

Is It Anti-Semitic to Defend Palestinian Human Rights?

Part I

By Edward C. Corrigan, BA, MA, LL.B.

Across Canada and the U.S., there is an organized campaign to suppress criticism of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. The campaign is especially strong on university campuses, where many voices have been raised in support of human rights for the Palestinians.

One such example is the attempt to suppress the Public Interest Research Group, founded by Ralph Nader, at the University of Ottawa, for its support for Palestinian rights. Similar anti-Palestinian campaigns have occurred at many universities in Canada, including the University of Toronto, the University of Western Ontario and York University.

An attack on a student group sympathetic to the Palestinians occurred at the University of Western Ontario in 1982. The group was refused official recognition because of its support for the Palestinians and for sponsoring Palestinian and Arab speakers. After this refusal a complaint was made to the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

After a long battle, and with the support of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association and its General Counsel Alan Borovoy, and a supportive editorial in *The Globe and Mail*, the Ontario Human Rights Commission compelled the University Students Council at the University of Western Ontario to issue a statement of regret and to ratify the student group. The refusal was deemed discriminatory against Palestinians and persons associated with them. (See "The Palestinian Question at the University: The Case of Western Ontario," *American-Arab Affairs*, Summer 1987.)

Over the last few years there has been a concerted attempt to suppress discussion of the Palestinian issue in North America, as well as campaign to punish those who have spoken out in support of the Palestinians by cutting funding and by denying them tenure and even getting them terminated from their positions of employment. Two well-known examples of firings

are the campaigns that targeted Jewish professors Norman Finkelstein, author of many books on Israel and Zionism including *Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict*, and Joel Kovel, author of *Overcoming Zionism: Creating a Single Democratic State in Israel/Palestine*.

Another tactic is to smear individuals supportive of the Palestinians with allegations of anti-Semitism. One such individual was Archbishop Desmond Tutu.



Rabbi Michael Lerner



Hannah Arendt

A few complaints from the mainstream Jewish community led to the Nobel Prize Laureate being banned from speaking on campus by the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. Marv Davidov, an Adjunct Professor with the Justice and Peace Studies program at the University of St. Thomas said, "As a Jew who experienced real anti-Semitism as a child, I'm deeply disturbed that a man like Tutu could be labeled anti-Semitic and silenced like this I deeply resent the Israeli lobby trying to silence any criticism of its policy. It does a great disservice to Israel and to all Jews." As a result of the strong backlash against the decision, and a campaign led by Jewish Voice for Peace in support of the Archbishop which produced more than 6,000 letters of protest, the University rescinded the ban.

Professor Bill Robinson was a target of a similar campaign over alleged anti-Semitism which was waged to get him fired at the University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB). Ultimately the University administration defended Robinson's academic freedom and the right to express his opinions in his global politics class. Robinson, who is Jewish, had distributed an e-mail prepared by a pro-Palestinian Jewish activist that compared the Israeli

attack on Gaza to the Nazi attack on the Warsaw Ghetto. In response to this attack on Professor Robinson, more than 100 UCSB faculty members signed a petition asking the university to dismiss the charges against him. In addition, 16 university department chairs wrote letters to the University authorities asking them to dismiss the case against Robinson.

The campaign to silence critics of Israel is a violation of free speech, academic freedom and of Palestinian human rights. When carried out by the government, it is also a violation of basic democratic rights. A recent example is the cutback to the Canadian Arab Federation's funding by Citizenship and Immigration Minister Jason Kenney. The punitive action taken by

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Minister Kenney is a denial of the rights of free speech and freedom of conscience guaranteed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Dissenting Canadian Jewish groups like Not in Our Name (NION) and Independent Jewish Voices (Canada), who are critical of the "Jewish State," are simply ignored. For political purposes they simply do not exist. The mainstream media rarely covers these alternative Jewish perspectives.

Documentation of Israeli human rights violations on the part of respected organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, The International Red Cross, the United Nations, and even Israeli organizations such as B'Tselem, Rabbis for Human Rights and the Israeli Committee Against Torture and by many Israeli journalists, are attacked and buried under a barrage of criticism that they are biased, unfair for singling out the Jewish state, or even anti-Semitic.

My own record as a lawyer representing refugee claims for Palestinians from the Occupied Territories made against Israel, is 28 positives to one negative, or a 96.5% success rate. But in the eyes of the supporters of Israel, this does not mean that there are serious human rights problems in the Occupied Territories. It is the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada that is "anti-Semitic," and the Jewish members of the IRB who rendered positive decisions on Palestinian refugee claims are "self-hating Jews."

Israel's citizenship and immigration procedures are unique in the world. To qualify as a "Jew" in "the Jewish state" one must meet a racial or ethnic criterion or alternatively a religious criterion. The Law of Return grants almost immediate citizenship rights to Jews from anywhere in the world. Palestinians who were born in the country and forcibly expelled are, for the most part, forbidden to return. The Zionist State of Israel defines itself as "Jewish" and structures itself to advance the interests of Jews at the expense of non-Jews, and especially against the indigenous Christian and Muslim Palestinian population.

In March 1919, United States Congressman Julius Kahn presented an anti Zionist petition to President Woodrow Wilson as he was departing for the Paris Peace Conference. The petition was signed by 31 prominent American Jews. The signatories included Henry Morgenthau, Sr., ex ambassador to Turkey; Simon W. Rosendale, ex Attorney General of New York; Mayor L. H. Kampner of Galveston, Texas; E. M. Baker, from Cleveland and president of the Stock Exchange; R. H. Macy's Jesse I. Straus; *New York Times* publisher Adolph S. Ochs; and Judge M. C. Sloss of San Francisco. The petition read in part: "We protest against the political segregation of the Jews and the re establishment in Palestine of a distinctively

Jewish State as utterly opposed to the principles of democracy which it is the avowed purpose of the World's Peace Conference to establish. Whether the Jews be regarded as a 'race' or as a 'religion,' it is contrary to the democratic principles for which the world war was waged to found a nation on either or both of these bases."

The argument is often made that criticism of Israel, or rather the self-described "Jewish state," is anti-Semitic. The fact that many Jews have criticized Israel and Zionism is deemed irrelevant. These Jewish critics are attacked as "self-hating Jews."

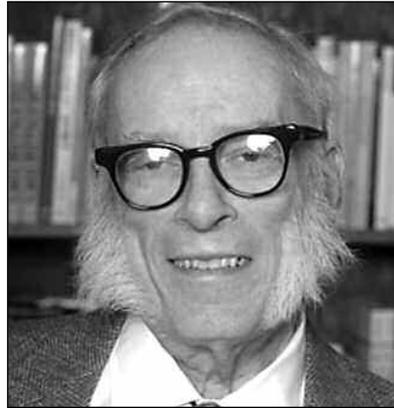
There is no rational basis for the argument that criticism of the State of Israel and the political ideology of Zionism is anti-Semitic. No state is above criticism. It makes no sense to accuse an individual who criticizes Apartheid South Africa's racist policies toward the blacks as evidence of racism toward whites. It would be equally absurd to argue that if one criticizes U.S. policy in Iraq, or the Jim Crow laws that institutionalized discrimination against African-Americans in the southern states, that one is racist against Americans. There is also much to criticize in the Arab world, but it would be absurd to say that one cannot criticize the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its treatment of women or its human rights record, because such criticism is racist toward Arabs or is anti-Muslim. No one would take seriously a person who made such an argument.

To quote one American Jewish academic on the comparison of Israel's

treatment of the Palestinians to the racist Jim Crow laws in the United States: "I grew up as a white girl in the Jim Crow South and I have spent my adult life in the study of racism; what I see when I go to Palestine is Jim Crow on steroids" ("A Jewish state—or Jewish values?," Tema Okun, Mondoweiss, 21 July, 2009).

It is a basic right to evaluate a political ideology or movement and review and even criticize a state's policies. The argument should be evaluated on the merits and truthfulness of the facts presented. It is also a right to present alternative facts and to have a debate. But when those on one side want to avoid debate, divert the discussion or suppress the topic, and launch personal attacks against their opponents, it is an almost certain proof that they are hiding some uncomfortable truths.

Dr. Joel Beinin, in an article, "Silencing critics not way to Middle East peace" (*San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb. 4, 2007), discussed the campaign to silence critics of Israeli policy. Beinin is a Professor of History at Stanford University and is Jewish. He is active with Jewish Voice for Peace. Here is what Beinin had to say: "Why discredit, defame and silence those with



Isaac Asimov



Noam Chomsky

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opposing viewpoints? I believe it is because the Zionist lobby knows it cannot win based on facts. An honest discussion can only lead to one conclusion: The status quo in which Israel declares it alone has rights and intends to impose its will on the weaker Palestinians, stripping them permanently of their land, resources and rights, cannot lead to a lasting peace. We need an open debate and the freedom to discuss uncomfortable facts and explore the full range of policy options. Only then can we adopt a foreign policy that serves American interests and one that could actually bring a just peace to Palestinians and Israelis."

The ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, as well as the massacres, rapes and illegal confiscation of Palestinian property, has been well documented by Israeli historians. These include Simcha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee problem 1947-1949* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1987); Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians* (Washington D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992); Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins* (Olive Branch Press: New York, 1993); and Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oneworld Publications: Oxford, 2006). There are many more Israeli commentators who have confirmed the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians in 1947-1949 and again in 1967, as well as the ongoing "slow motion ethnic cleansing," as it is called by some Israelis. (See "Slow Motion Ethnic Cleansing," Uri Avnery, *Counter-Punch*, Oct. 9, 2003.)

Yet the allegation of anti-Semitism is a frequent smear tactic that has been used against individuals who have publicly supported Palestinian human rights. These individuals include former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Bertrand Russell, Mahatma Gandhi, Arnold Toynbee, former President of Ireland Mary Robinson, and former UN Human Rights Commissioner

Louise Arbour.

Most of the strongest critics of Zionism and Israeli policies are Jewish. The only Jewish member of Lloyd George's cabinet when Great Britain first threw its weight behind Zionism in 1917, Sir Edwin Montagu, was adamantly opposed to the creation of a Jewish state. He attacked the Balfour Declaration and Zionism as anti-Semitic. Montagu argued that Zionism and anti-Semitism were based on the same premise, namely that Jews and non Jews could not co exist.

Ironically, people like me who want Jews to remain in our society, be an important part of our community and be safe from discrimination and racism are diametrically opposed to the Zionist goal of ingathering all Jews to Palestine. Zionists want to "save the Jews" because they are not safe in the Diaspora and face the threat of persecution due to the intractable anti-Semitism of non-Jewish societies. To quote one Zionist commentator, "The Law [of Return] and the Clause and, for that matter Zionism and the Jewish State are necessary so long as the threat to our people continues; so long, in other words, as Diaspora exists.....The Law of Return continues to be necessary for Jewish survival, to serve its essential function in Zionist theory and practice. The Law defines Israel's Zionist mission, our state as protector and refuge for threatened Diaspora Jewry." ("Hands off the Law of Return!", David Turner, *Jerusalem Post*, December 10, 2007.) Without the history of Christian anti-Semitism that has existed in Europe and the centuries of persecution of the European Jewish community, political Zionism would have no legitimacy.

Sir Edwin Montagu was also afraid that a Jewish state would undermine the safety of Jews in other countries. Montagu's opposition to Zionism and the Balfour Declaration was supported by the leading representative bodies of Anglo Jewry at the time, the Board of Deputies and the Anglo Jewish Association, and in particular, by three prominent British Jews, Claude Montefiore, David Alexander and Lucien Wolf.

Historically Zionism was not

supported by the majority of Jews. There is a respected and honoured Jewish tradition of opposition to injustice and human rights violations. There is no monolithic position on the part of Jews when it comes to Israel. There is a long, distinguished line of Jewish critics of Zionism and Israeli policies. The list includes Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Hannah Arendt, Isaac Asimov, I.F. Stone, Norton Mezvinsky, Alfred Lilienthal, Silvan Levi, Eric Rouleau, Tony Judt, Sara Roy, Ronnie Kasrils, Eric Hobsbawm, Saul Landau, Noam Chomsky, Hans Kohen, Eric Fromm, Bruno Kreisky, Pierre Mendes-France, Richard Falk, Harold Pinter (winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature), Philip Roth, Michael Selzer, Don Peretz, Immanuel Wallerstein, Rabbi Michael Lerner, actor Ed Asner and many other leading Jewish intellectuals and religious figures.

Isaac Asimov was one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century and wrote on many topics. He expressed his views on Zionism in a number of pieces. One example is found in the second volume of his autobiography *In Joy Still Felt*. There he wrote: "It is wrong for anyone to feel that there is anything special about any one heritage of whatever kind. It is delightful to have the human heritage exist in a thousand varieties, for it makes for greater interest, but as soon as one variety is thought to be more important than another, the groundwork is laid for destroying them all."

Asimov also commented on Zionism in a chapter titled "Anti-Semitism" in *I. Asimov*, his third autobiographical volume. There, Asimov expressed his distress at the capacity of the historically oppressed (such as the Jews) to in turn become oppressors if given the chance. "Right now, there is an influx of Soviet Jews into Israel. They are fleeing because they expect religious persecution. Yet at the instant their feet touched Israeli soil, they became extreme Israeli nationalists with no pity for the Palestinians. From persecuted to persecutors in the blinking of an eye." ♦

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