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## II. Interview

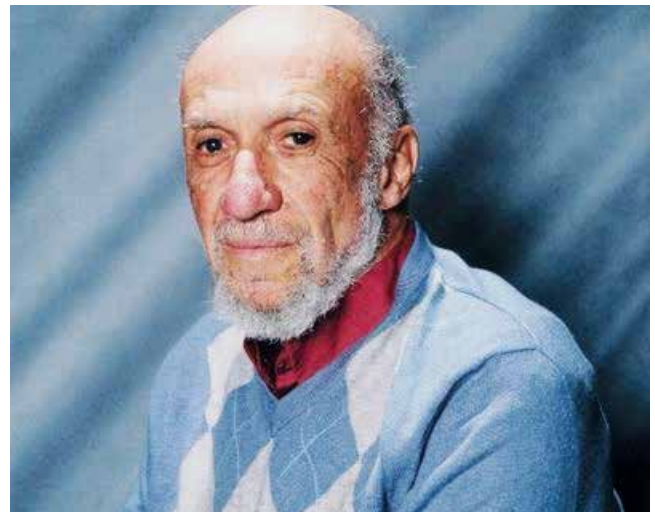
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# Prof. Richard Falk: Western ‘Liberal Democracies’ Responsible for Genocide in Palestine

*Mike Billington, representing Executive Intelligence Review and the Schiller Institute, interviewed Prof. Richard Falk on July 31, 2024. This is an edited transcript of that interview. Subheads have been added.*

**Mike Billington:** I have the pleasure of interviewing Professor Richard Falk today, who has done an [earlier interview](#) with us on Sept 5, 2023. He is a professor emeritus at Princeton, among other positions he holds in institutions around the world, mostly peace-related. Between 2008 and 2014, he was the UN Special Rapporteur for Palestine. So, given the circumstances that we have today in the Middle East, it’s a very timely moment to have a discussion with Professor Falk. So let me begin with that. Professor, the assassination of [ Hamas leader Ismail] Haniyeh today in Tehran is clearly a sign that Israel is trying its best to get an all-out war with Iran started, but also, it’s the fact that they just killed the person who, I believe, was the leading negotiator with Israel for peace in Palestine. What are your comments on that?

**Prof. Falk:** I agree with your final sentences, that this is certainly either gross incompetence or a deliberate effort to provoke a wider war. And from Israel’s point of view, to stimulate the engagement of the United States in their struggles in the region. One should also mention the double assassination. Not only Haniyeh, but [Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan] Nasrallah’s right-hand assistant and prominent military commander, Fuad Shukr, who was killed two or three days ago, in Beirut. And so now Israel, in successive assassinations, has attacked the two capitals of Lebanon and Iran, certainly signaling an almost intentional search for some kind of response. The Supreme Leader of Iran has already said that Iran will arrange—he didn’t go



Richard Falk X page

*Prof. Richard Falk*

into detail—arrange a response, a punishment for this criminal act. In the Lebanese context, Nasrallah and the Hezbollah deny the Israeli justification for the attack, which was the missile that landed in the Golan Heights a few days ago, killing a bunch of Syrian children on a soccer field. It was almost certainly not intended as the target by whoever fired the missile, and it’s still being denied by Hezbollah. The very explosive situation in the Middle East—perhaps it is a distraction from Israel’s failures in Gaza and Netanyahu’s unpopularity in Israel. A very dangerous way of proceeding, because a war of this wider character will bring widespread destruction and probably involve attacks on Israeli cities, something Israel has avoided, pretty much, over the course of its existence. So, it’s a dramatic turning point in the whole experience of Israel’s defiance of international law, international morality, and just plain geopolitical prudence.

**Billington:** You have been a very outspoken supporter of the role of the International Court of Justice, ICJ, and their rulings, including the [decision](#) on the South African petition that Israel is guilty of genocide in Gaza; the International Criminal Court Prosecutor's [request](#) for arrest warrants on both Israeli and Palestinian leaders; and more recently, the [verdict](#) that the entire occupation of the Palestinian territories has been illegal from the beginning, ordering it [Israel—ed.] to end the occupation and withdraw the settlements. But of course, Israel has ignored them totally, while the U.S. and the EU have equally ignored them. As you pointed out in one of your articles, [Israeli Prime Minister] Bibi Netanyahu even said, "No one will stop us," from driving all the Palestinians out or killing them. What can be done overall to deal with the Gaza genocide?

**Falk:** Well, it is, of course, a terribly tragic moment for the Palestinian people, who are faced with this massively sustained and executed genocide, which has now gone on for more than nine months on a daily basis. As your question suggests, Israel has been backed up throughout this process by the complicity of the liberal democracies, above all the U.S. And so long as that power relationship persists, it's very unlikely that an effective intervention on behalf of Palestine, or [one] in order to stop the genocide, can be organized and implemented. So, from that point of view, these judicial rulings, although they give aid and comfort to the supporters of Palestine, are not able to influence the situation on the ground. At the same time, the rulings are important in depriving Israel and the West of complaining about Palestine and Hamas as violators of international law. In other words, by finding that Israel is in gross violation of international law and issuing arrest warrants, the judicial procedures deprive these aggressive countries from opportunistically using international law as a policy instrument the way they have against Russia in the Ukrainian context. It also has an effect on civil society, particularly activists throughout the world, who feel both vindicated and challenged to do more.

### **A Universal Passion Against Genocide**

There is a variety of initiatives underway in civil society that not only brand Israel as a rogue state, but also propose nonviolent boycotting, divesting, and shows of opposition, including the activism of students in university campuses around the world, which is a

quite distinctive phenomenon: Even during the earlier activist periods involving South African Apartheid and the Vietnam War, there wasn't nearly as much passion or spread of this kind of civil society activism. This is the most universal reaction, including of the people in the country whose governments are complicit in supporting the genocide.

And it has uncovered a very unusual gap between what the citizenry wants and what the government is doing, highlighted and dramatized by the scandalous, honorific speech that Netanyahu gave last week to a joint session of Congress, where he received a hero's welcome, standing ovations, applause, and a meeting in the White House with [President Joe] Biden and Kamala Harris, although it was notable that Harris didn't attend the joint session of Congress, where ordinarily the Vice President presides when a foreign leader is speaking at that sort of event.

**Billington:** Your friend, and mine, Chandra Muzaffar, who is the founder and the head of the International Movement for a Just World, based in Malaysia, has written a [letter](#) to all member nations of the UN, noting, as you have also, that the West is ignoring the evil in Gaza, and called on the UN General Assembly to act upon [Resolution 377](#), which, as I understand it, allows the General Assembly, when the Security Council fails to take action to stop a disaster against peace, to act in its own name, to deploy forces, I think UN-armed forces, to intervene. You are, among other things, a professor of international law. What is your view of this option?

**Falk:** There is that option, which was adopted in the context of the Korean War. It was thought initially to give the West a possibility of nullifying the Soviet veto and mobilizing the General Assembly in that sort of situation. But as the anti-colonial movement proceeded, the U.S. particularly became more and more nervous about having an anti-capitalist General Assembly empowered to act when the Security Council was paralyzed. To my knowledge, Resolution 377 has never been actually deployed in a peace-war situation. I think there is a reluctance to press the West on this kind of issue, because it would require, to have any significance, a large political and financial commitment, as well as a difficult undertaking to make effective. So, I'm not too optimistic. I think the law can be interpreted

in somewhat contradictory ways, as is often the case, particularly where there's not much experience. But I don't think the political will exists on the part of a sufficient number of governments to make the General Assembly act. In this context, though, I think in general to have an effective UN, this empowerment of the General Assembly is a very important option that should be supported by people that want to have a more law-governed international society.

**Billington:** On that broader issue, do you have any hope, or any expectation, that the UN, in general, will be reformed in the current crisis-situation internationally?

**Falk:** I'm more or less skeptical of that possibility. There is this Summit of the Future on September 22 and 23. That is an initiative of Secretary-General Guterres, which seeks to have at least discussed fairly ambitious ideas about reform, civil society, enlarged participation in the UN and a more democratic, transparent UN. But my guess is that the Permanent Members, and probably including China and Russia, will not push hard for that kind of development, because they're both very conscious that their interests are better protected in a state-centric world than in a world which is more centralized in its authority structure and therefore would be more susceptible to Western domination and manipulation.

**Billington:** On the U.S. situation, you issued a public letter to Kamala Harris soon after Biden dropped out of the race. There and elsewhere, you have denounced what you called the "diluted optimism" of President Biden, who talks about American greatness and the great future America is looking forward to, and so forth. You called it "a dangerous form of escapism from the uncomfortable realities of national circumstances and a stubborn show of a failing leader's vanity." You express some hope that Kamala Harris will dump the Biden team of [Secretary of State Antony] Blinken and [National Security Advisor Jake] Sullivan. Who do you think could possibly come to be her advisors? Who could, in fact, change the failed direction of the Biden-Harris administration?

### **Gatekeepers of the Washington Consensus**

**Falk:** Well, it's a difficult issue, because it's hard to govern. And I think Harris would know, if you go too

far outside the Washington Consensus—and therefore the choices are somewhat restricted, because those that are prominent enough to be eligible for confirmation in the top job are either conforming to this geopolitical realism, or they're too controversial to get through the Congressional gatekeepers and the media gatekeepers. So, in fairness to her, or any leader for that matter, it's a difficult undertaking to make American foreign policy particularly more congruent with the well-being of people and more oriented toward sustaining peace in a set of dangerous circumstances that exist in different parts of the world. And, of course, the Israeli domestic factor is probably also at least a background constraint. So, the best that I think I could hope for, realistically, is some critical realist personalities like John Mearsheimer or Anne-Marie Slaughter, or possibly Stephen Walt. These are people that have been more enlightened in their definition of national interest and more critical of the Jewish lobby and of other manipulative private-sector forces. But they're strictly, properly, categorized as realists.

A more progressive possibility, but probably too controversial for serious consideration, would be Chas Freeman, who has a distinguished diplomatic background. Obama wanted to give him an important position in the State Department. But he was perceived at that time as sufficiently controversial as to be blocked, and the proposed appointment was withdrawn. Obama, himself, is an outside possibility. He's privately let it be known that he's quite critical of the way in which Israel has behaved in this period. He is more oriented toward domestic policy and would like to promote a more peaceful, less war-oriented world. But whether he would be willing to play that kind of role, having been previously President, is uncertain, and whether she [Harris] would want such a strong personality within her inner circle is another matter of doubt. Possibly, if he was willing, he could be the U.S. ambassador at the UN or some kind of other position. But it's strange that in a country of 330 million people, there are so few that are able to do the job and get through the gatekeepers, who make sure that more progressive voices are not allowed to do the job. So, for instance, someone like [Noam] Chomsky or [Daniel] Ellsberg, if he had lived, would be perhaps amenable to serving in a Harris government. And she might be eager to chart a somewhat independent path and give more attention to foreign policy and more support to the people that

have been suffering from inflation and other forms of deprivation resulting from a cutback in social protection that has occurred in the last decade or so.

**Billington:** In a more general sense, you've been critical of what you call the "incredible stance of Democratic Party nominees to be silent this year about the world out there, beyond American borders, at a time when the U.S. role has never been more controversially intrusive." As you know, Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the head of the Schiller Institute, has initiated an International Peace Coalition (IPC), which is aimed at addressing that problem, bringing together pro-peace individuals and organizations from around the world, many of whom have different political views, but to put aside those differences in order to stop the extreme danger of an onrushing nuclear conflict with Russia, and also possibly with China, and to restore diplomacy in a West, which has fully adopted the imperial outlook of the British Empire, which they now call the "unipolar world." How can this movement be made strong enough to make those kinds of changes in the paradigm?

**Falk:** That's an important challenge. There are other groups that are trying to do roughly parallel things. I've been involved with SHAPE [Save Humanity and Planet Earth], the group that Chandra Muzaffar is one of the co-conveners of along with Joe Camilleri [and Prof. Falk himself]. But it's extremely difficult to penetrate the mainstream media, and it's very difficult to arrange funding for undertakings like your own, that challenge the fundamental ways that the world is organized. The whole point, I think, of these initiatives, is to create alternatives to this kind of aggressively impacted world of conflict, and to seek common efforts, common security, human security, that meet the challenges of climate change and a variety of other issues that are currently not being addressed in an adequate way. But it depends, I think, ultimately, on the mobilization of people. Governments are not likely to encourage these kinds of initiatives. So, the question needs to be rephrased: How does one mobilize sufficient people with sufficient resources to pose a credible challenge to the political status quo in the world?

**Billington:** In that light, Helga Zepp-LaRouche has also called for the founding of what she called a

[Council of Reason](#), reflecting back on the Council of Westphalia, which led to the Peace of Westphalia, where people of stature, as you indicated, are brought to step forward and speak out at a time when that kind of truthful, outspoken approach is sorely lacking and very, very much needed. What's your thought on that?

### A More Sensitive Consciousness

**Falk:** I think all such initiatives help to build this new consciousness that is more sensitive to the realities of the world we live in. There has been, as you undoubtedly know, a [similar council of elders](#) composed of former winners of the Nobel Peace Prize and a few selected other individuals, but it hasn't had much resonance, either with the media or with government. It's very difficult to gain political space the way the world is now structured, through a coalition of corporate capitalism and a militarized state. It's hard not to be pessimistic about what can be achieved. But that doesn't mean one shouldn't struggle to do what at least has the promise and the aspiration to do what's necessary. And the Counsel of Reason, presumably well selected and adequately funded, and maybe with an active publication platform, could make a difference to international public discourse. It's worth a try, and I would certainly support it.

**Billington:** I appreciate that. What are your thoughts on the peace mission undertaken by Viktor Orbán?

**Falk:** Well, I don't have too many thoughts about that. It seemed to uncover what many independent, progressive voices were saying. In any event, the interesting thing is that he's a head of state, and therefore his willingness to embark on such a journey and to seek ways of ending the Ukraine conflict is certainly to be welcomed. He, of course, has a kind of shadowy reputation as a result of widespread allegations of autocratic rule within Hungary. I don't know how to evaluate those. I haven't been following the events in Hungary, but he's seen as an opponent of liberal democracy. And for that reason, he doesn't get a very good hearing from the media or from Western governments as a whole. The message may deserve wider currency, but whether he can deliver that message effectively seems to me to be in fairly significant doubt. I think the Chinese are in

a better position to make that point of view more influential in the world.

**Billington:** You're saying that he is accused of being against "liberal democracy." Do you think criticism of liberal democracy is wrong?

**Falk:** No, no. And I consider myself a critic of liberal democracy. But I think it's powerful, because it's linked to corporate capitalism on the one side, and the most militarized states on the other side. So, it's an ideological facade for a rather repressive phase of world politics.

**Billington:** You're generally very pessimistic about the U.S. election, saying that you saw the choice—this was before Biden dropped out—but you saw it as "a warmonger and a mentally unstable, incipient fascist." That's pretty strong. You welcomed Biden dropping out, but do you see any improvement in the choices today?

**Falk:** Yes, I see at least the possibility of an improvement, because we don't know enough about how Kamala Harris will try to package her own ideas as an independent position. It's conceivable it would even be to the right of Biden, but I don't think so. Her own background is one of being quite progressive. As a younger person, she has a mixed record, to say the least, when she served as prosecuting attorney and attorney general in California. But I think there is a fairly good chance that she will be more critical of Israel than has been true in the last few years. She's already indicated a determination to not support Israel, very openly, if they engage in a massive killing of Palestinian civilians. She probably feels she has to walk a narrow path to avoid alienating Zionist funders and others who would be hostile, should she show a shift to a more balanced pro-Palestinian position.

**Billington:** You referred to Trump in that passage as a warmonger. But on the other hand—

**Falk:** No, you misunderstood me. Biden is the warmonger.

**Billington:** Oh, a "warmonger and a mentally unstable, incipient fascist." I've got it. So those terms were both as a description of Biden.

## Reflections on Donald Trump

**Falk:** I wouldn't call Trump "peace minded," but he has at various points suggested an opposition to what he and others have called "forever wars," these engagements in long-term interventions that always seemed to end up badly, even from a strategic point of view, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. But he's so unpredictable and unstable that I wouldn't place any confidence in him. He does seem determined to move the country in a fascist direction if he's successful in the election. And if he isn't successful, he seems to want to agitate the country sufficiently so that it has an experience of civil strife, or at least unrest.

**Billington:** Well, he clearly is insisting that there must be peace and negotiation with Russia on the Ukraine issue. Do you see any hope that he would also negotiate with China in terms of the growing crisis there?

**Falk:** I doubt it, because of his seeming perception of China as an economic competitor, and as one that, in his perceptions, has taken advantage of the international openness to gain various kinds of economic leverage. So, I think he, if anything, would be likely to escalate the confrontation with China and put it on a very transactional basis, which meant that only when it was to the material benefit of the U.S. would the U.S. in any way cooperate with China.

**Billington:** Of course, we saw just recently in China that the Xi Jinping government brought many diverse Palestinian factions together in Beijing, and that they did come to an [agreement](#). What are your thoughts on the agreement that they came to, and what effect will that have?

**Falk:** Well, I hope it lasts. I mean, there have been prior attempts, mostly in the Middle East; mostly by Egypt before its present government. And none of them have lasted. There is a lot of hostility between the PLO, Fatah, and Hamas. It relates to the religious-secular divide and the difference of personality. It was encouraging to me that Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, condemned the assassination of Haniyeh. That, I think, was an early confirmation of the importance of this Beijing Declaration and the successful, at least temporarily successful, effort at bringing these Palestinian factions together. And from the Pales-

tinian point of view, unity has never been more important as a practical matter to achieve and sustain. Their entire future probably depends on being able to have a more or less united front in seeking a post-Gaza arrangement.

**Billington:** You recently signed an appeal which was issued by the Geneva International Peace Research Institute, which has called on the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, for alleged complicity in war crimes and genocide committed by Israel. What are your expectations for that effort?

**Falk:** The ICC, the International Criminal Court, is much more susceptible to political pressure than is the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which is part of the UN and was established when the UN was established back in 1945. The ICC was only brought into existence in 2002. It doesn't have many of the most important countries among its members or signatories to its treaty, to the so-called Rome Treaty, and so it would be a pleasant surprise if it follows the prosecutor's recommendation and issues these arrest warrants. Already, Netanyahu has given the recommendation of the prosecutor an international visibility by denouncing them and calling on the U.S. and, and the liberal democracies to bring pressure to avoid their being actually issued. And that reflects the sense that even though Israel defies international law, it is very sensitive about being alleged to be in violation, especially of international criminal law, and particularly of the serious offences.

### **'The Elephant in the Room—Genocide'**

The arrest warrant doesn't cover the elephant in the room—genocide. It enumerates other crimes that Israel, that Netanyahu and [Israeli Minister of Defense Yoav] Gallant, are said to be guilty of perpetrating, and does the same thing for Hamas, in trying to justify issuing arrest warrants for the three top Hamas leaders. Of course, they don't have to worry about Haniyeh anymore, and I think, I'm pretty sure he was one of the three that was recommended as sufficiently involved in the commission of international crimes, that an arrest warrant should be issued.

**Billington:** As I mentioned, you were the UN Spe-

cial Rapporteur for Palestine from 2008 to 2014. During that period, you were regularly declared by Israel to be an anti-Semite for things you said and did during that time. I'd be interested in your thoughts on that at this point. Also, the current person in that position, Francesca Albanese, is also under attack from Israel. What do you think about her role today?

**Falk:** Well, as far as my own role is concerned, the attacks came not directly from the government, but from Zionist-oriented NGOs, particularly UN Watch in Geneva and some groups in the U.S. and elsewhere, all in the white Western world. I mean, all the attacks on me. And, of course, they were somewhat hurtful. But this kind of smear is characteristic of the way in which Israel and Zionism has dealt with it for a long time. Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour Party leader in the UK, has been a victim of such smear and defamatory attacks. It's unfortunately a tactic that has a certain success in branding one as not fit to be listened to in the mainstream. Israel and its Zionist network are not interested in whether the allegations are truthful or factual, they just use it as a way of deflecting the conversation away from the message to the messenger.

And they've done, shockingly, the same thing with [Francesca Albanese](#), who's a dedicated, very humanistic person and very far from having any kind of ethnic prejudice, much less anti-Semitism. She's written very good reports in the time she's been the Special Rapporteur.

It's a real disgrace that this unpaid position is dealt with in such an irresponsible and personally hurtful way. The special rapporteurs enjoy independence, which is important, but they're essentially doing a voluntary job, which frees them from the discipline of the UN, but also makes them vulnerable to this kind of attack. The UN does nothing very substantial to protect those of us that have had that kind of position, because they're too anxious about losing funding from the countries that support Israel. After I finished being Special Rapporteur, I collaborated with Virginia Tilley to produce one of the early reports in 2017 on Israeli apartheid. That was denounced by [U.S. Ambassador to the UN] Nikki Haley in the Security Council. I was singled out by her as a kind of disreputable person. The UN Secretary General, Guterres, newly appointed at that time, was threatened with the withholding of funds if he didn't remove our report from the UN

website, and he complied. He did remove the report, though it was the most widely read and requested report in the history of the Economic and Social Commission for West Asia, which is a regional commission of the UN.

**Billington:** And who was it that had that removed?

**Falk:** Guterres. Yes. The head of this UN agency, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), a civil servant, resigned—Rima Khalaf—as a consequence of what was done. Our report was more or less an academic study. We were treated as independent scholars, not part of the UN. But the report was sponsored by a UN agency.

**Mike Billington:** Is there anything else you'd like to add before we close?

**Falk:** No, I think we've covered a lot. I would hope that things will look better in a few months, but I'm not at all confident that they will. They could look a lot

worse if this wider war unfolds in the Middle East, and if there are new tensions that come to the surface in the Pacific area. And one can just have this marginal hope that Kamala Harris will surprise us by being more forthcoming in promoting a different image of what liberal democracy means internationally.

**Mike Billington:** Let us hope. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your taking the time to do this at a critical moment, with your own personal role in the Middle East having been so important historically, and still today. We'll get this circulated widely. And let's hope that, in fact, we do see a big change at a moment where the crisis is such that you would think people would be stepping forward all over the world to stop the madness.

**Falk:** Yes, but they need—I found that they need the entrepreneurial underpinning. They have to have the support, sufficient funding. Support so that their words will have weight. So unfortunate, but it's one of the dimensions of following the money.

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