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Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, August 2009, pages 59-60

Waging Peace

Bennis Says Americans Should Make Peace

POLITICAL analyst and author Phyllis Bennis, a fellow at both the Transitional Institute in Amsterdam and the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, DC, spoke in Akron, Ohio on May 14, during a recent Midwestern lecture tour, to deliver an address entitled “Understanding America’s Role in the Contemporary Conflicts of the Middle East: Iraq, Iran & Israel/Palestine.”

The timing of Bennis’ visit took on added significance as May 14th marks the 61st anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel, celebrated by many, but also lamented by Palestinians as *al-Nakba* or “the Catastrophe.” Many political experts, including Bennis, director of The New Internationalism Project at the Institute for Policy Studies, view sustained peace in Israel/Palestine as key to sustained peace in the Middle East.



• *Phyllis Bennis*
(Courtesy IPS).

The Jewish-American activist began by re-framing an evocative interview from her appearance the previous night on Case Western Reserve University’s radio program “Cleveland People’s Radio.” The interviewer asked Bennis why, in the midst of foreclosures, brutal unemployment rates and a tanking U.S. economy, the average American should care what happens in the Middle East. “The horrifying policies in the Middle East are ones that we are paying for,” Bennis replied, framing the argument in terms of taxpayer dollars.

Bennis’ remark struck an especially germane chord because it came on the heels of Congress’ passage of a \$96.7 billion measure (H.R. 2346) to help fund the Iraq and Afghanistan wars through Oct. 1, 2009. Criticizing the measure, Bennis reminded the audience to “keep the pressure on” the Obama administration to halt the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Imploring Obama to keep his promise to end the war in Iraq, Bennis prescribed a four-point strategy for achieving this end. “We must bring home mercenaries making a killing literally and figuratively.” Bennis also recommended that the U.S. government close all its bases in Iraq and end all attempts to control Iraqi oil. Finally, she urged bringing American troops home from Iraq without transferring them to Afghanistan.

Sharing insights from her time as a journalist based at the United Nations, Bennis explained that in 1,500 years of Afghan history, not one foreign occupier has been successful in occupying Afghanistan. The overwhelming potential for a U.S.-led occupation of the country is that it will become a quagmire for U.S. forces—even more so than the mismanaged war and occupation of

Iraq—and could lead to a much longer engagement in the country than Americans may expect. “There’s a reason Afghanistan is known as the graveyard of empires,” warned Bennis. “Another foray into Afghanistan could potentially be President Obama’s Vietnam.”

In closing, Bennis, who also serves on the steering committee of the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and America’s role in helping to bring about a sustainable peace. This can only be achieved, Bennis suggested, by the cessation of U.S. military support for Israel. In light of Israel’s misuse of U.S. weapons against civilians, and of its continued settlement expansion, she urged the audience to support the campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS).

The speaking engagement and luncheon was sponsored by the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee (NEO-AFSC). Event chairwoman Jehan Mullin, the NEO-ASFC’s Middle East programming associate, organized the event as an *al-Nakba* commemoration. “After 61 years of conflict, violence and dispossession that has left both Israelis and Palestinians without peace or security,” she reflected, “we wanted to take the opportunity to mark the occasion by re-examining the current conflicts in the Middle East, our nation’s role in them and, more importantly, the possibilities forward toward peace.”

For more information on the NEO-AFSC Middle East work, visit: <www.afscmideast.net>. More information on Phyllis Bennis and her recent publications is available at: <www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?page=fellows_bennis>.

—Marjorie Blackthorn






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