



## **YORK UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE LIVES UP TO ANTI-ISRAEL EXPECTATIONS**

Anti-Israel propagandists were out in force this week participating in a June 22-24, 2009 conference convened and sponsored by York University titled, *“Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace”*. B’nai Brith Canada from the outset raised concerns surrounding this conference, issuing alerts to Jewish community members to expose what promised to be a blatant exercise in anti-Zionist propaganda. The Jewish human rights organization also mounted a national media campaign, which included Canada-wide ads in the *National Post* to draw attention to York University’s failure to provide balanced intellectual debate, and to ensure a welcoming and secure environment for all students.

The conference indeed delivered on its expected anti-Israel potential. Its overall tenor was one of open antagonism towards Israel and hostility towards those participants who dared to articulate even remotely sympathetic comments about the Jewish State.

Recurring themes that took center stage at the conference consisted of the usual canards:

- The libel that Israel is an apartheid state and a perpetrator of genocide.
- That the Jewish State is an illegal racist construct – an outrageous claim akin to Zionism=Racism, which smacks of antisemitism.
- Questions surrounding whether the Jewish State has a right to exist – a central tenet echoed repeatedly throughout the conference.
- Musings on whether Jews constituted a “people” who could then claim the right to self-determination – a right accorded to all other peoples in the world.
- Pontifications that Israel qualified as a “rogue” state, and therefore should not be recognized as a sovereign nation.

Tensions were palpable – both inside the conference sessions and outside where crowds mingled. Particularly vociferous were the question and answer periods where organizers were ineffective in controlling the hecklers and anti-Israel agitators who held court. Abuse was hurled by participants at those who voiced any sympathy towards Israel. Particularly problematic was the hostility faced by the Israeli academics at this conference, a number of whom expressed concerns about the antagonism they personally endured. “Check your white privilege before you talk down to me,” was a racist slur heard on more than one occasion on the conference floor.

Contributing to the overall hostile environment were items displayed for sale. Amongst them was the notorious film, *Route 181*, whose claim to fame is its widespread use by anti-Israel propagandists to

cast doubt on the legitimacy of Israel's very existence. This film in fact was screened at the opening of the conference, setting the overall tone and foretelling its outcome.

We note with concern the determined exclusion of media by conference organizers, a peculiar practice in light of the fact that the conference was heralded as "an exercise of academic debate" and model for "free speech". We learned from the *Jewish Tribune*, which was refused entry, that no journalist would be allowed to register. Meanwhile, at the registration table in plain view was a badge in the name of *Toronto Star* columnist Haroon Siddiqui. While Mr. Siddiqui in the end did not attend, conference organizers apparently had been prepared to admit him.

Below are some notable statements by speakers and audience members reflecting the overall anti-Israel climate of this conference. **Note: These statements are not verbatim quotes, but paraphrase the remarks of speakers and audience members as closely as possible.**

### **WISHFUL INDULGENCES ... TEACHING ISRAEL A LESSON**

*I can't wish a catastrophe on Israel to teach it a lesson it won't teach itself, because it would also engulf Palestine and the surrounding Arab states.*

--Marc H. Ellis, conference speaker

### **CHALLENGING JEWISH HISTORY**

*The mythology that the Jews were expelled 2000 years ago, even if true, does not give claim to the land... Anyhow, the claim of expulsion by the Romans is the topic of scholarly debate.*

--Omar Barghouti, conference speaker

### **ISRAEL AS AN ILLEGAL ENTITY**

*If you kill them all [Palestinians] rather than displace them, you can declare yourself a majority for the purposes of autonomy.*

--Anti-Israel agitator who was cheered on by audience members

### **REFUSING TO RECOGNIZE THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S RIGHT TO STATEHOOD**

*The Jewish right of self-determination is highly disputable.*

--Jeff Handmaker, conference speaker

## **THE VEIL OF ACADEMIA EXPOSED**

*There is a violent conflict that has been going on for sixty years. There has been silence about this in this conference, and there has been no sense of any responsibility for the conflict from the Palestinian side.*

--Na'ama Carmi, conference speaker from Haifa University who was subjected to particularly vicious attacks from audience members regarding what was construed as her pro-Israel remarks

*I'm a clinical psychologist and I'd like to hear how you come to reconcile yourself to your belief system that distorts international refugee law that way.*

--Conference participant questioning Carmi's mental state

*This is an academic conference, or, at least, it should be.*

--Na'ama Carmi responding to the onslaught of attacks that she faced in question period

*There is lots of room to criticize Palestinian action, which I admit has not been dealt with in this conference.*

--Hazem Jamjoum, conference speaker

*The lack of respect was difficult, and also had a personal tone to it.*

--Dorit Na'aman, conference speaker and member of the International Advisory Board

## **CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the moment this conference was announced, B'nai Brith Canada has raised concerns about what was clearly shaping up to be an exercise in anti-Israel propaganda. A hostile climate towards Jewish students at York University has been allowed to take root, as anti-Israel activity continues to intensify. The endorsement by York University of this conference has only made the situation worse and reinforces students' worst fears as a new academic year approaches.

Amongst B'nai Brith Canada's recommendations to York University are:

- The University should immediately declare itself a hate-free zone
- Israel Apartheid Week and conferences that question the Jewish State's right to exist should not be allowed on campus
- The University should enforce the prohibition against unauthorized demonstrations by anti-Israel agitators