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Review of *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom*

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Comments

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Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom, by Norman G. Finkelstein. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. 440 pages. \$34.95 cloth, \$34.95 e-book.

REVIEWED BY NUBAR HOVSEPIAN

Norman Finkelstein opens *Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom* with a powerful claim: “This book is not about Gaza. It is about what has been *done* to Gaza” (p. xi). He concludes the preface with, “If the evil is in the detail, it can only be confronted and disposed of in methodical parsing of logic and evidence” (p. xiii), and Finkelstein proceeds to parse the evidence with a meticulously researched book that can be described as forensic. *An Inquest* is not easy to read. To the contrary, it is overwhelming, but a must-read nevertheless. At a time when Palestine is simply not on the international (or Arab) agenda, the author uses his enormous research skills

to deconstruct Israeli policies and actions in Gaza and to interrogate reports by international commissions and human rights organizations. The conclusion he draws is unequivocal.

Israel launched at least seven punitive attacks on Gaza between 2004 and 2014, and assaulted the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in international waters in 2010. *An Inquest* investigates the most violent and devastating of these onslaughts, the twenty-two-day Operation Cast Lead (2008–9) and the fifty-one-day Operation Protective Edge (2014). The author also dissects the Goldstone Report (produced after Operation Cast Lead by the UN Fact Finding Commission on the Gaza Conflict), along with the deadly attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, the Freedom Flotilla’s flagship. The book is divided into four sections, one devoted to each of these topics.

Finkelstein argues that Operation Cast Lead had very little to do with Hamas and Gaza. Israel had suffered a setback in its 2006 war on Lebanon, from which its nemesis, Hezbollah, emerged relatively intact, despite heavy damage to Lebanon’s infrastructure. The Israeli military/security establishment was humiliated, and Israel’s deterrence capacity was negatively impacted as a result. Finkelstein concludes that Operation Cast Lead was, for Israel, round two of the war on Lebanon and dismisses Israel’s claims that its attacks were and are a noble battle against Hamas (deemed

by Israel and the United States a terrorist organization). Instead, he posits that Israeli attacks on Gaza are guided by a strategy to “punish, humiliate, and terrorize Gaza’s civilian population [partly by] the infliction of massive civilian casualties” (p. 347).

Several international commissions and observers issued strong reports afterward. For example, the Goldstone Report found that much of the destruction of Gaza was anchored in Israel’s military doctrine. Furthermore, Israel committed a series of war crimes, including “willful torture and killing,” among many other offenses: a competent court would find Israel committed crimes against humanity (p. 88). Under increasing pressure, on 1 April 2011, international judge and head of the UN Fact Finding Commission Richard Goldstone disowned his report—or as Finkelstein puts it, he recanted. Finkelstein concludes that Goldstone’s recantation “renewed Israel’s license to kill” (p. 129).

In the section of the book that focuses on Operation Protective Edge, Finkelstein deconstructs the findings of Amnesty International, the UN Human Rights Council, and to a lesser extent, Human Rights Watch. Highly critical, Finkelstein calls Amnesty International “the defense counsel of Israel” (p. 270), contending that Amnesty International’s evidence confirms that Israel set out to target Gaza’s civilian population (p. 292), but its legal analysis “consistently presumed” that it set out to target “legitimate military objectives” (p. 296): a gross dereliction of its responsibilities, because Amnesty International did not assume the role of a neutral arbiter. He argues that Amnesty International’s elisions are conscious political calculations intended to avoid Israel’s wrath. The author does not spare rhetorical flourish in his critique of former International Criminal Court chief prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo, who went out of his way to praise Israel for its respect for the rule of law in the wake of the attack: Finkelstein dubs Moreno Ocampo’s views “wanton acts of criminal prostitution” (p. 291). Human Rights Watch, which did not deem the Israeli assaults worthy of critical investigation, Finkelstein derides as “missing in action” (p. 287). In showing up the deficiencies of these several reports, Finkelstein makes ample use of testimonies collected by *Breaking the Silence*, an organization of dissident Israeli combatants. Their testimonies reveal in blunt and unapologetic terms the extent of unprovoked attacks and crimes committed by the Israeli military in 2014. One soldier explained, “We were firing purposelessly all day long. Hamas was nowhere to be seen” (p. 260). The unvarnished accounts provide evidence of indiscriminate bombing and shelling. Israel seems to get away with murder partly because—as Finkelstein puts it—“Palestine’s star is on the wane” (p. 361).

Finkelstein demonstrates that Israel fears any form of strategic political thinking on the part of Palestinians, pointing out that shortly before Israel launched Operation Protective Edge, Palestinian factions had put together a unity government at the end of April 2014. He also argues that Israel is actually terrified of any nonviolent forms of civil resistance. He suggests that a strategy of civil resistance, which comes at a cost for Palestinians, might eventually turn the tide.

Israel considers *any* Palestinian resistance to its settler-colonial project to be illegitimate and unacceptable. Finkelstein reminds his readers that the Israeli blockade on Gaza has nothing to do with security. Almost 50 percent of the population of the Strip is unemployed. For the most part, water is undrinkable, and at this pace, the United Nations fears that by 2020 Gaza will simply be

unlivable. The author shows, page by page, how the continuous punishment of Gaza, the multiple wars, and the Israeli- and Egyptian-imposed siege all aim to stifle Palestinian resistance through collective punishment.

Gaza: An Inquest into Its Martyrdom is destined to be Norman Finkelstein's magnum opus. His forensic treatment of what has been done to Gaza is accusatory, and deservedly so. One may compare its tone to Emile Zola's "J'accuse," in which he lambasts French officials for their cowardice, anti-Semitism, and complicity in the Dreyfus affair. Finkelstein calls out international commissions and human rights organizations for their elisions and cowardice, and in so doing, he is right on the mark.

Nubar Hovsepien, chair of political science at Chapman University, is the author of *Palestinian State Formation: Education and the Construction of National Identity* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).
