

## Finkelstein visit highlights scholar-activists and protest power

By Patrick Bond Muslim Views, August 2009

Norman Finkelstein is one of the world's most celebrated scholars of the Middle East conflict, and his national speaking tour over the next two weeks will interest many who might consider academic scholarship in such situations only half-baked until tested in the fires of harsh social realities.

One site of struggle is the university. No armchair academic, Finkelstein has been actively seeking to unmask propagandistic analysis by academics serving the status quo, particularly Israel's oppression of Palestinians, deemed worse than apartheid by expert witnesses.

But for Finkelstein this was a costly career move, for after his Princeton University PhD in political science and a brilliant period based at Chicago's De Paul University, he was in effect fired from DePaul in 2007, refused tenure (permanent job security) thanks to immense pressure brought to bear by Zionists.

Leading the attack was Harvard Law School's Alan Dershowitz, perhaps the highest profile US legal academic. Finkelstein's book *Beyond Chutzpah* ripped holes in Dershowitz's analysis, *The Case for Israel*, unveiling not only his errors of content but also blatant plagiarism.

In response, Dershowitz went for Finkelstein's jugular, and hence it is fair to conclude that his DePaul firing was based not on scholarly merit (his department and the tenure committee endorsed him overwhelmingly), but instead on politics, justified by the allegation that his style as an academic was combative. Which it was, appropriately so.

The US, after all, is a zone for name-calling as a distraction from sorting out the more durable Middle Eastern power plays. In April, the same Dershowitz pronounced that Archbishop Desmond Tutu - back from leading a UN factfinding mission in Gaza - "is a bigot and a racist... blind, deaf and dumb when it comes to issues of Israel."

In an interview with playwright Wajahat Ali, Finkelstein explained how Zionist propagandists seek "to delegitimize all criticism of Israel as motivated by anti-Semitism and to turn the perpetrators into the victims. It seems to have less effect in recent years due to overuse: once you start calling Jimmy Carter an anti-Semite, people really begin to wonder."

Finkelstein's visit to South Africa is hosted by a variety of leading academic and Palestinian-rights organizations unfazed by earlier attempts by the Zionist Federation along similar lines. So at least in Joburg, Durban and Cape Town before August 22, you will find a place to engage with this remarkable son of two Holocaust survivors who has put conscience ahead of blind religious loyalty: the Afro-Middle East Centre, the Univ of Joburg Centre for Study of Democracy, the Wits School of Social Sciences, the UKZN Centre for Civil Society and School of Politics, the Durban Univ of Technology Journalism, Durban's Diakonia faith centre, the UCT History and Current Affairs Society, and Stellenbosch Univ and UWC, along with Not in Our Name (progressive Jewish activists) and the Palestine Solidarity Group.

Finkelstein is not the only courageous US academic targeted by extremist Zionists intent on denying freedom of intellectual expression when it

comes to Israel.

Professor Joel Kovel, who was a visiting scholar at our UKZN Centre for Civil Society in 2006, suffered similar treatment - being fired notwithstanding world-leading contributions to both environmental and Middle East scholarship - from what was once a bastion of free speech and academic enquiry, Bard College in New York.

Though money was cited as a reason in a pathetic letter written to me by Bard official Dimitri Papadimitriou, Kovel's dismissal followed publication of his book *Overcoming Zionism*.

And in another high-profile case, Professor William Robinson from the University of California at Santa Barbara was attacked when he circulated material to his students underscoring a comparison made by Princeton Professor Richard Falk - a UN special rapporteur on Palestine - that related the Israeli incursion into Gaza to the Nazi's early Warsaw siege. Robinson's colleagues are fighting back on his behalf and seem to be winning.

In South Africa, academic silencing and self-censorship is not unheard of, and at UKZN we suffered the banning of Dr Ashwin Desai from employment at our centre in 2006 and again last year, the forced resignation of Professor Nithaya Chetty. But this is not yet due to Zionism.

Testing our freedom to criticize Israel, scholars in the law, religious and education faculties at my university and Univ of Johannesburg are making important statements against the Gaza massacre that we should all echo. Along with former Wits Law professor John Dugard (subsequently a UN special rapporteur on Palestine) and UKZN law prof Max du Plessis, Farid Esack and Salim Vally of UJ asked the National Directorate of Public Prosecutions to investigate war crimes committed by South African-born David Benjamin.

Benjamin, trained in law at UCT, is employed by the Israeli Army's Military Advocates Corps, hence making him not just party to but an active enabler of war crimes, especially white phosphorous bombs that in January were dropped upon Gaza civilians (illegal under the Geneva Convention). Benjamin recently bragged to Bloomberg News that "the Military Advocates Corps] were intimately involved in the planning [of the Gaza massacres]... Approval of targets which can be attacked, methods of warfare - it all has gone through us."

Against such men, we need much more combativeness by comfortable academics and the rest of the society, including more work on the Boycott Disinvestment Sanctions campaign against Israel.