

Middle East Notes
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
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The seven featured articles and the related links in this issue of the Middle East focus on growing U.S. condemnation of Israel's actions, such as: unrelenting violations of international law, continued occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, home demolitions and land confiscations; U.S. Congress authorization of billions in weapons to Israel and inclusion of an unconstitutional law aiming to silence the BDS non-violent movement for Palestinian rights; the announcement that a number of freshman left-wing U.S. Congressional Democrats would not be embarking on one of Washington's most sacred rites of passage: an AIPAC-organized trip to Israel; institutionalized discrimination by Israel of Palestinians as a more creative framework for addressing this injustice; ways to counteract the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, and recent attacks on Black-Palestine solidarity; the stark reality that since demonstrations at the Gaza fence began last March, nearly 300 Palestinians have been killed, including two women, and some 6,000 people wounded by the IDF, according to UN data and links to CMEP January Bulletins.

Commentary: With the identification of the Netanyahu government with Donald Trump, the new Democratic control of the House of Representatives, the openness of young U.S. Jews to the oppression of the Palestinians, the diminishing control of Congress and U.S. media by AIPAC and the older Jewish organizations, a new freedom to criticize Israeli policies without being restricted by the conflation process used so effectively to block criticisms, many U.S. Jews and friends of Israel are becoming freer to criticize the repression and oppression by the Israeli government of Palestinians without their criticism being conflated with rejection of all Israeli Jews, nor conflated with an attack on State of Israel, nor as an attack on all the Jews of the world. Nor is anti-Zionism so easily conflated with anti-Semitism. The obfuscation tactics of denial have become less effective and the obvious injustices by the Israeli government of half the population under its control from the 'sea to the river' are becoming starkly visible.

- Michelle Alexander writes in *The New York Times* that we the people of the U.S., to honor Dr. Martin Luther King's message and not merely the man, must condemn Israel's actions: its unrelenting violations of international law, continued occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, home demolitions and land confiscations. We must cry out at the treatment of Palestinians at checkpoints, the routine searches of their homes and restrictions on their movements, and the severely limited access to decent housing, schools, food, hospitals and water that many of them face.
- Amjad Iraqi notes in *972 Mag* that the uproar by Jewish establishment figures over Alexander's New York Times essay in support of Palestinian rights echoes the reactions of white Americans to the Civil Rights Movement decades ago.
- Yousef Munayyer writes in *The Washington Post* that as the U.S. Congress returned for a new session during a political crisis and government shutdown, the Senate chose an odd priority for its legislative agenda. Senate bill 1, or S1, authorizes billions in weapons to Israel and includes an unconstitutional law aiming to silence the movement for Palestinian rights.
- Noah Kulwin in *Jewish Currents* notes that shortly after their election this past November, a number of freshman Congressional Democrats announced that they would not be embarking on one of Washington's most sacred rites of passage: an AIPAC-organized trip to Israel.

- Yariv Mohar writes in *+972 Magazine*, that the existing frameworks we have for addressing Israel’s rule over the Palestinians are flawed and becoming less relevant. Comparing it to other regimes that share one of its prominent characteristics, institutionalized discrimination, can create space for new ideas.
- Michael Schaeffer Omer-Man in *+972 Magazine* says that “we often play the role of being able to say things that the rest of the movement cannot,” Jewish Voice for Peace director Rebecca Vilkomerson says in a wide-ranging interview about the group’s decision to come out as opposed to Zionism, how to fight the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, and recent attacks on Black-Palestine solidarity.
- Yaniv Kubovich notes in *Haaretz* that since demonstrations began last March, nearly 300 Palestinians were killed, including two women, and some 6,000 people wounded, UN data show.

1) [Time to Break the Silence on Palestine](#), Michelle Alexander, NYT, January 19, 2019

“On April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stepped up to the lectern at the Riverside Church in Manhattan. The United States had been in active combat in Vietnam for two years and tens of thousands of people had been killed, including some 10,000 American troops. The political establishment — from left to right — backed the war, and more than 400,000 American service members were in Vietnam, their lives on the line.

“Many of King’s strongest allies urged him to remain silent about the war or at least to soft-pedal any criticism. They knew that if he told the whole truth about the unjust and disastrous war he would be falsely labeled a Communist, suffer retaliation and severe backlash, alienate supporters and threaten the fragile progress of the civil rights movement.

“King rejected all the well-meaning advice and said, “I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight because my conscience leaves me no other choice.” Quoting a statement by the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, he said, “A time comes when silence is betrayal” and added, “that time has come for us in relation to Vietnam.”

“It was a lonely, moral stance. And it cost him. But it set an example of what is required of us if we are to honor our deepest values in times of crisis, even when silence would better serve our personal interests or the communities and causes we hold most dear. It’s what I think about when I go over the excuses and rationalizations that have kept me largely silent on one of the great moral challenges of our time: the crisis in Israel-Palestine.

“I have not been alone. Until very recently, the entire Congress has remained mostly silent on the human rights nightmare that has unfolded in the occupied territories. Our elected representatives, who operate in a political environment where Israel’s political lobby holds well-documented power, have consistently minimized and deflected criticism of the State of Israel, even as it has grown more emboldened in its occupation of Palestinian territory and adopted some practices reminiscent of apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow segregation in the United States.

“Many civil rights activists and organizations have remained silent as well, not because they lack concern or sympathy for the Palestinian people, but because they fear loss of funding from foundations, and false charges of anti-Semitism. They worry, as I once did, that their important social justice work will be compromised or discredited by smear campaigns.

“Similarly, many students are fearful of expressing support for Palestinian rights because of the McCarthyite tactics of secret organizations like [Canary Mission](#), which blacklists those who publicly dare to support boycotts against Israel, jeopardizing their employment prospects and future careers.

“Reading King’s [speech](#) at Riverside more than 50 years later, I am left with little doubt that his teachings and message require us to speak out passionately against the human rights crisis in Israel-Palestine, despite the risks and despite the complexity of the issues. King argued, when speaking of Vietnam, that even “when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of this dreadful conflict,” we must not be mesmerized by uncertainty. “We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak.”

“And so, if we are to honor King’s message and not merely the man, we must condemn Israel’s actions: unrelenting violations of international law, continued occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza, home demolitions and land confiscations. We must cry out at the treatment of Palestinians at checkpoints, the routine searches of their homes and restrictions on their movements, and the severely limited access to decent housing, schools, food, hospitals and water that many of them face.

“We must not tolerate Israel’s refusal even to discuss the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, as prescribed by United Nations resolutions, and we ought to question the U.S. government funds that have supported [multiple hostilities](#) and thousands of civilian casualties in Gaza, as well as the [\\$38 billion](#) the U.S. government has pledged in military support to Israel.

“And finally, we must, with as much courage and conviction as we can muster, speak out against the system of legal discrimination that exists inside Israel, a system complete with, according to Adalah, the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, more than 50 laws that discriminate against Palestinians — such as the new [nation-state law](#) that says explicitly that only Jewish Israelis have the right of self-determination in Israel, ignoring the rights of the Arab minority that makes up 21 percent of the population.” ...

2) [For Michelle Alexander’s critics, Palestinians don’t deserve civil rights](#), Amjad Iraqi, 972 Mag, January 23, 2019

“Michelle Alexander’s powerful *New York Times* essay on Saturday ([Time to Break the Silence on Palestine](#)), ahead of the commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, was arguably a milestone for the Palestine movement in the U.S.

“First, for *who* wrote it: Alexander, the author of the seminal book [The New Jim Crow](#), is a renowned lawyer and public intellectual respected for her activism and scholarship on racism in the U.S., who cannot easily be dismissed as “fringe.”

“Second, for *where* it was written: in a leading mainstream newspaper, which more frequently [features](#) op-eds by Israel advocates like Bari Weiss, Matti Friedman, Bret Stephens, Shmuel Rosner, and even officials like Naftali Bennett.

“Third, for *when* it was written: Alexander is the latest prominent Black American in recent months to vocally express — and be [targeted](#) for — her solidarity with the Palestinian people, after others like Tamika Mallory, Marc Lamont Hill, and Angela Davis faced [similar](#) public outrages and disavowals.

“And fourth, for *why* it was written: to challenge the widespread fear of backlash, held by many progressive Americans, for publicly criticizing Israel and speaking up for Palestinian rights.

“The uproar over Alexander’s essay came swiftly from Jewish establishment groups and figures. Some of them are worth reading in full, if only to witness the hysteria and chutzpah of telling a Black woman how to remember one of the most significant African-American leaders in history, or how to interpret her knowledge of injustice...”

See also: [What You Can’t Say About Israel \(With Marc Lamont Hill\)](#)

3) [The hypocrisy of anti-BDS laws is a slap in the face of Palestinians](#), Yousef Munayyer, Washington Post, January 19, 2019

“As Congress returned for a new session at a moment of political crisis and government shutdown, the Senate chose an odd priority for its legislative agenda. [Senate bill 1](#), or S1, authorizes billions in weapons to Israel and includes an unconstitutional law aiming to silence the movement for Palestinian rights.

“Boycott, divestments and sanctions, or BDS, are tactics Palestinian civil society has asked people around the world to utilize to hold Israel accountable for policies that deny them human rights. While these tactics have gained traction, many U.S. lawmakers have chosen to introduce repressive legislation targeting BDS tactics when implemented in support of Palestinian rights.

“These so-called ‘anti-BD’ laws, adopted at both the [state and federal level](#), have caused great controversy. Opposition to such bills has overwhelmingly come from Democrats on the grounds that economic protest is protected under the First Amendment right to free speech; Republicans have almost entirely supported these laws as a caucus. But the debate over the “Combating BDS Act,” recently packaged into S1, led to a revealing exchange. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), who sponsored the act, [claimed](#) some Senate Democrats secretly support BDS. Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) quickly [shot back](#) that such a claim was untrue.

“Both are wrong: There’s nothing secret about the Democrats’ support for BDS, and that support can be found on both sides of the aisle. All 100 senators, and countless elected officials, support the tactics of boycott, divestment and sanctions. In 2017, Iran-Russia sanctions legislation [passed 98-2](#), so that’s 98 senators that support BDS right there.” ...

“Today, some 40 percent of Americans and 56 percent of Democrats [would support sanctions](#) or greater pressure on Israel for certain violations like settlement building. It’s high time that our elected officials end the double standard of taking economic action for the human rights of others while providing economic support for those who trample on the human rights of the Palestinian people.”

4) [The Schism is Here](#), Noah Kulwin, Jewish Currents, January 31, 2019

“Shortly after their election this past November, a number of freshman left-wing Congressional Democrats announced that they would not be embarking on one of Washington’s most sacred rites of passage: an AIPAC-organized trip to Israel. These trips, which cost AIPAC around \$10,000 a person, are essential instruments of the country’s largest pro-Israel lobbying group. They present an illusion of political moderation (the politicians meet with a handful of AIPAC-selected Palestinians), and gesture at a forgotten tradition of bipartisan Beltway consensus.

“Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the freshman most vocal about AIPAC and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and herself a Palestinian-American, went a step further this week. She aims to organize an alternative Congressional delegation to the West Bank, completely unattached to AIPAC. In response, Rep. Eliot Engel, the Democratic chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and a staunch AIPAC loyalist, told journalists that ‘instead of [Tlaib] talking about things, she’s new here, she ought to listen and learn and open her mind and then come to some conclusions.’ Tlaib, in turn, invited Engel to join her in Palestine.” ...

“The events of the past week have crystallized this schism more than anything else in recent memory: the Senate’s vote to advance legislation that would allow states to break or withhold contracts from companies that boycott the Israeli government, the launch of a new political advocacy group called the Democratic Majority for Israel, and the Engel-Tlaib scuffle over the proposed trip to occupied Palestine.” ...

5) [A new framework for viewing Israel's regime in the West Bank](#), Yariv Mohar, +972 Magazine, January 31, 2019

“In the 51 years since Israel seized control of the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians, Israelis, and the international community have come up with various frameworks for understanding and trying to resolve the situation. While the international community still prefers to think about Israel’s military control as a form of temporary occupation, more and more people have begun framing Israel, and particularly its rule over the West Bank, as a form of apartheid.

“And yet, neither framework captures precisely the kind of regime that Israel has built over the past five decades. Rather than belligerent military occupation or apartheid, I propose viewing Israel’s rule in the West Bank as a ‘regime of discrimination.’ A comparative study I conducted for Rabbis for Human Rights, which sought to rank discriminatory regimes globally, concluded that Israel’s rule over the West Bank is the third-most discriminatory regime in the world today.” ...

“In the past few years, we have seen the ‘apartheid’ analogy, which seemingly prescribes sanctions on Israel, similar to South Africa’s apartheid regime, gain momentum internationally. Yet the apartheid discourse remains on the political margins, partly because Israel’s regime is in so many ways different than the South African case.

“In contrast, framing Israeli rule as a regime of discrimination means it is not bound to one specific historical example and its particularities. Instead, it allows us to view the regime in the West Bank as a general state of affairs, making it harder to dismiss and easier to utilize in comparative studies.

“Thus, I propose understanding Israel’s rule over the West Bank as a ‘regime of discrimination.’ As this study suggests, doing so will help us expose just how unexceptional yet severe Israel’s rule over the West Bank truly is. And perhaps, viewing it through a different framework could lead to innovative ways of resolving it.”

6) [JVP just declared itself anti-Zionist and it's already shifting the conversation](#), Michael Schaeffer Omer-Man, +972 Mag, January 30, 2019

“‘We often play the role of being able to say things that the rest of the movement cannot,’ Jewish Voice for Peace director Rebecca Vilkomerson says in a wide-ranging interview about the group’s decision to come out as opposed to Zionism, how to fight the conflation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, and recent attacks on Black-Palestine solidarity.

“Jewish Voice for Peace’s announcement that it opposes Zionism, published quietly on its website earlier this month, has thus far come and gone without much fanfare or public attention. It simply wasn’t surprising for many.” ...

“At least temporarily, the result has been advancing a small shift in the discourse about Zionism. This week, J Street, one of the only other progressive Jewish political outfits on the national scene, came to the defense of JVP and the Workmen’s Circle, the organization that was threatened with banishment from the Boston Jewish community over its ties to JVP.” ...

“A change is clearly happening in the way that American Jews talk — and think about — Israel and its ruling ideology. +972 Magazine spoke with Rebecca Vilkomerson about why and what it means that JVP has declared itself to be “unequivocally opposed” to Zionism, but perhaps more interestingly, the broader political moment for the question of Israel-Palestine.”

7) [180 Palestinian Women Wounded by Live Israeli Fire Since Start of Gaza Protests](#), Yaniv Kubovich, Haaretz, February 3, 2019

“Two Palestinian women were killed and some 180 wounded in Gaza by live Israeli fire since weekly protests along the Israeli border began in March, according to data in a United Nations report released last week and confirmed by Israeli security officials.

“Overall, the data shows, 295 Palestinians were killed and about 6,000 wounded by live ammunition. Some 29,000 others, about 1,800 of whom women, were hurt in some other way, mostly by tear gas. 45 of them were wounded by riot control gear, primarily rubber bullets.

“The Israeli army commented on the data, saying it ‘does everything it can to avoid hurting children and women.’ In a statement, it blamed Hamas for ‘making cynical use of [Gaza](#) residents,’ which it said were used as human shields in ‘violent riots’ along the border.

The army added it is committed to its rules of engagement. ‘When necessary, specific cases are looked into... and brought before the military prosecution for consideration,’ it said.” ...

“The Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza said on Friday 32 Palestinians were wounded over the weekend by live fire in clashes with Israeli forces along the border. It added two paramedics were also wounded by tear gas canisters fired by the Israel Defense Forces.” ...

8) Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) Bulletins:

- 2/1/19 – [\[Bulletin\] International Observer Mission Ends in West Bank](#)
- 1/25/19 – [\[Bulletin\] Michelle Alexander, Acclaimed Civil Rights Lawyer, Writes NYT Op-Ed on Palestine](#)
- 1/18/19 – [\[Bulletin\] Palestine Leads Influential U.N. Group](#)
- 1/11/19 – [\[Bulletin\] Controversy Over the Selling of Holy Land](#)
- 1/4/19 – [\[Bulletin\] Jesus' Baptism Site to Reopen in 2019](#)