

The dark side of a yearly ritual

By Leonard Stern
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Beginning Monday, university campuses play host to an annual event known as Israeli Apartheid Week, where Israel is assigned the role of Jew among the nations — singled-out, cursed and harassed.

Some Jewish students at Carleton and the University of Ottawa will discreetly choose to stay home, to avoid having to answer for the Jewish state. The whiff of something medieval hangs over this March ritual.

This isn't about Jews, say the organizers. It's about Zionists. Problem is, the activist groups behind Israeli Apartheid Week are doing everything to erase the distinction.

One of those organizations, the Ottawa Public Interest Research Group, refused in 2008 to promote a lecture on African development because Jewish students happened to be organizing it. The event had zero connection to Israel but OPIRG said it wouldn't partner with the Jewish students' union due to the latter's "relationship to apartheid Israel."

Demonizing Israel has become a central and unifying activity for those who practise radical politics. Consider Carleton University's Womyn's Centre and the Canadian Arab Federation. The first is a feminist organization; the second participated in a notorious conference in Egypt organized by fundamentalist Muslims who institutionalize violence against women. Both groups are endorsing Israeli Apartheid Week.

The perfidy of the Jewish state is a unifying belief just as the perfidy of Jews always was. The fascist right said Jews were bolsheviks and blamed them for the scourge of communism; the totalitarian left said Jews were financiers and blamed them for the predations of capitalism.

Of all the sponsors of Israeli Apartheid Week, the participation of gay and lesbian groups is most disheartening. Harvard University's Alan Dershowitz tells an anecdote about the time he gave a speech and spotted an anti-Israel sign in the crowd, held aloft by a gay rights group. Dershowitz reminded the protesters that Israel is the one country in the Middle East where they'd be able to hold a gay rights sign in public and not be lynched.

Israel's official government website celebrates Eytan Fox, one of the country's best known filmmakers. Fox's recent movie The Bubble, about a

love affair between two men, Arab and Jew, won an award from the U.S.-based Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, for its sensitive depiction of gay people.

Films like that aren't being made in Syria or Gaza. Gay Muslims have to flee to democratic countries if they want to come out. Israel itself recently took in a gay Palestinian from the West Bank town of Jenin. The man settled in Tel Aviv, moving in with his partner, an Israeli. Thousands of couples — Arab, Jewish, mixed — show up for the gay pride parade in Tel Aviv.

Yet back in Canada, gay student groups denounce Israel as their enemy. They aren't protesting against the many Muslim countries where homosexuality is criminalized — where, as *Der Spiegel* recently reported, men suspected of being gay are found with their genitals amputated and anuses sealed with glue.

(When Israel last year suffered an isolated act of homophobic violence — a gunman shot up a gay nightclub — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly expressed his personal horror.)

So am I saying Israel is a beacon of enlightenment and that anyone who disagrees is an anti-Semite?

No, I'm not. **Israel is a flawed country, as are all countries. Criticizing Israel does not make one an anti-Semite anymore than criticizing the government of France makes one anti-French. But it's one thing to criticize France and another to declare the French nation illegitimate and to advocate its dismantling.**

For that's what Israeli apartheid week is about. As Michael Ignatieff noted during apartheid week last year, "International law defines 'Apartheid' as a crime against humanity. Labeling Israel an 'Apartheid' state is a deliberate attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Jewish state itself."

It is the fanatical, disproportionate focus on Israel — no other country is subjected to a week-long hatefest at university campuses — that points to something darker going on.

The classic giveaway of prejudice is holding the hated group to a double standard. Israel is denounced for its designation as a Jewish state, with a Star of David on its flag. **Israel's accusers never complain that Muslim states have the half-crescent symbol of Islam in their flags. As the legal scholar Robbie Sabel notes: "For various Arab states to denote themselves Arab Republics is not objectionable, but a Jewish state is racism and apartheid."**

Saudi Arabia officially prohibits the practice of non-Muslim religions; Egypt has persecuted its minority Christians; Turkey and other Muslim countries make sure the Kurds remain stateless and dispossessed — and campus activists couldn't care less. It's Israel, and Israel alone, that consumes them.

Israeli Apartheid Week represents a strange, collective stalking. I don't know why they do it. What's scary is that, as the unconscious instruments of an ancient hatred, they don't always understand their own obsession.

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