

Interview - Norman Finkelstein

Written by E-International Relations

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Norman G. Finkelstein received his doctorate in 1988 from the Department of Politics at Princeton University. For many years he taught political theory and the Israel-Palestine conflict. He currently writes and lectures. Finkelstein is the author of eight books that have been translated into 50 foreign editions, including most recently, *Knowing Too Much: Why the American Jewish romance with Israel is coming to an end*, and *What Gandhi Says, About Nonviolence, Resistance and Courage*. He is currently working on a new book with Palestinian political analyst Mouin Rabbani, entitled *How to Solve the Israel-Palestine Conflict*.

In this interview, Finkelstein discusses the future of the Palestinians, the global movement for a campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel, Hassan Rouhani, the conflict in Syria and the follies of the academic tenure system.

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What were the most important familial and intellectual influences on your development?

As a child my late Mother played a critical role in my moral and political development. Both my parents survived the Nazi holocaust. They were both in the Warsaw Ghetto, and after the uprising was suppressed in 1943, they both ended up in concentration camps. My Mother was in Maidanek and then two slave-labor camps, while my Father was in Auschwitz and then the Auschwitz death march. Except for them, every member of my family on both sides was exterminated. After the war my parents met in the DP (displaced people) camps in Linz, Austria. My Father never talked about his experience. My Mother also did not talk about what happened to her family (I never did find out), but she was always mentally grappling with her war experience, trying to extract meaningful lessons from it. Both my parents looked at the world through the prism of the Nazi holocaust. We were always talking politics at the dinner table, and even when not at the dinner table. My Mother imparted to me her visceral abhorrence of war and injustice. When I got older (in my college years), I became involved in left sectarian/cultist politics. I was a Maoist. "Mao Tse-tung, /Live like him, /Dare to Struggle, /Dare to win." After I became disillusioned with Maoism and suspicious of ideologies in the late 1970s, I came under the influence of Noam Chomsky. I found appealing the premium he put on reason and evidence, but nonetheless infused with the same outrage against injustice that I inherited from my Mother.

You've recently described the current situation for the Palestinians as being the most politically weak it has ever been and that because of this there's an opportunity to impose an unfavorable settlement on them. Do you think the cause to establish a Palestinian state is completely hopeless at the moment or are there some reasons for optimism?

The Palestinians currently face a moment of truth. They have never been politically weaker. Egypt is tightening the economic blockade of Gaza; Iran will happily cut a deal with the U.S. at the Palestinians' expense; Hamas is devoid of external support and becoming evermore repressive; the West Bank economy grew at a rate of *negative* 0.5 percent in 2013; the so-called Palestinian Authority is hopelessly corrupt and inept; the Palestinian people are depressed, despondent and despairing. The U.S. and Israel accurately sense that the time is ripe to inflict a historic defeat on the Palestinians. I cannot be optimistic at the moment. If the Palestinians engaged in massive nonviolent

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civil disobedience, they could probably force Israel to end the occupation because international public opinion is overwhelmingly hostile to Israel. But I see no sign that the Palestinians are prepared to accept the sacrifices that such a mobilization would entail. The attitude among Palestinians now is, *Every man for himself*.

You've been highly critical of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. What do you think needs to change within that campaign in order for it to be more effective?

The strongest card Palestinians have to play is international law. On all the critical issues — borders, East Jerusalem, settlements, refugees — the law is completely on the Palestinians' side and has repudiated Israel's official positions. But the law cannot be selectively embraced. It comes with rights, but also obligations: if we have a right to walk at the green, it's because we also have an obligation to stop at the red. The BDS movement purports that it is anchored in international law. Accordingly, it calls for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied West Bank and Gaza, equal rights for Palestinian citizens in Israel, and recognition of the rights of Palestinian refugees. That's all well and good. But it refuses to recognize Israel as a state. If Palestinians have a right to self-determination and statehood, so do Israelis. This is not a matter of opinion, mine or anyone else's. It's the law. BDS selectively invokes the law. That's hypocrisy. Besides all else, it will never fly among a broad public. Israel's well-oiled propaganda machine will expose BDS's double standard, and consequently the movement will never get beyond the confines of a cult.

What are your views on the recent election of Hassan Rouhani as Iranian President?

Former president Ahmadinejad practiced the populist-demagogic politics of a small-town mayor. He playfully questioned the Nazi holocaust and undertook local development projects that won him many adherents. Rouhani is plainly more serious. Whether he will be able to pull off a "grand bargain" with the U.S. is anyone's guess. The main point of contention right now is Syria: the U.S. will have to choose between Iran and Saudi Arabia; there doesn't appear to be much room for manoeuvre. Otherwise, the U.S. will not accept an independent regional power in the Middle East. Iran will have to acquiesce in some sort of tutelary role if a reconciliation between the Washington and Tehran is to happen.

The civil war in Syria has lasted more than two years now and has caused an enormous amount of human suffering. What role do you feel the U.S. should be playing in this crisis?

I do not see any resolution to the conflict. I agree with the excellent journalist Patrick Cockburn that the best one can hope for right now is an externally imposed ceasefire. Of course, the ceasefire will break down sooner or later (probably sooner) and another one will have to be cobbled together. But until the various parties to the conflict are exhausted and realize the only option is political compromise, at least fewer lives will be lost with a series of ceasefires.

In the recent past, you were controversially denied tenure at DePaul University, which led to your resignation. Given the way it played out, do you think the academic tenure system at universities needs reform?

There's very little justification for the tenure system. In order to get tenure, you must sell your principles. Otherwise, you can't get published in the venues required to get tenure. The notable exception is if you are in one of those ridiculous post-modern fields where gibberish passes as scholarship. You must also sell your soul by ingratiating yourself with repellent senior faculty. Once you get tenure, you become identified with the institution that blessed you with it. You look askance at folks who make waves and upset the smooth ebb and flow of university life. There's also the feeling that you jumped through the hoops, so why shouldn't everyone else have to? The bottom line is, tenure was supposed to protect the intellectual independence of faculty. But my experience was that junior faculty without tenure was much more supportive than senior faculty with tenure. At DePaul University, after I was denied tenure, the senior faculty jointly signed a letter denying me my contractual right to what's called the "terminal year" of university affiliation. Only the junior faculty protested this egregious violation.

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Many of e-International Relations' readers are students. What advice would you give those who are considering focusing their research on the Israel-Palestine issue?

Academia is a very different place than when I was starting out. Back then, defending the Palestinians was the equivalent today of defending the Taliban. But nowadays it actually takes more courage to defend Israel than Palestinians on college campuses. Many professors who were silent in those years are now making a big show of their courage in supporting Palestinians. It's the usual academic farce. Left, right or centre, you can count on the fingers of one hand the number of academics in the United States with intellectual integrity—i.e., willing to pay the professional price of their beliefs. I lost my job seven years ago. Since then, not one professor at a research or even second-tier university in the United States has invited me to speak in any capacity, even at a departmental brown-bag lunch, and even in New York, where I live.

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*This interview was conducted by **AI McKay**. AI is the Blogs Editor of e-IR.*