APARTHEID WEEK ONE-SIDED BUT NOT ANTI-SEMITIC

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By Thomas Walkom, The Toronto Star, 3 March 2010

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Israeli Apartheid Week is an international, pro-Palestinian teach-in that, for the last six years, has taken place annually at about 40 campuses worldwide. Detractors call it poisonous and anti-Semitic. Last week, the Ontario Legislature got into the act by unanimously passing a resolution that condemned it for inciting "hatred against Israel" and diminishing "the suffering of those who were victims of the true apartheid regime in South Africa."

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Thornhill Conservative MPP Peter Shurman called it "about as close to hate speech as one get without being arrested." Toronto Liberal MPP Mike Colle said it was organized by "hate-mongers" and was based on the systemic hatred of "Israel and anything Jewish."
I didn't notice any hate-mongers at the Ryerson University lecture Monday night. It was clearly a partisan crowd – lots of Palestinian flags and kaffiyehs. The two speakers, South African political scientist Na'eem Jeenah and Canadian freelance journalist Jon Elmer, will never win any prizes as friends of Israel (Elmer at one point described Israeli officialdom as "the enemy.")

But Jew-haters? Not according to anything I heard or could find. Indeed, back in 2006, Jeenah publicly denounced Iran's infamous Holocaust revisionism conference as a misconceived attempt to deny a historical and moral crime committed against Jews.

It's also hard to accuse Israeli Apartheid Week of being anti-Semitic when small Jewish organizations, like Independent Jewish Voices, are sponsors.

The apartheid charge against Israel is not new. It's based largely on that country's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories – policies deliberately designed to create separate Israeli-only settlement enclaves linked by Israeli-only roads on lands that, according to the United Nations (and Canada), do not belong to Israel.

South African Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu has explicitly referred to Israel's actions in the occupied territories as apartheid. So has John Dugard, a respected South African lawyer who, until 2008, was the UN's special rapporteur on human rights in the Palestinian territories.

So too has former U.S. president Jimmy Carter (although he recently apologized for saying anything that "may have" stigmatized Israel).

Henry Siegman, former national director of the American Jewish Congress, wrote two months ago that Israel is "the only apartheid regime in the Western world." The Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem has called Israel's occupation "reminiscent of ... the apartheid regime in South Africa."

Even Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff – who as a practising politician now finds himself denouncing Israeli Apartheid Week – has made the comparison, writing in 2002 of the occupied West Bank as a "Bantustan, one of those pseudo-states created in the dying years of apartheid."

Are all of these people hate-mongers?

What is true about Israeli Apartheid Week is that it is a root-and-branch attack on how Israel operates, both internally and in the occupied territories. The organizers' stated aims are to create an international boycott and divestment campaign that will force Israel to change – just as similar pressure 20 years ago forced apartheid South Africa to change,

In particular, they want Israel to adhere to UN resolutions calling on it to pull out of the occupied territories and let Palestinian refugees who fled the country in 1948 return home. They also want Israel to change land ownership laws they say discriminate against the 20 per cent of its citizens who are not Jewish.

Controversial? Yes. One-sided? You bet. Fully achievable? I doubt it. But unless you think that criticizing Israel's complex system of ethnic preferences is an attack on all Jews, this is nowhere near anti-Semitism.