

British Academics Need Healing

The United Kingdom has many attractions, Wimbledon, strawberries and cream, and political parties that talk to each other. What a pity that it also has far too many self-righteousness and holier-than-thou academics whose bigotry is as considerable as their lack of knowledge of Middle East realities. The physical British fog, so familiar from the Sherlock Holmes stories, may have disappeared, but the mental fog prevails in the minds of some faculty members.

Shame on those 343 academic faculty members, to whom another 150 were added, who signed an advertisement in the British paper, *The Guardian* on October 27, 2015 pledging not to cooperate with Israeli academic institutions.

In a world in which hundreds of thousands of Middle East people are fleeing to European countries and when in one month of October 2015 ten Israelis were killed and more than 100 injured by stabbing by Palestinians, the original 343 opinionated individuals had a different priority. They were not concerned, let alone troubled, by the continuing violence and terrorism against Israeli civilians during that period.

Instead, they declared, in the language of zealots, that they were motivated by “deep concern for Palestinians...struggling to sustain some semblance of normal life in intractably difficult circumstances of occupation and denial of human rights.”

Accordingly, these resolute academics will take a brave, indeed heroic, stand. They will not accept invitations for academic visits to Israel or take part in events organized, funded or sponsored by academic institutions or act as referees related to them or cooperate in any way. All this is essential because of the “deep complicity of Israeli academic

institutions in Israeli violations of international law.”

One understands that many of the signers of the *Guardian* statement must have been subjected to both peer influence and pressure from Palestinian groups. It is difficult to know the extent of knowledge of international law or of human rights violations in Israel or elsewhere possessed by the faculty coming from the listed disciplines such as art, classics, design history, linguistics, physics, chemistry, civil engineering, translation studies, and zoology.

Of course, one does not expect these experts to discuss or comment on occupations or discrimination regarding the control by China over Tibet, or Turkey over north Cyprus, or Russia over the Crimea or eastern Ukraine. But some elementary information about two issues, Palestinian behavior as well as the role and behavior of Israeli institutions, might be expected.

On the first issue, they might have known of President Bill Clinton’s comment on the failure of the Camp David Talks in July 2000 between himself, then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barack and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, “ I regret that Arafat missed the opportunity to bring that (Palestinian) state into being.”

On the second issue, they might have known that Israeli Arabs, 20 per cent of the population, account for 50 per cent of the students in Israel’s main medical school, and that they constitute 22 per cent of the total of Israeli university students. This record does not appear to be what the academics call “deprivation of opportunities” for Israeli Arabs. Busy with their studies they may have forgotten that Israeli hospitals treat large numbers of Palestinian patients, including family members of Hamas leaders.

There are really only two question to be asked about the signatories of the infamous ad. What is their real motive in

signing, and why are they are anxious to prevent progress and research in Britain?

No doubt these academics felt self-satisfaction and moral uprightness from signing the statement but they should be ashamed of themselves for disclaiming the whole ethos of academia, open dialogue and pursuit of new ideas. They have acted not only in an ignorant fashion, but also in one that is divisive, discriminatory, and harmful, one that makes the pursuit of peace and understanding in the Middle East more difficult. They are destroying bridges, not building them.

They have not understood that the very academic institutions they wish to boycott are among the bodies that are often most critical of Israeli policies and places where open differences on policies regarding Palestinians are passionate. They might compare the expressions of concern of many Israeli academics to improve the life of Palestinians with the freedom of speech and open discussion available in Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, or even between the Fatah and Hamas factions of the Palestinians who are still killing each other.

The ignorance of the signers so concerned with the iniquities of Israel is truly astounding. One wonders how or if the 343 academics pursue the truth in their own scholarly disciplines. In this case of relations between Britain and Israel they are inexplicably preventing progress. Did they accept the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood and the statement, published on the same day as their ad, of the official Palestinian Authority daily paper , Al-Hayat al-Jadida, that it was the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 that "dragged the region into the disasters of war and instability?"

A brief supply of evidence, simply taking four examples, may be helpful to them if they are asked to sign any future denunciation of the State of Israel or its personnel.

One is the 5 year British-Israeli Birax scheme, partly funded

by the Cancer Research UK and the British Heart Foundation, for research and academic exchange partnership in the field of regenerative medicine which brings researchers from both backgrounds together. It is a token of the value in listening to and respecting opinions different from one's own.

Another is the Olive Tree Program, started in 2004, that supports equal numbers of Israelis and Palestinians to study at the City University in London. Its objective, the exact opposite of the 343 academics, is to bring together those involved in the conflict the opportunity to reflect and learn. The Program has awarded more than 50 scholarships in a variety of subjects regarding Palestinians and Israelis.

In the Negev in Israel the Arava Institute, one of the world's leading environmental think tanks, also has equal numbers of Israeli and Palestinians, together with Jordanians, engaged in studying energy, water management, waste management, and sustainable agricultural issues.

A fourth cooperative body is the Daniel Turnberg Middle East Fellowship program that has brought together more than 170 medical researchers, Palestinians from the West and Gaza and Israel to work in British universities on issues such as childhood cancers, motor neurone disease, stroke, and autism.

Perhaps one of these valuable scientific programs may help the 343 academics heal themselves, so they can take part in advancing the cause of peace in the Middle East.