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Reviews

Ta-Nehisi Coates' Trip to Palestine: Facing the Zionist Backlash

- Reviews section -

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Ta-Nehisi Coates is a celebrated writer, journalist and public intellectual known for his works on racism and the Black freedom struggle. Coates has been praised for his books and essays, including establishment publications. That would change after his 2023 visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories of Palestine, his first trip to the region.

As he says in his new book *The Message* (One World, October 2024, 250 pages):

“Writing is a powerful tool of politics. For positive action and clarity, or for misinformation and dishonesty by those in power.”

This book of essays is directed toward his students at Howard University in a writing workshop where he focuses on three trips — including to Dakar, Senegal and to Chapin, South Carolina. The controversy arose because of what he says about Israel and the Occupied Territories, where he visited the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The Message has stirred controversy and deep anger from Zionists and pro-Israel lobbyists.

“I Felt Lied To”

Going to Palestine was “a huge shock to me,” he told the *New York Times*. Coming back to New York, he felt, as he told reporter Peter Beinart, “a responsibility to yell” about what he’d seen — which he describes as apartheid and which he compares to the segregated Jim Crow South in the United States.

A review in *The Atlantic* by Daniel Berhner wrote that Coates “had confronted, he said, Israel’s ‘Jim Crow regime,’ its ‘segregationist order,’ enforced by the ‘biggest guns I’d ever seen in my life.’”

And given that Coates had been “reared on the fight against Jim Crow, against white supremacy,” he felt mortified by his years of blindness to the brutal simplicity of the Palestinian plight. “How,” he asked, “could I not know?”

The trip took place in May 2023, before the October 7 Hamas attack that sparked Israel’s ongoing genocidal war in Gaza, now expanded to daily bombing of Lebanon.

Coates has explained in numerous interviews and speeches that when he was guided from Jerusalem to Hebron on a tour organized by the Palestine Festival of Literature in May 2023, he found that the situation was far from complicated.

It reminded him of the Jim Crow South and apartheid in South Africa. “I felt lied to,” he told *New York Times* columnist and podcast host Ezra Klein. “I felt lied to by my craft. I felt lied to by major media organizations.”

“I don’t think I ever, in my life, felt the glare of racism burn stronger and more intense than in Israel,” he said. “There are aspects I found familiar — the light-skinned Palestinians who speak of ‘passing,’ the Black and Arab Jews whose stories could have been staged in Atlanta instead of Tel Aviv.”

The pro-Israel lobby sharply attacked Coates as a “dupe of Hamas” and an unwitting terrorist advocate.

CBS Mornings Show Blindsides

A September 30 interview with CBS Mornings news anchor Tony Dokoupil was no normal interview about a new book, nor an effort to seek the author's reason for writing a controversial but highly acclaimed book.

It was a hit job. Coates was aggressively challenged by Dokoupil on his claims against Israel's legitimacy. Dokoupil accused the author of engaging in extremist rhetoric.

“If I took your name out of it, took away the awards, and the acclaim, took the cover off the book, the publishing house goes away — the content of that section would not be out of place in the backpack of an extremist,” said Dokoupil.

Dokoupil's former wife and two children live in Israel, and he did not hide his pro-Zionist ideology while claiming to be an unbiased journalist.

As Coates later said after being ambushed by CBS, he asked where are the Palestinian and Muslim journalists on television? Why aren't they allowed to tell their story?

In fact, most pro-Arab voices are pushed off the mainstream media including at CNN, MSNBC and other outlets. Coates cites a study showing that over the past 50 years (1970-2019) fewer than two percent of opinion pieces about Palestine were written by Palestinian journalists or writers. (The Message, 229)

The Message, Coates said, was not intended to be “a treatise on the entirety of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis.” He isn't offended specifically by a “Jewish state,” Coates said, but “by the idea of states built on ethnocracy, no matter where they are.”

When Dokoupil asked him why his essay ignored the “terror groups” that seek to wipe Israel off the map — which might explain Israel's elevated level of scrutiny and lack of courtesy at security checkpoints — he replied that “Israel does exist. It's a fact. The question of its ‘right’ is not a question that I would be faced with any other country.”

Other Rebuttals

In an interview with Trevor Noah, the South African-born former host of the “Daily Show” on Comedy Central and prominent podcaster, Coates acknowledged what he had thought about “a lot” but never said out loud before.

He described the need to recognize the historical contexts that shape actions, likening the situation in Gaza to past struggles. He drew a parallel from October 7 to Nat Turner's 1831 slave rebellion: “The example I think about all the time is like Nat Turner. This man slaughters babies in their cribs.”

He questioned whether the “degradation and dehumanization of slavery” could ever justify such acts, pondering whether some enslaved people would have thought, “This is too far. I can't do that.”

In an interview on "Democracy Now" on October 8 he elaborated the point:

[Co-host] JUAN GONZÁLEZ: You write in the book, quote, "It occurred to me that there was still one place on the planet — under American patronage — that resembled the world that my parents were born into." Can you elaborate?

TA-NEHISI COATES: Yes. And I think I talked about it the last time I was here, actually. These are the words I have even now, and they are probably insufficient to what a Palestinian would offer who experiences this, but the words that come to me are "segregation."

When you are on the West Bank, there are separate roads. There are roads for Israeli settlers and citizens of Israel, and there are roads for Palestinians. These roads are not separate and equal; these roads tend to be separate and unequal. It tends to take longer to get where you want to go if you're a Palestinian.

If you enter a city like Hebron, for instance, Hebron is quite literally segregated. There are streets that Palestinians cannot walk down. There are streets (where) Israeli settlers are given complete and free movement...

The justice system, which is deeply familiar for African Americans today, is quite literally segregated. There is a civil justice system that the minority of Israeli settlers, as Israeli citizens, enjoy, and then there is an entirely separate justice system (to which) Palestinians on the West Bank are subject...

It has been this way since 1967. And the word we use for that is "occupation," which is a kind of a deeply vanilla word that does not actually describe what is going on.

Coates has taken the attacks of his critics and Zionists smear operatives well. It is a powerful example of how to respond to the racist right.

But *The Message* is much more than about Israel and Palestine. The sections on Senegal and South Carolina are worth a serious reading.

In Conclusion

Coates concludes his view of Zionism:

"I've been home for a year, but sometimes I still dream that I am back in Palestine..."

"Zionism was conceived as a counter oppression that feels very familiar. I read the early Zionist Moses Hess naming himself as part of "an unfortunate, maligned, despised, and dispersed people—a but one that the world has not succeeded in destroying," and I hear the prophets of Black nationalism, the struggle into which I was born, the struggle of Garvey and Malcolm, the struggle that gave me my very name....

"So much of what I saw during those ten days seemed explicitly about that particular mission. Honor. Even the platitude "Israel has the right to defend itself" made sense in the context of a people who'd so often been made to dance for their killers....

"But the security of Israel did not just require an agreement with apartheid — it required that Israel practice apartheid itself." (207)

The founders of Zionism explicitly saw themselves and their envisioned state as an outpost of Western civilization against Asiatic barbarism. Israel today stands revealed by Amnesty International as the perpetrator of genocide in Gaza. It also leads to Jewish deaths and antisemitism around the globe.

Palestinian resisters are freedom fighters just as enslaved people from Africa were the true heroes — not the slaveholders or Founding Fathers who incorporated white supremacist ideology into the blood and bones of American democracy to this day.

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