

US academic Norman Finkelstein denied entry to Israel

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Professor Norman Finkelstein, an American Jewish scholar known for his trenchant criticism of Israeli policy, was detained and interrogated by Israel's security forces, Shin Bet, for 24 hours at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport on May 23, denied entry into Israel and deported back to Amsterdam where he had been lecturing.

Finkelstein had been en route to visit a friend in Hebron in the occupied West Bank. His deportation, and a 10-year ban on entering Israel for "security reasons," is a major attack on the freedom of expression, the right of Israeli citizens to hear alternative viewpoints, and an attempt to intimidate and silence international opposition to Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians.

It also exposes the fraud of any putative Palestinian state where Israel controls the Palestinian borders and thus who may or may not enter.

Finkelstein, a son of Holocaust survivors, is one of a growing number of Jewish scholars who have made valuable contributions to the study of Israeli history and have become known as the "new" or "revisionist" historians. He has consequently been the focus of constant opposition from right-wing professors and the pro-Israeli media for years. He has been targeted in particular for his opposition to the charge of anti-Semitism being employed as a means of suppressing criticism of Israel's violations of human rights and international law.

The 55-year-old political science professor is best known for his 2000 book, *The Holocaust Industry*, which argues that the Holocaust has been exploited for ends—support for Israel and calls for reparations—that have nothing to do with historical truth or the victims of the Nazi genocide. Finkelstein has also written critical studies of Daniel Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which argues that the cause of the Holocaust can be located in the inherent anti-Semitism of the German people as a whole.

His most recent book, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, continues on these themes, as well as documenting in detail the human rights violations of the state of Israel. Among the targets of the book, published by the University of California Press, are Harvard law Professor Alan Dershowitz and others who have used the charge of anti-Semitism to suppress criticism of Israeli policies.

Last year, Finkelstein was denied tenure at Chicago's DePaul University where he had been lecturing for six years, despite

support from his department, his students, and the faculty of the university, following pressure from opponents of his views, including Dershowitz. His classes for his final year in 2007-08 were cancelled and he was denied access to his office, leading him to resign under duress.

After landing in Tel Aviv last Friday, Shin Bet held Finkelstein in an airport cell and interrogated him about contacts with Hezbollah—against whom Israel fought a massive 33-day aerial bombardment in 2006—whether Hezbollah had sent him to Israel, any contacts he had with Al Qaeda and how he intended to finance his stay in Israel.

Earlier this year, Finkelstein had visited Lebanon, where he had been invited to speak at a conference at the American University in Beirut. He also undertook a tour in order to promote his book, accompanied by his Arab publisher and representatives of Hezbollah in the south of Lebanon. He has subsequently published articles about his trip.

Finkelstein's web site posts excerpts from an interview he gave in January to Lebanese TV, in which he said he was "happy to meet the Hizbollah people because it is a point of view rarely heard in the US."

Shin Bet's line of questioning insinuates that Finkelstein is a supporter of Hezbollah, if not in their employ. Moreover to imply he is also connected to Al Qaeda is yet more absurd, particularly since Hezbollah is a Shiite party while Al-Qaeda is a Sunni Muslim grouping.

The Shin Bet said Finkelstein "is not permitted to enter Israel because of suspicions involving hostile elements in Lebanon" and because he "did not give a full accounting to interrogators with regard to these suspicions."

Finkelstein denied this in an emailed statement to Israel's *Ha'aretz* newspaper from Amsterdam. He wrote, "I did my best to provide absolutely candid and comprehensive answers to all the questions put to me. I am confident that I have nothing to hide. Apart from my political views, and the supporting scholarship, there isn't much more to say for myself: alas, no suicide missions or secret rendezvous with terrorist organizations." He added, "I support the two-state solution based on the '67 borders and I told my interrogators I'm not an enemy of Israel."

He explained that he was "en route to Palestine to see one of my oldest and dearest friends, Musa Abu-Hashhash."

Finkelstein said he had visited Israel every year for the last 15 years. He added that he was held in a cell and encountered

“several unpleasant moments with the guards.” Eventually he used a mobile phone belonging to another detainee and called another friend he had arranged to meet in Israel, the journalist Allan Nairn, who called a lawyer, Michael Sfard. Sfard met with Finkelstein and told him he could appeal the ban. He said that banning Finkelstein from entering the country “recalls the behaviour of the Soviet bloc countries.”

However, Finkelstein said that it was not “his inclination to pursue the matter,” although lawyers in Israel were encouraging him to do so on political grounds.

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Finkelstein said he is not “dogmatic or fanatic” and while he believes every country has the right to restrict entry, he does not agree with the criteria. “Just as I would oppose the US not allowing people to enter due to ideological beliefs, I would consistently oppose them in Israel,” he said.

He also denied that he poses any threat to Israel. “I couldn’t be [a risk] because of any security threat I pose,” said Finkelstein. “The US has as stringent anti-terrorism laws in the books as Israel, and Hamas and Hezbollah are on their terrorist list. If I posed a security threat I should be talking to you from jail. Because no authorities have contacted me there are no grounds for it.”

Finkelstein did not intend to visit Israel, but had to pass through Israeli customs “by force of circumstance,” to visit a friend in Hebron. “Israel has the right to restrict who enters its country, but the West Bank is not its country,” said Finkelstein. “One day the Palestinian Authority may restrict my rights, but that’s an issue for the Palestinian Authority,” he continued.

Israel’s Association for Civil Rights called the deportation of Finkelstein an assault on free speech. “The decision to prevent someone from voicing their opinions by arresting and deporting them is typical of a totalitarian regime. A democratic state, where freedom of expression is the highest principle, does not shut out criticism or ideas just because they are uncomfortable for its authorities to hear. It confronts those ideas in public debate,” said the association’s lawyer, Oded Peler.

The decision to deport Finkelstein stands in marked contrast to Israel’s willingness to permit the entry of right-wing fascist and religious zealots from the US and Russia who have been involved in all manner of provocative, criminal and murderous attacks on Palestinians—into both Israel and the West Bank.

The refusal to allow Finkelstein to enter Israel is particularly telling since Israel legally permits every Jew to exercise his or her right to live in Israel as a citizen of the country, in contrast to the Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948 and 1967 who are refused entry or the right of return, in accordance with the Law of Return that is fundamental to the Zionist state. It demonstrates that the security force reserves to itself the right to interpret the law as it sees fit. Israel is a home to diaspora Jews only providing that they do not criticise its military expansionism and oppression of the Palestinian people.

The ban on an academic critical of Israeli policy is all the more noteworthy because Israel likes to portray itself as a beacon of democracy in the region. In reality Finkelstein is not the first to be barred from entering the country: Israel regularly stops pro-Palestinian academics and peace activists from entering Israel who

go to show support for Palestinian activists.

It also demonstrates the degree to which Shin Bet’s operations and decisions are not subject to judicial oversight. Israeli lawyers say that the chances of overturning Shin Bet’s ban on Finkelstein are slim. According to *Ha’aretz*, the courts do not intervene when Shin Bet decides that someone constitutes a security risk. Immigration authorities can prevent tourists entering the country, without even having to provide an explanation.

A *Ha’aretz* editorial opined, “Considering his unusual and extremely critical views, one cannot avoid the suspicion that refusing to allow him to enter Israel was a punishment rather than a precaution.”

“The Shin Bet argues that Finkelstein constitutes a security risk. But it is more reasonable to assume that Finkelstein is *persona non grata* and that the Shin Bet, whose influence has increased to *frightening proportions*, latched onto his meetings with Hezbollah operatives in order to punish him,” the editorial continued (emphasis added).

The attack on a liberal critic of Israel reflects a degree of desperation on the part of Israel. Faced with international opprobrium and internal dissent due to its brutal treatment of the Palestinians and bellicosity towards Iran, Israel is using its security forces to stifle opposition and to maintain the political hegemony of the financial and corporate elite in Tel Aviv and Washington.

If Israel’s liberal press was moved to express concern about the decision to deport Finkelstein, then that is more than can be said for the press in the West. His treatment went almost unreported in the United States. In particular the *New York Times* did not mention the exclusion of one of New York’s most well known residents.

In Britain, the *Guardian* reported it, but without an editorial or op-ed comment. It later published two letters. The first was from Dershowitz, which devoted more space to justifying the decision to deny tenure to Finkelstein because of his lack of scholarship and professionalism than to opposing Israel’s decision to ban him. The second was from the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, which claimed that Israel’s decision was entirely legitimate.

The silence of the liberal press speaks volumes about their attitude to basic democratic rights and the freedom of expression. Silence denotes consent. They do not criticise Israel’s actions because they agree with them.



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