
Racism, Apartheid, and the Lie of 'Balance'

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- Statement of the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid in Response to Raja Khouri -

[Background: On 13 December 2006, former president of the Canadian Arab Federation, Raja Khouri, wrote an op-ed for the Globe and Mail that harshly attacked a leaflet distributed at the recent Liberal Party convention. The leaflet had described Bob Rae as a supporter of Israeli apartheid, a characterization that Mr. Khouri implied was "racist" and "hateful". CAIA has issued this response to Mr. Khouri's op-ed. The original op-ed is re-printed below.]

December 15, 2006

Before turning directly to Mr. Raja Khouri's op-ed in the Globe and Mail of December 13, 2006, we must point out a few facts to place matters in context.

Gaza is starving. Israel controls all entry and exit and prevents the entry of food and other aid. A significant number of children are suffering permanent developmental damage from malnutrition. Over the past several months, the Israeli military has killed 400 people in Gaza alone. Israel holds ten thousand Palestinians as political prisoners, hundreds of whom are children, over one thousand of whom have not been brought to trial or charged. For years, Israeli bulldozers have been demolishing Palestinian homes, leaving thousands homeless each year. In the summer, the Israeli military killed over 1000 Lebanese, the vast majority of these civilians, while deliberately destroying much of the infrastructure of that country. Over one million cluster bomblets were dropped on the country (90% in the last 72 hours of Israel's attack) and this unexploded ordnance continues to kill and maim.

Contrary to what Mr. Khouri may believe, these facts are not a question of "emotion". They are the daily life experience of Palestinians. They are well documented by UN agencies, and human rights organizations such as B'tselem, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. They bear restating because they so often drop from view amidst calls for "balance".

In 2002, Bob Rae 'parted company' with the NDP to become a public supporter of Israeli apartheid. At the time, Rae claimed that Israel's campaigns against Palestinians, which had already claimed thousands of civilian lives, were a "military response to the horrendous assaults on the [Israeli] civilian population". He made these comments as the Apartheid Wall, which currently dissects the West Bank, was under construction. Gaza had already been surrounded by walls and electric fences. Palestinians were forced to carry identification cards, seek permits from the Israeli military and pass through Israeli checkpoints to travel short distances. Israel imposed sieges and closures in the West Bank and

Gaza for weeks at a time. Israel conducted a series of assassinations that killed dozens of bystanders, and carried out a series of massive roundups of adults and children to fill its prisons. All this to say that Rae's support for Israel goes back many years. During his recent failed bid for Liberal Party leadership, he announced: "But with respect to the government of Israel, I've never heard a serious suggestion that there was any deliberate targeting of civilians."

Mr. Khouri and Bob Rae, object to calling this 'racism' or 'apartheid'. Indeed, Mr. Khouri says that calling this system 'apartheid', and suggesting that Bob Rae supports apartheid, is 'hateful'. He says that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians 'has always been a political one about land and identity, not about race.'

But if people are being discriminated against, starved, imprisoned, and killed with impunity on the basis of their identity - what is this? Palestinians are treated this way simply because they are Palestinian. If naming this reality is 'hateful', what words does Mr. Khouri have for what Israel is doing to the Palestinians today? Trying to say it is 'not about race' is simply a way to mislead readers from the real issues at hand.

These processes started decades ago, and can in no way be described as a "military response". They are, instead, the actions of an apartheid state, founded in 1948 on the displacement of hundreds of thousands of indigenous inhabitants, the Palestinians. Three quarters of the Palestinian population were driven out at this time. They now live in refugee camps throughout the region and have never been allowed to return. Neither their right to return nor their right to the land they were forcibly displaced from - much of which is now held and distributed by the Jewish National Fund - has been recognized by Israel, which instead has conducted a relentless series of wars against this population over the decades. By contrast, Israel's 'Law of Return' grants the right of any Jewish person to immigrate to the state built on those lands from which the Palestinians were displaced.

After offering some criticism of Canada's support for Israel's invasion of Lebanon (though without offering similar criticism of Israel's ongoing campaigns in Gaza) Mr. Khouri says that "none of [what Israel is doing] justifies racist sentiments against Jews". We totally agree. But this has nothing to do with the argument at hand. Mr. Khouri's op-ed is about the claim that Bob Rae supports Israeli apartheid. The leaflet distributed at the Liberal Party convention, the one Mr. Khouri is responding to, contained no racist sentiments against Jews. The only racist sentiments were those expressed by Rae himself, in his support for campaigns that invariably kill large numbers of civilians, calling them a "response", and his exhortation to avoid as "prejudicial" calling war crimes for what they are.

Mr. Khouri demonstrates his utter disdain for the Palestinian experience when he writes that Canadian Arabs are "preoccupied with actions such as the separation wall" claiming that this only encourages "hateful sentiment, animosity and a denial of each side's humanity". The fact that Mr. Khouri could simply dismiss the reality of apartheid and the encirclement of an entire people in concrete prisons as a 'preoccupation' is simply beyond belief.

Indeed, Mr. Khouri's argument reduces to the old accusation of anti-semitism and racism when we criticize Israel. Let us be clear: to stand against Israeli apartheid is not racism. This is a fairly obvious point, and we would think that Mr. Khouri of all people would understand this basic conclusion. It is sadly ironic that in the same week that Mr. Khouri chose to deny Israeli apartheid, the Israeli government refused entry to the Gaza Strip for Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a prominent supporter of the apartheid analogy, to head a UN inquiry into Israel's massacre of civilians in Beit Hanun.

Mr. Khouri goes on to refer to the episode as "un-Canadian". Unfortunately, Bob Rae's stance, like Stephen Harper's, has been all too "Canadian". Part of Canada's mythology is that Canada is neutral. By acting as if the "two sides" in the

conflict are somehow equal, Mr. Khouri has lost sight both of the massive disparity in power and of the cause-effect relationship of displacement and resistance. Such implicit dishonesty ends up supporting the stronger side against the oppressed. Canada has done this all too often, in its displacement of the indigenous peoples of this territory and also in its foreign policy. Having equated the oppressor and the oppressed, it is an easy step to condemning the opponents of the oppression as 'hateful'.

Mr. Khouri's implication that the Canadian Arab Federation (CAF), and its President Khaled Mouammar, are 'inflamed' and need to 'take a deep breath' is nothing but an underhanded attack on an institution that all members of the Arab community can today call a true representative of their interests. Throughout this year, CAF has played an immensely important role in articulating a principled and powerful voice to the Arab community. All of us remember the prominent role of CAF in the popular response to Israel's attack on Lebanon this summer. Mr. Khouri may prefer to publicly defend supporters of apartheid and pretend that this is 'multiculturalism', but thankfully CAF does not share his predilection for a supposed neutrality that only serves the powerful. Those of us who are genuinely, consistently, against apartheid and racism, know where we stand. If he can reacquaint himself with the facts, Mr. Khouri would be welcome back to our ranks.

-The Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid <http://www.caiaweb.org/>

December 13, 2006

Time for Canadian Arabs and Jews to work together

By RAJA KHOURI From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

At the recent Liberal Party convention, a flyer, electronically circulated among delegates, denounced leadership candidate and former Ontario premier Bob Rae for having once delivered a speech to the Jewish National Fund. The flier stated that the JNF is "complicit in war crimes and ethnic cleansing," adding that "Rae's wife is a vice-president of the CJC [Canadian Jewish Congress], a lobby group which supports Israeli apartheid." It concluded: "Bob Rae supports Israeli apartheid" and, therefore, should not be elected leader of the party.

The Canadian Jewish Congress condemned the flyer and blamed Khaled Mouammar, the president of the Canadian Arab Federation, for circulating it. The federation, in turn, denied producing or distributing the flyer but, nevertheless, said it supported its content and accused the CJC of habitually suppressing any criticism of Israel. Charges of anti-Semitism started flying.

Take a deep breath, everyone.

Bob Rae is no supporter of apartheid. Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion has condemned the hateful comments against Mr. Rae and his wife, Arlene Perly Rae, and so should all of us.

The flier was in very bad taste, and does not represent the majority view of Canadian Arabs. Nevertheless, it must be

said that many people agree with former U.S. president Jimmy Carter who, in his recent book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, accused Israel of practising a system of apartheid against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

But not in the way one might think. In a recent article explaining his views, Mr. Carter says he has "made it clear that the motivation [of apartheid] is not racism but the desire of a minority of Israelis to confiscate and colonize choice sites in Palestine, and then to forcefully suppress any objections from the displaced citizens."

Indeed, the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has always been a political one about land and identity, not about race. No doubt, emotions are inflamed, and have been for decades. History continues to weigh heavily.

The Holocaust remains a determinant of Jewish psyche. The wounds of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories and the oppression of Palestinians continue to fester. Violence goes on unabated, and many people have become radicalized. For their part, Canadian Arabs and Jews have been preoccupied with actions such as the separation wall or the targeting of civilians perpetrated by their Middle Eastern brethren. By doing so, they have encouraged hateful sentiment, animosity and a denial of each side's humanity. How un-Canadian.

Through it all, some of the fiercest critics of Israeli policy have been Jewish. Noam Chomsky and Rabbi Michael Lerner, in the United States, come to mind, as do the brave souls of Jewish Women Against the Occupation who have, for years, been holding weekly vigils in front of the Israeli consulate in Toronto. Many Canadian Jews have recognized Palestinian rights and suffering, though prominent ones tend to do so only privately.

It hasn't helped that some people have used the anti-Semitism label as a stick to silence criticism of Israel. Nor has it helped that some critics of Israel have, indeed, been anti-Semites in disguise. The Canadian government added fuel to the fire with its total support for the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon this past summer, with seeming disregard to Lebanese civilian losses. Our government's one-sidedness was seen as grossly divisive and as a cynical ploy to attract Jewish electoral support.

But none of this -- none -- justifies racist sentiments against Jews. Canadian Arabs and Jews have traditionally joined hands against all forms of hate and discrimination. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia remain serious threats to both communities.

Multiculturalism, democracy and human rights are values that are equally shared. It is time that representative leaders from both sides recognized each other's humanity and discussed their differing views in civil, dispassionate ways. It would be wise that they put their Canadian-ness to work for the benefit of peaceful co-existence. Let them lead their Middle Eastern brethren by example, instead of by emulating their enmity.