

Israel's New Cultural War of Aggression

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A Small Battleground in a Large Culture War

A few weeks ago my book [Palestine's Horizon: Toward a Just Peace](#) was published by Pluto in Britain. I was in London and Scotland at the time to do a series of university talks to help launch the book. Its appearance happened to coincide with the release of a jointly authored report commissioned by the UN Social and Economic Commission of West Asia, giving my appearances a prominence they would not otherwise have had. The report concluded that the evidence relating to Israeli practices toward the Palestinian people amounted to 'apartheid,' as defined in international law.

There was a strong pushback by Zionist militants threatening disruption. These threats were sufficiently intimidating to academic administrators, that my talks at the University of East London and at Middlesex University were cancelled on grounds of 'health and security.' Perhaps, these administrative decisions partly reflected the awareness that an earlier talk of mine at LSE had indeed been sufficiently disrupted during the discussion period that university security personnel had to remove two persons in the audience who shouted epithets, unfurled an Israeli flag, stood up and refused to sit down when politely asked by the moderator.

In all my years of speaking on various topics around the world, I had never previously had events cancelled, although quite frequently there was similar pressure exerted on university administrations, but usually threatening financial reprisals if I was allowed to speak. What happened in Britain is part of an increasingly nasty effort of pro-Israeli activists to shut down debate by engaging in disruptive behavior, threats to security, and by smearing speakers regarded as critics of Israel as 'anti-Semites,' and in my case as a 'self-hating,' even a self-loathing Jew.

Returning to the United States I encountered a new tactic. The very same persons who disrupted in London, evidently together with some likeminded comrades, wrote viciously derogatory reviews of my book on the Amazon website in the U.S. and UK, giving the book the lowest rate possible rating. This worried my publisher who indicated that how a book is rated on Amazon affects sales very directly. I wrote a message on my Facebook timeline that my book was being attacked in this way, and encouraged Facebook friends to submit reviews, which had the effect of temporarily elevating my ratings. In turn, the ultra-Zionists went back to work with one or two line screeds that made no effort whatsoever to engage the argument of the book. In this sense, there was a qualitative difference as the positive reviews were more thoughtful and substantive. This was a new kind of negative experience for me. Despite publishing many books over the course during this digital age I had never

before had a book attacked in this online manner obviously seeking to discourage potential buyers and to demean me as an author. In effect, this campaign is an innovative version of digital book burning, and while not as vivid visually as a bonfire, its vindictive intentions are the same.



These two experiences, the London cancellations and the Amazon harassments, led me to reflect more broadly on what was going on. More significant, by far, than my experience are determined, well-financed efforts to punish the UN for its efforts to call attention to Israeli violations of human rights and international law, to criminalize participation in the BDS campaign, and to redefine and deploy anti-Semitism so that its disavowal and prevention extends to anti-Zionism and even to academic and analytic criticism of Israel's policies and practices, which is how I am situated within this expanding zone of opprobrium. Israel has been acting against human rights NGOs within its own borders, denying entry to BDS supporters, and even virtually prohibiting foreign tourists from visiting the West Bank or Gaza. In a remarkable display of unity all 100 U.S. senators recently overcame the polarized atmosphere in Washington to join in sending an arrogant letter to the new UN Secretary General, António Guterres, demanding a more friendly, blue washing, approach to Israel at the UN and threatening financial consequences if their outrageous views were not heeded.

Israel's most ardent and powerful backers are transforming the debate on Israel/Palestine policy into a cultural war of aggression. This new kind of war has been launched with the encouragement and backing of the Israeli government, given ideological support by such extremist pressure groups as UN Watch, GO Monitor, AIPAC, and a host of others. This cultural war is implemented at street levels by flame throwing militants that resort to symbolic forms of violence. The adverse consequences for academic freedom and freedom of thought in a democratic society should not be underestimated. A very negative precedent is being set in several Western countries. Leading governments are collaborating with extremists to shut down constructive debate on a sensitive policy issue affecting the lives and well-being of a long oppressed people.

There are two further dimensions of these developments worth pondering:

(1) In recent years Israel has been losing the Legitimacy War being waged by the Palestinians, what Israeli think tanks call 'the delegitimation project,' and these UN bashing and personal smears are the desperate moves of a defeated adversary in relation to the moral and legal dimensions of the Palestinian struggle for rights. In effect, the Israeli government and its support groups have given up almost all efforts to respond substantively, and concentrate their remaining ammunition on wounding messengers who bear witness and doing their best to weaken the authority and capabilities of the UN so as to discredit substantive initiatives;

(2) while this pathetic spectacle sucks the oxygen from responses of righteous indignation, attention is diverted from the prolonged ordeal of suffering that has long been imposed on the Palestinian people as a result of Israel's unlawful practices and policies, as well as its crimes against humanity, in the form of apartheid, collective punishment, ethnic cleansing, and many others. The real institutional scandal is not that the UN is obsessed with Israel but rather that it is blocked from taking action that might exert sufficient pressure on Israel to induce the dismantling of apartheid structures relied upon to subjugate, displace, and

dispossess the Palestinian people over the course of more than 70 years with no end in sight.

Richard Falk is an international law and international relations scholar who taught at Princeton University for forty years. Since 2002 he has lived in Santa Barbara, California, and taught at the local campus of the University of California in Global and International Studies and since 2005 chaired the Board of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. He initiated this blog partly in celebration of his 80th birthday.

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