

The Israel Lobby And A Cowed Academia: British University Cancels Conference on Israel - No More “Je Suis Charlie”

When Free Speech Becomes Dead Silence

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The sudden cancellation of an academic conference on Israel, as well as the lack of outcry from ‘mainstream’ media, demonstrates once again the skewed limits to ‘free speech’ in ‘advanced’ Western democracies. ‘[Je suis Charlie](#)’ already feels like ancient history. It certainly does not apply when it comes to scrutiny of the state of Israel.

The conference, titled ‘[International Law and the State of Israel: Legitimacy, Responsibility and Exceptionalism](#)’, was to be held at the University of Southampton from 15-17 April 2015. Planned speakers included Richard Falk, the former UN special rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories, Gabi Piterberg, a historian at the University of California at Los Angeles, Israeli academic Ilan Pappé and Palestinian historian Nur Musalha.

The meeting was billed as the ‘first of its kind and constitutes a ground-breaking historical event on the road towards justice and enduring peace in historic Palestine.’ The approach would be scholarly with ‘multidisciplinary debate reflecting diverse perspectives, and thus genuine disagreements’. Rather than being a coven of political extremists and violent hotheads, this was to be a serious gathering of respected and authoritative academics with in-depth knowledge of Israel and Palestine.

But intense pressure from the Israel lobby about the airing of ‘[anti-Semitic views](#)’ has torpedoed the University of Southampton’s earlier stated [commitment](#) to uphold ‘freedom of speech within the law’. In a classic piece of bureaucratic hand-wringing, the university issued a corporate-style [statement](#) on 1 April that leaned heavily on the pretext of ‘health and safety’ to kill off the conference. This happened a mere two weeks before the conference, planned months earlier in consultation with the university, was due to begin.

The Board of Deputies of British Jews was among those Zionist groups that had been urging the university to cancel the event. Its president, Vivian Wineman, [said](#):

‘It is formulated in extremist terms, has attracted toxic speakers and is likely to result in an increase in anti-Semitism and tension on campus.’

The Telegraph [reported](#) that ‘at least two major patrons of the university were considering withdrawing their financial support. One is a charitable foundation, the other a wealthy family.’

There was also fierce criticism from several politicians at Westminster. Mark Hoban, the Conservative MP for Fareham, [described](#) the conference as a 'provocative, hard-line, one-sided forum that would question and delegitimize the existence of a democratic state.' Caroline Nokes, MP for Romsey and Southampton North, [said](#) the university risked bringing itself into disrepute by hosting what she described as 'an apparently one-sided event'.

A senior government minister even got involved. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities, [derided](#) the conference as a 'one-sided diatribe'. He went further:

'There is a careful line between legitimate academic debate on international law and the actions of governments, and the far-left's bashing of Israel which often descends into naked anti-Semitism.'

This was outrageous high-level political interference in free speech. When the university confirmed that it was cancelling the conference, the decision was predictably [welcomed](#) by the Israeli embassy in London:

'This was a clear instance of an extremist political campaign masquerading as an academic exercise, and it is only right to recognise that respecting free speech does not mean tolerating intolerance.'

Michael Gove, the Government Chief Whip and former Secretary of State for Education, could barely contain his [glee](#):

'It was not a conference, it was an anti-Israel hate-fest.'

The 'Health And Safety' Pretext

On April 2, the conference organisers [responded](#) to the university's sudden reversal of its earlier commitment to hold the conference. The organisers, who include Israeli-born law professor Oren Ben-Dor, said that they were 'shocked and dismayed' at the university's about-turn. This was especially disappointing given that the police had given assurances that they would be 'able to manage the demonstrations'.

The organisers noted that 'general sensitivity following recent terrorist events in Europe' had been 'misused to inflate the risks' of the conference going ahead. More widely, warned the organisers, the implications for academic freedom would be dire:

'The stakes for academic public space, for academic freedom and for freedom of speech are too high. The message it sends to other academic institutions and to students all over the world is grave and depressing. It will potentially make campuses obedient and depoliticised, distant and docile corporate spaces.'

An inadvertent clue to the reality underlying the university's rhetoric on 'security' and 'health and safety' could be found in a report last month in the *Jewish Chronicle*. Board of Deputies of British Jews president Wineman told the *Chronicle* that:

'When we had a meeting with the university vice-chancellor they said they

would review it [the conference] on health and safety terms.

'The two lines of attack [sic] possible were legal and health and safety and they were leaning on that one.'

The 'line of attack' about 'health and safety', then, appears to be cover for the university caving in to pro-Israel pressure. This fits a wider pattern of the pro-Israel lobby's fear of increasing global condemnation of Israeli crimes against the Palestinian people and international law. As Ben White, an authoritative freelance journalist on the Middle East, [reported](#) last month, the British ambassador to Israel, Matthew Gould, recently met with UK university heads to discuss Israel and the limits of 'freedom of speech'. Also present were representatives of at least three pro-Israel organisations: the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council, and the Union of Jewish Students.

Southampton University's refusal at the time to buckle under pro-Israel lobby pressure was cited in the meeting. White noted:

'This stubborn commitment to freedom of speech has clearly angered Britain's Israel lobby, but the bigger question here is why a UK ambassador was involved in the first place.'

When pressed to explain this, a Foreign Office spokesperson told White that 'part of Matthew Gould's role involves outreach to the British Jewish Community.' White added:

'The spokesperson did not elaborate on whether lobbying British universities was part of the ambassador's remit.'

The conference organisers have now lodged an injunction at the High Court in London in an attempt to prevent the university from curtailing their right to freedom of speech. The legal argument is that in unfairly withdrawing permission for the conference, the university has capitulated to the pro-Israel lobby. 'This is blatant censorship under the guise of a specter of campus being overrun by violent hordes, which is patently groundless,' [said](#) Mark McDonald, a public interest lawyer from the chambers of Michael Mansfield QC.

Many academics have protested the university's decision. David Gurnham, the Director of Research at the university's School of Law, wrote in an [email](#) to vice-chancellor Professor Don Nutbeam:

'It seems to me outrageous that you seem to have allowed the bullying and threats of the Israeli lobby to prevent the perfectly lawful and legitimate exercise of free speech and academic debate. I understand that the police had reported that they would be perfectly able and willing to deal with any security concerns at the event: this ought to be good enough.'

'Cancelling the event in this way makes the University look weak, spineless and reactionary. I am proud to be a member of academic staff here, but your decision to withdraw support for a conference in this manner makes me, and I'm sure very many others like me, seriously question the University's commitment to open and free debate.'

(More letters of protest from academics can be read [here](#).)

All this comes at a time when the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions [movement](#) is gathering strength. A recent [debate](#) at the Cambridge Union Society even passed the motion that 'This House Believes Israel Is A Rogue State'.

At the time of writing, a [petition](#) calling for the University of Southampton to uphold free speech has attracted almost 10,000 signatures in just one week (it took a Zionist petition in favour of cancelling the conference one month to reach around 6,500).

An earlier [petition](#) in support of the conference was signed by round 900 academics around the world, including Noam Chomsky.

All of this must make the pro-Israel lobby deeply uncomfortable. As Ben White [observed](#):

'Whatever the final outcome, this story is significant for the way in which it illustrates not so much the pro-Israel lobby's power, but its weaknesses.'

No More 'Je Suis Charlie'

Media coverage of the cancellation of the conference has been almost non-existent. We found just *three* news articles in the national press: [one](#) in the Guardian, [one](#) in the Telegraph and [one](#) in the Express.

But what is even more glaring than the lack of news coverage is the editorial silence on the pro-Israel lobby's bullying and intimidation. What happened to all those grand declarations from editorial offices, under the banner '[Je suis Charlie](#)', to uphold freedom of speech and the 'right to offend'? The journalists and cartoonists who were murdered at the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris were, we were told, 'martyrs for freedom of speech'. The atrocity was 'a war declared on civilisation', 'an attack on the free world', 'an assault on journalists and free speech'. A Guardian editorial [proclaimed](#):

'If there is a right to free speech, implicit within it there has to be a right to offend. Any society that's serious about liberty has to defend the free flow of ugly words, even ugly sentiments.'

Where is the outpouring of dismay now from liberal commentators across the British media at the actions of the pro-Israel lobby? Where are the comment pieces decrying this latest attack on free speech? When it comes to Israel, the 'right to offend' is quietly dropped.

Moreover, why should it be 'toxic' to examine critically the founding ideology of Israel, a state that was built on one of the largest forced migrations in modern history? As Israeli historian Ilan Pappé documented in his acclaimed 2006 book, [The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine](#), the establishment of Israel in 1948 was 'Nakba' – a catastrophe – for the Palestinians. More than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, were uprooted, and over 500 Palestinian villages destroyed.

Nakba largely remains a taboo subject for 'mainstream' coverage of the Middle East. Indeed, notes Pappé, the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians by Israel is a 'crime [that] has been erased almost totally from the global public memory'. This crime, he continues:

'has been systematically denied, and is still today not recognised as an historical fact, let alone acknowledged as a crime that needs to be confronted politically as well as morally.' (Ibid., p. xiii)

Sadly, the fear of offending the powerful pro-Israel lobby remains a major factor in British politics, cultural debate and media reporting of Israel and Palestine (see Peter Osborne's [Dispatches](#) documentary for Channel 4 in 2009). As one senior BBC television news producer [revealed](#) to Professor Greg Philo of the Glasgow Media Group:

'We wait in fear for the telephone call from the Israelis.'

'The Specious Slur Of Anti-Semitism'

In a moving piece of personal testimony, Professor Suleiman Sharkh of the University of Southampton, one of the conference organisers, published an [open letter](#). He said:

'I grew up in Gaza, but my family is originally from a town called Majdal Asqlan (now called Ashkelon by Israel). In November 1948, six months after the establishment of the State of Israel and after the wars had ended, the town was bombed and many people were killed. Those who survived were herded towards Gaza, crawling on their hands and knees in the thorny field. Since then we have lived in squalid refugee camps. I walked around in the sand soiled by the open sewers with my bare feet. I got my first shoes when I went to school at the age of six.'

Professor Sharkh then explained the relevance and importance of the conference to Palestinian people:

'International Law was responsible for our misery. It was used to legalise the theft of our homes and it continues to be used to legalise the ongoing oppression of my people by the State of Israel. The questions asked by the conference are therefore questions that I have been asking all my life. They are important questions that need to be answered.'

The conference is now likely to go ahead at an alternative venue to be publicised soon.

The journalist and filmmaker John Pilger, whose powerful documentary [Palestine Is Still The Issue](#) is a must-see, told Media Lens (email, April 3, 2015):

'Israel is a gangster state. It holds the world record in the breach and defiance of international law. It regularly massacres and terrorises the Palestinian civilian population of Gaza, which even David Cameron has described as an "open prison". Its courts uphold racism as state policy. It has re-elected a congenital liar as its prime minister. Its historians have long revealed the criminality of its beginning — the theft of land, the murder and brutalising of the indigenous population.'

He continued:

'What Israel has, however, are powerful collaborators, who, even at the lowest rung, are able to intimidate institutional bureaucrats and others with the specious slur of anti-Semitism. In Britain, the Jewish Chronicle and the Board of Deputies operate this barely disguised smear as efficiently as a metronome. They, and others, have now helped silence a much needed conference on Israel at the University of Southampton. But they should not be wholly blamed. The collusion of the university authorities as they run up the false flag of "security concerns" is to blame; and the memory of every murdered child in Gaza is now their spectre. And along with the so-called "lobby", they cannot win.'

Pilger concluded:

'The rest of humanity has long recognised the truth about Israel, as every international survey shows. With exquisite timing, student unions across the UK are joining the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement that is sweeping country after country, including the United States. The craven decision of Southampton will speed its progress; nothing is surer.'

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Suggested Action

Please sign this [petition](#) in support of the conference.

Academics can also sign this [statement of support](#).

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