

## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

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Speaking Truth to Power is a prophetic action my Blauvelt Congregation has chosen to put into practice. Speaking Truth to Power is a challenge for each and every one of us. The first Dominican community in the Americas offers us a helpful model. Their behavior makes us proud to be Dominican, which feels really good, and at the same time it inspires us to speak truth to the powers of our day, which makes us a little nervous.

The courage of Father Anton Montesinos to speak out in defense of the indigenous people of Hispaniola against the ‘powers that be’ (European royalty, the Vatican, local conquistadors and settlers/parishioners) was a result of communal action. Speaking out alone is more difficult and less effective than speaking out as a group. It was the collective study of the issue of the cruel treatment of the indigenous at the hands of the Spanish explorers and settlers that empowered the Dominicans to compose their prophetic sermon.

Just as the Dominican community collectively writing the sermon empowered the preaching of Montesinos, collective commitment empowers us to speak truth to power. One way this is happening today is through the Corporate Stances many Dominican Congregations have taken on issues such as the Death Penalty, Nuclear Weapons, and Immigration Rights. Corporate stances empower congregations to speak publicly as a body; they also allow individual members, congregational groups and leaders to speak out in the name of the congregation.

Speaking out on some issues gets more public support than others, though it is never easy to speak prophetically. Condemning Human Trafficking, for example, is supported by pretty much everyone, except those benefitting from it, or maybe those in a position to make change, like law enforcement agencies. But the vast majority of people, including church and civil leaders, support the anti-trafficking work. Speaking out against U.S. foreign policy, however, is another matter. Those who spoke out against war when the U.S. attacked Iraq were targets of hatred from every segment of the country. Now of course the majority of people in the U.S. are against our wars in the Middle East, but at the start of the Iraq War the streets of the U.S. were lined with flags demonstrating support for the war. Anyone who dared speak out against the war was condemned as unpatriotic and worse.

One of the most difficult issues to address is Palestine/Israel. Two years ago Israel, the fourth largest military power in the world (with nuclear weapons), attacked Gaza, a territory which had already been severely weakened by the Israeli blockade. How did the U.S. respond? Our leaders from Obama to Congress to local politicians and our media all agreed: “Israel had a right to defend itself.”

Yes, it’s true that members of Hamas did direct violent acts toward innocent Israeli citizens, which is a crime against humanity. But it’s a mistake to present Israel and Palestine as

equivalent. We hear: “Both sides need to stop the violence,” “ Hamas doesn’t accept the state of Israel,” and “Palestinians are terrorists.”

When we step back from statements like these and take a larger view, it is easier to see how propaganda has the power to turn reality up-side-down. If we think about the Indigenous people of the Americas, most of us learned as children that they were savages who violently attacked the European settlers. This is the narrative that has been told in U.S. history for centuries. The “Indians” were the problem. Only in recent decades have we become aware that the *victims* were portrayed as the *savages*, while *those who behaved savagely* were portrayed as the *victims*. Remember how the old western movies depicted the European settlers being terrified of the blood thirsty, ax wielding, wild Indians. We owe thanks to historians like Howard Zinn, who debunked the propaganda by telling the story of the U.S.- not from the usual perspective of those in power - but from the point of view of the people, in this case the Indigenous people (Zinn, 1980).

The same kind of propaganda is at work in the Palestine/Israel situation. Again it is thanks to historians, in this case particularly Jewish and Israeli historians like Illan Pappé, who researched and discovered the real history of Israel, debunking the propaganda (Pappé, 2006).

In her memoir, In Search of Fatima, Ghadi Karmi describes her childhood as a young girl in Palestine and her family’s expulsion in 1948 (Karmi 2002). Here second book Married to Another Man opens with the following account:

Following the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 at which the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine was first mooted, the rabbis of Vienna dispatched two representatives to investigate the suitability of the country for such an enterprise. The men reported the result of their explorations in this cable to Vienna:

The bride is beautiful, but she is married to another man.

To their disappointment they had found that Palestine, though highly eligible to become the Jewish state the Zionists longed for, was not, as the writer, Israel Zangwill, later claimed ‘A land without a people for a people without a land.’ It was already inhabited, spoken for by a native Palestinian Arab population whose homeland it already was (Karmi 2007).

Even with this knowledge, after the U.N. gave the majority of Palestinian land to the Zionists in 1947, Jewish people around the world were invited to come home to Israel; come to Israel “a land with no people for a people with no land.” The propaganda of turning an empty land into a thriving new Jewish state convinced literally millions of Jews from around the world to move to Israel. I am sure most of them had no idea that Zionist forces committed 33 massacres and destroyed 531 Palestinian towns to make way for their arrival. In 1948 750,000 indigenous Palestinians, whose families had lived in Palestine for hundreds of years, were forcibly expelled by, or fled in terror of, the powerful militias that would soon become the army of the state of Israel (Bennis, 2007). This is what is known as ‘the Catastrophe,’ *al Nakba* in Arabic.

While we would never condone the anti-Semitism that caused so much suffering for Jews throughout the world, most notably in the Holocaust, and while we might want Jews to have Israel as their state, we cannot turn a blind eye to the methods used to create and continually expand the state of Israel.



Since 1967 all of Palestine has been forced to live under an oppressive Israeli military occupation. The 2005 map demonstrates Israel's takeover of most of the West Bank including East Jerusalem through the development of illegal settlements. While President Obama told Israel to stop the settlement building, the United States soon after vetoed a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement building on occupied land (Haaretz Newspaper, 2011). Even though they know the settlement building is illegal, our government still gives diplomatic support to Israel.

The lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are totally controlled by Israel through constant check points and road blocks which prevent Palestinians from getting to work, to school, to a hospital and from visiting family and friends. Israeli forces provide military support for Jewish settlers who are allowed to use guns to threaten unarmed Palestinians. The Israeli military and settlers uproot Palestinian olive and citrus groves, and Jewish military forcibly move Jewish settlers into or demolish the homes of Palestinian families. The so called "security" wall, which one would expect to be on the border between Palestine and Israel, is in fact well into Palestinian territory, separating Palestinian families from each other, cutting farmers off from their farmland, animals and olive groves - taking more of their land. The wall obviously has much more to do with separating Palestinians from each other, their land and their livelihood than it has to do with providing security for Israel.

Israel has blockaded the Gaza Strip since 2006. No exports, no imports, and no free movement of people in and out of Gaza are allowed. Not nearly enough food, fuel, and medicine is allowed into Gaza, and no building materials have been allowed in since Israel bombed, bulldozed and destroyed the Gaza Strip during *Operation Cast Lead* from Dec 27, 2008 to Jan 18, 2009.

Israel said *Operation Cast Lead* was in retaliation for Hamas firing rockets into Israel, but in fact it was Israeli soldiers who broke the ceasefire by entering Gaza in November 2008 to attack Palestinians; Hamas then responded with rocket fire into Israel. Israeli forces to this day continue to fire at Palestinians who try to fish or farm their land.

Why Should Americans Care about Palestine?

I joined a delegation that fortunately was able to get into Gaza just four months after Operation Cast Lead. The Gaza Strip, which is not even a quarter of the size of Long Island, is crowded with 1.6 million people, half of whom are children, most of whom are refugees from 1948 and the war of 1967.

We travelled the length and width of Gaza and saw indescribable destruction and heard horrifying stories. Israel bombed Gaza with U.S. made F-16 fighter planes and Apache helicopters. Israeli occupation forces dropped illegal white phosphorous throughout Gaza and demolished homes and factories using Caterpillar bulldozers made in the USA. We saw remnants of land mines, bombs and shells labeled in English “made in the USA.”

As president, George W Bush made an agreement to give Israel \$30 billion in military aid over a 10 year period (in addition to other U.S. arms and aid given to Israel). President Obama has continued this military aid.

No matter what Israel does, no matter how illegal it may be, even at the risk of destroying the reputation of the United States in the international community, our government unconditionally stands with Israel.

We the citizens of this country are responsible to hold our government accountable for its actions.

Having witnessed the devastation of the people and land of Gaza, and knowing that my government uses our tax dollars to support the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine and the Siege of Gaza demands of me that I speak truth to power, that I speak out against my country's blind diplomatic and financial support of Israel.

In order to speak truth to power we need to be able to recognize and debunk propaganda. For those of us working on Palestinian Liberation we need to find ways to converse with those who say, “Both sides need to stop the violence.” Gathering data on Israel's military might (funded and provided by the U.S.) and its violent occupation of Palestine, including the settlement building in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the blockade of Gaza, can be used to debunk the propaganda that “Palestinians are the terrorists.” In fact if anyone is terrorizing anyone, it is the state of Israel terrorizing the Palestinian people through its occupation, with U.S. support.

As for Hamas not accepting the state of Israel, we can ask, “How exactly does Israel accept the possibility of a State of Palestine when it continually gobbles up Palestinian land with its settlement building?” While I'm not necessarily a supporter of Hamas, they have said they accept a Palestinian state alongside Israel with its 1967 borders (ArabNews, 2009). Like Hamas,

the Catholic Bishops of the Middle East, after meeting with Pope Benedict in Rome, called the international community to apply the 1967 U.N. Security Council resolutions which called Israel to withdraw from Arab land conquered in the 1967 Six-Day War that year (HuffingtonPost, 2010).

Lastly there is the systematic discrimination of the 1.3 million Palestinians living as citizens in Israel. According to [Adalah](#), the legal Center for Minority Rights in Israel, there are more than 35 Israeli laws explicitly privileging Jews over non-Jews (Palestinians, Christians and Muslims). Other Israeli laws appear neutral, but are applied in discriminatory fashion. For example, laws facilitating government land seizures make no reference to Palestinians, but nonetheless have been used almost exclusively to expropriate their properties for Jewish settlements (Sabbah, 2010). (View “Targeted Citizen,” a 15 minute film on the discrimination against Palestinians who are citizens in Israel: <http://vimeo.com/10302596>.)

Please understand that my criticism of the state of Israel is not a criticism of Jews or Judaism; it is a criticism of Jewish Zionism which has used violent means to acquire Palestinian land for the Jewish State of Israel. Many Jewish people in the U.S., around the world and even in Israel are against the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the siege of Gaza. Much of what I have learned about this situation came from Jewish writers and publications. Half the members of the group I travelled to Gaza with were Jewish, many of the activists I work with are Jewish, and many of the organizations that support Palestinian human rights are Jewish. Together we work for a just peace for Palestinians and Israelis.

I am grateful that the Israel-Palestine issue has been part of the North American Dominican Justice Promoters Call to Justice; I am grateful for the U.S. Dominican Palestine Coordinating Committee, and I am grateful for the many activists and organizations who work tirelessly for peace through justice in Palestine/Israel. These are the places where the collective work is organized; these are the places that empower us to speak truth to power.

Like the first Dominicans in the Americas, Dominicans today face the same daunting challenge to speak truth to power.

What is the injustice that most moves you to speak truth to power?

Where are the places and who are the people who empower your prophetic preaching for justice?

If Palestine/Israel is of great concern to you, consider joining the U.S. Dominican Palestine Coordinating Committee (contact: [ceilie@aol.com](mailto:ceilie@aol.com)).

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## Selected Resources

### DVDs

*Life in Occupied Palestine | A Witness in Palestine*

*Budrus* – Israeli-Palestinian collaboration in Palestine

*Occupation 101* – Historical root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

### BLOG

Mondoweiss <http://mondoweiss.net> Progressive Jewish Perspective

### WEBSITES

If Americans Knew [www.ifamericansknew.org](http://www.ifamericansknew.org)

The International Solidarity Movement <http://palsolidarity.org>

The US Campaign [www.endtheoccupation.org](http://www.endtheoccupation.org)

Jewish Voice for Peace [www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org](http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org)

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions [www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net)

Friends of Sabeel-North America [www.fosna.org](http://www.fosna.org)

The Israeli Committee against House Demolitions [www.icahd.org](http://www.icahd.org)