

# Canadian exhibition on the dispossession of the Palestinians accused of “antisemitism” in government-backed smear campaign

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An extraordinary campaign is underway in Canada to suppress a modest museum exhibition due to its purported “antisemitism.” At the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR) in Winnipeg, a 12-metre-long display titled “Palestine Uprooted: Nakba Past and Present” opened to the public on Saturday, June 27. It features five artefacts, photographs, videos, and first-person testimonies from Palestinian Canadians recounting their experiences of forced displacement during and after the founding of Israel in 1948, up to the present-day Gaza war.

In 1948-49 more than 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes and more than 400 Palestinian villages and towns were depopulated, destroyed or repurposed as the result of the Zionist state’s campaign of military conquest and deliberate, terror-enforced ethnic-cleaning—an imperialist-enabled crime that has come to be known as the Nakba (Arabic for “catastrophe.”)

The Israeli ambassador to Canada wrote to Prime Minister Mark Carney to demand he “intervene to prevent this exhibition from proceeding.” Irwin Cotler, the former Liberal justice minister and government special envoy on antisemitism, co-authored an open letter in the *Globe and Mail* denouncing the exhibit as “propaganda masquerading as scholarship.”

Others, adopting a more sophisticated approach, insist the exhibit be “rectified” with “historical context”—meaning it be subordinated to a Zionist narrative that would neutralize its political content. The common aim is clear: to prevent a national museum from publicly acknowledging, in however limited a manner, the foundational crime upon which the Israeli state was built under imperialist sponsorship.

Federal Heritage Minister Marc Miller—the minister responsible for overseeing national museums—visited the CMHR and declared the exhibit “should be rectified,” criticizing it for not identifying Hamas as a terrorist organization and calling this “an unfortunate error in curation.” That a federal minister is publicly instructing a national museum—a Crown corporation supposed to operate at arm’s length from the government—on how to present cultural exhibits shows how far the ruling class will go to police permissible speech on Palestine.

The ferocious denunciations of the exhibition are all the more remarkable given its thoroughly conventional character, which avoids making any explicit comment about the Zionist project being the cause of the Palestinians’ dispossession. On the contrary, the presentation refers in an inappropriately “even-handed” manner to the mass expulsion of the Palestinians and the reactionary campaign subsequently mounted by several Arab states against their Jewish populations. This even though the displacement of Middle Eastern

Jews began only after the Nakba and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, and was organized with Israel’s connivance to boost the newly-established state’s population. ‘

The mass dispossession and expulsion of the Palestinians went hand in hand with the denial of their existence as a people and the evisceration of their national rights.

What’s more, those smearing the exhibition as “antisemitic” conveniently ignore that since the CMHR opened over a decade ago, it has displayed information noting the displacement of Jews from Arab countries following Israel’s founding in 1948, but said next to nothing, until the opening of last month’s modest exhibition, about the fate of the Palestinians.

The museum’s chief executive, Isha Khan, has made a point of emphasizing that the institution has no intention of providing an historical overview of the period. “It’s a modest-sized exhibit,” Khan said. “It isn’t an historical retrospective of 1948 and the founding of the state of Israel.”

The CMHR was the brainchild of Israel “Izzy” Asper, the late CanWest Global Communications mogul who built a multi-billion-dollar media empire encompassing the right-wing *National Post* and 130 other newspapers, and was a fervent supporter of the Israeli state. In 2001, CanWest imposed centrally produced editorials on all its publications and pulled a column comparing the plight of indigenous Canadians to that of the Palestinians. The museum was kick-started by a C\$60 million pledge from the Asper Foundation, double Ottawa’s initial commitment. After Asper’s death, his daughter Gail led the project to completion.

Gail Asper has denounced the Nakba exhibit as antisemitic and threatened to lead a protest outside the museum, while Mark Berlin, the museum board’s sole Jewish trustee, has resigned in protest. He denounced the exhibition for ignoring the plight of Jewish refugees without even viewing the presentation himself.

And yet the exhibit opened. Despite the Israeli ambassador, despite the former justice minister, despite the current heritage minister, and despite the intervention of the CMHR founder’s daughter—a 12-metre display documenting the Nakba now stands in a national museum conceived and funded by a Zionist media baron who spent his career suppressing precisely these voices. This did not happen by accident. It reflects the pressure exerted by the anti-war and anti-genocide protests that have swept the globe since October 2023.

Canada’s ruling class has systematically smeared and repressed the broad sections of the population opposed to the Gaza genocide and Canadian imperialism’s complicity in it.

The attack on the Winnipeg exhibit is part of the campaign of censorship that has escalated steadily since October 2023, when the Palestinian uprising led by Hamas provided the pretext for the Israeli state's long-planned genocidal assault on Gaza. Hundreds of thousands of people have participated in anti-genocide demonstrations across the country, frequently met by heavily armed police interventions. Anti-genocide protesters have been smeared from the highest levels of the state, including by former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Ontario Premier Doug Ford and his Quebec counterpart Francois Legault as "antisemites" and "extremists." Many activists, including most notoriously the Toronto "Peace 11," were detained in early-morning raids on their homes.

The authorities have also directed a campaign of censorship in artistic and cultural fields. In October 2024, the Aurora Cultural Centre permanently closed an exhibition after pro-Zionist residents complained about a handwritten label reading "(Israel) Palestine" on a map. In January, the Art Gallery of Ontario rejected a work by Jewish-American photographer Nan Goldin after committee members denounced her opposition to the genocide—one even likened her to the pro-Nazi film-maker Leni Riefenstahl. Now the same forces have trained their fire on a national museum, demanding the suppression of an exhibit four years in the making.

The witch-hunt by the Canadian government, media, and other sections of the ruling class against opponents of the Gaza genocide forms part of an international campaign by the imperialist powers, led by the United States. Its aim is to criminalize any and all opposition to Israel's extermination and ethnic-cleansing of the Palestinians and the broader US-Israeli drive to reorder the entire Middle East.

But as far as the Canadian ruling elite is concerned, the crackdown on popular opposition to imperialist barbarism has not gone far enough. The *Globe and Mail*, the "newspaper of record" of Canada's corporate and political establishment, has been at the forefront of a concerted campaign to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism — a fraudulent conflation aimed at criminalizing all criticism of the Israeli state.

In early June, the *Globe* published an editorial sharply criticizing Prime Minister Mark Carney for a speech denouncing antisemitism that failed to explicitly label anti-Zionism as antisemitism. "What should he have said?" the editorial demanded. "That the problem is antizionism, a complete, anything-goes rejection of, and demonizing of, Israel's existence. And that antizionism is manifesting itself on Canada's streets and university campuses, in a complete, anything-goes rejection, and demonizing, of Jews." The editorial concluded that "this is where the Prime Minister's courage failed him."

The *Globe's* demand is in line with the definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which seeks to defend Zionism against any criticism. In 2020, the Ontario legislature voted unanimously to adopt the IHRA working definition of antisemitism. Bill 168 passed with the support not only of Doug Ford's Conservatives but of the social-democratic NDP—the entire political establishment united behind the project of silencing opposition to the crimes of the Israeli state. The IHRA definition has been exploited by right-wing, pro-Zionist forces to silence opponents of Israel's imperialist-backed war crimes, including during the witch-hunt of left-wing members of Britain's Labour Party who backed its former leader, Jeremy Corbyn.

The hypocrisy of the Canadian bourgeoisie lecturing anyone about antisemitism is staggering. The same Canadian ruling class that now parades its concern for "antisemitism" blocked Jews fleeing the Nazi

regime from finding refuge in Canada and has maintained a decades-long alliance with the Nazi's Ukrainian nationalist collaborators and their political descendants. After World War II, Canada provided safe haven to thousands of veterans of the Waffen SS's Ukrainian-staffed 14th "Galicia Division" and members of Stepan Bandera's Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) who collaborated with the Nazis, including in the Holocaust of European Jews. Canada became a centre for the promulgation of far-right Ukrainian nationalism, whose leading ideologues had advocated an "independent" Ukraine purged of Jews and Poles in Nazi-occupied Europe under Hitler. In September 2023, the entire Canadian parliament rose to give a standing ovation to Yaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old Galicia Division veteran, introduced as "a Ukrainian hero, a Canadian hero."

The Liberal government has massively increased military spending, provided more per capita to Ukraine in arms and money than any other G7 state, and continued to deliver military equipment to Israel as it wages war on the people of Gaza despite a supposed suspension of new permits.

The *Globe's* real complaint is that Carney's speech did not go far enough in providing the ideological justification for the repression that the ruling class requires to impose this unpopular agenda of war and rearmament. The campaign to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism—and the parallel campaign to shut down exhibitions like the Winnipeg Nakba commemoration—is not about protecting Jews. It is about criminalizing opposition to the predatory wars and genocidal policies through which the imperialist powers, including Canada, are seeking to redivide the world. Speaking at the Davos World Economic Forum in January, Carney made clear where Canada stands: it would not be "on the menu" and would instead secure "a seat at the table" where the spoils of imperialist aggression and war are divided up.

The defence of democratic rights cannot be separated from the broader political struggle against the capitalist system that is systematically dismantling those rights. The same ruling class that demands the suppression of the Nakba exhibit is driving down living standards, eviscerating public services, and rearming for world war.

The struggle against censorship, the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and imperialist war must be led by the working class fighting for a socialist program.



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