

The Price for Criticizing Israel

Israel is well-known for having a potent U.S. lobby that not only influences Congress and the mainstream media but intimidates Americans who dare criticize its policies toward the Palestinians, as Dennis J Bernstein describes.

By Dennis J Bernstein

There are very few journalist in the U.S. or Europe who have the courage to report fairly on Israel's seemingly endless illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. Personally, as a Jewish-American, and the grandson of a revered Rabbi, I have been roundly denounced by pro-Israeli representatives and their Zionist lobbyists in the U.S.

I've stopped counting the number of vicious personal attacks that have labeled me a self-hating Jewish anti-Semite. Here's one that got my attention and the attention of journalist Robert Fisk of the Independent of London, who I introduced one night for a lecture in Berkeley, California, and who then wrote an article about the plight of Jewish journalists and activists in the U.S. who dare to write or speak honestly about Israel's brutal and illegal occupation of the Palestinians:

"You mother-fucking-asshole-self-hating Jewish piece of shit. Hitler killed the wrong Jews. He should have killed your parents, so a piece of Jewish shit like you would not have been born. God willing, Arab terrorists will cut you to pieces Daniel Pearl-style, AMEN!!!" The latter reference to the late Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was kidnapped and decapitated in Pakistan.

And at another level, the Israeli consulate in San Francisco has complained to my managers at KPFA/ Pacifica Radio repeatedly about my "pro-Palestinian terrorist" and "anti-semitic" reporting, and my apparent "hatred" for the Jewish State.

Emmy award-winning filmmaker and investigative reporter John Pilger is one of the rare exceptions who has plowed head-first into this crucial story of our time. Pilger has made two documentaries 25 years apart about Palestine, with almost the same name, *Palestine is the Issue* and then *Palestine is Still the Issue*.

I spoke recently with Pilger about Palestine and the brutality of the continuing occupation, and also about the responsibility for empowering and sustaining the occupation that falls at the feet of the Western press, based on its misreporting and, in some cases, not reporting at all the brutal realities of

Israel's iron-fisted occupation of Palestinians, which many critics, as well as several UN officials, have labeled as a form of ethnic cleansing that borders on genocide.

I also spoke with Pilger about the recent G-20 meetings in Germany, where President Trump held his first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid the Russia-gate frenzy. John Pilger's latest film is *The Coming War on China*. He recently gave a moving talk at the Palestine Expo in London on the ongoing battle for the liberation of Palestine, excerpts of which have been published by Consortiumnews.

Dennis Bernstein: Let's start with some current events. We just had the G20 meeting in Europe with a big deal made about the meeting between Trump and Putin and a lot of action in the streets. Your thoughts on what happened there and some of the goings-on?

John Pilger: I think it was very interesting on two levels. First of all, it was a clear demonstration of the continuing rebellion against remote governments, governments often justifiably referred to as oligarchic. The number of people in the streets of Hamburg accurately represented that rebellion.

The interesting thing about the G20 itself was that Germany clearly set out to determine the agenda. Merkel wanted to put her country forward as the undisputed leader now of Europe. Some would say it has been for quite a while and with Britain on the way out the opportunity does exist. But that didn't happen.

The discussion was appropriated by the meeting between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Putting aside all the grotesque, cartoon qualities of Trump, the one thing that he has been consistent about is doing some deal with Russia. This has gotten him in a lot of trouble because the Democratic Party and, in fact most of the beltway institutions in Washington, don't want this to happen. They would like Russia to remain a perennial enemy.

Without Moscow there as the demon, it is very difficult to justify a lot of the infrastructure of power in the United States, particularly the massive armament and military industries. Trump openly challenged this, virtually from the beginning. Although he seemed to have to prove himself to the pillars of power in Washington by firing missiles at Syria, this element in his presidency has remained pretty much constant.

This was of course the first meeting between Trump and Putin. They spoke for two hours and twenty minutes and, by all accounts, some kind of rapport was developed. In previous times that would be good news. It used to be called "detente." These days this is not good news, either in the US political

establishment and corporate media or, to a large degree, here in Britain.

The ridiculous allegations that the Russians helped to elect Trump by directly interfering in the great American democratic process have converged with the news that Trump and Putin may well have struck some kind of deal. Whether Trump is allowed to pursue whatever arrangements he has made toward normalizing relations with Russia, given the institutions of power in the United States, is rather doubtful.

DB: Of course, the corporate press is not at all interested in detente in Syria. Their main story ever since Trump's meeting with Putin has been that his son may be guilty of treason.

JP: I've never heard something so absurd in my life, especially as the United States has intervened so aggressively in post-Soviet Russia. All through the 1990's the open and quite successful intervention was blatant. And for these powerful forces in the United States to obsess with Russian meddling in our election process demonstrates a kind of double standard that is difficult to comprehend.

DB: In light of your new film, *The Coming War on China*, this is a time when detente at all levels is crucial because the dangers of staying the course are so huge. It is interesting to see that right-wing hawks in Washington are helping to foster a new relationship between Russia and China. But detente is the only answer at this point, isn't it?

JP: Yes, it is. What's needed is a diplomatic settlement. Unfortunately, the United States doesn't do that anymore. It doesn't have "diplomats" in the real sense of the word. To now see the presidents of two of the major nuclear-armed powers in the world seemingly forging some kind of political arrangement—agreeing, apparently, that they shouldn't go to war with nuclear weapons. This is a throwback to a time before George W. Bush abolished the START treaties and others that were put together so painstakingly over so many years between the Soviet Union and the United States. It demonstrates how far the world—at the level of its political elite—has regressed. The United States is a very frightening vision for most of us because nuclear weapons are in the background all the time. The chance of a mistaken launch of nuclear weapons is high.

Consider the case of Korea, where the United States has installed its very aggressive THAAD so-called "defense" system which threatens China. No one believes for a minute that these missiles are pointed at North Korea, which could be dealt with in many other ways by the United States. The long-term strategy of an ascendant Pentagon is the balkanization of the Russian Federation

and the intimidation of China. And if there is any glint of some kind of pullback from that position, as there might have been in the meeting between Trump and Putin, then that is good news.

DB: And of course it is so bizarre that you have America talking about the role that China should be playing and how we are so disappointed that they are not doing all they can to facilitate THAAD, which is part of a strategy to surround their country in what we know is shaping up to be “the Chinese century.”

John, I’d like you to talk about how you first began to report on Palestine and then I’d like to fast forward to current issues.

JP: I first went to Palestine in the 1960’s and stayed on a kibbutz. I probably came with the popular assumption that Israel’s myths about itself were true, that Israel was a good idea. I conflated the horror of the Holocaust with the new Jewish state. The people on the kibbutz regarded themselves as both socialists and Zionists.

I came to understand the doublespeak or the contemporary amnesia that is so pervasive in Israel. We had some very lively discussions but rarely mentioned the majority people. I saw them one evening and they were referred to as “them,” as silhouettes beyond the limits of the kibbutz. I asked about them and was told, well, they’re the Arabs. One man called them nomads. By just asking the question I was crossing a line, and a disturbed silence followed. I was with good people on the kibbutz, they had principles, many had memories of the horrors in Europe. They knew, of course, that they were on stolen land.

The word “Palestinian” was almost never used, rather echoing Golda Meir’s later remark that “there’s no such thing as Palestinians.” Because once the term “Palestinian” was recognized, the state of Palestine had to be recognized. For me it was a very interesting introduction to the extraordinary situation in Palestine. I learned a lot from a wonderful photographer named Dan Hidani who lost all his family in Germany during the War. We talked out this subject of the so-called Arabs and I learned a lot from him about the guilt of the colonizers that can never quite be covered up. These early experiences really alerted me to the huge injustice the Palestinians were suffering and of course still suffer today.

DB: Could I ask you to tell the story of the novelist Liana Badr, because it really does speak to what has happened to many Palestinians and the way they have been treated?

JP: In 2002, when Ariel Sharon was prime minister and several times sent the Israeli army and tanks into the West Bank, I arrived in Ramallah just when the

Israeli army was withdrawing. Ramallah was devastated and one of the places I visited was the Palestinian Cultural Center. There I met the center's director, the renowned Palestinian novelist Liana Badr, who teaches at Columbia University now. Her manuscripts were torn and scattered across the floor. The hard drive containing her fiction and a whole library of plays and poetry had been stolen by the Israeli soldiers. Not a single book had survived. Master tapes of one of the best collections of Palestinian cinema were lost.

This was an assault on a people's culture. The soldiers had urinated and defecated on the floors and on the desks and smeared feces on children's paintings. It was the most vivid and telling symbol of what a colonial power does to the people whose country it occupies.

It was an attempt to dehumanize, that is what this assault on the Palestinian Cultural Center represented. What struck me, as well, was the determination of the Palestinians in this situation not to comply with what was expected of them as victims. That is the most astonishing thing about the Palestinians. As you walk through the rubble of Gaza, where the Israelis have attacked so many times, all of a sudden you see in the distance a group of school girls beautifully turned out in their starched and pressed uniforms and their hair done. It is a vision of defiance and determination to keep going. So the occupation may have worked physically but it hasn't worked spiritually. And perhaps in the near future it may not work politically.

Jaffa oranges are famous around the world. Actually, Jaffa is a Palestinian town taken by Israel. Jaffa oranges form part of the mythical history of modern Israel, the idea that the desert of Palestine would be made green by the arriving Jews, who would make the desert bloom. But the oranges and grapes were in fact grown by Palestinian farmers and the oranges had been exported to Europe since the eighteenth century. At one time, a rather melancholy name for the town of Jaffa used by its former inhabitants was "the place of sad oranges."

DB: I want to talk to you about Palestine and journalism. Maybe we could compare and contrast Mohammed Omer, on the one hand—who is dodging bombs and trying to get food for his family as the drones are flying past his window, trying to get as best he can the truth from the ground—compare Mohammed Omer with the people at CNBC and the BBC.

JP: Well, we know that most of mainstream journalism is simply an extension of the state. We've talked about the extraordinary McCarthy-like propaganda campaign that wants to blame everything including the weather on Russia. That happens because the media is the propaganda wing of the institutions that form power in the West.

The one that produces the most refined propaganda is the BBC. CNN and the others are just cruder versions. Any truth about Israel/Palestine or, more generally, the Middle East is not going to come from the mainstream media. Those of us who know this should rather stop beating our heads against a brick wall, asking why they don't tell the truth. That's not what they're there for.

Fortunately, there are now many independent sources, such as your program. You mentioned Mohammed Omer. We saw how brilliant and objective his reporting was from Gaza during the last terrible attack in 2014. His own family was under attack, they had very little food and water and so on, but every day he would produce these concise reports of no more than maybe 800 words, together with his photographs that would tell you what was happening as he witnessed it. It was about how people were still leading their lives in the most extraordinary ways, despite all the grief and suffering.

In other words, he did what the official media in the West rarely does: He put faces and names on people, he described their lives. He has collected those pieces together in a book. And there have been other journalists, particularly Palestinian photographers and camera people, who have done similar work. They make me proud to be a journalist.

DB: I only bring up the corporate journalists because they sustain these kinds of conditions by not reporting them or misreporting them.

JP: From my own point of view, I find it unwatchable, unless I am either monitoring it or deconstructing it. It is their censorship by omission, by distortion, by demonology. General Petraeus once said he spent most of his time with the media because that mattered more than trying to defeat the Taliban.

The good news is that a lot of people don't believe it anymore. One of the elements in the rebellion rolling across Western societies is an anger with the media. This is certainly true in Britain. I've never known the media to be so popular a subject for debate. And it's being discussed with a great deal of resentment. Reporters find themselves now having to account for their actions. That's a new development.

Yesterday, The Guardian ran a rather defensive front-page article about journalists being called to account by the survivors of the terrible Grenfell Tower fire here in London. Well, that was emblematic of the media being called to account over a wide range of issues. People are becoming aware, they understand now. They're no longer simply consumers of this sort of nonsense.

Certainly, the power of the media remains. But one of my favorite stories is that, on the night that Jeremy Corbyn almost won the election here, there was a

party at the Times newspaper, which of course is run by Rupert Murdoch. When the first results came in and it became clear that Labor was doing so well, Murdoch stormed out. That was a very symbolic moment because it meant that his media and the media like his no longer had the power to ensure that certain politicians were elected. Two days before the election, The Daily Mail devoted thirteen pages to an attempted character assassination of Corbyn. It had no effect whatsoever.

DB: We just had on our show Arab Barghouti, the son of Mustafa Barghouti, who hasn't touched his father for two years. Mustafa Barghouti has been in prison for fifteen years and just led a major hunger strike. Strong, articulate, he can't be silenced. Or you mentioned Dr. Mona El-Farra, a medical director on the ground who had a good part of her extended family wiped out in 2014. She is still ministering to the people and telling the truth to anyone who will listen. It's amazing.

JP: Yes, these are amazing people and it's quite inspiring to be in their company. Even amidst all the carnage in the world, they make you feel good about being human.

DB: Why do you think Nelson Mandela said Palestine is the greatest moral issue of our time?

JP: There is a lot to criticize about Mandela but one of the things that was interesting and admirable about Mandela was that he was loyal to those who had supported and given solidarity to the people in South Africa struggling for their freedom. Certainly, right through his time in prison he always stressed the importance of that solidarity. In other words, of people standing together. It was a rather old-fashioned internationalist view of struggle.

He associated the struggle of the majority people of South Africa against the apartheid regime with the plight of the Palestinians who were struggling with their own form of apartheid. In the same way, Desmond Tutu has been to the West Bank and has been very outspoken in echoing what Mandela said. Tutu is on the record as saying that he regards the structures of apartheid in Israel/Palestine as in some respects even worse than those in South Africa.

I suppose Mandela considered Palestine the greatest moral issue because it was about a people wronged. The Palestinians were not the Germans, they didn't do terrible things to the Jewish people. In fact, they had lived peacefully with the Jewish people for a very long time. They were the majority people in their country. Jews, Muslims, Christians lived together in peace, generally speaking, until the state of Israel was imposed on them.

As Mustafa Barghouti put it, "The Zionists wanted a state at the expense of the Palestinians." That's what Mandela meant. Palestine is a classic colonial injustice. [Israel] is the fourth largest military power in the world backed by the largest military power, the European Union and other Western countries, taking away the freedom and imposing oppression on the people of Palestine.

DB: And the idea of a free Palestinian people is one that is very troubling to the Arab world that is aligned with the United States. It seems nobody wants to think about the liberation of Palestine because then they have to think about their own corrupt and vicious dictatorships. Palestine really is the issue of war and peace. Whether there will ever be peace depends on whether these people will ever have a place to call their home again.

JP: Certainly, until the Palestinians have justice—in a way that they recognize it—there will be no peace in the region. In a sense, all roads of conflict in this troubled region lead back to Palestine. If the Palestine issue were resolved, that would mean that Israel would be a normal country. Not armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons and intimidating and oppressing the indigenous people, but a normal country living with equality within its own sphere. If that happened, if that were resolved, I'm not saying that peace would suddenly break out all over the Middle East, but it would be the beginning.

DB: Do you see the boycott/divestment movement as a hopeful light? Clearly, people who have supported it in the US, students and teachers, have suffered great repression. But do you see this as a viable movement? In some ways it is modeled on the South African anti-apartheid movement.

JP: All you have to do is look at the reaction in Israel. They are terrified of it. They have brought all kinds of pressure to bear on governments, particularly the British government, to stop the BDS movement having an influence. Just the other day, a court judgment found that local councils in Britain could indeed boycott, dis-invest and sanction whoever they please. The British government had told them they couldn't. Well, they can.

The BDS movement really worries the Israeli regime because it's popular. In Norway, the biggest trade union has endorsed it. Student bodies in the United States are going along with it. People have had their say and they have voted for it. It represents a kind of local democracy. It's much more widespread in the United States than people realize and it certainly is across Europe.

BDS on its own is not going to bring about freedom for the Palestinians. In South Africa, the sanctions did undoubtedly have an effect. But White South Africa managed to get around the sanctions. It was when it lost a powerful friend, when the Reagan administration decided that South Africa was causing

more trouble than it was worth and finally withdrew its support, that the system fell.

I'm afraid that that is the way power works. But there is no doubt that power is always influenced by popular movements such as BDS. Ultimately, I believe that the solution is in the United States. Without US backing in all its forms, Israel would have no choice but to become a normal country.

DB: It is interesting to see how strong the reaction has been to the boycott/divestment movement. Professors have lost their jobs, kids have been beaten up. Below the corporate media surface, it has really been reverberating out there in the grassroots.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
