

## the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Interview with Professor Gilbert Achcar

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*Prof. Gilbert Achcar is a renowned Lebanese academician, writer, socialist and anti-war activist. He left Lebanon in 1983 and taught international relations and politics at the University of Paris VII for several years. Since 2007, Achcar has been Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. He is a frequent contributor to Le Monde Diplomatique and ZNet.*

*Prof. Achcar joined me in an interview to discuss the latest developments related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel's attack on the Freedom Flotilla and the prospect of Israel's occupation of West Bank and Gaza.*

Kourosh Ziabari: Dear Prof. Achcar, what's your estimation of the prospect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Gilbert Achcar: This is extremely difficult to answer because the situation of the Middle East is changing so quickly and frequently that any kind of prediction about the future is always very risky, so what I can say in reply to your question is that in the foreseeable future, there can't be any serious and acceptable compromise leading to a peaceful coexistence between Israel and the Palestinians. The reason is that the Israeli society has been continuously shifting to the right so that more and more extreme branches of Zionism are governing Israel, and therefore it's extremely difficult to imagine that governments like the present government of Israel would make all of the concessions that are required for a true peace with the Palestinians. There can't be any beginning of peace actually without an end to the occupation of the territories that were occupied since 1967, the dismantlement of the separation wall which Israel has been building and the dismantlement of the settlements. These are basic conditions to which of course one should add the immediate lifting of the blockade of Gaza. So, there's absolutely no indication at present that the Israeli government as it is, has any inclination to go in that direction.

KZ: Both of the Palestinians and the Israelis, from a religious viewpoint, claim that the land of Israel belongs to them. Both of them cite the historical evidences and religious implications in this regard. What's your idea about that? How should this interminable conflict come to an end?

GA: This should be hardly debatable among serious people because it's absolutely clear that when the United Nations voted on the partition of Palestine and voted on creating a Jewish state on Palestine which was the goal of the Zionists, it gave 56 percent of the land of Palestine to the Jewish population which constituted only one third of the whole population. Moreover, the majority of this one third were immigrants, the overwhelming majority of

whom had been in Palestine less than 15 years, so there is no fair standard on earth by which this kind of resolution could be considered as legitimate and just; it was completely unjust and completely unfair. No people on earth would admit that recently arrived immigrants have a right to establish their own state in their country. However, I believe that a just solution to the problem is one that would not involve any new expulsion of population; it should be a solution based on democratic principles and peaceful coexistence of Muslims, Christians and Jews, Arabs and Israelis in the region. But, for this to happen, the very nature of Israel's relationship with its environment should change whereas what we're seeing now is more and more violence, barbarity and cruelty on the part of Israel.

KZ: Israelis believe and claim that they should have a state with its borders spanned from Nile to Euphrates. This is the "Promised Land" which they recurrently refer to. What do you think about that? Is it a reasonable and justifiable claim?

GA: Even in Israel, very few people subscribe to this view. Only some extremist branches of Zionism believe in this idea. It sounds so absurd that only crazy people can uphold such perspectives. Now, if we had to redraw the map of the world to go back to how the world was 2,000 years ago, we can imagine what a terrible mess would happen in the whole world. Besides, there's much debate even on the fact that the European Jews who came to Palestine in the 20th century are descendants of the Jews who were in Palestine 2,000 years ago. But even if that were the case, and again, if we had to redraw the map of the world as it was 2,000 years ago, why not 3,000 years ago or 1,000 years ago? So the only legitimate claim to a land is that of the people who were living on it in recent centuries. But no Palestinian group among the main Palestinian forces is calling for the expulsion of Jews and Israelis from the Middle East. All of them call for coexistence, but coexistence based on democratic principles and on equal footing, not the present situation of very harsh oppression of the Palestinians and the Lebanese by Israel.

KZ: Some Arab nations are progressively taking steps to normalize their ties with Israel. We can name the United Arab Emirates which invited the Israel's transport and infrastructure minister to an international summit held in Abu Dhabi. Other Arab states, in turn, are making efforts to establish new relations with Israel. Isn't it going to be harmful and destructive for the cause of Palestinian people?

GA: Four countries have established relations with Israel among the Arab states and they are Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and Oman. This is damaging for the cause of the Palestinians, especially when the country betraying them is Egypt which is the largest Arab country. This is a result of the increasing hegemony of the United States over the Middle East, which pushes the Arab governments to establish relations with the state of Israel against the will of their own people. If you look at Jordan and Egypt, you'll see that the overwhelming majority of their population is opposed to Israel and its policies, and this creates a wide gap between governmental policies and what the population wants.

KZ: What's your view regarding the recent Israeli assault on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla? What would happen if another country rather than Israel, say Iran, had attacked the flotilla of 600 international peace activists? Would the international community's response have been the same?

GA: You should ask me what would happen if the United States had attacked the flotilla, because they do such things quite often. But, you're right in saying that Israel gets the least

protest in comparison with other countries when it comes to the violation of international law and perpetration of war crimes and crimes against humanity. This judgment is in line with the reports of Judge Richard Goldstone who is a devout Jew and even a devout Zionist, but honest enough for acknowledging the fact that Israel committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza. So of course Israel gets much less condemnation than any countries that are opposed to the United States and to Western hegemony. One should say, however, that Israel started to lose even the support of Western public opinion recently, especially since the Gaza war of 2008-2009 which was a brutal and cruel attack on defenseless civilians and was criticized even by traditional friends of Israel. After the attack on Freedom Flotilla, the international condemnation of Israel reached an unprecedented level. A few countries cut their diplomatic relations with Israel in Latin America like Venezuela and Bolivia in the last year and Nicaragua in the current year. A number of countries recalled their ambassadors: we have seen a shift in the stance of public opinion and even a wave of protests has taken shape in the United States. So there's been a real impact and this shows that the Israeli state by its cruelty and brutality is losing more and more ground in the global public opinion.

KZ: The Saudi King has recently made remarks in which he likened Iran's government to the state of Israel and said that these two countries don't deserve to exist. Is this a fair and rational statement? Doesn't it damage the Islamic solidarity and integrity?

GA: First of all, this statement, if true, is a really infamous statement. Putting Iran and Israel on the same level is totally absurd. Israel is a state that has been created through a colonial process and is violently oppressing the original population of the land it seized. Iran is a country which has been there for a long period of history and there was no involvement of colonial powers in its creation. Its government is certainly more legitimate than that of the Saudi kingdom, which was established by armed conquest less than one century ago, and never elected since then. However, the Saudi King meant probably that both the Israeli government and the Iranian government are extremist to his taste. The truth is that the Saudi regime is the most reactionary and the most backward regime in the whole region. They're closer to the Taliban than to anything else in terms of regime and society. Saudi rulers are better advised to change their own regime rather than trying to change the regimes in other countries.

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