

Pro-Israeli Groups “Weaponize” Jewish Cultural Initiatives to Amplify Their Campaign against Palestinians

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Global Research, June 03, 2018
[Dissident Voice](#)

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Should “Jewish Heritage Month” be used as a cover for Israeli nationalism and to suppress Palestinian protest?

A recent incident at a Toronto high school demonstrates the depravity of the pro-Israel lobby. It also illustrates their use of Canadian cultural and “diversity” initiatives to promote a country that declares itself to be the exact opposite of diverse.

Amidst the recent slaughter of nonviolent protesters in Gaza, a half-century illegal occupation of the West Bank and weekly bombings in Syria, an Israeli flag marked with “Jewish Heritage Month” was hoisted in the main foyer of Forest Hill Collegiate Institute. After a couple of days the flag created by Israeli nationalist students was moved – possibly due to complaints from other students – to a less prominent location where Jewish Heritage Month events were taking place. In response B’nai Brith, Hasbara Fellowships, Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies and Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs (CIJA) all claimed persecution. “[Discrimination has](#) absolutely no place in our schools”, noted a CIJA spokesperson with regards to moving the Israeli flag to a less prominent location in the school. For their part, the Wiesenthal Center said our “objective is to ensure that TDSB [Toronto District School Board] adheres to its own values of equity and inclusivity for all students” while B’nai Brith’s press release decried the “[Jewish students](#) who have had their heritage denigrated.” That group then published a story titled “[Forest Hill](#) Collegiate Has History of Alienating Jewish Students, Former Pupil Says.”

After the uproar the flag was returned to the Forest Hill Collegiate Institute’s main foyer and the [TDSB apologized](#). At an assembly to discuss the matter, in which the principal and TDSB representative spoke [standing behind a podium](#) adorned with an Israeli flag, a student apparently yelled “Free Palestine”. B’nai Brith immediately denounced the brave, internationalist-minded high schooler, tweeting:

“This morning, before an assembly about the removal of a #JewishHeritageMonth banner at Forest Hill Collegiate, a student yelled ‘Free Palestine’ during the morning announcements. We have been assured that this was not approved by the school and that an investigation is underway.”

In another Twitter post B’nai Brith claimed the Israeli flag flap made a “[mockery of](#) Canada’s first Jewish Heritage Month.” Their statement highlights a mindset that views gaining official

sanction of cultural initiatives as a way to strengthen their campaign to support a violent, European colonial outpost in the Middle East.

Earlier this year the House of Commons [unanimously](#) adopted May as “Jewish Heritage Month”. The motion was sponsored by York Centre MP Michael Levitt who is chair of the [Canada Israel Interparliamentary Group](#) and a former board member of the [explicitly racist](#) Jewish National Fund. Two weeks ago the Liberal MP issued a statement, partly rebutting the prime minister, that [blamed](#) “ Hamas incitement” for Israeli forces shooting thousands of peaceful protesters, including Canadian doctor Tarek Loubani.

The bill’s other sponsor was Linda Frum. Last year the Conservative Party senator [called Iran](#) “one of the most malign nations in the world” and labeled a Palestinian-Canadian’s 2014 art exhibit at Ottawa’s city hall “[a taxpayer-funded tribute to a Palestinian terrorist](#)” and “the murder of innocent civilians.”

Leaving aside the background of those driving the initiative, the likely political effect of creating Jewish Heritage Month should have been obvious. The Canadian *Jewish News* report on the House of Commons resolution noted that May was chosen to celebrate Jewish Heritage Month because of the “[various events](#) on the Jewish calendar, including the UJA Walk for Israel, the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, Jewish Music Week and Israel’s Independence Day.” Similarly, when Ontario adopted May as Jewish Heritage Month in 2012 United Jewish Appeal Federation of Greater Toronto president Ted Sokolsky linked it to the group’s Israel campaigning. He said,

“[this announcement](#) will call for an extra celebration at this year’s UJA Walk with Israel, which for 45 years has taken place in May.”

Despite the initiative being steeped in colonialist politics, the NDP voted in favour of the bill creating Jewish Heritage Month. During discussion of the motion NDP MPs [Jenny Kwan](#) and [Randall Garrison](#) claimed it would enhance cultural/religious understanding. Garrison said,

“Jewish heritage month will help contribute to better understanding of just how diverse we Canadians are, and in doing so contribute to building a Canada free from hatred and division.”

Of course, this would be a laudable goal, but putting up an Israeli flag in a public high school while that country is murdering unarmed Palestinian demonstrators can only cause hatred and division. And it is an affront to thousands of Jewish-Canadians who do not support Israel.

The flag flap at Forest Hill Collegiate illustrates how pro-Israel groups have weaponized Jewish cultural initiatives to amplify their anti-Palestinianism. Those who seek justice for Palestinians need to recognize this fact and figure out way.

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Yves Engler is the author of [A Propaganda System: How Canada’s Government, Corporations, Media and Academia Sell War](#) and [Canada in Africa: 300 Years of Aid and Exploitation](#).

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