

# Dr. Norman Finkelstein talks to UMass

## The controversial political scientist welcomed discourse regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict

By Luke Macannuco, Jack Underhill, and Grace Fiori

On Tuesday, Oct. 17, around 100 people gathered in Thompson Hall and over 400 attended via Zoom to listen to Dr. Norman Finkelstein, a controversial American political scientist who specializes in the study of the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict. The lecture was labeled, “The Struggle for Justice in Palestine: Past, Present, and Future.”

The talk took place amidst the war between Israel and Hamas. On Oct. 7, the militant organization based in Gaza led a brutal invasion of Israel, killing over 1,400 people, mainly civilians. Israel retaliated by cutting off resources to the Gaza strip and bombarding the region with airstrikes, sparking a humanitarian crisis. The death toll in Gaza surpassed 5,000 with over 1 million displaced.



Kalina Kornacki

Finkelstein has been tuned into the longstanding Israel-Palestine conflict since the 1970s. Over the next few decades, Finkelstein became one of the loudest voices in academia for the Palestinian cause. His critiques of the state of Israel gained Finkelstein a controversial reputation, with public critics labeling him an antisemite.

The first half of Finkelstein's lecture was an abridged history of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Describing the talk as a “teach-in” – a term coined during the Vietnam War when professors would host informal educational forums on the topic – Finkelstein began in 1948, describing the conditions of the region as the state of Israel was established.

He highlighted several significant events in the history of the conflict: the Six Days War in 1967, the First Intifada in 1987, the blockade of Gaza beginning in 2006, up until today. Throughout his speech, he emphasized the importance of scholarly skepticism, encouraging the students listening to do their own research to challenge his claims.

Finkelstein eventually opened the discussion to audience questions. He requested that those with dissenting opinions be the first to speak; no one presented an opposing viewpoint.

When asked if he condones or condemns the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, Finkelstein invoked the memory of the Nat Turner slave rebellion, the deadliest slave revolt in American history, where 55 white men, women and children were killed. Finkelstein prefaced this by expressing that the people of Gaza, “have been trapped in a concentration camp for twenty years” as “the international community had abandoned them, and whatever tactic they attempted, including nonviolent resistance, had no impact on freeing them from that concentration camp.”

With these conditions in mind, he went on to reference William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the abolitionist newspaper “The Liberator.” Following Nat Turner's 1831 revolt, Garrison wrote a column in The Liberator about the uprising. Finkelstein said that while Garrison admitted that the rebellion was shocking and could not be justified, “never once, never once... did [Garrison] condemn the slave rebellion.”

Talking about the Hamas attack Finkelstein said, "It was shocking, yes. Can it be justified? No. Should it be condemned? William Lloyd Garrison clearly said no. Neither condemn nor condone it."

Finkelstein was supposed to be present in the Integrative Learning Center to run a series of three lectures prior to the Hamas attack. But since Oct. 7, the scope of the lecture changed to focus solely on the recent developments of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

The determination to move to Zoom was informed partially by the desire to "focus on ideas and not [Finkelstein]," retired UMass communications professor and event organizer Sut Jhally said. Many departments that were originally co-sponsors also dropped out. One such was the communications department.

Claudio Moreira, a professor and the chair of the communications department, stated that while the department encourages freedom of speech on campus, the organizers were asked to postpone the talks to "allow us to make safe space for challenging discourse."

The history department initially supported a panel on Palestine that included Finkelstein but did not support his recent talk, despite the flier indicating otherwise. The department withdrew "support entirely," according to their email to history majors.

While they never pulled support, the Department of Philosophy had only agreed to sponsor the series of lectures and were not asked to sponsor Finkelstein's teach-in.

The Institute for Holocaust, Genocide & Memory Studies and Interlink Publishing have not yet confirmed whether they sponsored the lecture.

The UMass Resistance Studies Initiative, part of the sociology department, approved the talk, agreeing with Jhally that Finkelstein's presence came at a perfect time.

"There was a lot of obstacles at the University, people saying this was the wrong time to be talking. My view is that this is exactly the right time," Jhally said. "If we don't talk about these things then I don't know why we exist."

Jhally is the director and co-founder of the Media Education Foundation, another co-sponsor of the event. This is not the first time Jhally has found himself in the face of controversy. In May 2019, a panel titled, "Not Backing Down: Israel, Free Speech, and the Battle for Palestinian Human Rights," faced legal trouble when an attorney filed a lawsuit on behalf of three anonymous UMass students, requesting a preliminary injunction to prevent a panel on Palestinian advocacy.

The attorney expressed the event would increase the level of hostility towards Jewish students and supporters of Israel on campus.

Rabbi Aaron Fine is the executive director of UMass Hillel, the center for Jewish life at the University. Fine said that Finkelstein's presence on college campuses being "purposefully provocative" is "nothing new."

Fine found it "upsetting" and "deeply unfortunate" that UMass faculty would invite speakers that are "obviously dogmatic and polemical and polarizing rather than try and create opportunities to foster civil discourse and actual education rather than indoctrination."

Aviva, a board member of the Student Alliance for Israel, expressed the organization's discontent with Finkelstein's presence on campus. While SAFI recognizes the importance of free speech and diversity of opinion on campus, they found that Finkelstein's lecture was "one-sided and did not tell a full story," adding that the professor "left out crucial historic facts, as well as spread false information."

SAFI fears that Finkelstein's teach-in will lead towards a rise of "antisemitic events" on campus.

Dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Science Karl Rethemeyer attended the lecture. "This event is in the tradition of having a free and open campus where we discuss difficult, painful and complex issues," he said.

Senior economics major Ava Hawkes and freshman English major William Normand were glad Finkelstein was still able to give a talk.

"I think we all appreciated that he even did this and that the school got to have him here even if he wasn't able to be here on campus," freshman English major William Normand said. "And it is unfortunate that, and it is regrettable that the school didn't really allow for that to happen."

SJP Co-President Ruya Hazeyen, a senior political science and Middle Eastern studies major, felt that despite departments pulling their sponsorship, discussion is still necessary.

"It's not the time to be pulling out and it would have been a lot better if he could have come," Hazeyen said.

Finkelstein is set to continue his lectures during the spring.

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