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Attempt to Cancel Exeter Conference Fails

Professor Richard Seaford, University of Exeter

On 2-3 October an academic conference was hosted by the University of Exeter as part of a

project funded by the (national) Arts and Humanities Research Council. The theme of the conference was 'Settler Colonialism in Palestine. It was followed by a one-day workshop on 'Subaltern Agency and Resistance in Settler Colonial Contexts: the case of the Naqab Bedouin.' It is important to understand how these events represent a serious defeat for the Zionist lobby and constitute a precedent that will make such academic conferences more difficult to sabotage in the future. Despite threats from various quarters, and pressure from the Board of Deputies, from the Jewish Leadership Council, and from 'high up within the government', the conference was not cancelled. Nor did they succeed in imposing speakers on the conference.

The Jewish Chronicle claimed that a compromise had been reached in which 'Pro-Israel speakers will provide a counter narrative' and that the University 'would invite two lecturers to present the Israeli position'. But in fact the agreement was, according to the University website, that the JLC nominate two participants 'to attend and participate in the conference in its current form' (i.e. without giving lectures). This was of course neither a concession nor a compromise. The two participants were entitled to 'attend and participate' anyway. All they had to do was register like anybody else. To present this as a 'compromise' was merely the University allowing the Zionists to save face. Moreover, they could also have applied to give papers, which would have been welcomed by the organisers. But only one 'Zionist' abstract was submitted, well after the deadline, and not on the theme of the conference.

The other element of the 'compromise' was the plan for another 'academic event' in the future in the form of a debate, co-organised by the University and the JLC. Such debates, with an agreed neutral format, are to be welcomed, as a way of breaking the media grip on the issue. The more we have of them the better.

It is possible to criticise Exeter management for negotiating with the Zionists at all, and for allowing them to save some face. But they are also to be congratulated for making no genuine concessions under enormous pressure. The conference sessions that I attended were not concerned with criticism of Israel, but rather with the question of the extent to which the settler-colonial paradigm applies to Palestine. For instance, the opening speaker, an expert in American settler-colonialism, said that he thought the paradigm could in some respects illuminate and in some respects occlude the issue. This kind of investigation is a normal part of the academic attempt to understand past and present. As I listened to the analytic discourse, involving leading experts from universities all round the world, it struck me as not just shocking but bizarre that anybody should have tried to ban the event. Defenders of Israel often claim that Israel is unfairly singled out. This conference was doing the opposite, considering Israel in relation to a paradigm that is also applied to the USA, Australia, South Africa, Algeria, and so on. But that too, it seems, is unacceptable.

The numerous contributions of the two Zionists to the discussion were respectfully listened to. The idea that any of them could have changed the mind of any of the (intelligent, well-informed) audience on anything whatsoever is preposterous.

The Proceedings of the conference will be published. Will the Zionists try to prevent their publication (why not?). The logic of their position also implies the banning of the academic Journal Settler Colonial Studies (albeit only those issues that mention Israel). The enemies of academic freedom generally have very little idea of what academic practice and values are. As it is, their failed attempt takes its place among many other counter-productive attempts to close down discussion of the issue of Israel-Palestine.

It is significant that the conference is the first conference of its kind (i.e. objected to by Zionists) to be hosted by a University Department. It passed off peacefully, and enhanced understanding. It makes the cancellation of the Southampton conference under Zionist pressure earlier this year look especially shameful. And it sets a precedent for many such peaceful and productive conferences in the future, which - like this one - will be open to all. One final, telling detail: Anybody who believed that the two Zionist participants were motivated by the spirit of academic debate would have been disappointed by their taking photographs - I am told - of some of the participants (without their consent), including a Palestinian.

Political dissent as 'extremism' under the PREVENT programme.

Les Levidow, Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC) and BRICUP

Pro-Palestine = extremist?

At a London school last summer, a boy was questioned by a police officer about the 'terrorist-like' views in his leaflets promoting a boycott of Israel; likewise his Free Palestine badge was 'extremist'. Moreover, the boy was advised that his tutor had a legal duty to report such views to the police (Hooper, 2015). This incident offers a window into the pervasive practices of the Home Office programme on Preventing Violent Extremism. Many parents have told their children to say nothing in classroom discussions on controversial issues, for fear that their comments may be reported to the police.

Higher education too has intimidated political debate as 'extremism'. Pro-Palestine meetings have undergone monitoring for 'extremist' views. In some places, staff from the university's PREVENT board, or a seconded police officer, sits in the front row at any Palestine event, thus deterring free expression (IHRC, 2015, Education workshop report). Some student groups have even been denied room bookings for meetings to discuss Palestine or the PREVENT programme itself. A conference on Institutional Islamophobia was planned for December 2014 at Birkbeck College, which cancelled the booking a few days beforehand on 'security' grounds - as raised by Camden Council's PREVENT officers. Although

these measures may not logically follow from any official guidance, they complement the British state's agenda to demonize pro-Palestine movements and deter political dissent, especially in public institutions.

Under the PREVENT programme, Muslims have been the main target. They have been monitored and reported for 'extremist' views that are seen as normal dissent if expressed by non-Muslims. Yet any group's criticism of UK foreign policy has been increasingly labelled and monitored as 'extremist'. What drives this programme? And how can an opposition movement stop it?

Monitoring 'extremism'

Under the government's Contest (Counter-Terrorism) Strategy, since 2008 the Home Office has funded a programme supposedly to 'Prevent Violent Extremism'. As its basic rationale, people espousing 'non-violent extremism' create an environment in which terrorists can operate and so promote 'violent extremism'. According to this conveyor-belt model, radicalisation pushes individuals from non-violent extremism to terrorism. The model comes from a psychiatrist and former CIA officer, arguing that violent radicalisation occurs within small groups 'where bonding, peer pressure, and indoctrination gradually changes the individual's view of the world' (Sageman, 2008: 84; though more recently he has questioned such a 'radicalisation' model).

On a similar rationale, the PREVENT programme has been designed to identify Muslims suspected of being or becoming 'radicalised'. The concept of 'vulnerable' individuals has been extended from schoolchildren to university students. Extremism has been officially defined as hostility to 'British values', in turn characterised as follows: 'democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind' (Home Office, 2011). What has all this meant in practice? Through the PREVENT programme, widespread surveillance has spread fear within Muslim communities and closed down spaces for political dissent. The programme has a self-fulfilling cycle: Muslim organisations outbid each other for resources, exaggerate 'radicalisation' amongst youth, reinforce policymakers' rationale and thus build careers in 'counter-radicalisation'.

Early on, the programme was widely denounced for violating privacy, undermining professional norms of confidentiality and degrading local democracy (Kundnani, 2009). As above, the official definition of extremism conflates universal human values with Britain, whose foreign policy regularly contradicts such values. Any Muslim highlighting this inconsistency or criticising UK foreign policy has been readily labelled as an extremist (Mohammed and Siddiqui, 2014).

Much broader than a Muslim issue, the PREVENT programme has expanded the state's power to undermine everyone's privacy, civil liberties and free expression. Community groups, voluntary organisations and public employees have been put under pressure to implement the programme by spying on service users, thus undermining their trust. Without opposing the programme altogether, Muslim groups have criticised it for undermining community initiatives: rather than engaging communities, the strategy fixates on ideology and deviance from 'British values' to identify so-called 'extremists' for police and governmental intervention. This policy perspective is based on a theorisation of radicalisation as a religious and political process rather than one related specifically to violence (Faith Matters, 2015: 5).

Intensifying the attack, the PREVENT programme was put on a statutory basis by the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. This imposes a legal obligation on public servants (teachers, lecturers, doctors, social workers, etc.) to inform the police about any person who may be 'radicalised' or express 'extremist' views. Public institutions must monitor such views and report them to Home Office representatives, who are embedded in local authorities and police forces. Abject compliance has many examples: The British Library has declined an offer to archive Taliban documents, for fear that staff might be arrested or prosecuted for terrorism (Sian, 2015). A Muslim student who read a book on terrorism was accused of being a potential terrorist (Ramesh and Halliday, 2015). And pro-Palestine activities have been targeted (see again the Introduction).

Perhaps elaborating the conveyor-belt model, the SOAS administration has proposed a description

of a typical student prone to radicalisation - namely, someone with a 'desire for political or moral change' or 'a need for identity, meaning and belonging'. The Students Union attacked this as 'menacingly vague', applicable to any SOAS student. It announced a boycott of the programme (Plant, 2015). Nevertheless SOAS is going ahead.

Intervening to sabotage the PREVENT programme

The shift to a statutory basis has provoked widespread protest against the PREVENT programme. In April the National Union of Teachers passed a critical motion. An oppositional conference was organised in June by the Islamic Human Rights Commission with other groups (IHRC, 2015). The Palestine Solidarity Campaign held an event to promote critical responses (PSC, 2015). Last year the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) warned that the legal duty 'risks undermining the academic freedom of institutions and the trust relationship between academic staff and their students'. Its May 2015 Congress voted to boycott the programme (UCU, 2015).

The Nation Union of Students has launched an opposition campaign, 'Students Not Suspects', initially with public events in three cities, including KCL on 14th October (NUS, 2015). Malia Bouattia, the NUS's black students officer, said: In bringing their battle 'for hearts and minds' – and against dissent – to spaces of education with the new Act, the government is inviting to our campuses the same brutality that plagues black and Muslim people at the hands of the police and state in wider society (quoted in McVeigh, 2015). Although boycott campaigns are crucial, abstention will not defeat the programme, especially given its statutory basis. This has been fiendishly designed for routine implementation, regardless of whether anyone thinks that it will avert terrorism or accepts its conveyor-belt model of terrorism. Even worse, legal requirements strengthen the drivers for institutional compliance.

Compliance has two main aspects, each warranting an intervention strategy against the PREVENT programme. First, each institution is required to train staff in monitoring and countering any signs of 'extremism'. When

London's Newham Council appointed Gaffar Hussain from the government-funded Quilliam Foundation as an adviser for such training, for example, school staff criticised his approach and blocked his return for subsequent sessions (IHRC, 2015, Education workshop report). Second, each staff member has a reporting duty, in turn triggering 'deradicalisation' sessions for 'vulnerable' students. Some students have been warned that they will be disciplined if questioning the rationale, i.e. failing to repent or modify their 'extremism'. Therefore effective opposition will need to go beyond boycott-as-abstention, towards a constant active intervention in the compliance activities. This will be necessary to sabotage the PREVENT programme, while also supporting anyone who may be disciplined for non-compliance. Such a campaign will require strategic discussion among staff, students, community groups and others.

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UCU (2015) Prevent agenda: conference motion, <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=7523#62>

Other resources.

'Together Against Prevent' pledge, togetheragainstprevent.org

Educators Not Informants, www.educatorsnotinformants.wordpress.com

PSC, 'Right to campaign, right to protest – briefing', <http://www.palestinecampaign.org/right-to-protest/>

Tory attack on local authority independence.

Jenny Morgan and Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi

Britain's Conservative government has announced [a new policy](#) to block local councils from choosing to boycott or divest from companies complicit in the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine. A statement on October 3 said the government would change procurement guidelines affecting local authorities in England and pension regulations in England and Wales in order to "stop the growing spread of militant divestment campaigns against UK defence and Israeli firms."

It says that "foreign nations" may only be targeted for boycott if the government has imposed "formal legal sanctions". The announcement brands Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, his deputy John McDonnell, a number of local authorities in England, "Labour-affiliated" unions UNISON and GMB, the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign as part of a "hard left", "politically motivated" "radical fringe" guilty of "poisoning community relations" by supporting the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement called for by Palestinians.

The government statement retails baseless allegations that the boycott movement targets Kosher products and Jewish films. It suggests that British Jews depend for their identity on supporting the state of Israel – a wrongheaded idea far more poisonous to community relations than a justice-based BDS campaign for human rights and respect for international law. The Conservatives have, to all intents and purposes, adopted wholesale the agenda of "politically motivated radical fringe" [Zionist groups](#) intent on outlawing boycott actions which they define as antisemitic.

Whatever one's attitude to BDS, the new government policy is alarming for all those concerned about the wider government agenda of curtailing freedoms in other areas of society, from

trade union rights, to lobbying by charities, to imposing a surveillance role on teachers and lecturers under the PREVENT strategy. The latter, with its focus on identifying individuals “vulnerable to radicalisation,” primarily among Muslims, is genuinely damaging to community relations. Although Scotland is not covered by the threatened restrictions on democratically elected local authorities, the Scottish National Party also comes under attack in the government statement for “strongly discouraging trade and investment from illegal settlements.” [PSC has noted](#) that this contradicts warnings to business from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) about the financial, legal and reputational risks of working with or in Israel’s illegal settlements.

The government statement is at least honest in expressing fears about the “threat” that human rights campaigners can cause to the UK military and defence industry, and its close relationship with Israel through the arms trade and military and security cooperation. This is the Tory response to growing support for campaigns uniting ethically concerned citizens who are opposed to both the international trade in instruments of mass killing and the Israeli state which buys them, sells them and uses them against Palestinians with impunity.

BRICUP will be working with other concerned organisations to defend the right of dissent from the policies of an increasingly repressive Westminster government.

Jeremy Corbyn and Palestine

Ghada Karmi

For the 32 years in which Jeremy Corbyn has been an MP he has been a consistent supporter of the Palestinians. He has visited Israel/Palestine nine times and addressed numerous demonstrations, rallies and pickets to express that support. Until recently his activities did not provoke a reaction from the pro-Israel lobby in this country because it regarded him as a loony lefty who supported all sorts of crazy causes, including that of Palestine, and could safely be ignored.

But ever since Jeremy Corbyn became a serious contender for leadership of the Labour Party, he has become a *bête noire* for the lobby and for many individual British Jews. The situation has only got worse since his election as leader on September 12. When he came out of the shadows, as the lobby would see it, and asserted his leadership with a massive popular support other politicians can only dream of, he has been subjected to personal attacks and a vituperative Zionist campaign supported by the right-wing press to discredit him.

So he has been dubbed an anti-semite for speaking at a Deir Yassin Remembered event partly organised by Paul Eisen. This man is widely perceived as a holocaust denier, which made Corbyn the victim of a smear campaign of guilt by association. He has been described as a terrorist sympathiser because he met members of Hamas (subsequently denied by them) and Hezbollah in parliament and called them “friends”. His “terrorist” associations have also included sharing a platform with the Palestinian activist, Diyab abu Jahsh, and calling Raed Salah, an Israeli Arab citizen involved in a resistance campaign against Israeli oppression, “honourable”. These allegations were so vicious as to put Corbyn on the defensive. He responded by saying that he shared platforms with many people, but it did not mean he shared their views. About his contacts with Hamas and Hezbollah, he asserted that in any peace negotiations one had to speak to all sides. He cited his contacts with Irish republicans in the search for a settlement in Northern Ireland which led to the Friday agreement. It hasn't made any difference, and he is still dubbed a friend of terrorists.

It is a pity that he was defensive at all. The organisations making these accusations needed to have been countered by a strong attack. As, for example, to question on what basis are Hamas and Hezbollah terrorists, rather than legitimate parties to any discussion about a solution to the conflict? The same applies to the Palestinian activist and to Sheikh Raed Salah, who is not accused of terrorism even in Israel. That would have forced the lobby to come up with answers that could have been challenged and its servility to a foreign state, Israel, exposed. He fared better when he took part in a panel at the JW3 Jewish centre in North London, on July 1st. As one of the four contenders for the Labour Party leadership at the time, he was asked how he would deal with Israel if he were elected. While the other three candidates vied with each other as to who was

the most abjectly subservient in his or her dealings with Israel -- including an astonishing admiration of the Balfour Declaration as the foundation on which Israel's democracy would be built -- Corbyn struck a dignified pose and gave a moderate answer no reasonable person could argue with. He said he supported the two-state solution, thought that Israel should not obstruct the Palestinian desire for freedom, and opposed arms sales to Israel while it continued with its current policies.

In fact and setting aside the Zionist hysteria that has surrounded Corbyn's support for the Palestinian cause, his views on the conflict are remarkably mild and not out of step with British government policy on this issue. He wishes to be a Labour leader who will facilitate peace between the two sides, based on the two-state solution, the Palestinian state to be created within the 1967 borders. For that reason, he deplores the election of a right wing government in Israel which he fears does not agree with this solution. He supported British recognition of Palestinian statehood and would lobby for that recognition internationally. He opposes Israel's violations of international humanitarian law, as in the detention of 1000 young people, of whom 360 are children under the age of 16, and also the detention without trial of adults. He deprecates the Gaza siege, and the harassment and humiliation of Palestinians under occupation. And he is against further building of the separation wall, and demands a settlement freeze.

Many Palestinians are much more radical than this. They see the two-state solution as now impossible, given Israel's settlement expansion all over the West Bank, and are talking increasingly of a one-state solution. They demand the removal of the separation wall in its entirety, and would like to see Israel taken to the International Criminal Court and indicted for war crimes. Thus, Corbyn's position is unexceptionable and there is no justification for the Zionist witch hunt, except on the basis that those not wholly subservient to Israel are automatically castigated as its enemies. Recognising the reality on the ground and telling the truth about it are not acceptable. Only the Zionist version can be considered.

If Corbyn is elected to be prime minister, as many hope he will, it will be first time that an open supporter of the Palestine cause is at the head of this country. For that, he will earn the gratitude and admiration of all Palestinians and their friends.

Notices

BRICUP is the **British Committee for the Universities of Palestine**.

We are always willing to help provide speakers for meetings. All such requests and any comments or suggestions concerning this Newsletter are welcome.

Email them to: newsletter@bricup.org.uk

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