

York's farce of a conference

Gerald M. Steinberg, National Post

Published: Tuesday, June 09, 2009

The president of York University in Toronto has issued a statement defending his university's sponsorship of an on-campus conference entitled "Israel/Palestine: Mapping Models of Statehood and Paths to Peace," scheduled to take place June 22-24. This response attempts to portray serious criticism of the event as an attack on academic freedom. However, in examining the details and the debate over the conference, and in the context of vulgar anti-Israel activities and physical intimidation of Jewish students at York, these bland words are a diversion -- a straw man aimed at deflecting criticism and blocking the important public debate over the role of university campuses as battlefields in the Arab-Israeli narrative wars that perpetuate the violent conflict.

York's defence seeks to answer the public statement issued by Hershell Ezrin, head of the Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy. This analysis was based on a careful examination of the speakers and their topics, which reveals that this conference "aims to explore a one-state, binational solution to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the imposition of which would spell the end of Israel as a Jewish state. The conference will include a number of speakers who are recognizable for their roles as organizers and outspoken proponents of 'Israel apartheid week' and the Israel boycott movement."

This sort of criticism is not an attack on academic freedom -- far from it. Such analysis highlights the very absence of the free exchange in a marketplace of ideas, which is the indispensable foundation for academic freedom.

The extremely complex history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and multiple dimensions of peace efforts contrast starkly with the narrowly constricted ideologies reflected in the conference's list of 44 speakers. Had the event's 11 sponsors -- six from York, four from Queen's University plus a government-funded research framework -- exercised due diligence, they would have found that many of the speakers are virulent anti-Israeli activists, with little or no connection to academic research on this subject.

For example, the first speaker on the list is Ali Abunimah, who runs a propaganda Web site known as the "Electronic Intifada" that specializes in demonizing Israel. The Electronic Intifada is home to articles such as "Why Israel won't survive." He is also affiliated with The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, a political organization based in Gaza that systematically distorts and exploits the language of human rights to attack Israel.

Abunimah's groups frequently condone Palestinian terrorism, using the euphemism of "resistance" and terms like "apartheid" and "racist" in reference to Israel -- the exact opposite of promoting compromise and a two-state solution.

While the ideological biographies and activist records of all 44 speakers would fill dozens of pages (a task that the sponsors at York University should undertake as a public service), a few more illustrations are useful. Jeff Halper is another veteran pro-Palestinian campaigner, far removed from any academic pursuits. He runs a small organization that claims to oppose the demolition of illegally constructed Palestinian houses, but most of his activities are aimed at generating support for the Palestinian narrative.

He recently participated in sailing a few small boats from Cyprus to Hamas-controlled Gaza, hoping to engage in a publicity-generating confrontations with the Israeli navy.

Halper often appears in support of Naim Ateek, whose speeches include classical anti-Semitic references, such as accusing Israel of "crucifying Palestinians." The context of Palestinian mass terror attacks, the mangled bodies and the hatred against Israelis that promotes this inhuman behaviour is nonexistent.

An Israeli columnist recently witnessed Halper urging "his Muslim listeners in an American university to reject the Arab peace initiative, because it serves the Muslim tyrants. He told his audience that Israel is a force that serves world capitalism, in the framework of the attempt to make enormous populations in the world disappear. To label such activities as promoting peace or as being remotely connected to university discourse is an insult to intelligent people.

(Recently, Halper's main benefactor, the European Union, rejected his application for renewed funding. Yet York University -- for reasons yet to be explained -- is giving him the facade of academic legitimacy.)

Regarding the few genuine academics scheduled to make presentations at the conference, the ideological range runs from strongly critical of Israel (but accepting of the legitimacy of Jewish sovereign equality) to one-state promoters, who are essentially in favour of "wiping Israel off the map." There are many academics whose research goes beyond one-dimensional Israel-bashing to examine the failures of Arab, Palestinian and Muslim leaders to contribute to peace-making. Unfortunately, these dimensions are conspicuously absent from the program.

With so many obvious distortions, the defence offered by the president of York University is a farce. Without a free market of ideas, academic freedom and even the concept of a university, is meaningless. Given a conference which fails to even hint at the complexity of the issues, the result is not censorship but the transformation of the university into a macabre circus that sells hatred, martyrdom and murder.

Seen from the Middle East, conferences like the one about to take place on a Canadian university campus will only serve to fuel the vicious warfare and mass terror, which has taken the lives of tens of thousands of Israelis, Palestinians and others and is escalating into nuclear confrontation. York University has now become an accomplice in this crime. - Gerald M. Steinberg is chair of the Department of Political Science at Bar Ilan University in Israel, and executive director of NGO Monitor. www.ngo-monitor.org