

“Advocating for Palestine in Canada - Histories, Movements, Actions”

Book review (Eds: Emily Wills, Jeremy Wildeman, Michael Beuckert, Nadia Abu-Zahra. Fernwood Publishing, Halifax/Winnipeg, 2022)

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Different groups advocate for Palestine from a variety of perspectives while developing several common themes. Advocating for Palestine contains nine presentations looking at Palestine from the viewpoint of students, Jewish activism, indigenous issues, being Palestinian-Arab in Canada, and Zionism and “Euro-Jewish whiteness”. Several themes are common to all the discussions.

The book starts with fear in a global perspective, recognizing that advocacy may result in personal attacks from pro-Zionist organizations working from the top down. In Canada that top down starts with the government of Justin Trudeau, down through the media (much of which is owned by the Asper family who strongly support Israeli objectives), continuing on down through a powerful variety of pro-Israeli NGOs to the identities of a white, Christian, conservative base within the populace.

This fear is connected to “a broader project of liberation from all forms of systemic injustice”, an “anti-racist movement” with “people of all backgrounds who are critical of the globalized Israeli military-industrial complex and its link to global militarism.” On the other side of fear is “in transforming fear into solidarity, in seeing ourselves as in relation to one

another, we can build those futures [of a free Palestine and world] in the present.”

The first essay “The Elephant in the Room” discusses the unseen internalized colonialism that permeates Canadian society and the author’s recognition as to how it affects her encounters within different social situations. Most of the racism she encounters includes “highly educated scholars, professional writers, journalists, newspaper columnist, clergy and the like.”

This racism is “cobbled together through some combination of Zionist historical narrative and contemporary Israeli propaganda, in combination with the sheer laziness of media commentators who could not ...decolonize their viewpoints....This has helped Israel enjoy widespread and institutionalized impunity while committing violations of international law on an ongoing basis.”

The essay “Zionist Loyalty and Euro-Jewish Whiteness” discusses how the Jew “must be understood as simultaneously under attack and as the beneficiaries of racial privilege.” Jews in Canada maintain a position of eternal victim to an “ascent...into whiteness by permission,” a combination of holocaust memorials and contemporary positioning within the western world today. “Pro-Palestinianism is not tolerated by an institutional Jewish community which strive for acceptance in white settler societies like Canada which are incontrovertibly racist in both their colonial histories and contemporary exclusionist postures and structures.”

The essay “Singled Out” talks about the new antisemitism, being essentially how Israel is singled out, but with comparisons to South Africa showing that criticizing Israel “may not be unique after all but is like that experienced by other states.” The ‘new’ standard is composed of demonization (negative attacks), double standards (other countries do it to) and delegitimization (right to exist) as the new currents of antisemitism. However, activism does focus on a particular target and in this case on a state “which refuses to be held accountable.”

“Israel Apartheid Week” [IAW] discusses the problems and successes of Israeli apartheid week and its associated boycott, divestment, and sanctions activism. In Canada the IAW examines similarities between settler colonialism in Palestine and “Turtle Island” (North America). As recognized elsewhere, “pro-Israeli attempts at censorship and oppression have only encouraged popular dissent and creative interventions in support of Palestine.”

The Jewish community’s values are examined in “Two Jews, Three Opinions”. Citing recent Canadian polls, it is found they “undermine the legitimacy of the Canadian government’s claims to be acting on behalf of Jews when it sides with Israel.” The author concludes “Neither public opinion nor a significant proportion of Jewish Canadians share our government’s uncritical support of Israel.”

Canada is an example of British colonial settlerism that compares readily to the colonial settlerism in Palestine. The essay “Knowing and Not Knowing – Canada, Indigenous Peoples, Israel and Palestine” examines Canadian history of racism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide and its – mostly – similarities with Israel-Palestine. Contemporary events still uphold our “enacted values” which are “for the most part those of the corporate and security-state interests that have guided public policy.” Violence and dispossession are still elements of current Canadian society against its indigenous people.

The media and its pro-Israel bias is critically examined in “Canadian Media and Pro-Israel Bias – An Insider’s Perspective.” CanWest Global Communications owns a disproportionate share of Canadian media and its original owner Israel Asper maintained a strong pro-Zionist bias (now within family control). The CBC, supposedly independent of government, carries the Trudeau government pretence of balance while extolling the virtues of Israel while ignoring Israel’s ongoing settler-colonialism in Palestine. The word Palestine is not allowed to be used by CBC broadcasters.

“The core journalistic function of informing the public,” the “unwillingness of journalists to address the power imbalances” and the resulting “role in dissuading the public from working to hold Israel to account” when exposed will hopefully “give readers the tools to combat the pro-Israeli Bias.”

The problems and successes of Canadian activism are presented in “Palestinian Solidarity Work in Canada.” From the discussion of strengths and opportunities the “PSM must try to keep its focus on human rights and international law.” Part of that is the intersectionality with other groups working against racism and other societal concerns.

The final essay focusses on “Campus Palestine Activism in Ottawa from the 1970s to the 2010s”, comparing two universities and the different levels of activism through the author’s experiences. The activism derives from Arab student movements, anti-war interests (vis a vis the Gulf wars), the rise and fall of the Oslo process, and the renewed attacks on Gaza after the 2006 elections. The BDS movement is currently becoming more active as the “now dysfunctional PLO and discredited PA” have been abandoned.

Political rhetoric/programs have transformed to one that is more directed at international law through the BDS movement, the recognition very recently of the apartheid nature of Israel, and the discussions around the vague and poorly stated IHRA definition of anti-Semitism.

In their conclusion the editors state, “the Palestinian solidarity movement s described in this book is at its core an inclusionary movement closely linked to anti-apartheid, anti-colonial, and anti-racist values, resonating with people seeking social justice and basic human rights.”

“Advocating for Palestine in Canada” is a valuable and positive examination of the Palestinian solidarity movement located in Canada. It highlights the government, corporate, and media efforts to disguise Israeli transgressions against human rights and demonstrates that there is an ongoing and growing solidarity and understanding of Palestinian interests in a peaceful equitable solution to Israeli colonial-settlerism.

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