

# BALKAN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

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## Can Serbs Learn From Israelis and Palestinians?

Despite very different conflicts, Serbian, Israeli and Palestinian rights activists say they face common problems: state denial of past atrocities and the task of helping wartime refugees return home.

Marija Ristic | BIRN | Tel Aviv, Bethlehem

“You need to get out from your own context, learn about other conflicts so you can look at your situation from a different perspective,” explained professor Orli Fridman, the Israeli director of the Belgrade-based Centre for Comparative Conflict Studies, during her latest study seminar to Tel Aviv last month.

Fridman has been organising such study seminars over the past years, bringing human rights activists from Israel and the Palestinian territories to Serbia to explore what people who have been through two very different conflicts can share and learn from each other.

Back in 2007, when she brought the first group of Israelis and Palestinians to Serbia, the Balkan state had some lessons for them, because there were still some projects, aided by the international community, to help Serbs expelled during wartime to go back to their countries of origin, she explained.

“At that time in the Balkans there were processes and projects to allow people to return and where they were not allowed to return and where it was impossible there were some reparations, you could rebuild your house and sell it. We wanted to show them that there are some legal means to ask for your property to be returned,” she said.

The state of Israel is still denying the right of return to the majority of Palestinians who fled during the 1948 war and its aftermath, said Salah Al-Ajarma, director of the Palestinian NGO Lajee Centre, based in the Aida refugee camp in the West Bank.

Al-Ajarma, himself a refugee from the town of Ajjur, said that it was not known how many people might want to return even if the Israeli authorities allowed it.

“It is of course a question of what will be the conditions of return, but the majority of us would return... We want to live in the same country as Jews, we don’t want two states, but we just don’t want this state to be called Israel,” Al-Ajarma said.

Eitan Bronstein Aparicio, founder of the Israeli NGO Zochrot, who also supports Palestinians’ right to return to their home villages, said it was estimated that there were now around six million Palestinian refugees, but that a maximum of a million would actually choose to go back.

Aparicio, who was part of the group that visited Belgrade in 2009, said it was a valuable experience for both Israelis and Palestinians to see how the issue of returnees could be resolved.

“More importantly we saw that the issue of return doesn’t end if you have legal permission to come back. And that there are still problems even when you return. This is what we started thinking when we came back from Serbia, based on the Balkan experience,” Aparicio said.

### Activists labelled ‘traitors’



Fridman with activists from Serbia during one of the study seminars. Photo by Marija Ristic



Eitan Bronstein Aparicio, director of the Israeli NGO Zochrot. Photo by Marija Ristic

Aparicio's organization, Zochrot, is also dealing with memory projects in Israel that raise awareness about the Nakba, the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948, among the wider public. This, according to Fridman, is another point of connection between Serbia and Israel, because people trying to explore alternative versions of the history of atrocities committed by the state are often called traitors, and their work is always questioned.

"Human rights activists are marginalised in Serbia, they are marked as traitors as they are struggling to deconstruct an alternative to the hegemonic narrative. And this is what is happening in Israel as well," Fridman argued.

"Doing memory work about Nakba in Israel is similarly marked as non-patriotic like when Serbian activists are insisting on memorialising Batajnica [where Kosovo war victims were buried in a mass grave] or Srebrenica in Belgrade," she adds.

Nenad Porobic, a member of the Belgrade-based Working Group Four Faces of Omarska, which explores historical memories of Omarska mining complex in Bosnia, focusing on the recent past when it was also a wartime detention camp for Bosniak prisoners, said that a lot that can be learned from the Israeli and Palestinian activists.

He argued that both states, Serbia and Israel, are denying the atrocities they committed in the past and that activists are the only ones providing alternative views of the past.

"But what we in Serbia can learn is to use public space more often for our work. [Belgrade rights group] Women in Black are doing that and they are the only ones. The other human rights organisations based their work on public statements and office meetings and this is where Israelis are ahead of us," Porobic noted.

"Like Zochrot is organizing tours to the former Palestinian villages, we could organize Belgrade tours to the army headquarters from which people were sent to war to Croatia, or to the headquarters of Radical Party which organized volunteers to go to war," he said.

Jasmina Lazic, from the Belgrade office of Youth Initiative for Human Rights, who also took part at the seminar, argued on the other hand that Serbian NGOs' work in dealing with the past is in some cases more advanced than that of their colleagues in Israel.

"We heard that they plan to form a public truth commission about the events of 1948. This is something we did several years ago with [the campaign for a regional ex-Yugoslav truth and reconciliation commission] REKOM, but in our case this is not any more on the level of civil society, but on the political level," Lazic said.

After a couple of years of campaigning, REKOM saw some progress last year when the majority of presidents of former Yugoslav countries agreed to send their personal envoys to be part of an expert group that will examine the legacy of the war.

Aparicio said however that he had been surprised by the continuing post-war discontent in Serbia, with complaints about the lack of progress in war crimes trials or the hunt for missing persons continuing two decades after the fighting stopped.

"Conflict has passed, war is over, there is no shooting, but people still feel frustrated," he observed.

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Zochrot's activist during one of the tours through Palestinian villages in Tel Aviv. Photo by Marija Ristic



Jasmina Lazic visiting Aida refugee camp. Photo by Marija Ristic

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