Critics bring invigorated Israel-Palestine debate to town: Siddiqui

In recent weeks, several outspoken critics of Israeli policies have brought their perspectives to Toronto.

American liberal Zionist Peter Beinart recently told a Toronto crowd that the challenge of the next generation of North American Jews is to keep Israel democratic.

By: Haroon Siddiqui Columnist, Published on Wed Nov 06 2013

The most pointed debates about the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands take place in Israel. Those are now spilling over into North America, brought to Canada by some Israelis or American Jewish critics of Israeli policies. In recent weeks, Toronto has had three such visitors.

- American liberal Zionist Peter Beinart is the author of The Crisis of Zionism (2012) and editor of the blog Open Zion, “a new conversation about Israel, Palestine and the Jewish Future.”

He spoke here at the first national conference of JSpace Canada, the theme of which was “For Israel’s sake, raising the voice of progressive Zionists in Canada.”

He said the challenge of the next generation of North American Jews is to keep Israel democratic. What Israel is doing in the West Bank is not, and is alienating many young liberal Jews from Zionism itself.

- Israeli-American peace activist Miko Peled came here during a cross-Canada tour, arranged by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East.

His grandfather was among the founders of Israel, his father a celebrated war hero. His niece was killed in 1997 by a suicide bomber in Jerusalem. That prompted him to try to understand the Palestinians. He wrote The General’s Son: Journey of an Israeli in Palestine, and maintains a blog, Tear Down the Wall.

I asked him what he was telling Canadians.

“That there was a Palestine and there were Palestinians long before Israel came and that Israel continues its atrocities and crimes against the Palestinians. And that a two-state solution is going nowhere.”
But the peace talks are going on.

"It’s a fig leaf to allow Israel to continue the occupation and oppress the Palestinian people."

If so, why is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas going along?

"The Palestinian Authority doesn’t really represent the Palestinian people any more. If there were free and fair elections held, they would be tossed out."

The last election, in 2006, was won by Hamas, prompting Israel and, right behind it, Canada to declare the result null and void. Was that a mistake?

"A big mistake but it was inevitable that Israel would not allow any legitimacy to any elected government, because Israel wants to determine who it will negotiate with. It wants to determine what the other side will do.

"In a few years, Canadians will look back at this period of their government’s blind support of Israel with shame, and many will deny that this happened — similar to the people who don’t want to remember that they had supported apartheid in South Africa."

Is he for a one-state solution?

"One state already exists. It is not a democratic state. Half its people live in segregation, under Israeli terror, under racist laws. The state needs to be democratized."

Does he support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign?

"Completely. Canadian Jews, as Jews elsewhere, get offended when Israel is compared to apartheid-era South Africa...Mind you, not the entire Jewish community is offended. Many Jewish people are offended by the Israeli occupation, while a great many others are indifferent."

- Dana Golan belongs to the Israeli group Breaking the Silence, which has been collecting testimonies by commanders, officers and rank and file soldiers of the Israel Defence Forces about what they witnessed in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. About 900 have spoken out. Golan, 30, a former soldier herself, was here to promote the English translation of Our Harsh Logic, a collection of 145 testimonies. She spoke to Hashomer Hatzair, Jewish youth group, and at another event.

The book drives a truck through familiar rationalizations, such as that what Israel is doing in the Occupied Territories is temporary and essential to preventing terrorism.

"Israel’s actions are not solely defensive," it says. "Rather, they have systematically led to the de facto annexation of large sections of the West Bank through the dispossession of Palestinian residents and by tightening control over the civilian population and instilling fear."

Palestinians are separated from Israelis by a wall and kept in tightly controlled areas. The policy also entails separating Palestinians “from each other” — in Gaza and the West Bank, in cities and villages, and by dividing them further by creating “new borders on the ground” through channelling their movements through “Israel’s monitoring mechanisms.”

Palestinians are systematically separated from their land. There is collusion between soldiers and the settlers. There’s one law for Israelis and another for Palestinians.

Israel suggests that life for the Palestinians under occupation “can be tolerable, and even good,” says the book. But “on a daily basis, the Israeli authorities decide which goods may be transferred from city to city, which businesses may open, who can pass through checkpoints and through security barrier crossings, who may send their children to school, who will be able to reach the universities and who will receive the medical treatment they need.”

Golan tells me: “We Israelis would never live in such circumstances.”

Israel keeps “total control over the Palestinians...

"You arrest the brothers, the cousins, the neighbours. You arrest all men between 16 and 60 in a village, put them in an emptied school, blindfold them and handcuff them.
And you do this in villages where there’s greater participation in the freedom struggle — the more the Palestinian participation in the struggle, the more the arrests.

“New soldiers are trained through mock arrests. You go to the house of an innocent family, take the Palestinian out and release him after a few hours. Why? For two reasons: For practice and to ‘demonstrate your presence,’ ‘make your presence felt.’

“You disrupt the day-to-day life of a Palestinian neighbourhood …

“You tear apart the Palestinian society.”

Her group arranges tours and lectures. It took 4,000 Israelis and foreign visitors to Hebron … There are streets Palestinians cannot walk on. There are bridges Palestinians cannot drive on.

“We are trying to get more and more Israelis to come and see this reality.”

Her group was demonized as consisting of “traitors.”

“The more they called us ‘traitors,’ the more the people came to us. So, the government has stopped calling us that.

“We are loyal to the truth. No one has proven that what we have said is false.”

Golan has seen a change for the better. “Four or five years ago, there was a debate over what you could say and could not say. Now, I don’t hear that.”

Why is she herself so engaged?

“I am trying to save my home for my kids.”

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