the methods used to address climate change; the second, meanwhile, reflects concerns that many conventional approaches to climate mitigation in fact exacerbate injustices. For instance, carbon offsetting schemes can displace indigenous communities, while low-carbon transitions may create “green sacrifice zones”. In short, whether broader justice issues should be addressed by climate activists depends on what motivates them to tackle climate change in the first place.

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Climate activists not only differ over *why* addressing climate change is important, but also *what* the nature of the problem really is. If climate change is perceived as a standalone issue, addressing it in isolation makes sense. After all, including other issues could harm the fight by diverting attention and challenging movement unity or public support.

But if climate change is understood as a symptom of underlying systemic problems, then addressing it in isolation becomes ineffective for two reasons. First, it targets the symptoms, not the cause; second, treating only one symptom makes no sense if the disease causes so many other ills. As the likes of Naomi Klein have argued, without a systemic approach, climate change will persist, while related symptoms – other forms of ecological degradation, for instance, or other injustices – will continue to produce unjustifiable human suffering and ecological damage.

A third point of contention concerns the route to achieving climate goals. Some argue that even if climate change is a systemic issue, there is no time for radical system change. Emissions must be halved by 2030, and it is hard to imagine that the economic systems and culture of consumption that fuel high emissions will be overhauled by then. Advancing reformist change within the current system might therefore be the more realistic path forward. Such reformism is associated with moderate tactics that stick to the playbook of representative democracy, whereby social change results from public pressure on elected politicians. If broad-based support for climate policies is therefore paramount, the exclusion of divisive issues like the war in Palestine might become justifiable.

Then again, pushing a politically “neutral” science-based climate narrative so that neither progressives nor conservatives are offended might backfire. Some contend that a more outspokenly political narrative that integrates climate change and social justice, such as the “just transition” narrative, is more likely to garner broad social support because it speaks to key concerns of workers and provides a guardrail for those whose jobs are threatened by the transition.

Still another perspective suggests that winning public support isn’t even the most effective path to

desired social change. Researchers Kevin A. Young and Laura Thomas-Walters argue that the US civil rights movement derived much of its influence from strategically orchestrated disruptions that put pressure on influential actors to advocate for policy changes. In other words, these actors didn't meet the movement's demands because they supported it, but because they wanted the disruptions to end. Notwithstanding major differences between the civil rights movement and the climate movement, the argument suggests that movements shouldn't necessarily prioritise public support when disruption can be a powerful tool. This insight might not directly inform how the climate movement should respond to issues like the war in Gaza, but it does challenge the prevailing belief that maintaining broad support at all costs is the most effective strategy.

Strategic considerations aside, ideas around who is an important ally for the climate movement are ultimately informed by ideological considerations. As movements coalesce around collective identities, the question arises: does the movement share more common ground with those advocating for peace and justice, or with anyone dedicated to combating climate change irrespective of social justice? The answer will shape the direction and character of the climate movement as it evolves. It might even challenge the notion that there is such a thing as a singular climate movement.

## **Climate and conflict**

Most commonly, activists refer to a capitalist, colonialist, or extractive system as the underlying issue of climate change. When it comes to Gaza, the connections between the war and climate change are, to many, multivarious. Some point to the fact that Israel's historic treatment of Palestinians exacerbates the climate risks facing the population by, for instance, compromising access to water. Israel is also accused of greenwashing colonialism when it legitimises the dispossession of Palestinians in the name of addressing climate change. The campaigning group 350.org has meanwhile provided a narrative that connects the two without making causal claims, arguing that "there can be no climate justice without peace, and in calling for peace we're being very clear about peace on both sides."

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The broader debate on the role that climate change plays in intensifying conflicts in the Middle East is longstanding. So too is the depiction of militarism as a critical pillar of extractive systems of oppression. These facilitate climate change while ensuring the system's continuity in the face of opposition. Since its inception in the 1970s, the modern environmental movement has espoused pacifism as a core tenet, and there are strong historical links between the peace movement and the anti-nuclear wing of the environmental movement. The inclusion of anti-militarism in the climate change struggle, as expressed through its support for Palestine, is historically unsurprising, and cannot be dismissed as a distraction from what is "really" at stake in the climate struggle. In fact, it sits flush with more system-critical climate narratives.

## **Dynamic entities**

So how should the climate movement manage internal conflict around the relevance of issues like Gaza?

The first thing is to acknowledge that climate action cannot be reduced to simply cutting CO2 emissions; it entails winners and losers, and differing opinions on what constitutes an appropriate response. It is therefore inherently political, as the current farmers' protests across Europe, and the Yellow Vests movement before them, illustrate.

Addressing what the movement should do about Palestine or any analogous issue requires asking what the climate movement *is*. Does it make sense to consider it as a predefined entity seeking to address climate change, and nothing more, nothing less? Those advocating for the exclusion of seemingly unrelated causes seek to police the boundaries of a movement that in their eyes should be concerned with addressing only climate change. But movements are dynamic entities that evolve their ideology as they navigate complex political landscapes. There is no pre-given essence that those joining the movement can be expected to sign up to. Positions are challenged as new constituencies join, issues emerge, and coalitions are built.

It is therefore crucial to avoid demonising those who raise new concerns or accusing them of undermining the movement's "actual" cause, for there is no such thing. And while raising new issues may introduce conflict – and while radical political analysis may upset some audiences – activists may rest assured that such conflict can be productive. Indeed, advocating for a singular political message that offends no one is unlikely to be the most convincing path to transformational social change.

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