

Canada Should Condemn Israel

BY WALID CHAHAL

“If I must die / let it bring hope.”

(Rafat Alareer, poet and professor from Gaza, killed by Israeli airstrike on December 6, 2023).

Words need to be put into action. It is common knowledge that misbehaviour will not stop unless consequences are applied. So why haven't Canadian politicians stepped up to stop the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza through sanctioning Israel? How can we move towards a post-racial society that is equitable, just, and free from racism and discrimination when many of our politicians do not apply our democratic values when it comes to Palestinians?

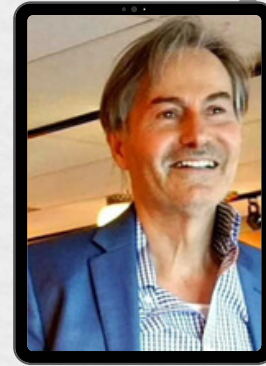
Consider, for instance, Canada's immediate response in both words and actions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Compare that with Canada's response to Israel's invasion of Gaza. Many of our politicians, with their speeches and blind support for Israel, do not seem to stand for justice and rights when it comes to the Palestinians. What does Canada's hypocritical stance on the Palestinians, who have been oppressed by Israel's military occupation, imply to racialized communities here at home who themselves struggle against racism, police brutality, and in many cases are denied rights?

So far, many of Canada's political representatives have not shown interest to act in accordance with the provisional measures of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or the reports produced by the UN (e.g. by Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur) that argue that Israel is committing war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in Gaza. Recent reports by human rights organizations such as B'Tselem and Al-Haq have provided evidence that Israel has created an apartheid system in Palestinian territories that it occupies. Israel has also been systematically destroying schools and universities in Gaza and killing and injuring students and teachers in a mass crime known as scholasticide. Why haven't Canadian politicians condemned Israel for its scholasticide in Palestine and issued sanctions?

Many liberal and most conservative politicians, especially at the federal level, have ignored or been silent on Israel's blatant acts of mass destruction—if not supporting them outright through the repetition that Israel has the right to defend itself. Our politicians recognized the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, but do they also recognize that Israel's creation and its expansion in 1967 through occupying the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, means Nakba (Catastrophe) to the Palestinians?

Canadian news, such as the CBC, shows bias towards Israel. With its decontextualized coverage that does not link what is happening today to Israel's occupation and apartheid of Palestinians, the CBC misleads the Canadian public. This fuels tensions and divisions in Canada rather than informing readers about the harms of a decades-long occupation on Palestinians. The mainstream news uncritically shares our politicians' statements, such as PM Justin Trudeau and Pierre Poilievre's support of Zionism and Zionist Canadian organizations. Premier Ford recently conflated the Palestinian flag with Hamas' flag, implying that peaceful protestors carrying the Palestinian flag are Hamas supporters. This falsely generalizes that all Palestinians and even their allies are terrorists when they raise the Palestinian flag.

Israel's imprisonment of Palestinian political dissidents, including student leaders, is barely newsworthy in Canada yet the number of Palestinians detained since Oct. 7th, 2023, has increased to 14,000. A Palestinian does not even have to be politically active to get detained as shown by the 12-year-olds, doctors, and professors who are kidnapped. Palestinians spend years in Israeli prisons without trial and due process, simply for opposing the occupation and demanding Palestinian freedom. Palestinian youth have been locked up in administrative detention, sometimes indefinitely, for the most benign acts of civil disobedience. Currently in Gaza, civilians have been detained, transferred into Israel, with reports of them being stripped and tortured, including having limbs amputated due to extreme handcuffing. Yet most mainstream news stays focused only on the Israeli hostages.



ONE CITY, MANY VOICES

The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Equity Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

Israel's retaliation to the Hamas-led Oct. 7th attack on Israel has resulted in 35,091 dead Palestinians—including 14,500 children and 8,400 women—and 78,827 injured civilians, many with severe injuries, including multiple loss of limbs, mostly in Gaza but also in the West Bank. The numbers change daily as Israel's brutal assault has not lessened even though it is answerable to the ICJ for plausible genocide and the provisional measures. Furthermore, according to OCHA and WHO, Israel has destroyed most of Gaza's infrastructure, including homes, hospitals, schools, universities, mosques, churches, groundwater wells, greenhouses, and agricultural land.

So why haven't Canadian politicians demanded sanctions on Israel as Canada sanctioned Russia for its brutal attacks in Ukraine? For 8 months, Canada's political class has failed to do anything meaningful to stop the slaughter and suffering of Palestinian civilians.

Many of Canada's politicians, with the help of corporate and mainstream media and parallel to the US, UK and most European nations, have centered the Israeli narrative, which portrays Israel as the victim and the saviour of Western civilization, and the Palestinians as animalistic terrorists hell-bent on destroying democracy; hence, they don't deserve democratic principles to be applied to them nor their own sovereign state.

Israel's political and military leaders have made clear their debasement of Palestinians (“Burn Gaza now, nothing less!”; “We are fighting human animals”) and have delivered on their intentions as evidenced by the genocidal acts in Gaza that we bear witness to. Nonetheless, many of our political officials keep siding with Israel and have not applied any sanctions on it to end its military assault and to call for an end to Israel's impunity.

In the mythic colonial narrative, Palestinians do not count as people, nor do Palestinian Canadians, who, along with their allies, have been named as hateful—including by Premier Ford—in their protests to stop Israel's genocide or for simply wearing the keffiyeh or using Arabic words such as Intifada.

Instead of supporting the groups and agencies that are fighting structural discrimination and racism, Canada has done the opposite. Our political representatives' staunch support of Israel and Zionism, their failure to condemn and sanction the fascist rhetoric of Israeli leaders, such as Netanyahu, Gallant, Ben Gvir, and Smotrich, and their echoing of Israel's fabrications about the actual crimes Israel is committing in Gaza, including the baseless accusation against UNRWA, repeats the colonial binary of us, the civilized, and them, the savages.

This self/other framing (re)produces tensions, animosity, and fears in settlers—in Israel and in Canada—who are unsettled as they feel threatened by the resistance of the oppressed and their call for freedom. Yet incredulously, politicians blame pro-Palestine protestors as the reason for “the divisions,” and mainstream news reports the “fact” that “the Israel/Palestine conflict” is divisive without recognizing their own role in creating divisions.

Rigid us/them thinking leads to grave consequences. For example, on May 9th and 13th, 2024, university administrators at both the U of Calgary and U of Alberta respectively called in riot police on peaceful student protesters seeking to end Israel's genocide in Gaza by demanding their universities disclose and divest. For taking up their democratic right of protest, the students were brutalized and hurt.

Us and them rhetoric is also evident here in Thunder Bay. While there has been tremendous and growing community support for rallies for Gaza and Palestine events in our city, there has also been hateful behaviour. Passersby have yelled obscenities at protestors, including calling them terrorists and screaming “kill all the Palestinians,” incidents of harassment and anti-Palestinian racism in workplaces and schools have been shared, Palestine signs and posters have been torn down, and angry callers accused peaceful community gatherings—Coffetime with Palestine—to be places of hate.

Canadian politicians must speak out against Israeli government leaders when they repeat civilizational rhetoric and dehumanize and demonize Palestinians by calling them animals and children of the dark who should be eliminated.

When Canada's foreign policy and political representatives do not abide by principles of international peace and justice, international law and the ICJ's provisional measures, Canada may be complicit in Israel's crime of genocide. Canada abets Israel through economic relations, supplying weapons, diplomacy, UN votes, and repeating that Israel has the right to defend itself, which in relation to those it occupies (the Palestinians), it does not. Under the Geneva Conventions, a state must legally protect civilians living under its occupation and should provide them food, shelter, education, and medicine—not restrict and prevent access to them—until the occupation ends. UN Resolutions 242 and 338 affirmed the legal obligation of Israel to withdraw from Palestinian territories obtained in the 1967 Six Day War, which Israel has ignored. Israel's occupation of Palestine has been one of the longest military occupations in the world yet Canada, by not holding Israel accountable, has accepted that grave injustice.

When Canada and its political representatives support such an apartheid state and center the Israeli story line that denies the reality of the brutal occupation, anti-Palestinian racism and anti-Semitism here at home increase.

Weaponizing antisemitism makes it difficult for some to speak out for Palestine. But it is not antisemitic to criticize a state. Conflating criticism of Zionism and Israel's apartheid occupation with antisemitism is dangerous as is representing all Jewish Canadians as Zionist Jews who inherently support the policies and actions of Israel. There is a substantial difference between Zionism and Judaism. The former is a political anti-Palestinian colonial movement, while the latter refers to the Jewish religion—the two are not synonymous. Yet both Canadian politicians and the media uncritically accept pro-Israel lobby groups' weaponization of antisemitism. They also use the word Jews to stand in for pro-Israel Zionist Jews rather than make clear that, as any other group, Jewish people take up various political stances and opinions.

Canada must serve as an honest broker to protect all civilians, wherever they live. This will include helping free both Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners. Canada must name and address the root causes of the violence and injustices in the region and stop Nakba denial. Canada must sanction Israel to hold it accountable for its numerous crimes. Palestinians deserve liberation; they deserve an end to 76 years of violence against them. Palestinians deserve a homeland.

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