

Inside Israel's Apartheid State An Interview with Max Blumenthal

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Journalist Max Blumenthal's latest book *Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel* has been one of the most controversial and enlightening books of 2013. It's a fearless, no holds barred take on life in Israel and the brutal occupation of Palestine. Needless to say, not all have been happy with Blumenthal's take on Israeli culture and politics. I recently caught up with Max to discuss his new book and the backlash he's received from the pro-Israel coterie. -JF

Joshua Frank: Max, seems your latest book *Goliath* has really caused a stir among right-wing Zionists and other liberal defenders of Israel, like your *Nation* colleague Eric Alterman. What's all the fuss about?

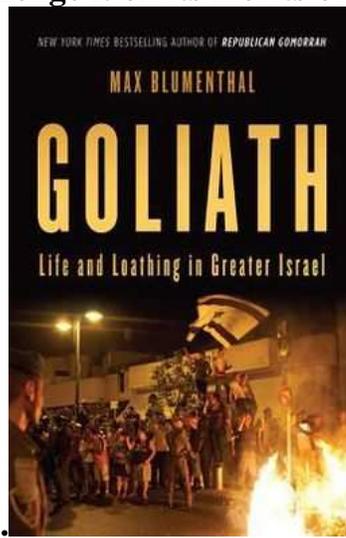
Max Blumenthal: *Goliath* is the first on-the ground, journalistic portrait of the real Israel that has been whitewashed and covered up by the mainstream American media. The book reveals a society overrun with extremism, with open racism emitting from the highest levels of government, inspiring anti-Arab and anti-African riots from the West Bank to Tel Aviv while the siege of Gaza deepens. Many of the pivotal events I detailed at length through background research and first-hand reporting were buried or ignored by the *New York Times* and have scarcely been examined even in progressive American media.

The atmosphere I captured in the pages of *Goliath* is the one that veteran Israelis from Uri Avnery to former *Maariv* editor Amnon Danker to former *Haaretz* editor-in-chief David Landau have described in no uncertain terms as fascistic. Through the experience of almost a year on the ground in Israel-Palestine, I was able to capture the feeling of the atmosphere they described and to bring it to life on the pages of my book. Obviously, pro-Israel zealots were not terribly happy about this.

There was also the fact that I did not write *Goliath* with concern for Israel's anguished "soul," or with any abiding belief in the absolute necessity of a Jewish state; that I did not advance the fantastical notion that the Israel that exists behind the 1949 Armistice Lines is a vibrant democracy. And I refused to pay lip service to the idea that the Palestinians were partially at fault for their own dispossession — that "both sides" were responsible for the crisis. This is what you are expected to do if you wish to cater to Jewish-American opinion from a liberal perspective. I refused to take

this approach not only because I reject the Zionist narrative but because it is deeply dishonest and actually requires intellectual contortions about the present and the willfull distortion of the past. That my book managed to gain traction despite my rejection of the established liberal Zionist narrative framework was another reason so many viewed it as threatening.

I presented Israel without sentimentalism or nostalgia, painting a portrait of a state that controls all people between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea under a regime of ethnic separation with no national borders. Some of those who have grown accustomed to the hackeneyed liberal Zionist narrative found my factual portrayal of Israeli society deeply discomfiting. And neocon types were absolutely infuriated that I was able to generate publicity and attention. But of all those who have attempted to destroy my book, none have been able to challenge it on its merits or disprove any



substantial facts in it. None.

JF: What is it about criticism of Israel that creates such a fervor?

MB: If Zionism had succeeded in building a democratic state that enjoyed normal relations with its neighbors, the international hasbara apparatus that exists to crush criticism of Israel and propagandize on behalf the Jewish state would be superfluous. Unfortunately, this was never the point of the Zionist movement. Israel is the product of a settler-colonial project that requires perpetual campaign of violent demographic engineering against the wishes of the indigenous Palestinian population. The project continues before our very eyes in the Negev Desert, the South Hebron Hills, and along the electrified walls of the Gaza ghetto. Unless you are some kind of bellicose nationalist, there is not much about it to be proud of.

In the post-Oslo Israel that I bring to life on the pages of *Goliath*, Jewish Israeli society has doubled down on its anachronistic settler-colonial project, entering what could be described as the “neo-Zionist” era. With no hope of achieving international legitimacy and little desire to do so, Israel must call on its partisans across the globe to crush political opposition by all means necessary.

The looming terminal stage of Zionism will be marked by crusades to crush the free speech rights of citizens inside Israel and across the West — to restrict their very ability to organize for the rights of Palestinians. Former Israeli ambassador to the US Michael Oren reflected the increasingly anti-democratic undercurrent of pro-Israel advocacy when he took to Politico to call on Congress to pass laws illegalizing Palestine solidarity activism and punishing Americans for protesting Israeli officials in public forums. 11 students at UC-Irvine have already faced a criminal prosecution for protesting Oren for literally two minutes during a public event. So the campaign to block me from discussing my book at venues across the United States was of a part with the McCarthyite tactics that form the heart of today’s pro-Israel playbook.

JF: The Obama administration, and in particular Secretary of State John Kerry, are set to present a “framework agreement” to jumpstart new Israel/Palestine peace negotiations. What can we expect to come from this?

MB: We can’t expect much, at least in the sense that Kerry has made the Palestinian Authority an offer it can’t accept. The details of Kerry’s plan are slowly leaking out, and they amount to transforming the already ghettoized West Bank into another Gaza Strip. Kerry is advancing Netanyahu’s main demands, including the erection of a gigantic wall along the Jordanian border that would imprison Palestinians from the east while the Israeli separation wall confines them from the west. Israeli Army Radio has reported that “the Palestinians will be imprisoned between the two fences” – that is the actual language the network used. Additionally, the US will authorize Israel to patrol the West Bank’s airspace with drones on a 24/7 basis as it already does with the Gaza Strip. Israeli troops will be allowed to maintain a presence on the Palestinian border with Jordan for an indefinite period, but even this is not enough for the Israelis. Israel’s Minister of Defense Moshe Ya’alon is leading a chorus of outrage from cabinet level officials who demand that Israel receive near-permanent control of the Jordan Valley – that’s where much of the West Bank’s arable land is. And the younger, up-and-coming legislators from Netanyahu’s party – the future of Likud –

may soon introduce proposals in the Knesset to annex the Jordan Valley.

General John Allen, the retired former commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has helped devise the arrangements that will consolidate Israel's control over the West Bank. It is safe to assume that the plan will be a major boon to US and Israeli private security contractors, who will supply the "early warning" systems that will spy on the Palestinians permanently confined to this dystopic, Gazafied Panopticon. Unsurprisingly, Kerry has not faced a single tough question about his plan from the American media. Instead, he was recently hailed by Jeffrey Goldberg for his "uncomplicated affection for the promise of Zionism."

JF: In *Goliath* you write a lot about realities on the ground in Israel. What were some of the more surprising ones you discovered?

MB: There was no particular incident or event that I was not prepared for when I began the fieldwork for the book. What shocked me was the degree to which Israel was able to fuse Western-style neoliberalism so seamlessly with settler-colonial apartheid. In *Goliath*, I described drinking at a bar in a hip neighborhood in Tel Aviv, staring at the nearby luxury "ghost tower" inhabited by wealthy American Jews like Marty Peretz, and listening to fusion jazz emanate from an adjacent club with my t-shirt still saturated in the residue of teargas from the demonstration against the separation wall I attended earlier in the day. That is when it became clear to me how much the Tel Aviv bubble required the Iron Wall.

I am filled with memories like this. In one instance, I was sitting in a macrobiotic/vegan restaurant in central Jerusalem with a French tourist who was staying at my flat during the summer of 2010. The tourist grabbed a French-Israeli magazine on a nearby table, flipped to a random page, and began translating an article to me about the dangers Jewish women could face if they dated Arab men – how the Arab male would charm you before he took you captive in his village and beat you into submission. The feeling of having a Jim Crow-style tract read to me in a French accent while I noshed on a quinoa, tempeh and kale platter in a restaurant packed with vegan settlers summed up the whole experience of Israel for me. I was living life in a tech-savvy, gay-friendly apartheid state where oiled up soldier girls in skimpy bikinis tanned themselves to an orange hue on balmy beaches a few kilometers up the coast from a besieged ghetto filled with food insecure refugees. Each day I spent in Israel, I was staring straight at the West's most vulgar image of itself.

JF: Norman Finkelstein has written about Israel's vulgar image and the exploitation of the Holocaust, which you expand on in Goliath. Can you talk a little about what this means, exactly?

MB: The state of Israel demands the near-total participation of its Jewish citizenry in the project of controlling and dominating Palestinians. This is not a particularly appealing endeavor, especially for the youth who are forced to conscript in the military at age 18. So the military must find ways to help young people overcome their natural skepticism about army life, while the main institutions of the Jewish state work to cultivate unanimous reverence for the military. Thus an occupying, neocolonial, nuclearized army has been re-branded as the last line of defense against Jewish extermination, with soldier boys and girls just out of high school marched into the West Bank to dominate the angry Arabs cast as the spiritual heirs of Nazi Germany. Without intense indoctrination, an Israeli soldier might fall into a personal crisis the moment he has to rip a Palestinian adolescent from his bed and drags him to a dank cell in the middle of the night. Of course, many do, and wind up offering harrowing testimonies to groups like Breaking the Silence. But the truly frightening thing is that so many do not. They return to daily life without any impulse towards critical reflection.

The cradle-to-grave process of indoctrination has helped provide Israelis with more than the motivation to participate in army life. It has allowed them the psychological space they need to accept and justify the vast desert internment camps the state has constructed for African asylum seekers deemed a demographic threat and identified by numbers, not names; the concrete separation wall erected to prevent what Netanyahu called "demographic spillover," and, of course, the existence of the Gaza ghetto. The depressing impact of Holocaust exploitation in Israeli life was reflected in a recent poll in which 57.2 percent of Israeli Jews declared support for the idea that "the main lesson of the Holocaust is that we can only rely on ourselves and must not to hesitate to use force without taking the opinion of other nations into consideration."

JF: How is this perpetuated in the Israeli school system?

MB: The Israeli school system is intimately linked to the military, and in an unprecedented way since Netanyahu's election in 2009. In Goliath, I documented how Jewish Israeli children have been indoctrinated into the culture of militarism and fear as early as age four, describing how pre-schoolers in the city of Holon were lined up before a chalkboard and forced to ponder the following question: "Who wants to kill us?" I detailed a high school field trip in which teens were taken to an army base to shoot at simulated targets

wearing Palestinian kuffiyehs. And I explained the role of the Holocaust in all of this, writing about the trips that 25% of Israeli high schoolers have taken to Auschwitz a year before they enter the military.

These Holocaust tours, called “The March of the Living,” are explicitly designed by the Israeli Ministry of Education to produce more nationalistic attitudes among Jewish youth and a more favorable impression of the army. In his devastating documentary about the exploitation of anti-Semitism, Defamation, the Israeli filmmaker Yoav Shamir accompanied a group of Israeli students to Auschwitz. He showed how after a week of unrelenting indoctrination, the students were reduced to tears of rage, with some declaring that they wanted to go out and find some Nazis to kill. Of course, the Nazis are all dead, or maybe a few of them had their brains frozen in cryogenics labs somewhere in the jungles of Paraguay. So all that is left to do is lash out at those explicitly designated by Netanyahu and other societal leaders as the Nazis’ heirs: the Palestinians.

JF: Let’s go back to Eric Alterman for a minute. In a recent Salon.com interview you say you knew he’d freak out about the book. How’d you know?

MB: I knew that the initial impulse of pro-Israel writers would be to willfully ignore my book if they could not poke any significant holes in the facts I introduced, and they have proven that they couldn’t. Having spent time around The Nation, I was aware of Eric Alterman’s reputation as a kind of pro-Israel enforcer, and also someone who was full of shpilkas, almost to a comical degree. He seemed like the perfect candidate to break the boycott on Goliath. So when I learned that Alterman was getting exercised about Goliath’s publication, I made sure he got a note from my publisher informing him that I was eager for his opinion. And I told my publishers to send copies to pro-Israel writers like Liel Liebowitz of Tablet, to Commentary, and to Sohrab Ahmari, a neocon book reviewer for the Wall Street Journal. I was operating on the assumption that these characters would revert to type with just a little prompting.

Like clockwork, Alterman returned with a vitriolic, error laden attack on my book in The Nation that was immediately torn to shreds by everyone from Ali Gharib to Chip Manekin to Corey Robin to Phan Nguyen. Alterman must be a serious glutton for punishment, because he followed up with eight more blundering attacks on me, each more embarrassing than the next. He also participated in a smear campaign against me outside The Nation that relied on warmongering neocons to promote his attacks. As for the

others, Ahmari publicly boasted that he threw the review copies of my books in the trash rather than review them, while Liebowitz called my book “a work of fiction” after confirming its most devastating sections as accurate – “generally factually accurate,” as Alterman said of the book. If I ever meet Alterman, I hope I have a box of chocolates on me. It is the least I can do to thank him for his role in getting my book to a second printing.

JF: What other backlash has ensued as a result of Goliath?

MB: I was informed that a local chapter of AIPAC demanded that the Dallas Council on World Affairs cancel the talk they were hosting for me. A far-right Islamophobic, anti-gay group called the Florida Family Association attempted to shut down a Council on American Islamic Relations banquet I was keynoting. Alan Dershowitz denounced me as “anti-American” and basically condemned my parents for conceiving me. The Free Beacon attacked my parents for hosting a book party at their home for me, trying to pressure the Clintons cut all ties with my father, who had worked in the Clinton White House. BuzzFeed’s Ben Smith commissioned a comprehensively false smear piece about my book and my father’s relationship to the Clintons. John Podhoretz (who has accused me of “sucking the cocks of Jew killers”) and red diaper neocon Ron Radosh attempted to pressure the New America Foundation into canceling my talk at their offices in DC. The pro-Israel group StandWithUs attempted to force a community center to cancel an American Muslims for Palestine event I participated in, labeling me and other speakers “extremists” in their letter to the center. Finally, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, just named me the 9th biggest anti-Semite of 2013. Like so many other Jews, I strive to be at the top of my field, so I was really disappointed to find myself so low on this Islamophobic outfit’s blacklist. Next year, I promise to try harder and aim for number one.

JF: Were these the type of reactions you expected would happen for reporting on Israel as you saw it?

MB: Once the Zionist freakout began, the sub-mental smears were predictable. As I said, if they could make a positive case for the Jewish state, they would do so. But they can’t. And so they are left with nothing but risible propaganda and McCarthyite tactics. I suppose it was an honor that John Podhoretz, the son of the man who smeared Hannah Arendt for writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, wound up labeling Goliath, “the year’s most disgusting book.”

Though mainstream media has yet to acknowledge the existence of Goliath, the book has received extremely favorable reviews from unexpected quarters. Most notably, James Fallows, the

Atlantic Magazine's editor-in-chief, returned with a vigorous defense of my work after attending my talk at the New America Foundation and actually reading *Goliath*. Fallows dared to take an objective look at my journalism and this is the conclusion he came to: "Blumenthal has made a sobering prima facie case that there are extreme forces to be aware of, and reckoned with more fully that American discourse usually does. And, very importantly, his doing so is no more 'anti-Israel,' let alone anti-Semitic, than *The Shame of the Cities* and *The Jungle* and *The Grapes of Wrath* were anti-American for pointing out extremes and abuses in American society."

Finally, the response to my book across the country has been nothing short of incredible. With absolutely no mainstream coverage, sizable, extremely energized crowds in cities across America have appeared almost spontaneously to hear me discuss my work. The audiences are diverse, with people of all ages, including hardcore activists and new faces who are generally curious about the issue, but they are all united in their disgust at the repression both inside Israel-Palestine and in the US. Something is happening out there and I truly believe a tipping point is approaching. At the very least, we can conclude that the gatekeepers are rapidly weakening.

As long as the status quo in Israel-Palestine persists, all of the trends detailed in *Goliath* will intensify. And since 1967, the US has been the primary guarantor of the status quo. So when I speak to audiences around the country, I encourage them to give up all hope on their elected representatives and societal elites doing anything decent or courageous to challenge Israeli apartheid. After all, these are the same people who have enabled apartheid to retrench itself across this country, either by actively driving inequality or through cynical negotiations with the corporate forces behind it. If Americans want to see genuine change in the Holy Land, they can participate in grassroots, Palestinian-led campaigns like the BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction) movement. This movement is growing rapidly and sending shockwaves through the pro-Israel establishment. And that's a very good thing considering that Palestinians may have few effective tactics left to resist a project aimed at their absolute dispossession.

Joshua Frank is Managing Editor of CounterPunch and the author of *Left Out! How Liberals Helped Reelect George W. Bush* (Common Courage Press, 2005), and along with Jeffrey St. Clair, the editor of *Red State Rebels: Tales of Grassroots Resistance in the Heartland*, and of *Hopeless: Barack Obama and the Politics of Illusion*, published by AK Press. *Hopeless* is now available in Kindle format. He can be reached at brickburner@gmail.com.