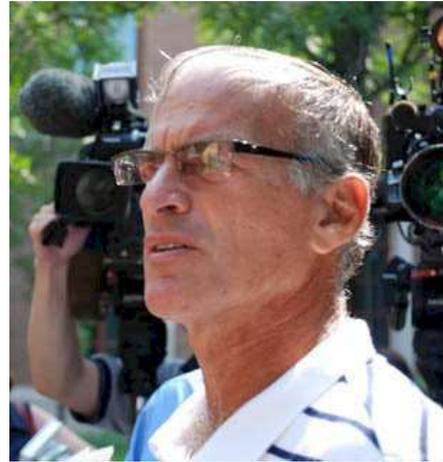




CJPME Interview with Dr. Norman Finkelstein (July, 2012)

As Israel continues to expand its colonization of the West Bank, belief in the viability of the “two-state solution” within the Palestinian Solidarity movement is beginning to wane. Despite ominous developments under Israel’s Netanyahu government, Dr. Norman Finkelstein remains a compelling proponent of the two-state solution. CJPME interviewed Dr. Finkelstein in order to clarify the reasons why he continues to argue in support of the two-state solution for Israel-Palestine.



In addition to clarifying Dr. Finkelstein’s arguments for the two-state solution, CJPME also wanted to better understand certain comments that Dr. Finkelstein made in a video released on YouTube in February. Rumours have circulated for years that Dr. Finkelstein does not support the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign launched against Israel in 2005. On this point and others, CJPME felt it was important that Dr. Finkelstein have a chance to clarify his stance.

For decades, Dr. Finkelstein has been an important voice arguing in favour of a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict based on international law. An American Jew and son of Holocaust survivors, Dr. Finkelstein did his Ph.D. thesis at Princeton University on Zionism. Dr. Finkelstein’s credibility as an advocate of Palestinian human rights is unassailable, and he has faced off against many of the strongest and most strident voices in the pro-Israel lobby in America. His many books on the Arab-Israeli conflict have been read by hundreds of thousands, and have encouraged countless individuals to get involved in the struggle for Palestinian human rights.

The interview centered around five points, as follows:

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Dr. Finkelstein’s support for the two-state solution

CJPME: Some people have attempted to qualify you as an intransigent proponent of the two-state solution. But when one listens attentively to the video and your lectures from earlier this year (2012), your defence of the two-state solutions derives primarily from practical concerns. These concerns can be summarized in a small number of key points:

1. a belief that mass international support for anything other than the two-state solution is very distant, and that as a result,
2. the two-state solution is the only solution which is politically viable in any short-term (e.g. less than 10 year) timeframe. Also,



3. the suffering of the Palestinians (and the Israelis) under the status quo has gone on far too long, and that every effort must be made to end the suffering as quickly as possible.

Thus, rather than arguing for the two-state solution as a type of dogma, you're a proponent of it because you see it as the most expedient way of arriving at a solution, imperfect though such a solution may be.

Is this a fair characterization of your position in support of the two-state solution? Are there other considerations that also drive you to argue for the two-state solution?

Dr. Finkelstein: Yes, that is the core reasoning for my support of the two-state solution. It does not reflect my *personal* beliefs, but rather what I consider *politically* possible.

In effect, the only basis for building a movement that can reach a broad public is international law. On this point everyone seems to agree, including the BDS leadership, which speaks of a “rights-based approach” anchored in “international law.” But international law is clear that Israel is a state having the same rights and obligations as any other state, and that the two-state settlement is the only basis for resolving the conflict.

Dr. Finkelstein's concerns about proposals for a one-state solution

CJPME: Some people try to characterize you as being “against” the one-state solution. As we understand it, you are not against the one-state solution per se. Instead, you see pursuit of the one-state solution as being 1) impractical, and 2) potentially counterproductive.

As an impractical strategy, you make the following arguments:

1. A “one-state” solution has never been considered by Palestinian or Israeli negotiators. Instead, all accords speak of a “two state” solution. None of the peace accords signed over the past several decades have ever considered the Palestinian Arabs in Israel as part of the negotiations puzzle. Such accords mention the Palestinian refugees and East Jerusalem, but do not mention the Palestinians in Israel as an element for discussion.
2. Presently, there is no international consensus to challenge the existing conception of the state of Israel as a majority Jewish state. While an ethnically-based state may be an anachronism in today's world, there is no international will to rethink the concept of the state of Israel.

Dr. Finkelstein: Yes, that's one important angle. It is not required of Palestinians, nor should they (in my opinion), recognize Israel as a Jewish state or even a Jewish-majority state. I also see no reason why one wouldn't want to call for full and equal rights for Palestinians inside Israel, although the international consensus does not speak to this issue. However, what one *can't* do, in my opinion, is deny the existence of Israel as a state—because such a denial has no basis in law, and in fact constitutes a fundamental breach of it.

CJPME: As for the one-state solution being a counterproductive strategy, I believe you make the following arguments.



First, since it would dissolve the “majority Jewish” character of Israel, the one-state solution would undermine international law vis-à-vis Israel as a country. For example, among other legal instruments, UN General Assembly resolution 181 (1947) called for the creation of a majority Jewish state in mandate Palestine. The ICJ ruling of 2004 also recognized the legitimacy of Israel based on its pre-1967 borders. Thus, you say, arguing for a one-state solution suggests that one does not support international law.

Dr. Finkelstein: Yes, I just addressed these points above.

CJPME: Second, since the strongest arguments in favour of Palestinian human rights are all based in support for international law, you believe that supporters of Palestine must demonstrate an unwavering commitment to international law. Arguing for the one-state solution, you assert, suggests that one does not truly support international law.

Is this a fair characterization of your concerns about the one-state solution?

Dr. Finkelstein: Yes. If one picks and chooses with international law, it enables Israel’s apologists to claim that the Palestinian solidarity movement is hypocritical and not to be trusted.

CJPME: And would it be fair to say that you “accept” the reasons that some advance for the one-state solution, but you don’t see it either 1) as being conducive to the long-term strategies of the Palestine solidarity movement, or 2) as being expedient in terms of ending the conflict?

Dr. Finkelstein: I have said on many occasions that I support neither two states nor one state. I support zero states. Professor Chomsky often says that the best solution would probably be something along the lines of the Ottoman Empire when one traveled freely from Cairo to Baghdad. But there’s simply no basis for such a solution in the current state system.

Dr. Finkelstein’s support for the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees

CJPME: Some people have questioned whether you believe in the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees, as asserted in Resolution 194. As per your points in the video, however, it seems clear that you agree with the legal arguments which assert this right of the refugees. Can we thus assume that you agree with the “right of return” of Palestinian refugees?

Dr. Finkelstein: In everything I have ever written on the subject, I have emphasized that Palestinians have a right of return, and no one has the right to tell Palestinians that they should renounce this right as a precondition for negotiations. In fact, I was the first person to point out that both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch had endorsed the right of return.

CJPME: However, as you say, you listen not from the perspective of “is it right, or is it wrong.” Instead, you listen from the perspective of “can I defend it,” and you question whether you can. Similar to your concerns about the “legality” of one-state arguments, insisting that 5 million Palestinian refugees return to Israel-Palestine is something you would have difficulty “defending.” Thus, is it accurate to say that, while you agree with the “right of return” in principle, you do not advocate the return of *all* refugees as a core tenet to resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict?



Dr. Finkelstein: My opinion is that a reasonable political solution can be found if Israelis negotiate in good faith. But to date, the official Israeli position is that they don't accept any historical, legal, political or moral responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem. That is a non-starter. Negotiations must start from the premises that (1) Israel bears overwhelming responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem, and (2) Palestinians have a right of return. Once these points are acknowledged by Israel, I think a resolution can be found.

Dr. Finkelstein's support for the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions of Israel) movement

CJPME: For some reason, a rumour has circulated for some time that you oppose the BDS movement. Having listened to literally dozens of your talks, there seems no question that you *do support* the BDS movement as a tactic in support of Palestinian human rights. Is this true?

Dr. Finkelstein: I supported BDS long before there was a BDS movement! I attended and spoke at the 2006 Presbyterian convention in Birmingham Alabama, lobbying the church group to divest from investments in the occupied Palestinian territories. I even donated a free copy of Beyond Chutzpah to every one of the 800 attendees to the conference.

CJPME: That said, you do disagree with some of the ways in which the BDS campaign has been positioned and promoted by its founders. As per the above discussion, your disagreements are more practical than philosophical in nature. With this in mind, are some or all of the following statements true?

1. You disagree with some of the specific "three tier" demands of the founders of the BDS movement. Particularly, as per your points above, you disagree with the BDS founders' insistence on the return of *all* Palestinian refugees, and linkage with the rights of Palestinians in Israel.
2. In effect, you consider the specific demands of the BDS founders to parallel those of the one-state proponents. While you agree that the BDS movement puts positive pressure on the Israeli government, you believe the stated "end goals" of the BDS movement to be impractical with the current international political environment.
3. You believe that the BDS founders have a tendency to inappropriately impose BDS, and/or all their "three tier" demands on all facets of the Solidarity movement. As a result, while there may be broad support for Palestinian human rights, the insistence on linkage with BDS or all the "three tier" demands prevents greater broad-base public support.

Dr. Finkelstein: Exactly correct.

Dr. Finkelstein's comments that certain elements of the Solidarity Movement function like a cult

CJPME: During the video, you assert that certain elements of the solidarity movement function like a cult. While it wasn't always clear who, or what, you had in mind, the following were some elements which emerged:



1. You feel that some leaders of the BDS movement emit dictates or conclusions, and expect everyone to accept and repeat them without questioning.
2. You feel that some leaders in the Solidarity movement have truly dark motives, but couch them in purposely evasive or misleading language.
3. You feel that some Palestinian leaders within the solidarity movement are overly, inappropriately and manipulatively involved in the international solidarity movement.

Dr. Finkelstein: I would add these points: 1) Self-proclaimed leaders of the BDS movement claim to speak in the name of “Palestinian civil society” or “the Palestinian people,” although they have no basis to make such a claim. They then use this fraudulent claim as a club to silence any opposition to their diktat; 2) The movement is riddled with flagrant hypocrisy – a) a leader calls for the boycott of all Israeli universities while he himself studies at Tel Aviv University, (b) a leader claims that BDS doesn’t target individuals or an individual’s beliefs, only institutions, but he then calls for a ban on Daniel Barenboim¹ because Barenboim is a “Zionist,” c) BDS did *not* call for a ban on [the film] Five Broken Cameras although it was produced in conjunction with an official Israeli film society. These are the hallmarks of a cult: everything is decided on the whim of the guru, who himself is exempt from all rules and restrictions; 3) The movement functions in a cocoon world where the incantation of mantras – “BDS,” “One State” and “Israeli Apartheid” – has replaced a *political* analysis of what’s possible and likely to reach a broad public.

CJPME: It seems pretty clear that, in making the points above, you had specific individuals in mind, and not “all leaders” within the international solidarity movement.

Dr. Finkelstein: Correct.

CJPME: CJPME supports the BDS movement, and hosts a “Boycott Centre” on its Website. In conceiving and launching this Centre, while CJPME reviewed the text of the Palestinian call to BDS, CJPME never consulted with anyone outside of Canada. Like most international BDS initiatives, CJPME’s BDS activities and objectives are specific to our context, and our BDS plans originate from within the organization.

Since many other organizations function similarly to CJPME, would you agree with the following points?:

First, that the vast majority of international activists for Palestinian human rights function independently, and are not “coordinated” or influenced by activists in other countries, let alone Palestine.

Dr. Finkelstein: I am *not* convinced on this point. Everywhere I traveled this past year (except CJPME), all I heard was BDS, BDS, BDS. It’s become a mantra, alongside “One State,” and

¹ Daniel Barenboim is a world-famous conductor of classical music, an Israeli, and an outspoken critic of Israeli rights abuses against the Palestinians. Together with the late Palestinian author Edward Said, Barenboim founded the West-Eastern Divan orchestra, an orchestra which brings together musicians from Israel, Palestine and other Arab countries. In January 2008, Barenboim was offered and accepted honorary Palestinian citizenship, becoming the first Jewish Israeli citizen to be offered the status.



“Israeli Apartheid.” The fact that all my speaking engagements were abruptly cancelled also suggests more coordination than you acknowledge.

CJPME: Like CJPME, most proponents of the BDS movement have their own reasons (and goals) in adopting BDS as a tactic. For example, many BDS supporters may be totally unaware of the “three tier” demands of the BDS founders. Would you agree with this?

Dr. Finkelstein: I suspect you are correct on this.

CJPME: Many organizations like CJPME function independently in choosing their own emphasis, based on their own strategies and principles. For example, some organizations *only* call for BDS on Israeli companies implicated directly in the Israeli occupation. As another example, some organizations specifically *adopt* the cultural and/or academic boycott of Israel, while others specifically *sidestep* these tactics.

Basically, although the BDS movement was launched with a certain spin, its implementation will take literally thousands of independent forms as different, well-intentioned, principled groups and individuals implement it in their own way, and within their own contexts.

Would you agree?

Dr. Finkelstein: Yes. I cannot see how the movement can succeed unless we use the tactics of boycott, divestment and sanctions, which seem to have strong appeal especially among church groups.

For further information:

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