

# ‘We Have More People Supporting the Rights of Palestinians to Life; It’s Huge’

CounterSpin interview with Phyllis Bennis on Israel's war on Palestinians

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*Janine Jackson interviewed the Institute for Policy Studies' Phyllis Bennis about Israel's war on Palestinians for the [July 19, 2024, episode](#) of CounterSpin. This is a lightly edited transcript.*

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**Janine Jackson (JJ):** “We must not lose sight of what is happening in Gaza, where an unprecedented humanitarian crisis continues to get even worse.” That [recent statement](#) from Sen. Bernie Sanders can be explored almost word by word. With zero cynicism at all, I wonder, who is “we,” exactly? What repercussions or responses accrue to a “humanitarian crisis” that differ from, for example, war crimes? And then, if “losing sight” is wrong, what has maintaining sight delivered?

Reports from just recent days are in of Israeli forces [killing](#) more than a hundred people in a southern Gaza designated safe zone, attacking schools where people were sheltered.

The [Lancet reminds us](#) that the roughly 40,000 people who have been reported killed in Gaza since last October should not be the number we hold in our heads, given not just the difficulty of data collection, but that armed conflicts have indirect health implications beyond the direct harm from violence. People dying from infectious disease and a lack of clean water are no less dead.

A numerical accounting of the toll of the current Israeli war on Palestinians may take years, but why should we wait? The effort to end it is now. So how and where does that happen? What needs to happen to get there?

We’re joined now by Phyllis Bennis, director of the [New Internationalism project](#) at the Institute for Policy Studies, and author of numerous books, including the constantly updated [Understanding the Palestinian/Israeli Conflict](#). She joins us now by phone. Welcome back to CounterSpin, Phyllis Bennis.

**Phyllis Bennis (PB):** Good to be with you, Janine.

**JJ:** Last October, you [wrote](#) that

while it's necessary, condemning attacks on civilians isn't enough. If we are serious about ending this spiraling violence, we need to look at root causes, and that means, hard as it may be for some to acknowledge it, we must look at the context.

Well, it's now July 2024. We're at where we're at. Is there anything that you would add or change from that call to understanding, from last year?

**PB:** I think the only thing I would change is that we are now looking at almost 10 months of genocide. When I wrote that, back in October, it had just started, and we had no idea we would be still at work, still having been unable to gain even a ceasefire. Even a ceasefire remains out of reach.

What has changed is the language of the White House, the language of some in Congress. We hear President Biden now [saying](#), "We need a ceasefire. We want a ceasefire." But he keeps on [transferring weapons](#), including the 500-pound bombs, these massive bombs that were temporarily paused a few weeks ago, along with the giant 2,000-pound bombs, one of which alone can wipe out an entire city block, destroy every building on the block, and kill every person in those buildings.



MK-84 bomb (From the Public Domain)

For the moment, those bombs are still being "temporarily paused," maybe because in a [recent Reuters report](#), we learned that the US had, since October, already transferred at least 14,000 of those MK-84 bombs, those 2,000-pound giant weapons of mass destruction, and the smaller, less dangerous 500-pound bombs, that maybe could only destroy half a block at one time, and maybe only half the people that were living in those houses. So, OK, that should be right, right?

The hypocrisy of it. Saying, "I want a ceasefire," President Biden says, while he continues to transfer the weapons. And then he goes on to say, while he continues to enable this genocide by providing the weapons—which is all that Israel wants from him, they don't care whether he says he wants a ceasefire or not; they want him to send the weapons, and he is sending the weapons. And then he [says](#), "I'm the guy that did more for the Palestinian community than anybody." What kind of hypocrisy are we hearing here?

**JJ:** Right. Well, Ramzy Baroud [just wrote recently](#) about the importance of separating humanitarian efforts from political and military objectives, essentially using the survival of people as a bargaining chip. I feel that media—not media alone—but they've fuzzed up this

understanding that when elephants fight, it's the grass that gets trampled, that we're supposed to think about civilians being harmed, and they should be protected whenever.

But just to say, the international bodies that even just witness and record this carnage are themselves undermined.

**PB:** Absolutely.

**JJ:** And the idea is: It's just every country against every other country—which, side note, would be demoralizing enough, even if it weren't such an obvious lie, given that we know that commerce is global; we accept meta-national rules when it comes to corporate behavior. But here the international bodies that would say this is wrong, where are they?

**PB:** Well, you're absolutely right. The international community, as it likes to be called—meaning the United Nations, the international courts, all of those institutions—have failed. In the main, they haven't failed primarily for lack of trying. They certainly have not tried hard enough. But they have tried.

The problem is they have been undermined every step of the way by their most powerful member, which happens to be the government of the United States. We should not forget what Dr. King [taught us](#), that the greatest purveyor of violence in the world is our own government. He said that in 1967 at Riverside Church. I will say it again, today, so many years later. That has not changed.

Image: Delegates from South Africa at the ICJ



We do see, in the International Court of Justice, in the Hague, the extraordinary impact of South Africa's [initiative](#) to challenge Israel directly, state to state, to say that Israel is violating the international convention against genocide. And after several weeks, on an expedited basis, the court came out and [said](#), yes, this is plausibly genocide. And while it will take some time, usually months or years to make a complete and final determination, we are hereby ordering a set of things, that they ordered Israel to do, to make sure that the potential for genocide—or the actual genocide, they were leaving themselves that little wiggle room—but to make sure that that stopped, and they gave explicit orders, which Israel, again, simply ignored.

And what's different this time, Janine, what you said is so important about other countries, as well as the international institutions, standing by and watching: One of the things that's different here is that the international covenant against genocide, unlike most parts of international law that are very complicated, very hard to understand and really only apply very narrowly, the [Genocide Convention](#) specifically holds accountable every country that is

a signatory, a party, to that convention. That includes the United States, ironically enough, includes Israel. But it says that every country who has signed on to that treaty has the obligation to make sure that it doesn't get violated.

That was the basis for South Africa charging Israel with violating the covenant. But it also goes to every other country, including our own. So the Biden administration, aside from its active enabling of the genocide, is doubly responsible here, because it has an explicit, affirmative obligation to do everything in its power to stop the possibility of these attacks turning into genocide, or to stop them if they are indeed already genocide.

And the US answer to that requirement is to keep sending the weapons: 14,000 of these giant 2,000-pound bombs, 6,500 of the smaller 500-pound bombs, 3,000 Hellfire precision-guided air-to-ground missiles, a thousand bunker-buster bombs, 2,600 airdropped, small-diameter bombs, and more and more and more.

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