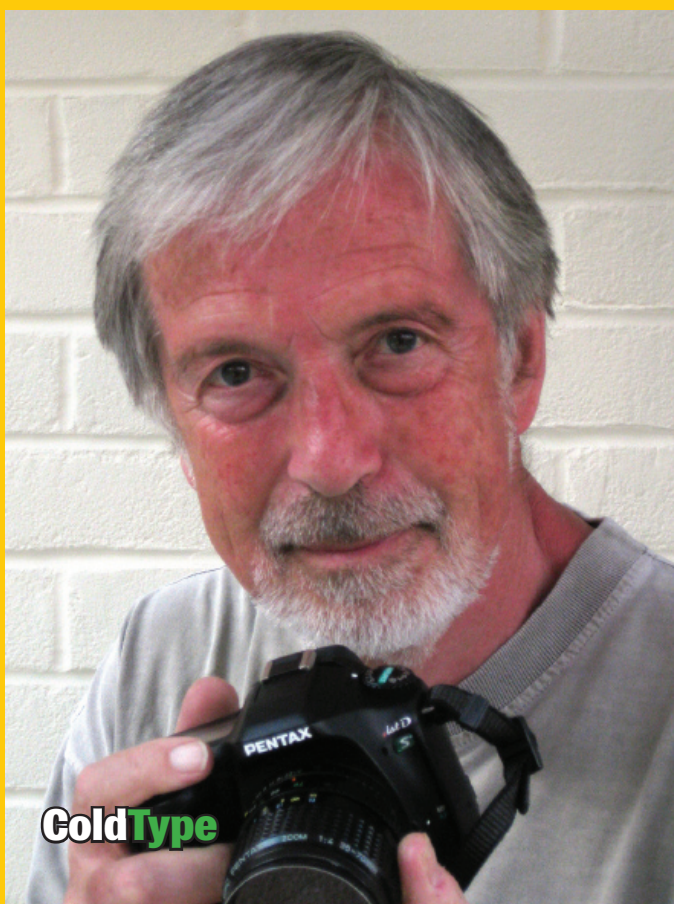
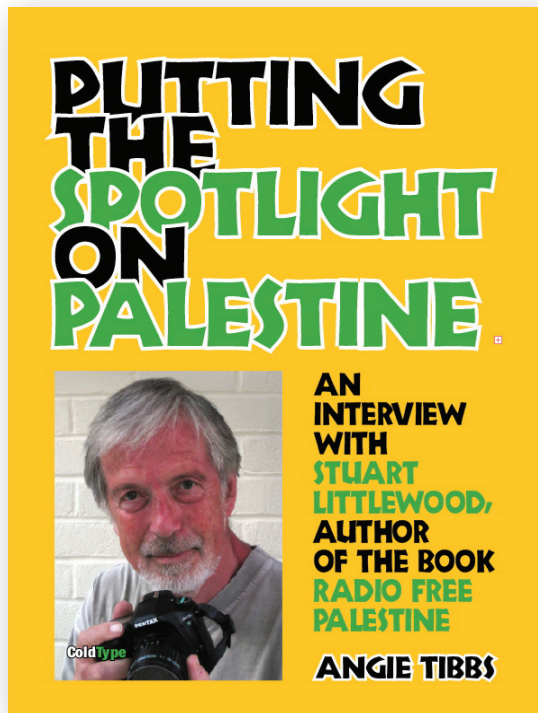


PLACING THE SPOTLIGHT ON PALESTINE



AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
STUART
LITTLEWOOD,
AUTHOR
OF THE BOOK
RADIO FREE
PALESTINE

ANGIE TIBBS



THE AUTHOR

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PUTTING THE SPOTLIGHT ON PALESTINE

An interview with Stuart Littlewood, author of *Radio Free Palestine*, by **Angie Tibbs**

STUART LITTLEWOOD is one of the most consistent and passionate writers on the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestine. His book, *Radio Free Palestine*, and his frequent articles focus readers on the plight of the Palestinian people, on the occupiers who are responsible, and on the governments who support Israel's slow-motion genocide and theft of an Indigenous people's homeland, culture and history. I spoke with him recently.

Angie Tibbs: *Has your active support for the Palestinian people always been a part of who you are or was there a defining moment which caused you to speak out?*

Stuart Littlewood: I'm new to this game. The Palestinians' struggle for justice isn't taught in school here and our politicians are afraid to discuss it, so the British people are kept in ignorance.

I knew next to nothing until I had

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The Palestinians' struggle for justice isn't taught in school here and our politicians are afraid to discuss it, so the British people are kept in ignorance

to research the subject for a newspaper column. The more I delved into it the angrier I became. A short time later, in 2005, somebody who had read my column invited me to visit the West Bank and shoot pictures for a book.

Tibbs: *What towns and villages did you visit in occupied Palestine and what were your impressions?*

Littlewood: Much of the time was spent with Palestinian priests in their parishes. These are the Church's front-line troops. They are abused and sometimes shot at by the Israelis, yet they remain focused and good-humoured.

The first trip took us to Jericho, Bethlehem and East Jerusalem, including the Old City, as well as smaller towns in the West Bank. We also visited Jenin, which was considered dangerous so we didn't stay long. The town was a rubble-strewn

mess after the onslaught three years earlier). The devastation was massive and brought back childhood memories of London after the Nazi blitz, which my family lived through.

All over the West Bank what struck me most was the resilience of ordinary people under brutal occupation and having to cope with endless restrictions. There is no legal protection against the thuggish military. Every Palestinian we met urged us to tell their story when we got home because they felt sure the British people didn't know the truth... otherwise how could we stand idly by?

These are kind, hospitable and sophisticated people who have done nothing to deserve the misery inflicted on them by the Israeli regime and its supporters in the West.

I was also shocked by the way the Israelis have systematically trashed the Holy Land and many of its antiquities. Once-beautiful landscapes, many with biblical connections, are now crowned with hideous hill-top settlements or military installations. Israel's vandalism, visible everywhere, has ruined a gentle Arab civilization and its heritage, and that's something else they'll never be forgiven for.

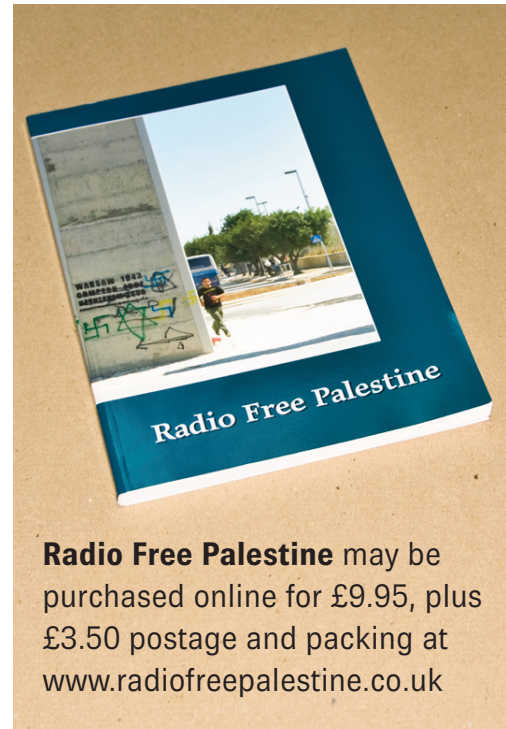
Tibbs: *Your initial trip to the West Bank was shortly after the death of President Yasser Arafat. Were people talking about him? Remembering him?*

Littlewood: No, but his image was everywhere... in village squares, on buildings, inside shops and offices. I noticed in the assembly hall of a Catholic school an enormous portrait of the Pope, and on the adjacent wall an equally large portrait of Arafat. As a symbol of resistance he's as big as they come.

On the second trip, I visited Arafat's



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Radio Free Palestine may be purchased online for £9.95, plus £3.50 postage and packing at www.radiofreepalestine.co.uk

mausoleum in Ramallah. The family I was staying with were delighted I wanted to go there and they accompanied me. It was only half-built, so I asked the soldiers who stood guard, "Is he really buried here?" "Yes," they said, visibly swelling with pride, "he's under that slab." For all his faults, it seems the old rascal is greatly missed.

Tibbs: *Your visits to Palestine resulted in your book, Radio Free Palestine. Tell us about that. First of all, what is the significance of the title?*

Littlewood: We were going to call it *This Land is Our Land*, but that title had already been used. Eventually we settled on *Radio Free Palestine* because that's what Palestinians need: a broadcasting service that can be heard all over the world.

Proceeds from the sale of the book go to humanitarian projects in the West Bank, by the way.

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The original idea was a poems-and-pictures book with me shooting the photos. But it soon became clear that to do the situation justice we needed to report in greater detail how the Israelis had effectively turned the Occupied Territories into a prison and were creating ‘facts on the ground’ to make their occupation permanent. The least we could do was tell the truth and provide readers with enough information to challenge the propaganda and lies.

So I made a second visit at Easter 2006, just after Hamas’s surprise election victory. The place was in turmoil, tension was running high and plans to meet Palestinian Authority officials in Ramallah had to be scrapped. My contacts also advised me that it was much too risky to visit the Gaza Strip.

All the same, I gathered a lot of material, and it was a great privilege when Jeff Halper agreed to write the Foreword. I had visited his organization ICAHD (Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions) in Jerusalem and learned a great deal from his team. Jeff is a truly courageous man and a beacon of hope.

Tibbs: *You had to leave Gaza out of your book, but nevertheless you provided readers with an in-depth look at 2007 Gaza in your widely published article See Gaza and Weep <http://redress.cc/palestine/slittlewood20071213>, in which you described how Gaza’s people were struggling to survive under the appalling conditions created by Israeli sanctions. What stands out most vividly in your mind today, some two years on, not only about Gaza, itself, but about Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, and his party, Hamas?*

Littlewood: On the third trip, a small group of us went into Gaza and met Mr



The Gaza Strip had been under sanctions and siege for about 18 months, so there was already a chronic shortage of food, fuel and essentials. The sick were dying from lack of medicines and hospital equipment spares. Power cuts were a daily fact of life – another Israeli weapon of collective punishment

Haniyeh, but, as you say, that was after the book came out. The Gaza Strip had been under sanctions and siege for about 18 months, so there was already a chronic shortage of food, fuel and essentials. The sick were dying from lack of medicines and hospital equipment spares. Power cuts were a daily fact of life – another Israeli weapon of collective punishment. 3,500 licensed fishermen couldn’t put to sea without being shelled by marauding Israeli gun-boats.

Mr Haniyeh and his colleagues were courteous and attentive. He gave us a generous slice of his time considering the problems he faced and the continual emergencies. I was pleased to see a strong sense of unity, with Muslims and Christians standing together against a common enemy. They are all “Palestinians first”.

I think it would be a mistake to underestimate Hamas. These are men who have pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. Most were raised in refugee camps, and have done time in Israeli jails or been exiled for putting up resistance. But they made sure they got themselves a good education at the Islamic University. Some went to universities in Britain and the US. They are as well-equipped as we are to govern, and they have been tested almost beyond human endurance.

When I got home the Health Ministry in Gaza sent me a list of hospital spares they desperately needed. I forwarded it to our own Health Ministry and to my MP. It was ignored, and the disgust I felt – and still feel – towards our political class is beyond words.

In the meantime I was receiving heart-breaking messages from Gazan doctors telling about the difficulties at work and at home, where their shivering children struggled to study by candle-light. What

could I say to them? Here we are, two years later, and we are still letting those decent and desperate people down. How despicable is that? I cringe with shame.

Tibbs: *What were your contacts telling you about the conditions in Gaza?*

Littlewood: One message in particular still haunts me. Fr Manuel Mussallam, the elderly priest in Gaza, emailed to say, “If you wish to really understand what is taking place in the Gaza Strip, please open your Bible and read the Lamentations of Jeremiah. This is what we are living. People are crying, hungry, thirsty, desperate. They need food. Even if there is food for sale, people have no money to buy it. They have no income, no opportunities to bring food from outside and no opportunities to secure money inside Gaza. No work, no livelihood, no future... They have no hope and many very poor people are aimlessly wandering around trying to beg for something from others who also have nothing. It is heartbreaking to see.”

He ended: “I beg you, we do not need pity, we need only justice. If you don’t give justice, there will be no peace. Peace is the farthest thing away from the mind of anyone, Christian or Moslem, in Gaza at this time.”

Tibbs: *Israel has branded Hamas a “terrorist organization” and convinced its friends to do likewise. Is this a valid designation, and what role, if any, has it played vis-à-vis lasting peace?*

Littlewood: I suppose it depends where you stand on the fascist spectrum. The Nazis called the French Resistance terrorists; we called them heroes. When a vicious occupier has his jackboot on your



The big guys are going to have to talk with Hamas eventually and when they do, they’ll discover that Hamas are not at all the way they are painted. Britain should lead the way since we caused this mess in the first place, 92 years ago

throat you have no choice but to fight with any weapon or any method that’s available. Pinning labels like “terrorist” and “militant” on people who are defending their homes and families is ridiculous. Always the little guy with the little gun is the terrorist, never the big guy with big guns, bunker-busting bombs and nukes. This warped mentality is the greatest obstacle to peace.

I call Palestinian fighters guerrillas or freedom fighters. The Palestinians would love to hit back with F-16 jets, tanks, helicopter gunships, armed drones and naval gunboats. That would be nice and conventional and acceptable, yes? But all they have are AK47s, RPGs and rockets made in the garden shed, and they ride into battle in a pick-up truck.

The US administration defines terrorism as “an activity that (i) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and (ii) appears to be intended to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion, or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking”. And they use the definition to hurt people they don’t like. The laugh is that it fits the US itself, and its special friend Israel, like a glove.

The big guys are going to have to talk with Hamas eventually and when they do, they’ll discover that Hamas are not at all the way they are painted. Britain should lead the way since we caused this mess in the first place, 92 years ago.

Tibbs: *What was your reaction to seeing the illegal Wall and the hundreds of checkpoints that are scattered throughout occupied Palestine? What effect is this curtailment of free movement having on the area*

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and its people?

Littlewood: I love Banksy's graffiti art on this monstrosity. The fact that the Wall is still standing – and still being built – five years after the International Court of Justice ordered it to be pulled down tells us all we need to know about our contemptible Western leaders.

Most tourists are waved through crossings in the Wall without leaving their bus seats. The last time I stayed in Bethlehem, I caught the ordinary service bus back from Jerusalem and walked with Palestinian workers (those who were lucky enough to have permits) through the sinister maze of steel and concrete barriers and holding pens...it was a thoroughly de-humanising experience. They often have to queue for hours to get to work and queue again to get home - all part of Israel's humiliation policy.

The Wall is also an insult to Christianity in the way it seals off and imprisons towns like Bethlehem and important holy places like the Church of the Nativity. It shreds and divides communities and prevents access to Jerusalem. It disrupts the life of the Church as well as the livelihoods of ordinary people.

Its other purpose, and the real reason it bites deep into Palestinian territory, is to steal large areas of prime agricultural land and the water resources beneath. If it was purely for security, as the Israelis claim, they should have built it on the internationally-recognised 1967 border.

We have just seen the world's high-ranking hypocrites celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall but saying nothing about Israel's apartheid wall.

Tibbs: *Let's talk about the religious dimension in all of this. How important is it?*

Littlewood: The three faiths are all in one



While Israel was planning its blitzkrieg against Gaza's Muslims and Christians – after blockading and starving them with the British government's connivance – the Archbishop of Canterbury went swanning off with the Chief Rabbi on a visit to Auschwitz, preaching their joint solidarity against extreme hostility and genocide!

place, and Jerusalem is vitally important to all of them. What's lacking is proper respect. How many people in the West realise that Israel doesn't allow Muslims and Arab Christians living outside Jerusalem to visit the Holy Places in the Old City?

When Palestine was under British mandate, Christians accounted for 20 per cent of the population. Now, after 61 years of hostilities, dispossession and economic strangulation the numbers have been whittled down to one or two per cent. At this rate there will soon be no Christians left in the land where Christianity was born. The Israelis are waging a religious war that's designed to disrupt and paralyse Christianity in the Holy Land. It's part of their attempt to Judaise everything.

Western Christendom doesn't seem bothered and keeps quiet. Few churchmen, I believe, have any real clue what's going on there. Shame on them.

Tibbs: *Are Western church leaders playing a sufficient role in protecting the Holy Land, its religious history, and its people?*

Littlewood: The Catholic Church, which has a significant presence in the Holy Land and runs a number of schools, appears to be fighting the battle alone. Anglican Church ministers I have spoken to are largely disinterested. Yes, their faith is focused on the Holy Land, they teach the Holy Land texts and they deliver sermons on the Holy Land, but what do they really care about it? One morning they'll wake up and discover that the Holy Land – the central plank to their existence – has been stolen from under their noses.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem – the Catholic Church in the Holy Land –

does its best, but I don't think it gets the support it deserves from the Vatican. As for the rest, they could unite and surely do much more. While Israel was planning its blitzkrieg against Gaza's Muslims and Christians – after blockading and starving them with the British government's connivance – the Archbishop of Canterbury went swanning off with the Chief Rabbi on a visit to Auschwitz, preaching their joint solidarity against extreme hostility and genocide! The Archbishop talked about the collective corruption and moral sickness that made the Holocaust possible. But where was his concern for the shattered Christian remnants in Gaza? Or for the murdered, maimed and homeless Muslims who, many claim, are being subjected to a 'slow genocide'? Let's remember that the Israelis' killing spree left nearly 60,000 homeless and 400,000 without running water, and they still won't allow cement and other reconstruction materials to be brought in.

Did the Pope visit Gaza to show solidarity with his frightened and impoverished flock there?

Pious wafflers in their palaces make me sick, when genuine men of God - those in the front line, the priests, the nuns and the imams – risk their lives as they work round the clock to bring comfort to the victims of political greed and aggression.

Angie: *You visited occupied Palestine in 2006 after the landslide victory by Hamas, and again in 2007. Did you get a sense of optimism from the population? Hope for a better future? Or had "the West" and Israel already begun their campaign to ensure that the Palestinian democratic election results would never become a reality?*

Littlewood: We were there just after the election in 2006, and the situation was



The US and Israel were plotting to bring down Hamas by "starving" the Palestinian Authority and hence all the people it employed and served

turning nasty. Fatah's defeat at the polls seemed broadly welcomed, but hopes of a brighter future were scuppered by the West's childish rejection of the people's democratic choice, Hamas.

The US and Israel plotted to bring down Hamas by "starving" the Palestinian Authority and hence all the people it employed and served. It began by axing US-EU aid while Israel stepped up its military attacks on Gaza, killing and maiming, and destroying infrastructure including the only power station – which was built with UK taxpayers' money, I understand. Israel also kidnapped eight Hamas cabinet ministers and a quarter of the elected members of the legislative council. On top of that, Fatah collaborators joined the plotting against Hamas and organised strikes and protests.

What spurred me to finish the book as quickly as possible was an email from a girl who worked for the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah. Daily life was getting worse and she hadn't been paid for over two months because the West had cut the flow of money and Israel was stealing the Palestinians' own tax revenues. "Some of my colleagues can't come to work anymore because simply they don't have money for the transportation. On Thursday we made a protest in front of the entrance of our ministry demanding the international community to end this isolation and asking for our salaries. The mothers are bringing their babies and kids to work everyday because they can't pay for the kinder yards or the baby sitters...."

Eventually her emails stopped. Presumably she could no longer get to work and access the internet. Her distress was the final straw.

Hamas misjudged the lengths to which pro-Zionist Western leaders would go to

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undermine democratic processes that didn't suit their purpose or Israel's interests. These same leaders endlessly praise Israel for being "the only democracy in the Middle East"... Everyone must be made to understand that's because they deliberately snuffed out Palestine's democracy as soon as it was born.

Tibbs: *How has this ongoing siege affected the lives of the women of occupied Palestine and how are they coping?*

Littlewood: The wrecking of the Palestinian economy has made it impossible for the men to work or do business effectively, and this puts a great strain on their women. They are amazingly resourceful, like the women of London during the German blitz. As a child I remember the courage of my mother and our neighbours as they overcame the hardships of being bombed every night. But Palestinian women face the added danger of enemy troops, tanks and armoured bulldozers.

In Palestinian society women hold many important positions. Even Hamas has a woman minister. Nuns also play a big part among the Christian communities. Not only are they very brave and enterprising, they are great fun to meet.

Visit Bethlehem and Birzeit Universities and you'll see many determined young women – Christian and Muslim – working hard for a first-class education and running the gauntlet of Israeli checkpoints and other unpleasant obstacles. On every trip I manage to spend some time at Bethlehem Uni and am always impressed by the sharp minds and outgoing nature of the women students. I salute them.

Tibbs: *Does Palestine have an official voice*



You'd think Palestinians were tormented enough without the added misfortune of being represented in London by the most invisible and silent embassy it is possible to imagine. Little is done to set the news agenda or ensure that the Palestinian case is clearly heard

in the UK, and, if so, how effective is it?

Littlewood: You'd think Palestinians were tormented enough without the added misfortune of being represented in London by the most invisible and silent embassy it is possible to imagine. Little is done to set the news agenda or ensure that the Palestinian case is clearly heard.

In contrast the Israelis are businesslike and proactive. They pump out endless disinformation which is lapped up, unchallenged, by the media. Their version of events and their definition of the situation is accepted. So it's a propaganda massacre. Many of us are convinced that the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah has instructed embassies and delegations abroad not to embarrass Israel, and denies them the necessary resources to do an effective job. It's like a fixed football match. Palestinian 'strikers' mustn't even shoot at an open goal.

Tibbs: *What role, if any, does Britain play in Palestine today?*

Littlewood: None that I can see. The country that betrayed the Holy Land and its people does nothing. Our navy used to guarantee the freedom of the seas, but now it won't even protect mercy ships from attack by Israeli pirates. The MV Dignity, for example, was deliberately rammed and nearly sunk in international waters with 16 civilians aboard, including British citizens. Nor will Britain intervene when Gazan fishermen, lawfully trying to feed a hungry population, are fired on.

Tibbs: *The UN and most world leaders continue to turn a blind eye to Israel's crimes against humanity and its occupation of Palestine. What can be done to end what many feel is the slow motion*

genocide of the Palestinian people?

Littlewood: This is how my good friend Dr David Halpin, a tireless campaigner for justice, describes the situation, and I couldn't put it any better myself... "There is an axis of evil with Tel Aviv at one pole and Washington at the other. In the centre is London where barbarity and treachery is clothed in plummy speech and fine spectacle. Power shuttles backwards and forwards along this axis as busily as the jets carrying the psychopaths to these command centres which bring hell to earth."

I call it the Axis of Greed, but either will do.

Israel is an aggressive military power bristling with nuclear and state-of-the-art weaponry, funded and equipped by the US and run by what British MP Sir Gerald Kaufman – himself a Jew – calls "a gang of amoral thugs". That is simply terrifying. Those thugs are already threatening another bloodbath in Gaza, as if their atrocities 11 months ago weren't despicable enough. If the international community doesn't get a grip and force Israel to observe acceptable standards of behaviour and conform to international law, we can say goodbye to hopes of building a civilized world. Lawlessness must have painful consequences for the lawless, not their victims.

As for the Palestinians, their internal squabbles play straight into the enemy's hands. Other nations would find it easier to intervene positively if Hamas were to carry out a convincing 're-branding' exercise and issue a new Charter that's more appropriate in tone to the 21st century and their diplomatic ambitions. They now have democratic credentials and a certain amount of sympathy and goodwill among Western citizens. I hope



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they'll build on it, not throw it away.

Tibbs: *What would be a good starting point for us, the citizens of the world, in our efforts to help the Palestinian people in a real and productive manner?*

Littlewood: At citizen level we must continue to expose Israel's propaganda lies and evil intent. The other side uses every dirty trick under the sun and has produced an instruction manual to teach its embassy staff and its army of cyber-activists how to brainwash Western citizens and their politicians. It'll be a long haul but the truth will eventually break through.

Citizens also need to tackle Zionist infiltration and rid us of its stranglehold on our political and government institutions. Israel has the British government eating out of its hand. Here's an example. The other day David Miliband, Britain's Foreign Secretary, said in the House of Commons, "Israel is a close ally of the UK and we have regular productive exchanges at all levels, going far beyond relations between governments. Our political relations allow us to address openly issues both of common concern and where we disagree. Most recently, on 27 October, I met the Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon. We will continue to foster this relationship and use it to further the interests of both countries and the wider region." No prizes for guessing the British minister's ethnicity.

Israel's agents of influence are so embedded at the heart of government that signing up to the Zionist cause is a necessary stepping stone to high office. These stooges are fatal to our foreign policy and security, and have cost us dear in terms of world respect and dead and injured. At election time activists need to identify

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and expose parliamentary candidates who are involved with the Israel lobby.

We are supposed to be governed in accordance with the Seven Principles of Public Life. Principle no.2 is about “integrity” – holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties. The Israel lobby has been powerful enough to ensure this is ignored. Activists need to find ways to reimpose it.

Tibbs: *What happens next, and where do you fit into the scheme of things?*

Littlewood: In a sane world the UN would have guaranteed to keep Gaza’s sea border open and provide a naval escort for ships wishing to trade. And it would have declared Jerusalem an international city as stipulated in the partition plan. I hope the UN might still find the backbone to do these things.

The way America is now trying to rewrite international law to legitimise Israel’s continuing land-grab and settlement expansion, and the way the US House of



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Representatives voted 344 to 36 to reject the UN-Goldstone report exposing Israel’s war crimes – in which America is deeply implicated – shows more clearly than ever how US politics is corrupted by the power and influence of the Israel lobby.

As for me, I’m not really an activist. I’m more a commentator. I am, however, involved with a campaign group that is part of a rapidly growing global network. There are many, many others and we are linking up. The Zionists know they have a fight on their hands in the battle for hearts and minds.

Tibbs: *Finally, what is your most fervent wish?*

Littlewood: That you and I and anybody else can visit friends in Palestine without being molested by Israel’s bad-mannered security officials. We should be able to fly or sail direct, without setting foot in Israel. Citizens of the world must make this crystal clear to the UN... if we want to wander through Old Jerusalem’s souk, holiday on Gaza’s beach, go fishing with Gaza’s fishermen or talk football with Mr Haniyeh over coffee, it should be none of Israel’s damn business.

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