

A response from Dr Najib Lafraie to Dr Rachael Kohn's "Peace Lecture": Can we Think Our Way to Peace?

Dr Kohn begins her Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith Group's 2018 Peace Lecture with a positive note of sympathy with the victims of ancient empires and contemporary tyranny and shares the inspiring stories of an Afghan taxi driver and the Somali "Black Muslim of Brighton". She also ends her lecture positively by noting human beings' creation in the image of God; the "transcendent quality" within us; the significance of "remembering our connection to God"; and the significance of remembering the meaning of the greeting "peace", which will result in "an outflow of the most positive feelings of love and kindness, which can ... change our world for the better." In-between, however, the bulk of the lecture is, in my opinion and unsuccessful attempt to defend the occupying state of Israel and to criticise those people and nations who oppose the Israeli state's oppressive occupation of Palestine. It also seems to me that Dr Kohn demonstrates a bias against Islam.

Even when praising some Muslims, Dr Kohn betrays her bias against Islam by trying to distance the praiseworthy attitude of two Muslim people from their religion. After the "spontaneous sermon" of the taxi driver she notes, "But I hoped that the deep truth which he arrived at was not at the expense of religion, as if Islam were incapable of that reverence for all life." As for the Somali lady, Dr Kohn attributes her positive outlook to what "she learned partly from a Buddhist teacher ... as well as from her brave story-telling African mother."

Another example of Dr Kohn's biased stand is the story of the little girl learning that the Jews are "apes and pigs". How true is this story? It is difficult to know! Dr Kohn gives her source as the Fox News, which is well known for its "alternative facts"; and the Fox News bases the story on a "Translation by the Middle East Media Research Institute", an institute "co-founded in 1998 by Yigal Carmon, a former Israeli military intelligence officer and Meyrav Wurmser, an Israeli-born American political scientist." Even if the story is true, and even if some "Muslim scholars" promote similar views from time to time, it neither means that most Muslims view the Jews as such (contrary to the assertions of some dubious "Muslim authors") nor that Islamic religious texts condone it. The writer of this response was born and raised in Afghanistan, a country with more than 99% Muslim population. I never ever heard, neither in a mosque nor in school or elsewhere, the Jews being referred to in derogatory terms. On the contrary, Jewish communities in various cities in Afghanistan were respected members of the Afghan society. My own father had Jewish friends and business partners, and I have fond memories of visiting their houses on the occasions of their religious celebrations.

Most disturbing is Dr Kohn's misinterpretation of the Quran. She claims, "The Qur'an refers to Jews as 'apes and swine' in three places, 2:63-65, 5:59-60, and 7:16 [which is on a completely different subject, but probably she means 7:166]." Let us look at these verses to see what they really state, and for the first I start a verse earlier because it shows the Quran's general view on Jews and believers of other religions:

- “The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians—all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good—will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve. Remember when We took [oh Children of Israel] your pledge, and made the mountain tower high above you, and said. ‘Hold fast to what We have given you and bear its contents in mind, so that you may be conscious of God.’ Even after that you turned away. Had it not been for God’s favour and mercy on you, you would certainly have been lost. You know about those of you who broke the Sabbath, and We said to them, ‘Be like apes! Be outcasts!’” (2:62-65).
- “Say [Prophet], ‘People of the Book, do you resent us for any reason other than the fact that we believe in God, in what has been sent down to us, and in what was sent before us, while most of you are disobedient?’ Say, ‘Shall I tell you who deserves a worse punishment from God than [the one you wish upon] us? Those God distanced from Himself, was angry with, and condemned as apes and pigs, and those who worship idols: they are worse in rank and have strayed from the right path” (5:59-60).
- “When in their arrogance they [the Children of Israel] persisted in doing what they were forbidden to do, We said to them, ‘Be like apes! Be outcasts!’” (7:166).

As we see, none of the verses refers to Jews in general as “apes and swine”; on the contrary, 2:62 promises the Jews who believe and do righteous deeds their reward with God. The first and the last quotes are about those Jews who transgressed the Sabbath and persisted on their disobedience. And the second quote makes it clear that it is not limited to the Jews, but anyone that is distanced from God and has earned His anger are like “apes and swine”, that is, they are “deaf and dumb, and who do not reason” (as noted in the Quran 8:22 and elsewhere).

Dr Kohn misrepresents the Noble Quran when she tries to quote it in support of the establishment of the state of Israel too: “Allah assigned Israel to the Jews until the Day of Judgement (Sura 5 Verse 21), and that Jews are the inheritors of Israel (Sura 26 Verse 59). And in Sura 17:104: ‘We [Allah] said to the Children of Israel: Dwell securely in the Promised Land. And when the last warning will come to pass, we will gather you together in a mingled crowd.’” Again let us look how accurate Dr Kohn’s translations/interpretations are (all the translations of the Quran in this reply are from Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *The Quran: A new translation*):

- “[Moses said to his people,] ‘My people, go into the holy land which God has ordained for you—do not turn back or you will be the losers’” (5:21).
- “So it was that We made them [the Egyptians] leave their gardens and their springs, their treasures and their noble dwellings—We give [such] things [later] to the Children of Israel” (26:58-59).
- “After his [Pharaoh’s] death. We told the Children of Israel, ‘Live in the land, and when the promise of the Hereafter is fulfilled, We shall bring you to the assembly of all the people’” (17:104).

Unfortunately for Dr Kohn, none of these verses talks about “Allah assign[ing] Israel to the Jews until the Day of Judgement”. God did ordain it for them but warned that if they turn back, they “will be the losers”—and as we know, they transgressed God’s commands time and again. To be fair to Dr Kohn, some Muslim scholars do understand Quran’s reference to “the land” in 17:104 as the land promised to the Children of Israel, but they also note its conditionality. As Yusuf Ali, whose translation Dr Kohn seems to have used (with some changes), puts it in his commentary of the verse: “The Israelites were taken to the Promised Land in Palestine, and they established their own kingdom there, but they forfeited God’s favour by their sins and backslidings and will have to answer like all souls by the laws of personal responsibility at the Day of Judgment.”

Dr Kohn’s attempt to justify the establishment of the state of Israel and to portray a rosy picture of the country is very detailed and multifaceted. Responding to all the arguments she presents would require an article longer than her paper. Here I will try to briefly answer her question, “Why are Israel and Jews viewed as a collective RCO [Repugnant Cultural Other], not only by Muslims, but now by a large number of students who have adopted their view? Does this make any sense?”. Hopefully the response to this question will also deal with some of the points she makes.

1. First of all, criticising the repressive policies of a state does not necessarily mean that it is seen as “RCO”. Secondly, even if Israel is viewed as such, the state of Israel is not one and the same as the Jews. There are many Jews, and even Israeli Jews, who are highly critical of Israeli government’s policies; Noam Chomsky and Ilan Pappé being the two prominent ones. Those who choose to intelligently critique and oppose the repressive policies of Israel against Palestinians are not being anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish. Dr Kohn seems to believe that opposition to the repressive policies of Israel is an expression of anti-semitism. This is not the case.
2. The creation of the state of Israel was at the enormous cost to the Palestinians. Contrary to the Zionists’ claim that Palestine was “a land without people for a people without land”, supported by Western public figures such as Mark Twain, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians lived in the land before the British occupation in the late 1910s. A small Jewish community also lived there in peace and harmony with their Muslim and Christian neighbours. Problems began when the Jewish migration increased in the 1920 and 1930s, promoted by the Zionist movement and the British Mandate, and because of anti-Semitism in Europe. Palestinian resistance led to changes in British policy towards Jewish migration, resulting in acts of terror by the Zionist paramilitary groups, interestingly led by two future Israeli prime ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir.

After World War II Britain gave up its mandate and asked the UN to come up with a solution. The UN partition plan was extremely unfair to the

Palestinians, giving 43% of the territory to 1.3 million Palestinians who controlled 93% of the land, and granting 56% of the territory to 600,000 Jews who controlled 7% of the land. Palestinians understandably rejected the plan. The Zionist leaders, however, were not happy even with that large share. As the first Israeli prime minister stated to his cabinet, they accepted the UN plan with the understanding that the Arabs would reject it, and Israel would be able to capture more land as a result of the war. The 1948-49 war resulted not only in usurping more territories, but also in the forceful expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes. They still live as refugees in other countries, and have never gained the right of return, despite numerous UN General Assembly resolutions.

3. Israel occupied the rest of Palestine, the West Bank and the Gaza, which had become part of Jordan and Egypt respectively, in June 1967. It is still going on and has become one of the longest occupations in modern times. The UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967, which was passed unanimously, called for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories. Israel accepted it but interpreted it in a way which went against the view of most of SC members who had voted for it; i.e., “total withdrawal of Israel forces from all the territories ... occupied by Israel as a result of the conflict which began on 5 June 1967.”

As an article by the Amnesty International (AI) notes, “Israel’s military rule disrupts every aspect of daily life in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. It continues to affect whether, when and how Palestinians can travel to work or school, go abroad, visit their relatives, earn a living, attend a protest, access their farmland, or even access electricity or a clean water supply. It means daily humiliation, discrimination, fear and oppression. People’s entire lives are entirely at the mercy of the Israeli authorities.”

4. The AI annual reports on “Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories” document the enormous atrocities inflicted on defenceless Palestinian civilians by the Israeli security forces. Just an overview of their latest report gives a glimpse of the ongoing tragedy of the past 50 years:

“June marked 50 years since Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian Territories and the start of the 11th year of its illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip, subjecting approximately 2 million inhabitants to collective punishment and a growing humanitarian crisis. The Israeli authorities intensified expansion of settlements and related infrastructure across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and severely restricted the freedom of movement of Palestinians. Israeli forces unlawfully killed Palestinian civilians, including children, and unlawfully detained within Israel thousands of Palestinians from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), holding hundreds in administrative detention without charge or trial. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees, including children, remained pervasive and was committed with impunity. Israel continued

to demolish Palestinian homes in the West Bank and in Palestinian villages inside Israel, forcibly evicting residents. Conscientious objectors to military service were imprisoned.”

5. The Gaza Strip is described as “the world’s largest concentration camp”. About two million people, most of them refugees from other parts of Palestine, are cramped in an area less than 365 square kilometers. Life has always been miserable under occupation, but it got worse as a result of the Israeli land, air, and sea blockade imposed in 2007. As AI notes, “Israel’s blockade triggered a humanitarian crisis with electricity cuts reducing access to electricity from an average of eight hours per day down to as little as two to four hours, affecting clean water and sanitation and diminishing health service access, and rendering Gaza increasingly ‘unlivable’ according to the UN. Gaza’s economy deteriorated further and post-conflict reconstruction of civilian infrastructure remained severely hindered; some 23,500 Palestinians remained displaced since the 2014 conflict. Many patients with life-threatening illnesses were unable to access treatment outside Gaza due to Israeli restrictions and delays by West Bank authorities in processing referrals.”

The “2014 conflict”, referred to above, was an air and land attack by the Israeli military forces on Gaza in July-August 2014. More than 2,100 Palestinians (including 500 children) were killed and more than 10,500 were wounded. “7,000 homes for 10,000 families were razed, together with an additional 89,000 homes damaged, of which roughly 10,000 were severely affected by the bombing”. The Palestinians did fight back with their meager weapons; killing 66 Israelis soldiers and wounding 470 of them (5 civilians were also killed as a result of Palestinian rocket attacks and 260 were wounded). Earlier in October 2012 about 200 Palestinians were killed as a result of another Israeli attack on Gaza. That had followed the December 2008/January 2009 major attack which had killed more than 1200 Palestinians and injured thousands. Smaller scale attacks on Gaza are occurring every month, and even every week. As a writer in *The Intercept* notes about an attack on 14 May this year, “Israel has once again conducted a premeditated, full-scale massacre in broad daylight, in front of the cameras of the world. Once again, it took place in Gaza. ... It appears that the only way not to be killed, according to Netanyahu, is to meekly accept imprisonment inside the prison of Gaza. Among those killed by Israeli forces was an 8-month-old infant. Her name was Laila al-Ghandour. They also killed at least seven other children and a man in a wheelchair, and that man had lost his legs after they had to be amputated following an earlier Israeli attack.”

6. Since the beginning of the occupation, illegal Israeli settlements have been spreading like cancer in the Palestinian territories. More than 700,000 Jewish settlers live in about 400 settlements and “settlement outposts” in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, almost half established with the approval of the Israeli government and the other half without its approval. “Settlements and their infrastructure are a means by

which Israel dominates access to Palestinian natural resources. Palestinians are denied access to resources such as water, fertile land, quarries, and minerals.” The settlements are linked to each other through extensive road networks that are exclusively for the use of the Jewish settlers and Israeli citizens. The settlements and connected road systems have turned Palestine into a “Bantustan”, denying “Palestinians the ability to create a viable state in even a small part of historic Palestine.”

Settlers are allowed to carry arms and use violence against the defenseless Palestinians. As B’Tselem, “The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories”, notes “Settler violence has long since become part of Palestinians’ daily life under occupation. Israeli security forces enable these actions, which result in Palestinian casualties – injuries and fatalities – as well as damage to land and property. In some cases, they even serve as an armed escort, or even join in the attacks. ... A stark example recurs every year during the olive harvest. After repeated settler attacks, the military forbade Palestinian farmers from entering their own land if it lies near a settlement – instead of protecting the farmers by enforcing the law on the settlers.”

Israeli settlements are illegal under the international law. Numerous UN resolutions refer “to the Fourth Geneva Convention as the applicable international legal instrument, and call upon Israel to desist from transferring its own population into the territories or changing their demographic makeup.” The latest SC resolution on the subject, Resolution 2334 of 23 December of 2016, “Reaffirms that the establishment by Israel of settlements ... has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law and a major obstacle to the achievement of the two-State solution and a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.” The Resolution also “Reiterates its demand that Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and that it fully respect all of its legal obligations in this regard.” Fourteen members of the SC voted in favour of the resolution, and only the US abstained. That lack of a veto by the US of a UN SC resolution critical of Israel was unprecedented in the last several decades. According to a report in *The New Yorker*, the reason for that was a map of Israeli settlements shown to President Obama. He “was shocked to see how ‘systematic’ the Israelis had been at cutting off Palestinian population centers from one another.” Unfortunately for the Palestinians, though, less than a month later Obama was replaced by Trump. “According to Peace Now, settlement plans in the West Bank have increased since the beginning of 2017, when Donald Trump, a key ally of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was inaugurated as president of the United States.”

7. The US support of Israel is not limited to only diplomatic one. Since the 1970, every year Israel has received from the US around three billion dollars, two third of it military assistance. A few months before Obama allowed the passage of a SC resolution critical of Israel, he approved an agreement according to which “The United States will give Israel \$38

billion in military assistance over the next decade, the largest such aid package in U.S. history. ... The deal ... will allow Washington's chief Middle East ally to upgrade most of its fighter aircraft, improve its ground forces' mobility and strengthen its missile defense systems." It is such generous aid from the US that has enabled Israel, which "is about 1/13th the size of New Zealand", to have one of the strongest military forces in the world—a force that has been mainly used for suppressing and oppressing the Palestinians. After the Congressional approval of 3.8 billion dollars of military aid to Israel for 2019 in August this year, a news report noted, "The massive amount of aid the U.S. government is set to give to Israel comes during Israel's unprecedented crackdown on unarmed protesters and a looming Israeli military operation. ... Indeed, since March 30, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) — the very forces set to receive billions in U.S. taxpayer funding — have killed 164 Palestinians, including 26 children as well as journalists and medics."

So yes, it makes a lot of sense to me (and many others) be highly critical of Israel and its policies towards Palestinians, and even to consider such behaviour as repugnant. This behaviour needs to change if peace is ever to be possible in the Holy Land.

Dr Najib Lafraie
Dunedin, NZ.
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