

Israel-bashing seminar does Australian National University no credit

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Gerald M. Steinberg September 11, 2013 The Australian

The main task of a university is to pursue knowledge, free from political or religious dogmas, and ideological or other biases. It is for this reason that institutions of higher learning are granted special status and supported by public funds.



But when these values are violated, and the campus is exploited as a venue for lobbying on behalf of narrow interests, this tarnishes the reputation of the academic community, while society is deprived of benefits from the pursuit of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the conference on "Human Rights in Palestine", scheduled for the Australian National University today and tomorrow, is a blatant effort to exploit and distort the marketplace of ideas. Only a few of the advertised speakers have relevant research credentials or peer-reviewed academic publications in the field of human rights. Instead, the program is dominated by opinionated activists associated with and funded by political advocacy groups that exploit the banner of human rights.

For example, "Professor" Hanan Ashrawi, who is featured in the program, is a prominent Palestinian politician and highly visible media spokeswoman. She holds a PhD in medieval and comparative literature. She achieved notoriety in January 1991, during a US radio interview at the beginning of the Gulf War, when she referred to Saddam Hussein favourably for "standing up for Arab rights, Arab dignity, Arab pride". (Yasir Arafat and the PLO were closely allied with Saddam.) In February 1991, while the Iraqi dictator's troops were looting and burning Kuwait, she praised Saddam's "commitment to peace". And in 1996, she was among the minority of PLO officials who opposed revising the PLO Charter to remove clauses calling for Israel's destruction.

Other speakers are involved with "the Steering Committee for the Gaza Freedom March", the "Palestinian Boycott Divestment and Sanctions National Committee", and Electronic Intifada. For example, Ziyaad Lunat has referred to Israel as "[the Zionist colonial implant](#)" - not the type of language one would expect at an academic conference on human rights.

Keynote speaker Richard Falk is [primarily known as a fringe "9/11 conspiracy theorist"](#), and has been widely denounced, including by the Secretary-General of the UN, for [vile comments](#) blaming the Boston terrorist attack on "the American global domination project" and "Tel Aviv".

As noted by the [British government's equality and non-discrimination team](#), Falk's recent writings are "resonant of the longstanding anti-Semitic practice of blaming Jews (through the state of Israel by proxy) for all that is wrong in the world".

In a clumsy attempt to endow the event with some academic credibility, the ANU organisers included the logo of the prestigious British Academy on the website as an indication of co-sponsorship.

When this was brought to their attention, officials replied: "The academy is not organising that event, was not consulted on the program and is not directly sponsoring the event itself. The text that appears on the conference website claiming that the British Academy is a 'platinum sponsor' for the event, is therefore misleading, and appeared without authorisation from us."

Instead of removing the logo, however, the official program website recently added a tiny and misleading caveat underneath. Even if a complete correction were subsequently to be made, the fact that the conference organisers made so fundamental an error does not reflect well on the organisers' standards of accuracy.

At a time when shocking atrocities are being committed in Syria against Palestinians, among many others, an academic conference ostensibly dedicated to the entirely legitimate subject of Palestinian human rights should not be focused exclusively on the West Bank. This, and the neglect of other pressing human rights issues in the Middle East, reinforce the impression that the real purpose of the conference is to polemicise against Israel.

It also seems not to have occurred to the organisers that Israelis have human rights too. Any assessment of

"Economic, Social, Political and Cultural Rights" in the "Occupied Palestinian Territories" that excludes the central complexities is at best meaningless, at worst sinister.

It is up to the ANU to decide how best to deal with this scholarly farce, which threatens to tarnish its reputation.

Even respected universities are not immune from fringe political campaigns, or from indulging in nonsense.