

Violence with Impunity: The Unending Tragedy of the Israeli Occupation of Palestine

Global Research News Hour Episode 244

By [Michael Welch](#), [Sean Clinton](#), and [Prof. Yakov M. Rabkin](#)
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Region: [Canada](#), [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#), [USA](#), [World](#)
Theme: [GLOBAL RESEARCH NEWS HOUR](#), [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

“The conflation of Jews with Israel, and of Judaism with Zionism, is not only intellectually incorrect, but it is politically incorrect, undermining liberal democracy by treating Jewish citizens as though they belong to a different body politic and a different country.” - Yakov M. Rabkin [1]

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With the death of 21 year old **Razan Ashraf al-Najjar**, the female Palestinian medic [killed by Israeli gun fire](#) while attending to injured protesters at the Israeli border fence with Gaza, the focus of the world’s humanitarian concern and outrage has once again fallen on the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza, as of the beginning of June, [over 118 people had died in the demonstrations](#) which started along the Israel-Gaza border. The protests, involving tens of thousands, started on Good Friday March 30th . The ‘Great March of Return’ was meant to demand the right of return for Palestinians expelled from their homes and villages in 1948 during what they refer to as the Nakba, or “catastrophe.”

The violence endured by the Palestinian population has reached [a level of carnage unequaled since the 2014 Gaza War](#).

This past week, [Argentina withdrew its football team](#) from a World Cup warm-up event in protest to Israel’s actions against Palestinians in Gaza.

[A statement](#) from the UK Parliament’s Official Opposition leader **Jeremy Corbyn**, condemned the violence and the bystander role played by world governments in the face of this bloodshed.

Unfortunately, the actions of other world leaders was far less inspiring. Canada’s Prime Minister **Justin Trudeau**, after issuing a statement demanding an “immediate independent investigation” into the killings of protesters in Gaza, found himself, two days later, [opposing such an investigation](#) when the suggestion was tabled at the UN Human Rights Council.

U.S. Ambassador to the UN **Nikki Haley** defended the actions of Israeli Defense Forces saying, "[no country would act with greater restraint than Israel.](#)"

And, of course, Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** framed Israeli retaliation to the protests as [their only recourse against "protesters seeking fatalities."](#)

As devastating as the well publicized casualties of the last two months may be, there is a serious humanitarian catastrophe playing out within the Gaza Strip. Human rights observers have noted that with dilapidated infrastructure stemming from previous assaults and the ongoing blockade, the strip of land may well be [uninhabitable by the year 2020.](#)

This week's Global Research News Hour radio program explores the dynamics driving Israel's aggressive occupation of Palestinian land, its brutal treatment of its captive population, and ways in which the situation may be remediated.

We'll first hear from **Ron Rousseau**, one of the Canadian travelers on board this year's [Freedom Flotilla to Gaza](#), about the conditions in Gaza inspiring him and others to engage in solidarity actions. We'll then hear from **Sean Clinton**, long time Palestine solidarity activist about Israel's lucrative diamond industry and why that could prove to be an effective target for a boycott campaign. Finally, historian **Yakov Rabkin** provides background on the political movement known as Zionism which spawned Israel as an ethnic state, and the forces that continue to uphold and foster Zionism and the violence associated with it.

***Ron Rousseau** is a postal worker, president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers Whitehorse local, Indigenous Vice President of the Canadian Labour Congress, a father and grandfather, and he lives in the traditional territory of the Carcross Tagish First Nation in Yukon.*

***Sean Clinton** is a long time Palestine solidarity activist. He has written for Electronic Intifada and Global Research. He is the author of the recent article: [The Gaza Massacre and Israel's Thriving "Blood Diamond" Economy](#). He is based in Limerick, Ireland.*

***Yakov M. Rabkin** is Professor of History at the Université de Montréal and a founding member of Canada's Independent Jewish Voices; his recent books are *A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism* (Zed/Palgrave-Macmillan) and *What is Modern Israel?* (Pluto/University of Chicago Press).*

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Transcript- Interview with Yakov Rabkin, June 6, 2018

Part one

Global Research: While the US comes to defense of Israel, successfully blocking a call at the U.N to condemn Israeli actions, other countries have been registering their opposition. Recently, Argentina announced it was canceling a World Cup warm-up match with Israel, apparently having yielded to pressure from its domestic population. To get some insight into the forces driving Israeli violence and where this is all headed, we got in touch with Yakov Rabkin.

Yakov M. Rabkin is Professor of History at the Université de Montréal and a founding member of Canada's Independent Jewish Voices; his recent books are *A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism* (Zed/Palgrave-Macmillan) and *What is Modern Israel?* (Pluto/University of Chicago Press).

Thank you so much for joining us, Professor Rabkin.

Yakov Rabkin: My pleasure.

GR: So, let's put the history of the events of the last two months within that historical context which you could speak to. Could you outline who is behind the Zionist project? And maybe speak about this... the issues...the factors that have shaped this project that is Israel?

YR: The Zionist project is a political movement that emerged in the end of the 19th century, or to be more precise, it involved Jews at the end of the 19th century. Prior to that time, the idea of ingathering Hebrews into the Holy Land had become rather popular among certain English-speaking Protestant denominations in England and in North America.

And these, that we would call anachronistically Christian Zionists, these Christian Zionists had got quite a bit of popularity, particularly in Britain in the 19th century. Lord Shaftesbury and many other politicians saw an opportunity in creating, so to speak, a Jewish state in a strategically very important region.

However, until the very end of the 19th century, there were no Jewish takers for this project. Why? While the Protestants interpreted the Biblical prophecy literally, which they usually do because they have a direct immediate relationship with Biblical texts, Jewish tradition reinterprets these biblical texts according to tradition. Thus Jews do not take these biblical prophecies literally, and the return to the Holy Land is rooted in Messianic expectation, Messianic yearning, and therefore in political passivity.

What changed at the end of the 19th century, as a result of this Christian Zionist influence, is that some people of Jewish descent embraced the Zionist idea. They were quite removed from the Jewish tradition, and that's why they, like Herzl and a group of German-speaking intellectuals in Vienna and Germany, engaged in political activism. They created a political movement, with the first Zionist Congress taking place in 1897, in Basel, Switzerland.

It's interesting also why it took place in Basel, Switzerland, in a small, relatively small, Jewish community. Originally, the first Zionist Congress was to be convened in Munich, but the organized Jewish community of Germany put pressure on the German government to forbid such a meeting. This shows you how much opposition the Zionists had to face, from both assimilated Jews, and of course from more pious, that is Orthodox Jews. This background suggests that Zionism began as a movement of a few intellectuals. But they were, so to speak, generals without an army.

The foot soldiers of Zionism didn't come from Austria, Germany, or France, for that matter. They came from the Russian Empire, and the importance of the Russian dimension in Zionism is still very great. Jews of the Russian Empire at the turn of the 20th century lived under official discrimination. They could not move around the country, had to live in a certain area (the Pale of Settlement), and this generated a lot of frustration. This frustration expressed itself in various ways. One of them was joining the Zionist movement. And even

though the number of settlers from the Russian Empire to Palestine was quite small, they played a crucial role in the realization of the Zionist project in Palestine and determined the direction that it took. Up to this day, all the prime ministers of Israel were either born in the Russian Empire, or their parents were born there.

Their main goal was to occupy a maximum of land with a minimum of Arabs in order to create a separate society, a separate economy, a separate state. It would be new, drastically different from society then existing in Palestine. It was also a radical departure from the Jewish continuity and tradition. So this is the background of the Zionist project.

GR: Could you explain the evolution, because you indicate in your writings, the majority of Jews were opposed to Zionism in the beginning, and yet today, it seems, at least looking in, whether it's within Israel or even in Canada or the United States, it seems as if people conceive Zionism as a response to the need to protect Jews from anti-Semitic governments, be they Germany or wherever. How did we see that transformation in the popular imagination to the point where anti-Zionism is practically equated with anti-Semitism?

YR: It was a tremendous success of the Zionist movement and later of the state of Israel to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. The late Abba Eban, a brilliant foreign minister of Israel, considered this conflation very important in order to strengthen and protect Israel's position in the world. And I think to a great extent it has succeeded.

As I said earlier, the opposition to Zionism was of two varieties. One was from Jews who wanted to integrate and to be part of their country. When the Zionists came and said, well, you don't really belong here, you belong to a separate nation that should live in Palestine, their message paralleled that of the anti-Semites that Jews don't belong, that they constitute an alien pernicious element.

That's why Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, wrote very clearly in his diaries that Anti-Semites will be our best allies and friends. So Jews who wanted to integrate into their society saw Zionism as a threat.

The second kind of opposition came from more Orthodox circles who actually 'till today are not Zionists, the Zionist project was a profanation of Judaism, a secularization of the heritage of the Bible, which Jews never understood literally. They continue to reject the entire Zionist project. This can be seen in the way the so-called ultra-Orthodox relate to the Zionist state, for example, to the state law obliging them to enroll in the Army.

A few years ago when I went to Israel to promote my book on [Jewish opposition to Zionism](#) that was published there in Hebrew, I noticed a big demonstration in Jerusalem. Half-a-million ultra-Orthodox Jews dressed in black and white demonstrated against military draft. They did not want to serve because they rejected the entire Zionist project.

Now, how did it happen that today most Jews except the ultra-Orthodox support Zionism, moreover they see that Israel embodies their Jewishness? Many of them don't do anything else Jewish. Today a Jew may transgress the Sabbath, eat non-kosher foods, violate all rabbinic commandments, and he would still be accepted as part of the Jewish community. But if he or she criticizes Israel, the community life of that person becomes really difficult.

Now, how did it happen? Well, it happened in stages. Many descendants of Russian Jews, in North America in particular, took control of Jewish organizations which had been in the

hands of German Jews who were quite opposed or at least neutral with respect to Zionism. So this Russian dimension of Zionism also permeated Jewish communities in North America. And then in the course of the Second world war the Nazi genocide exterminated millions of Jews. That of course affected many people, including political leaders, who saw in the Zionist project a way of, so to speak, solving Europe's Jewish problem. But active support for Israel didn't begin before 1967, before the Six-Day War, when Israel attacked its neighbors, occupied territories, and came out as a valiant, triumphant nation.

It's after that, that Jewish communities intensified support of Israel, identified with Israel. This resulted, at least partly, from a very important education project conceived in Jerusalem and carried out practically in all non ultra-Orthodox communities around the world: to instill the centrality of Israel into Jewish identity. And this has become a reality. I think today, the vast majority of non ultra-Orthodox Jews in North America, in France and elsewhere identify with Israel as something that constitutes their Jewish identity.

My colleague from Tel Aviv University, Shlomo Sand caustically remarked that 100 years ago, if somebody would say that the French Jew doesn't belong to the French nation, that person would be considered an anti-Semite. Today, if you say that French Jews do not constitute a separate nation, but belong to the French nation, that would be considered anti-Semitism. That shows how the term anti-Semitism really was turned upside down. While that happened to many terms in history, anti-Semitism came to mean something totally different from what it was at the end of the 19th century when the term anti-Semitism was coined.

GR: So I'm wondering now, in the modern day we have Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and it does seem as if the rhetoric about protecting the Jewish state, and the enemies, and Iran and elsewhere, is certainly up substantially. I'm wondering if his prime ministership, does it represent a particular turning point or is this merely an expansion of a long-standing expansionist project?

YR: No, I think that Prime Minister Netanyahu represents the continuity of Zionism the continuity of the Zionist project. He was quite effective, when he was Israeli representative at the United Nations, , in mobilizing support of Christian Zionists in the United States. Today, Netanyahu is to the left of his own government. He is definitely not the most hawkish member of it.

What he has done, and I think that's again a standard procedure, is to solidify support for himself and for Israel by insisting that Israel always faces an existential threat. Well, many political leaders have identified or invented threats in order to solidify their support, but Netanyahu has done that quite successfully. And particularly with Iran - he opposed the treaty that was concluded in 2015 between six nations and Iran, and he succeeded. To a large extent, it was his work that the United States recently withdrew from that treaty.

So I think that Netanyahu is a true Zionist in that he positions himself very explicitly, more explicitly than his predecessors, as the leader of the entire Jewish people, not just the people of Israel who elected him. This is something new, and tends to blur distinctions between Jews in other countries and Israelis, which, in turn, endangers Jews who are very often wrongly accused for what Israel does, even though they, however wealthy and however important, have no political influence in Israel whatsoever. Jews have become hostages of what Israel does and is, and so it's a win-win situation for Prime Minister

Netanyahu. He's been very successful in advancing his agenda.

Intermission

Part two

GR: You mentioned Christian Zionism and that being a factor in some countries like the United States, but Zionist organizations, and Christian Zionist organizations, they're a minority even within the United States. It seems to me that there has to be some other motivation for the United States, Canada, and other international players to continue endorsing the Zionist project, or at least sort of looking the other way when we're seeing the kind of violence that we've seen recently in Gaza. What are those factors that are contributing to the foreign support for the Israeli actions that we're seeing?

YR: Well, let me start by correcting what you just said. I don't think Christian Zionists are a minority or a marginal group. They themselves claim that they are from 50 to 80 million people in the United States. I must remind your listeners that the number of Jews in the entire world is about 14 million, so we're talking about a much more massive support for Zionism coming from Christians than from Jews. And, consequently, the inauguration of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem included two prominent Christian Zionist leaders. That was clearly a message sent back to the United States that President Trump hears them and is sensitive to their plight.

Now, of course, Christian Zionism does not explain everything. Much more important, in my opinion, is the position that Israel has come to occupy as a purveyor of security know-how and security equipment, as a major source of defense materiel and high-tech surveillance technologies. So Israel has become an indispensable source precisely because of the ongoing oppression of Palestinians that requires Israel to become inventive. They test their new technology on Palestinians, and therefore, their exports, to a large extent, consists of high-tech security and military equipment and know-how.

That is a very important fact that explains the impunity which Israel enjoys in many Western capitals. Another, I think, another important reason is that Israel is seen as an island of Western influence in the Middle East and Western Asia, and this is a function that the Zionist leaders had cherished from the very beginning, to be an island in, as they saw it, in the barbaric region. And so for all these reasons, Israel is very useful to Western governments and particularly in the larger context in which we live.

And the larger context is that of a growing gap between rich and poor, which requires more sophisticated methods of crowd control, of oppression of population, of surveillance, and Israel is very useful as a source of that know-how. So in the larger context of neoliberal economics and the growing frustration of people around the world, including in the Western countries, Israeli means of controlling population are very handy, very useful, and I think that's a niche that Israel occupies with tremendous success.

GR: Could you comment on the historic significance of the U.S. Embassy move to Jerusalem?

YR: Well, I don't, I wouldn't subscribe to its historic significance, I think that it's a symbolic gesture that consecrates U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. I don't think that it really changes very much because it had been clear from practically all the previous

administrations in Washington for the last 20 years that the U.S. stood behind Israel and vetoed all attempts to criticize Israel, so I think President Trump did something which is perfectly within the logic of U.S. attitudes towards Israel.

Previously the U.S. government spoke on both sides of the mouth. On the one hand, it criticized the expansion of settlements of the West Bank, on the other, it provided Israel with huge amounts of support. So now, that hypocrisy is largely ended, and I think that President Trump, for all his other failings, can be congratulated for being quite honest and direct in what he did.

GR: Now, given the powers that are backing the Israeli government internally and externally, the rise of the non-Jewish population within Israel, and the success of Palestine solidarity movements, where do you see the conflict heading? Possibly a unitary Jewish Palestinian state? A two-state solution? Or will Israel successfully conquer the Golan and continue to expand its territories?

YR: Well, that question should be put to a prophet not to a professor of history.

GR: Based on past trends, you might say, looking at the current trajectory...

YR: Right. What I can't see is the idea of a two-state, a Palestinian state and an Israeli state. That idea has been dead for quite a while, simply because of the expansion of Israeli settlements around the West Bank. So what other ways... I think there are several scenarios, but looking for the future distracts us from seeing the present. And what we have in the present is the territory from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean entirely controlled by Israel, with Israeli currency, with Israeli economy, and the Israeli Army. So if we don't look at formalities, we could just see that Israel has become one state. Palestinians, whether Palestinian Authority or Hamas, doesn't exercise much control over their territory. Any Israeli soldier, any 18-year-old recruit has more power than Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. And we could see that in this recent violence of Israeli troops against Gaza.

What we see today is a territory controlled by Israel in which some people have political rights and others don't. Some people have more economic privilege than others. So we see, essentially, a perpetuation of a situation that has existed since 1967. And, in fact, had existed before. We shouldn't forget the Arab population of what became the state of Israel in '48 lived under military rule for, I think, 15 years.

What we see today is a continuous process while the rest of the world, including you, are questioning what is going to be the solution. There may not be any solution. There may be just perpetuation of the current state which is quite comfortable for Israel. Palestinians don't represent an existential threat. And as I said, they're also very useful objects for testing new weapons. So I don't think that Israel is looking for solutions. I think Israel looks rather for a continuation of the current situation.

GR: Just a final thought about what the larger community, what sorts of activities, or what sorts of lobbying should they be enacting in order to realize a more just turn of events?

YR: There exists a tremendous democratic deficit in the Western support for Israel. In other words, governments support Israel, but the population doesn't support it to the same extent, or doesn't support it at all. That is the case in Canada, where the position of the Canadian government on Israel is not supported by the population. However, I don't expect

any government in the world to lose power because it supports Israel. It's not an electoral issue, so to speak.

There are many Grassroots movements, including the BDS, the boycott, divestment and sanctions; we have demonstrations, we have sometimes cancellation of football matches like you mentioned in the beginning. So these are unpleasant events for the government of Israel and, I think, for Israeli society, but I don't think it, at this point, affects what Israel is and does.

It actually has provided Prime Minister Netanyahu, at one point, an opportunity to name the BDS as an existential threat to Israel. Honestly, boycotting Israeli oranges is important, but no one is boycotting import of Israeli high-tech military weapons, and they constitute a lot more in the exports of Israel than oranges. So I think that for mobilizing support for Palestinians, for sort of serious critique of Israel, these movements are important; so far they have not changed anything in the behavior of the Israeli government. And I would say that I don't see in the future that they can. Israeli government is very strong, Israeli society is fully behind it. It's very important to understand that Israel is a democratic country, and what you see in the behavior of the Israeli government and the Israeli Army is what the Israeli majority, that is the non-Arab majority, want.

So some people argue that the government, Benjamin Netanyahu betray the ideals of Zionism. I don't think so. I think he is positioned in a straight line from Ben-Gurion and on, and the Israeli society, as I just said, elects him, and elects much more right wing and much more nationalistic parliamentarians. In that sense, Israel is quite consolidated.

GR: I want to thank you very much, Professor Rabkin, for sharing your thoughts and your expertise with our listeners.

YR: Thank you. All the best.

GR: We've been speaking with the Montreal-based scholar and author, Yakov Rabkin. Many of his articles are posted at the Global Research website.

The [Global Research News Hour](#) airs every Friday at 1pm CT on [CKUW 95.9FM](#) in Winnipeg. The programme is also podcast at [globalresearch.ca](#) . Excerpts of the show have begun airing on [Rabble Radio](#) and appear as podcasts at [rabble.ca](#).

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Notes:

1. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/is-it-anti-semitic-to-criticize-and-boycott-israel/5536920>

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