



## What is the Canadian Museum for Human Rights?

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) is a federally funded museum in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was created as a federal Crown Corporation through an amendment to the Museums Act by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2008, and it opened in 2014.

The stated mandate of the CMHR is “to explore the subject of human rights, with special but not exclusive reference to Canada, in order to enhance the public’s understanding of human rights, to promote respect for others and to encourage reflection and dialogue.”<sup>1</sup>

## Why are Palestinian Canadians dissatisfied with the Museum?

Palestinian Canadians are disappointed that the CMHR does not substantively include information about Palestinians, and that it has refused to recognize the *Nakba*. *Nakba* (Arab for “catastrophe”) is the name given to the massive dispossession of Palestinians from their lands by Israel in 1948, when at least 700,000 Palestinian became refugees. For this reason, some Palestinian Canadians protested the CMHR’s opening in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

## Is Palestine mentioned in the CMHR at all?

There have been very few mentions of Palestine in the CMHR since it first opened.

Since 2016, the CMHR has had an exhibit on “Rights Today,” profiling 17 individuals including Buffy Sainte-Marie and Craig Kielburger. Although Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Palestinian doctor in Gaza who lost three daughters and a niece in Israeli attacks in 2009 is profiled in this exhibit, there is no mention of the *Nakba*.<sup>3</sup>

The CMHR’s new CEO also insists that the *Nakba* is referenced in a human rights timeline in its introductory gallery, although not mentioned by name.<sup>4</sup>

## How have Palestinian Canadians tried to dialogue with the Museum?

Palestinians were active members of the Canadians for Genocide Education (CGE), a coalition representing dozens of community associations, which as early as 2009 was pushing for a broad and inclusive vision for the

museum in opposition to having a central focus on the Holocaust. CGS argued that there should be no particular emphasis on any one case of human suffering, which would suggest that a “hierarchy of human suffering exists.”<sup>5</sup> The CGE website lists the *Nakba* among 20 other “Cases of genocide” which it believes should get equal treatment.<sup>6</sup>

Relatedly, community activists like Rana Abdulla and the Palestinian Canadian Congress have been trying for an entire decade to get the CMHR to recognize the *Nakba* and tell the stories of its survivors.

- In 2011, Rana Abdulla started sending letters, emails and phone-calls to request a meeting with CMHR officials but did not get a substantial response.
- Abdullah also started to gather stories from *Nakba* survivors for the purpose of sharing with the CMHR, so that they could be used in an exhibit.
- In 2013, Abdulla was finally contacted by the CMHR after being interviewed by the CBC for her activism. However, after a series of meetings, the museum took no action on Abdulla’s recommendations or proposed content.<sup>7</sup>

## Does the CMHR have a pro-Israel bias?

There is no concrete evidence that the museum’s programming is guided by a pro-Israel bias. However, key individuals and organizations behind the creation and direction of the CMHR include long-time advocates for the State of Israel, and it is reasonable to conclude that this has had an influence on the museum’s decision-making.

The CMHR is known to have been the “dream” of the late Israel Asper,<sup>8</sup> the founder of media company CanWest Global who came up with the idea for the museum in 2000. Initially intended to be a Holocaust Museum, early plans for the project were funded jointly by private fundraising and public funding. After Israel Asper died in 2003, the project was spearheaded by his family and the Asper Foundation, eventually winning government support.<sup>9</sup> Today, Gail Asper serves as both President of Asper Foundation and as a trustee on the CMHR board.

## How have the Museum's key founders advocated for Israel?

In 2002, during the Second Intifada, Israel Asper led a delegation to Israel, saying: "Israel is the only democracy in the entire region. It supports human rights."<sup>10</sup> In a speech that same year, Israel Asper claimed that "anti-Israel bias" was destroying the credibility of the media and urged listeners to cancel their subscriptions or boycott the advertisers of news sources that published content critical of Israel.<sup>11</sup> As the head of CanWest Global, he enforced a strict pro-Israel editorial position at his own newspapers.<sup>12</sup>

The Asper Foundation funds many projects in Israel, including initiatives with a political angle. Some of these projects include:

- The Menachem Begin Heritage Centre in Jerusalem, in order to "perpetuate the thoughts, deeds and achievements of Prime Minister Menachem Begin."<sup>13</sup>
- The Asper Institute for New Media Diplomacy at IDC Herzliya. This institute was founded in 2007 to "teach Israel advocacy."<sup>14</sup> According to a press release, the "aim" of the institute is "focus on the study and application of new media technologies to help tell Israel's story to the world."<sup>15</sup>
- The Asper Center for Entrepreneurship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,<sup>16</sup> whose campus overlooks the Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhood of Isawiya.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that the Asper Foundation boasts about these projects alongside the CMHR gives credence to concerns that a pro-Israel bias may play a role in discouraging Palestinian perspectives from being included in the museum.

## Has the CMHR faced other scandals?

The CMHR has faced many scandals related to how it has dealt with issues of racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. For example:

- For several years, the CMHR refused to use the term "genocide" to refer to Canada's treatment of Indigenous people, even though they used the term for five other cases around the world. This policy thankfully changed in 2019.<sup>18</sup>
- In 2020, the CMHR faced a series of allegations: of racism against Black and Indigenous employees; dismissing complaints of sexual harassment; and ordering staff to censor LGBT content for certain

guests. Some curators and content creators also distanced themselves from the CMHR, saying that it was watering down content for political nationalistic reasons. These accusations led the museum's CEO to resign. A report by an external review later concluded that "racism is pervasive and systemic within the institution."<sup>19</sup>

With a new CEO appointed in August 2020, the Museum has an opportunity to overhaul its approach and consider seriously engaging with the Canadian Palestinian community.

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR), "Our Mandate," accessed March 23, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Brean, "Canadian Museum for Human Rights opens amidst controversy and protests," *National Post*, September 19, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Myron Love, "Human Rights Museum criticized for featuring Palestinian Doctor," *Canadian Jewish News*, April 11, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Candice Bodnurak, "Where's Palestine? The Nakba is Missing from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, March 23, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Canadians for Genocide Education (CGE), "Submission to Canadian Museum for Human Rights Round Table Discussion – Ottawa, June 11, 2009."

<sup>6</sup> CGE, "Cases of Genocide," accessed March 23, 2021

<sup>7</sup> Candice Bodnurak, "Where's Palestine? The Nakba is Missing from the Canadian Museum for Human Rights," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, March 23, 2021; Ryan Hicks, "Palestinian-Canadians fell ignored in human rights museum," *CBC News*, March 4, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Brean, "Canadian Museum for Human Rights opens amidst controversy and protests," *National Post*, September 19, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> The Asper Foundation, "Canadian Museum for Human Rights," accessed March 23, 2021; Kelly Geraldine Malone, "Embattled Canadian Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg has history of controversy," *CBC News*, July 12, 2020; CMHR, "Our History: One person's dream, built by a community," accessed March 23, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> "Obituary: Israel Asper, Son of Immigrants and Founder of Media Empire, Dies," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, October 9, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Edge, "The Asper Slam on News Media," *The Tyee*, November 23, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Davide Mastracci, "Uncovering Canadian Media's Devastating Pro-Israel Bias," *Passage*, June 23, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> The Asper Foundation, "Press Release: The Asper Foundation Announces Major Gift to the Menachem Begin Heritage Centre in Jerusalem, Israel," February 25, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Talya Halkin, "IDC to teach Israel advocacy," *Jerusalem Post*, July 4, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> IDC Herzliya, "Press Release: Ten Years of Partnering to Make the Case for Israel," June 5, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> The Asper Foundation, "Asper Centre for Entrepreneurship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem," accessed March 23, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Nir Hassan, "The Murky Relations Between the Hebrew University and Its Neighboring Palestinian Village," *Haaretz*, April 12, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Lenard Monkman, "Genocide against Indigenous Peoples recognized by Canadian Museum for Human Rights," *CBC News*, May 17, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Porter and Ian Austen, "'Racism Is Pervasive and Systemic' at Canada's Museum of Human Rights, Report Says," *New York Times*, August 6, 2020.