

It's Anti-Apartheid Week in the U.K.!

Lea was walking out of a lecture at Cambridge University when she noticed a peculiar occurrence outside the history building. Metal fencing had been put up, and young blonde students wearing khakis and carrying fake plastic guns were shouting orders at passers-by, next to an Israeli flag and a sign reading “stop for inspection” in Hebrew, English, and Arabic.

“It was really surreal and quite terrifying,” said the 21-year-old student, who asked that her full name not be used for fear of retribution.

The mock checkpoint was the kick-off event of “Israeli Apartheid Week” on campuses across the United Kingdom. That morning, London commuters could read about the BBC’s biased pro-Israel news coverage and British collusion with Israeli “apartheid” on posters pasted by activists across the city’s underground transportation system.

The posters were quickly removed by Transport for London, local media reported, citing Israeli intervention on the highest level. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asked the director general of the foreign ministry Dore Gold to raise the matter with government officials in London, as opposition politician Yair Lapid publicized his intercession with London mayor Boris Johnson.

“I explained to him that the State of Israel will not tolerate these things,” he told his Yesh Atid party colleagues, waving color photos of the offensive posters.

With the stated goal of fueling efforts to boycott, divest, and sanction Israel, Israeli Apartheid Week was first launched in Toronto in 2005, but has since spread to 150 cities and campuses across the globe, [according](#) to the organizers.

At the campaign flagship event at University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), pins reading “stop arming Israel” and matchboxes with the pound sterling symbol on the backdrop of a bloodied hand grenade were spread out across a table for the taking. On the podium, Palestinian activist and poet Rafeef Ziadah was gloating as she addressed the vocal Israeli indignation over the tube campaign. “The Israeli state thinks we’ve received money to pay for this, but we’re all just volunteers,” she boasted.

Much of the literature handed out focused on British security company G4S. According to [War on Want](#), a British nonprofit that advocates for an arms embargo on Israel alongside its struggle to eradicate global poverty, the company provides equipment and services to five Israeli prisons where “political prisoners are held without trial and subjected to torture.”

The keynote speaker at the gathering was Steven Salaita, a professor of Native American Studies whose appointment at the University of Illinois was revoked in 2014 following the exposure of tweets where he blasted the “smugness,” “greed,” and “violence” of Israelis, expressing hope that “all the f****g West Bank settlers would go missing” after the kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers by Hamas.

Israel’s *raison d’etre*, Salaita told the SOAS audience of mostly Middle Eastern students, was “to halt Palestinian life at its inception.”

“Israel’s mere presence is a continued act of violence,” he declared, to loud cheers.

But despite the somewhat feigned enthusiasm in the hall, doubt about the utility of BDS seeped in during the Q&A. Even as grassroots activists were pushing for boycotts of Israeli products, one frustrated student noted, trade between Israel and Britain has doubled in recent years. Anti-Israel resolutions passed by student unions were being shot down one after the other by university administrations. “Are boycotts enough?” he asked the panel on stage. “What else do you think we can do?”

Outside, a bearded Irishman named Phillip, a black and white *kaffiyeh* wrapped around his neck, was chatting with a young Italian woman named Lorenza. The two had just returned from a guided tour of what they called Palestine, where they planted olive trees and toured the empty streets of Hebron with a group of internationals.

Phillip, 66, said he found the SOAS event somewhat detached from the “horrors” he witnessed on the ground. The event was too theoretical for him, but probably appealed to the young audience, he said. He agreed that the comparison of Israel to the former racist regime of South Africa may not be accurate, but said he “wasn’t going to be picky” when it comes to terminology. “It’s hard to describe the horror from afar,” he noted somberly.

Israeli Apartheid Week has been going on for years, but somehow in Britain its bite seems sharper. The political atmosphere in the United Kingdom, the cradle of Zionism in the early 20th century, is becoming increasingly inhospitable to advocates of the Jewish national movement.

On Feb. 23, Lord Spencer Livermore warned his peers in the upper house of parliament of a “disturbing resurgence of anti-Zionism, bordering on the anti-Semitic, particularly—I regret to say—in sections of the left in British politics.” A few days earlier, Alex Chalmers, co-chair of the Oxford University Labour Club resigned over his group’s decision to endorse “Israeli Apartheid Week.” His letter of resignation, [posted on Facebook](#), left no room for interpretation:

Whether it be members of the Executive throwing around the term ‘Zio’ (a term for Jews usually confined to websites run by the Ku Klux Klan) with casual abandon, senior members of the club expressing their ‘solidarity’ with Hamas and explicitly defending their tactics of indiscriminately murdering civilians, or a former Co-Chair claiming that ‘most accusations of anti-Semitism are just the Zionists crying wolf,’ a large proportion of both OULC and the student left in Oxford more generally have some kind of problem with Jews.

Jewish intellectuals are growing more vociferous in expressing their malaise too. In an op-ed published by the *Financial Times* on Feb. 19, renowned British historian Simon Schama [expounded](#) the history of anti-Semitism in Europe, which has led Jews to seek the establishment of their own nation state. “Enter the historian, and history says this: anti-Semitism has not been caused by Zionism; it is precisely the other way round.”

Howard Jacobson, the award-winning author, spoke of the oppressiveness of Britain’s anti-Zionism as a Jewish Brit. “The criticism of Israel is of such a pitch that it does feel like a kind of persecution,” he [told Tablet](#) last February. “Israel’s not my country. This is my country. It’s not my war. But I just feel the dinning of it, the dinning of it. I can’t claim I am persecuted because of that. But it affects the mental music, the mood music around. It’s ugly. It’s ugly to be a Jew living in any country when that is what people are talking about all the

time.”

But judging by the numbers of *Olim*—people who make *aliyah*, or move to Israel—from Britain, the usual yardstick for the acuteness of anti-Semitism in a given country, things aren't that bad. Just 689 British Jews immigrated to Israel in 2015, a similar number to the previous year. That is one tenth the annual number of *Olim* from next door France, which has less than double the number of Jews.

Meanwhile, at the University of Birmingham, the Jewish Society has decided to fight back. Like other campuses across the UK, students at Birmingham have launched “Israel awareness week,” distributing flyers and organizing pro-Israeli speaking events.

“Our opening line at the stand is that we're pro-peace, pro-negotiations,” said Sam Hillel, a campaigns officer at the university's Jewish Society. “Israeli Apartheid Week is such a destructive concept for negotiations and peace, so when we address it we need something constructive and positive. The confrontation we have with pro-Palestinians is very muted, because they can't really argue with that.”

Coinciding with “Discover Islam Week,” pro-BDS activity at the Birmingham campus was barely noticeable. That's why some Jewish student activists were so frustrated with what they considered the overreaction of Israeli pundits.

“The whole idea of BDS is for the Israeli politicians to take notice, and here you have the prime minister of Israel responding to a bunch of students in a room,” said one national student leader, speaking on condition of anonymity for the sensitivity of his comments. “He's playing into their hands. It's so frustrating,” he added.

“A few idiots went into the tube and changed a few posters. While I disagree with it, I don't think it helps the situation to have all the Israeli politicians making statements about it publicly. I saw them [the BDS activists] in their groups. They were all talking to each other, saying, ‘Look at all the fuss we've caused.’”

It was not only Israeli officials who are speaking up about Israeli Apartheid Week, however. In an op-ed published in the *New Statesman*, Chief British Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis used his South African credentials to argue that the calling Israel an Apartheid state was offensive not only to Jews, but to victims of racial discrimination in his native land as well.

“Words make a world of difference,” wrote the rabbi in an [article](#) titled “I grew up in South Africa, so believe me when I say: Israel is not an apartheid state.”

Over time, they become charged with inference and allusion and, deployed effectively, they have the power to change the very fabric of our civilization [...] note: not Palestinian “nationalism” or “awareness” week, which might focus on the well-being of the Palestinian people, but a week dedicated to attacking Israel—its government, its people, its very existence. The implied message here is simple: Israel today is where South Africa was in the latter part of the 20th century. It is a comparison that is entirely false; a grave insult to those who suffered under apartheid; and a tragic obstacle to peace.

But will anybody heed the rabbi's call to “believe him”? In the tiresome debate surrounding Israel in Great Britain, is anyone really still on the fence, waiting to be persuaded? The Israeli embassy seems to think so. Helping local Jewish organizations from behind the scenes, Israeli diplomats were busy touring campuses across the country, exposing local instances of anti-Semitism, and hosting an Israeli medical officer who had

fought in last year's Operation Protective Edge and treated Hamas terrorists under fire.

Back at Cambridge, student Lea volunteered to go through the checkpoint simulation. She had visited Israel numerous times but never experienced a real checkpoint. At the entrance, she was given the fake identity card of a Palestinian factory worker from Jenin, which she was expected to memorize, which she said reminded her of the cards of victims handed out at Holocaust museums. When Lea failed to properly act out her new persona to the "soldier" interrogating her, she was yelled at and humiliated.

"I was dismayed," she said, describing the ordeal as "scary and confusing." Later, the blonde mock soldier apologized to her, explaining that she herself had once gone through a similar checkpoint in the Palestinian territories.

"There was no point to it," Lea said. "I think it was just humiliating for Palestinians. It wasn't helpful, just victimizing in a grotesque way."

Lea asked the activists whether they planned to attend the launch of Palestinian Peace Week that evening, organized by five student bodies including the Israel Society, the Kurdish Society, and the Persian Society. They said they didn't. She later discovered that the Palestinian Society was boycotting the event.

For those of us living in Israel, the obsessive preoccupation with the Palestinian issue seems self-evident. After all, for us it's a matter of life and death. But the level of emotion and indignation in Britain over our little corner of the earth seems strange. Post-colonial guilt? Latent anti-Semitism? Those are surely part of the mix. Perhaps, as a perennial showdown between "occident" and "orient," Israel-Palestine will forever remain an intriguing story.

Then again, maybe not. At Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park, an elderly man wearing a T-shirt with the Israeli and Palestinian flags stood on a ladder, passionately advocating the two-state solution. A small crowd gathered round him that Sunday afternoon, but a much larger one stood nearby, listening to Gulf Arabs hurling insults at each other.

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