

Rachael Kohn's Reply to Dr Lafraie

Dr Lafraie's response to my Peace Lecture for the Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith Group in 2018 has obliged me to reply to his specific points and his general conclusions which have been posted on the Dunedin Abrahamic Interfaith website.

First, I must say at the outset that my talk was about the way groups fasten on to rigid views about 'the enemy' or the repugnant cultural other, blind them to the facts of history, and thereby become counter-productive to the task of understanding, working through and coming to a resolution in conflict ridden situations.

I began with the example of two Muslims from very different countries and parts of the Islamic *umma*, who have experienced conflict in their homes, and who, in Australia, found ways to transcend it. Yet Dr Lafraie has accused me of a bias against Islam, saying that by citing the examples of the Afghani taxi driver and the Somali founder of Resilient Active Women, I was 'trying to distance [their] praiseworthy attitude' from Islam.

I understand why he arrived at that interpretation, but I do not think that a Muslim, Jew or Christian, who is open to sources of inspiration and wisdom outside of his or her tradition necessarily distances them from their faith.

In my experience of many educated faithful today, it is precisely the opposite: moments of insight and different perspectives offered by other traditions of thought, reinforce and enhance the awareness of similar truths in their own. Indeed, many like to cite the ecumenical unity of mysticism or the ethic of the 'golden rule' in various faith traditions as examples.

This was certainly what I sensed with Mariam Issa. I do not know if it was so with the Afghani taxi driver, which is why I hoped his universalist views were "not at the expense of religion, as if Islam were incapable of that reverence for all life."

If there is a bias in my approach to Islam, it is a bias I hold toward all faiths, which is valuing faith that is conversant and comfortable with the insights outside of it, and does not regard them as necessarily dangerous or blasphemous or diminishing of their own. That is the reason I said of the

Afghani taxi driver that I hoped his universalist views were not at the expense of religion, as I didn't think it ought to be.

Dr Lafraie also questioned the veracity of the TV program in which a young Muslim girl was 'interviewed' about Jews and stated reprehensible views which she said were in the Holy Quran. He then went on to dispute the interpretation of the said passages that associate Jews with apes and pigs.

In doing so Dr Lafraie missed my point, which is that it is not the problematic passages in holy texts, which all traditions possess; it is the interpretation and use of them by unprincipled people specifically to encourage prejudice and violence against groups or individuals.

It is indeed encouraging to hear that Dr Lafraie's father had "Jewish friends and business partners" in Afghanistan. (It is a sad fact that to date there is only one Jew left in Afghanistan, many having escaped the Soviet Union were deported back there, while others have left for Israel.) He would probably know that his father's example does not represent the norm, and admits that some "Muslim scholars" promote anti-Jewish views from 'time to time.'

Indeed, Malala Yousafzai, the Afghani Nobel Prize Laureate of 2014 and courageous champion of education for girls in her native land, referred to Jews several times in her autobiography, *I Am Malala*. She said her history textbooks 'denounced Hindus and Jews,' and that many of her people 'argued that the attack [on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon] was actually carried out by Jews as an excuse for America to launch a war on the Muslim world'. Fortunately, Malala's father, an enlightened man and educational reformer who had to flee Afghanistan along with his wife and children, said 'this was rubbish.'

Another young woman, Manal al-Sharif, who's written *Daring to Drive* about her rebellion against Saudi Arabian culture, was a devout Salafist. She chanted 'songs' that glorified the killing of Westerners, burned her family's magazines, cds and tapes and vehemently protested sitting in the same room with a Coptic Christian who was a friend of her relative in Egypt.

But Manal had a change of heart after September 11 2001 which, she writes, was 'the start of my rebellion against the teaching of hatred and hostility toward non-Muslims.' Thus began a journey of immense pain and courage for the Mecca born, now Sydney based, Manal, but one that ultimately brought

her freedom from both a physical and a mental tyranny that was perpetrated in the name of Islam.

It is not Islam itself, however, but certain interpretations of it that are causing pain for Muslims like Manal, and for others who are persecuted in its name. That is the argument of modernists and reformers, like the founder of Quilliam, Ed Husain. This is not to say that Islam is the only religion which is susceptible to abuse in its name.

One of the most popular media sources is *Al Jazeera*, the Qatari based news service, which some on the political left champion as an alternative to American based news stations. But what they usually do not know is that *Al Jazeera* broadcasts the sermons of the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al Qaradawi.

The inflammatory nature of Qaradawi's sermons prompted the foreign minister of the UAE, Anwar Gargash, to write a statement to the National Media Council of the UAE in which he said *Al Jazeera* "promoted antisemitic violence" and repeatedly crossed the threshold of "antisemitism discrimination and inciting religious hate." He cited the sermons of Qaradawi, which "praised Hitler, described the Holocaust as 'divine punishment,' and called on Allah to 'take this oppressive, Jewish, Zionist band of people... and kill them, down to the very last one.'" (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/uae-slams-al-jazeera-for-anti-semitism-over-imams-sermons/>)

Closer to home, the former Mufti of Australia, Sheik Taj el-Din al-Hilaly, was for many years a public voice of Muslim communities in Australia. I remember well in 1988 when I was teaching in the Departments of Religious Studies and Semitic Studies at the University of Sydney that he addressed students in Arabic (of which a translation was made afterward).

In the course of presenting Jews as the existential enemies of the rest of humanity, Hilaly blamed Jews as a people as the cause of all wars and accused Jews of using sex and deviancy to control the world. Even prior to these comments, he had been criticized for insulting and derogatory comments concerning women and people of Christian Lebanese background.

Hilaly's diatribe would today fall within the working definition of antisemitism that was adopted in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (an inter-governmental organisation consisting of 31 democratic

member States, 11 Observer and Liaison States, the United Nations, UNESCO, OSCE/ODIHR, International Tracing Service (ITS), European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), and the Council of Europe among others) which includes the following examples:

- *Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions;*
- *Using the symbols and images associated with classic antisemitism (e.g., claims of Jews killing Jesus or blood libel) to characterise Israel or Israelis*

This brings me to the major part of Dr Lafraie's response to my lecture, in particular his answer to my question about 'why Israel and Jews are viewed collectively as RCO [Repugnant Cultural Other] not only by Muslims, but now by a large number of students who have adopted their view'

1. He begins with the trite observation that "*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.*" Of course, the policies and actions of any state or organisation must be open to critical analysis and freedom of conscience with impunity. The risk is that discourse about any conflict, like the conflict itself, polarises those who have a stake in its outcome. Lapsing into derogatory, racial or religious generalizations about *the people* on the other side, using pre-existing stereotypes such as those listed above must be avoided at all costs because it merely perpetuates division and distrust and prevents engaging with the full facts of history.
2. 'The creation of the state of Israel was at the enormous cost to the Palestinians' asserts Dr Lafraie. Scholars like Professor Benny Morris, one of the most thorough, impartial and widely respected academic historians of the period, and a trenchant critic of both sides of the conflict, have demonstrated that the 'cost to the Palestinians' was by no means intended or inevitable, but resulted from the decision of the Arab League States and Palestinian leaders to initiate a war of annihilation against the Jewish population already living in the country in order to prevent the UN partition plan for establishing Jewish and Arab States from being implemented. The Arab states grabbed as much land

as they could, and the lands today designated by the UN as ‘Occupied Palestinian Territory’, ie, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, were annexed by Jordan or placed under Egyptian administration after 1948.

As Professor Morris observed in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.7:

“it cannot be stressed too strongly that...the events cumulatively amounting to the Palestinian Arab exodus occurred in wartime and were a product, direct and indirect, of that war, a war that the Palestinians started. The threat of battle and battle itself were the immediate backdrop to the various components of the exodus”.

The ultimate cause of that war, in the words of Professor Morris, was:

“the intention of the Palestinian leadership and irregulars and, later, of most of the Arab states’ leaders and armies in launching the hostilities in November-December 1947 and in invading Palestine in May 1948 to destroy the Jewish state and, possibly, the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine) itself”.

Morris’s judgement is vindicated by statements made by Arab leaders at the time, and since, admitting their complicity and responsibility for the Palestinian refugees.

Dr Lafraie refers to the slogan ‘a land without a people for a people without land’, but this was never a core or widely accepted Zionist precept. Zionist leaders from the 1920s onwards declared repeatedly that the central purpose of Zionism was not to displace the Arabs of Palestine, but to build a Jewish national home alongside them. The Zionist Congress in September 1921 passed a resolution expressing: *‘the determination of the Jewish people to live with the Arab people on terms of unity and mutual respect, and together with them to make the common home into a flourishing community, the upbuilding of which may assure to **each** of its peoples an undisturbed national development’* [British Gov’t White Paper, 3 June 1922, reproduced by the Avalon Project, Yale Law School.]

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/brwh1922.asp

Yet a Palestinian Arab delegation to Britain in July 1921 opposed further Jewish immigration to the Holy Land and on 3 March 1922 the secretary

of the delegation made threats “about the necessity of killing Jews if the Arabs did not get their way” [Martin Gilbert, *Towards Jewish Statehood*, lecture to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, 31 Oct 2007, pp. 11-12.]

In fact, before Theodore Herzl published “The Jewish State” in 1896, making the case for the Jewish return to Israel, Jews fled there in the 19th Century escaping Russian pogroms. There were Turks and Arabs who sold land to the Jews, and those who opposed the sale, and in some cases the wealthy land owners sold the land at inflated high prices over the heads of the poorer inhabitants who worked it. [Neville Mandel, *Turks, Arabs and Jewish Immigration into Palestine 1882-1914*, St Anthony’s College Papers, Oxford, 1965; Yehoshua Porath, *The Palestinian Arab National Movement: From Riots to Rebellion*, London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd 1977).

Dr Lafraie rightly points to the changes in British policy towards Jewish migration, but identifies only Zionist paramilitary groups who committed acts of terror, while ignoring the first sixteen years of British rule when all of the killings and massacres were carried out by the Arab side, resulting in the deaths of 501 Jews.

Among the most notable and deadly, of these incidents were the Arab attack on Jewish village of Tel Hai in Northern Galilee on 1 March 1920; the Arab pogrom against Jews in Jerusalem between the 4th and 7th April 1920; further pogroms in May 1921 in Jaffa, Rehovot, Petah Tikva, and other Jewish towns; large-scale riots and armed attacks by Arab groups against Jews throughout the country in August 1929, including the notorious Hebron massacre which made world headlines; and “the Bloody Day in Jaffa” at the opening of the Arab Revolt against British rule between 19 and 29 April 1936.

Dr Lafraie then says the UN partition plan was extremely ‘unfair’, but bases his argument on myth rather than fact, saying it granted 1.3 million Palestinians who controlled 93% of the land only 43% of the territory. In fact, before 1948 Arabs privately owned only 20.2 % of the land (Jews owned 8.6%), with the rest of the land – over 70% - being public lands previously owned by Ottoman rulers which then vested in Britain as the Mandatory Power. After 1948, these public lands vested in Israel as the successor State.

Much of the 70% that was public land was mostly uninhabited arid or semi-arid territory in the Negev region in the south of the country and had never been held in Palestinian private or public ownership. The 93% claim has no foundation in fact.

As for Jerusalem since at least 1893 it had a Jewish majority, as attested by British writer, Albert Shaw, and confirmed in the official British censuses of 1922 and 1931.

The UN partition plan map was based on demographics, with the Jewish state (14, 245 km²) containing a population of 538,000 Jews and 397,000 Arabs; and the proposed Arab state (11,655 km²) with 804,000 Arabs and 10,000 Jews.

The larger territory of the Jewish state had a majority of desert and waste lands (the Negev) and a larger population to support. The UN partition plan was thus much fairer than Dr Lafraie has suggested.

Dr Lafraie states that the ‘Palestinians understandably rejected the plan,’ as if this automatically justifies or makes inevitable their decision to go to war against their Jewish neighbours. Their resort to war was illegal, a flagrant violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. By choosing war, they virtually guaranteed the mass displacement of many of those on the losing side, which the Arab leaders’ confidently announced would be the Jews. They were wrong.

3. Dr Lafraie’s interpretation of UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 1967 ignores the intention of the drafters which contained two principles of **equal weight**: ‘withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict’ and ‘termination of all claims of states of belligerency’ and the right of ‘every State in the area...to live in peace within secure and recognised boundaries free from threats of acts of force.’

Resolution 242 was implemented by Israel in its Peace Treaties with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, as well as the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords and other agreements with the Palestinians. In 1982, following the signing of the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, Israel withdrew its military forces and civilians from the Sinai Peninsula, dismantling all 18

settlements that had been built there, and returned the territory to Egypt. The Israel-Jordan peace treaty likewise resolved outstanding territorial issues between those two States. In 2005, Israel unilaterally withdrew its military forces and civilians from the Gaza Strip, dismantling all 21 settlements there.

Regarding the West Bank, the absence of the words “all” or “the” before the word “territories” in resolution 242 was deliberate, and confirms that Israel is not required to relinquish all territories it captured in 1967. This was attested to several times in public by Britain’s Lord Caradon, the principal drafter of resolution 242.

When the Palestinians follow the examples of Egypt and Jordan and sign a final peace treaty with Israel, they in turn will receive, after land swaps equivalent to about 6.5% of the West Bank territory, the equivalent of 100% of that territory. This is despite the fact that between 1967 until 1988 the Palestinians rejected resolution 242 and the pre-1967 ceasefire line. Hamas still does so.

4. Dr Lafraie cites the far from impartial Amnesty International [AI] reports on ‘Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories’ to support his view that Israel has inflicted ‘enormous atrocities’ on ‘defenceless Palestinian civilians.’ AI says nothing about the continuing violence against Israel and Israelis or the 120 year old eliminationist attitude towards large-scale Jewish life in the country that underpins this violence. The emotive reference to ‘children’ disguises the fact that many are teenagers 15 years or older, and those minors who are involved in terrorism are disguised by AI’s use of general statistics that avoid detail, presenting a black and white picture of a more complex situation.

Detaining children who engage in rock throwing, knifings and other acts of violence in Israel is no different from what occurs under Australian law which punishes juvenile offenders in such situations just as severely.

When Farhad Mohammad murdered police employee Curtis Chen at random in a terrorist attack in Sydney’s Parramatta in 2015, Farhad was shot dead by police at the scene. No human rights group called this an ‘extrajudicial killing of a ‘child’. Palestinian leadership which encourages and uses children to confront Israeli police is not only a form of brainwashing but also a form of child abuse.

5. It is a one sided caricature to call Gaza ‘the world’s largest concentration camp’ as if the miserable conditions in which Palestinians live under Hamas rule is the consequence of Israeli policies. During the wars in 2008-9 and 2014 Hamas used UN facilities, schools, childrens’ playgrounds, water towers, mosques and many other active civilian facilities as launching sites for rockets and attacks. In 2014 alone, Hamas launched more than 4,600 rockets and mortar shells at Israeli civilians, including 1,600 rockets from civilian sites in Gaza. The consequences are obvious, when the Israel Defence Forces respond as any other State would if their citizens were similarly attacked. Civilian casualties which are inevitable are then used by Hamas to create international pressure on Israel.

Additionally, nearly 300 militant rockets in the 2014 war landed short inside Gaza, killing 13 Palestinian civilians, most of them children. [Sebastien Roblin, *The National Interest*, 2 Feb 2019].

Indeed, Hamas’ commitment to ‘a land without Jews’ has resulted in their diversion of funds that would otherwise improve the lives of its civilians, to weapons, a highly developed tunnel building network into Israel, and weapons smuggling.

The blockade of Gaza by Israel and Egypt was found to be both necessary to prevent weapons entering Gaza and legal under international law in a report by the former New Zealand prime minister and professor of law, Geoffrey Palmer, who was commissioned by the UN Secretary General:

<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/world/Palmer-Committee-Final-report.pdf>.

Nonetheless, the blockade has not prevented Israel from providing humanitarian medical treatment to Palestinians, as well as food and other supplies, comprising on average 15,000 tons of supplies per week.

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I have responded to the issue of settlements above, so finally let me address Dr Lafraie’s charge that Israel’s financial support from the US has enabled Israel to suppress Palestinians with ‘one of the strongest military forces in the world.’ Large-scale US military aid to Israel began

after the 1967 war, which began with the massing of Arab armies on Israel's borders, the Egyptian naval blockade of Israel's southern port of Eilat, the Egyptians' expulsion of the UN peace keeping force separating the Egyptian army from Israel, and the whipping up of the Arab masses by their leaders' loudly proclaimed declarations of intent to terminate Israel's existence. The Iranian leaders' consistent and open declaration to remove Israel from the map with their weapons and proxies is a real and present danger to Israel. It has paid the US strategically and financially (where most of its aid to Israel is spent) to support the only genuine democracy in the Middle East.

Dr Lafraie's conclusion, that it is justifiable to regard Israel's behaviour as 'repugnant', is unfortunate, but not surprising, given it is based on a highly one-sided and incomplete view of the history of Israel and its Arab neighbours. That history could have been very different had Israel's neighbours, including the Palestinians, made different choices. They are not hapless objects without a mind of their own. They made choices, many of them spectacularly self-destructive, which some Palestinians, who I cited in my original talk, have recognised. They need to start making new choices, and the academics, the student bodies, and the 'well meaning' sympathizers in the West ought to help them do so, rather than entrench them in a perpetual anti-Israel narrative of resentment, rejectionism and war. These cannot be the basis of a successful, democratic society, and that is what we all want for Israel and the Palestinian people.