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Reviews

When Liberals Fail on Palestine

- Reviews section -

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The title of this book is partly based on a label applied to many progressives in the United States: "Progressive Except for Palestine." Except for Palestine argues that progressives and liberals who oppose repressive policies on immigration, racial justice, gender equality, endless wars, LGBTQ rights and other human rights issues, must extend these principles and values to the oppression of Palestinians.

The challenge is particularly timely right now, as the longstanding consensus of the Democratic Party "in support of Israel" is fraying with Israel's latest brutal assault on Gaza and continuing ethnic cleansing in occupied East Jerusalem. Palestinian American young people today are speaking out and finding growing support among Black Lives Matter activists and their allies.

Marc Lamont Hill is a professor at Temple University and was a commentator on CNN until the network fired him for his support for "free Palestine." Mitchell Plitnick was a founder and served as a staff person for Jewish Voice for Peace.

The authors' definition of the "except Palestine" syndrome is encapsulated by their quote from a "progressive including Palestine" commentator, Mehdi Hasan:

"A proud supporter of liberal interventions will back interventions everywhere, except occupied territories. Their heart bleeds for Syrians, Libyans, Afghan, Iraqis, Rwandans, but not for Palestinians."

The book covers four areas where there has been a historical gap between progressive and liberal principles and values, and their silence and apathy towards Israel: 1) Israel's demand that the Palestinians recognize its right to exist in general and particularly as a "Jewish state;" 2) the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions ("BDS") movement; 3) The failure to recognize that Trump's policies, although brash and distinctive on their face, were not really a significant break from longstanding American policies towards Israel; and 4) the horrible humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Right to Exist As What?

Israel's demand that its recognition be affirmed as a Jewish state, or "the nation-state of the Jewish people," is historically unique and extremely problematic.

In the international system, states recognize each others' territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders, and acknowledge (or deny) the legitimacy of their current government.

Most of the world recognizes Israel as a state. While it came into existence by the dispossession of another people through settler colonialism, Israel's dispossession of its native population parallels what occurred in Australia, Canada, South Africa and the United States and the world recognizes all of these entities as states, nevertheless. Recognition also entails obligations under terms of international law.

Israel's demand that its right to exist as "the Jewish state" be affirmed is exclusively aimed at the Palestinians, the victims of historical and continuing Zionist settler colonialism. That demand is not directed toward other states.

The function of this relatively new demand is to deny Palestinians their rights and self-determination in their own homeland. Under this irrational and discriminatory demand, Israel wants the Palestinians to affirm its existence (as "the Jewish state") while Israel has never even defined its own borders.

In fact the Palestinian leadership has recognized Israel on three different occasions: 1) in the Palestinian declaration of independence of November 15, 1988 which accepted a Palestinian state only in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. This implicitly recognized Israel within its 1967 borders; 2) in PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's speech to the United Nations in 1988 wherein he recognized Israel's right to exist; and 3) in a letter Arafat gave to Israel's Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, during the Oslo negotiations in which he affirmed the PLO's recognition of the State of Israel, to exist in peace and security.

It bears repeating that Israel does not demand that other states recognize it as a Jewish state not the United States, the European Union, nor even the Arab League or the non-aligned states.

Egypt and Jordan have peace agreements with Israel without the unusual recognition of Israel as a Jewish state. The same is true of its recent diplomatic arrangements with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

The authors inquire why Israel demands that it be recognized as a Jewish state, when the world has never recognized Iran as "the Islamic Republic," Saudi Arabia as an absolute monarchy, Sweden as a constitutional monarchy, or the United States as a federal republic.

Their answer is obvious: Palestinian recognition of "a Jewish state" would affirm the secondary status of Israel's non-Jewish citizens and tacitly make them accept their own discrimination.

The Israeli Knesset passed the "Nation-State Law" in July, 2018. It specifies that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people and national self-determination in the State of Israel exclusively belongs to "the Jewish people." As such, it codifies into law that non-Jewish Israelis are second-class citizens.

This would be analogous to the U.S. Constitution stating that the USA is a "Christian" nation. For Palestinians to accept this characterization of Israel would be tantamount to supporting their own oppression. It would immediately compromise Palestinian freedom and ultimately their self-determination.

This demand is not only inconsistent with international law, but also contrary to anything resembling progressive values. It is a profound regression from the basic principles of equal citizenship rights.

Criminalizing BDS

On July 9, 2005 Palestinian civil society, consisting of 170 groups, called for the boycott, divestment and sanctions ("BDS") against Israel. This call was timed to correspond to the decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) holding that Israel's construction of its wall in the West Bank violated international law.

The BDS call occurred after the end of the second Intifada, when it was recognized that a nonviolent nonmilitary movement was necessary to secure Palestinian rights.

This movement was loosely modeled after the world-wide opposition to South African apartheid and had four goals:

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1) ending the occupation; 2) removal of the separation wall in the West Bank (i.e. the "apartheid" wall); 3) equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel; and 4) assuring the Palestinian right of return as stated in UN resolution 194 and upheld many times since.

Israel initially ignored the BDS movement, but this changed dramatically around 2009-2010 when Israel began to mercilessly attack the BDS campaign. This change occurred because BDS gained tremendous support and momentum within the international community.

It also resulted from Israel's reputation being tarnished by its vicious attack on Gaza in 2009, which it called Operation Cast Lead; the election of right-wing nationalist prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu that same year; and Israel's fatal attack on the Free Gaza Movement flotilla's Turkish ship Mavi Marmara on May 31, 2010.

The attacks on the BDS movement in the United States have been relentless. In 2010 the Anti-Defamation League listed the top ten U.S. anti-Israel groups, based primarily on their support for BDS. As of January 2020, 28 U.S. states have passed laws and policies penalizing businesses, organizations and individuals engaging in (or even refusing to disavow) boycotts against Israel.

There have been legal challenges in three of these states, Kansas, Arizona and Texas, and in all cases these laws were struck down as violations of the First Amendment.

In February, 2019 the US Senate passed the "Combatting BDS Act of 2019." This bill, which would have allowed states and municipalities to follow through on laws that were already declared unconstitutional by the federal courts, fortunately did not pass the House of Representatives.

Progressive folks who have always supported popular boycotts such as those against Chick-fil-A for funding anti-Queer groups, Hobby Lobby for its denial of women's right to contraceptives because of "religious values" and Walmart for its anti-labor practices should be hard pressed to oppose BDS.

BDS is not the only nonviolent legal tactic that the U.S. government and many of its supporters have condemned, including so-called progressives and liberals. These have included legal and diplomatic penalties for Palestinians going to the International Criminal Court and for joining the UN General Assembly.

Those who oppose BDS and other nonviolent legal tactics allow Palestinians only one route to redress their grievances - bilateral talks with Israel under U.S. auspices, which have been proven utter failures for over a quarter century.

BDS shifts the conversation from states, territories and nations to equal rights. Those opposing BDS attempt to censor this conversation, because they cannot win the battle on the terrain of rights. Here again they are completely out of step with progressive values.

Trump's Policies

Donald Trump implemented many policies towards Israel/Palestine which many charged were great and dangerous historical deviations from the status quo.

These included recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights (Syrian territory occupied by Israel since 1967), moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and cutting aid to the United Nations Relief Works Administration (UNRWA).

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The authors discuss whether Trump's actions were real breaks from decades of U.S. policy or rather only dangerous extensions.

On March 25, 2019 Trump recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights and was rewarded a couple of months thereafter by having an Israeli settlement there renamed after him "Trump Heights."

There is no question that Trump's action violated international law. The UN charter specifically forbids the acquisition of territory by force, as Israel did in the 1967 war.

No other country in the world has recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights. This non-recognition had also been Washington's official position. The United States, however, never actually opposed Israel's settlement expansion in the Golan Heights.

This laissez-faire attitude towards Israel settlement activity in the Golan Heights effectively allowed Israel to do as it pleased, especially as Syria was consumed by its civil war since 2011.

Whatever the U.S. official or de facto position towards Israel sovereignty towards the Golan Heights, it did not change the facts on the ground. It did, however, take away a bargaining chip to obtain an agreement between Israel and Syria.

In addition, from 1972 to the present time, the United States has vetoed 44 UN Security Council resolutions critical of Israel. It also blocks Security Council cease-fire resolutions during Israel's assaults on Gaza until the Israeli government signals its assent.

Trump's moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which opened on May 14, 2018, was indeed unique in many ways. In 1947 the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 181 which declared Jerusalem to be an international entity not belonging to a future or Jewish state. In 1949 Israel claimed Jerusalem as its capital, a claim not recognized by the international community.

In 1980 Israel passed a Basic Law claiming Jerusalem as its complete and united capital. (This now includes the vastly expanded "Greater" and "Metropolitan" Jerusalem virtually bisecting the West Bank.) Here again, no other country recognized Israel's claim, and Israel was censured by the UN Security Council.

Yet Trump's actions relative to Jerusalem, although largely seen as unique and reckless, were actually in line with the gradual change in U.S. policy. During both Ronald Reagan's and Bill Clinton's primary campaigns, they supported recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Once in office, however, they did not follow through on their campaign promises.

On October 23, 1995, Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which required the embassy to move to Jerusalem by May 31, 1999. Clinton neither signed nor vetoed this Act, and it became law on November 8, 1995. But the Act included a six-month waiver which was continuously renewed until 2018.

In conclusion, Trump did not drastically overturn U.S. policy towards Jerusalem, but instead fulfilled legislative policy which gradually approved of the embassy move over time.

The Refugee Crisis

UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) was created in 1949 to provide protection, social services, education and relief to the Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1947-48 war. Israel grudgingly accepted UNRWA for a couple of reasons. First, it faced overwhelming world criticism for creating the refugee problem in the first place. Second, it gave itself an excuse for not being responsible for the refugees.

On August 31, 2018 Trump cut all U.S. financial aid to UNRWA, comprising a third of its budget. There were a couple of ostensible reasons for Trump's actions. It demonstrated his overwhelming support for Israel, and was another way of attacking the Obama administration which never cut aid to UNRWA. (Biden has restored UNRWA funding ed.)

Aside from these reasons, the authors offer a symbolic and potentially much more important explanation. By attacking UNRWA Trump wanted to take the important issue of refugee right of return off the table.

Advised by neoconservative Zionist forces, Trump believed that the five million refugees and descendants of refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars would no longer have refugee rights as defined by UNRWA.

Trump's position was totally misguided. Palestinians right of return is not based on any UNRWA definition but on international law. This right of return is sanctioned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and UN General Assembly resolution 194, which has no "statute of limitations" for terminating refugee rights.

Hill and Plitnick maintain that Trump's position on defunding UNRWA and Palestinian right of return was no great break from U.S. policy.

For example, in a letter from President George W. Bush to then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Bush stated there should be no expectation that Israel would allow return to Palestinian refugees to Israel's internationally recognized borders.

This was also in line with other U.S. policies, reducing aid to the Palestinian Authority, closing the PLO office in Washington, and the State Department's position that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories weren't inherently illegal.

Gaza's Continuing Disaster

Gaza is home to approximately 1.8 million Palestinians, most of them refugees from the 1948 and 1967 wars. It is generally referred to as an "open air prison" with Israel and Egypt controlling the entrance and exit of all people and goods. The situation was catastrophic long before the horrors of May, 2021.

In September, 2015 the UN Conference on Trade and Development issued a grim report on Gaza, finding that it had a 44% unemployment rate, GDP had plummeted by 30% since 1994, 72% of the population was food insecure, and 95% of the water in coastal aquifers is not drinkable. Several years ago the United Nations stated Gaza would be essentially uninhabitable by the year 2020.

From 1970-2001 Israel established 21 Jewish-only settlements in the Gaza strip. As the second Intifada waned, Sharon withdrew these settlements.

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As the renowned Palestinian writer Edward Said stated, Gaza became a millstone around Israel's neck for which it did not want responsibility. Rather, Israel wanted to use Oslo to give Gaza to the Palestinians and keep the best lands elsewhere for itself.

A watershed event occurred on January 20, 2006. In the first Palestine Legislative Elections held since 1996, Hamas unexpectedly won the majority of seats in the Palestine Legislative Council (PLC). Although the United States had designated Hamas a terrorist organization, its victory was mainly attributed to its rival, Fatah, being seen as ineffective and corrupt.

According to Noam Chomsky, Gazans committed the cardinal sin of "voting the wrong way." As a result in May, 2006 Congress passed the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006 which forbade aid to the Palestinian Authority unless the President certified that no PA ministry, agency or instrumentality was controlled by Hamas.

This Act was co-sponsored by 294 members of Congress. In the House only 31 Democrats and six Republicans voted against it, and in the Senate it had 91 co-sponsors. Even Representative Betty McCollum, widely recognized as the most principled defender in Congress of Palestinian rights, still supported the milder Senate version of the law.

A subsequent U.S.-supported abortive coup left Hamas in power in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank, an impasse frozen until the present day. On December 27, 2008 Israel launched a major military operation against Gaza, called "Operation Cast Lead," the first of four major attacks on Gaza in the next six years.

According to Al Haq, a Palestinian human rights organization, Israel killed 1409 Palestinians, of whom 1172 were civilians including 342 children. The UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) authorized a fact-finding mission to investigate this operation which was led by Richard Goldstone, a Jewish South African jurist with strong connections to Israel.

The 450-page report which followed found that Israel, Hamas, and other Palestinian groups were guilty of "violations of international human rights and humanitarian laws and possible war crimes, and crimes against humanity."

Israel, which refused to participate in the investigation, expectedly denounced the findings, as did the Obama administration and a large bipartisan majority in Congress.

Goldstone, under widespread attack from all sides, especially Israel, eventually gave in, and in an April, 2011 op-ed undermined some of the report's findings (i.e. that it was Israel's strategy to harm the civilian population of Gaza). He did this without consulting the report's two co-authors.

Israel again launched a large scale military assault of Gaza in the summer of 2014 called "Operation Protective Edge." During the 50 days of fighting 2202 Palestinians were killed, including 1371 civilians, as well as 68 Israelis.

In Spring 2018 tens of thousands of Gazans began taking part in unarmed protests at the Israeli border organized by grassroots activists and civil society. The goal was to focus attention on the siege of Gaza and to bring to the forefront the Palestinian Right of Return enshrined in UN Resolution 194. After one year of continuous demonstrations, Israel had killed approximately 266 Palestinians and wounded over 30,000.

In all these military operations and attacks on protests, Israel engaged in what only can be described as collective punishment, violating international law. Despite this, most Democrats, including those who consider themselves to be progressive or liberal, have been as silent as Republicans in speaking out against Israel's vicious attacks.

Conclusion: The Picture Changes

"To move beyond the current limits," Hill and Plitnick contend, "progressives must embrace a more principled politics, one that begins by recognizing the fundamental humanity of Palestinians...entitled to the same rights to freedom, justice, equality, safety, and self-determination as everyone else around the world. Only from this place can equal human, civil, individual, and national rights for both Israelis and Palestinians be achieved."

Despite the authors' criticism of progressives and liberals for not extending their human rights principles and values to Israel/Palestine, they are optimistic about the future. They cite the positions that Bernie Sanders took in his 2016 presidential campaign where he criticized the Netanyahu government's rightwing policies, labeled the Israeli policies in Gaza "disproportionate," and described U.S. policy towards Israel in general as "one-sided."

They also mention the significance of the two Muslim women elected to Congress, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar. Both are supporters of BDS, which did not appear to negatively affect their successful campaigns.

Opinions are changing at the base. The authors describe polls demonstrating that Palestinian rights have become more popular with the America public over time.

A University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll released in December 2018, one month after the mid-term elections, revealed that 56% of Democrats would agree to "impose sanctions" or "take more serious action" towards Israeli settlements while only 39% would agree to "do nothing" or "criticize but do nothing more."

In Pew Research Center polls, while in 2016 48% favored Israelis and 29% favored Palestinians, by 2018 27% were sympathetic towards Israelis and 25% were sympathetic to Palestinians. Among liberal Democrats sympathy for Palestinians rose from 22% in 2016 to 35% in 2018, whereas sympathy for Israelis was 22% in 2016 and only 19% in 2018.

The authors criticize progressives and liberals for not applying their values to Israel/Palestine, despite Israel's horrendous treatment of Palestinians as thoroughly described in their book, but don't provide explanations for this inconsistency.

They do mention that progressive youth are much more consistent in applying their values to Israel/Palestine. One plausible explanation could be that young people do not view Israel through the lens of the Nazi holocaust as much as their elders do. This would be a valuable topic for a future work.

In the face of progressive silence and/or weak opposition to Israel's crimes against the Palestinians, the Republican Party has abandoned any interest in Palestinian rights and totally backs Israeli policies.

In 2016 the goal of a two-state settlement was eliminated from the Republican Party platform. In November, 2019 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a new U.S. policy that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are legal under international law.

In conclusion, the authors see overwhelming support for Israeli policies from conservatives on the one hand, and either silence or weak opposition to Israeli crimes from progressives on the other.

As Martin Luther King wrote in his 1963 "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," explaining the Black freedom struggle at

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the time, it is not so clear-cut what is worse:

"I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;,' who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.' Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejections."

Source: [Against the Current-Â»<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc213/when-liberals-fail-on-palestine/>

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