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### Avi Benlolo: Universities quick to ban white supremacy, but do little to stop anti-Semitic speech



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AVI BENLOLO, NATIONAL POST | September 21, 2015 8:06 PM ET



An image from a tweet showing a White Students Union poster near the University of Toronto on Bloor Street. Christie Blatchford/Twitter

As the pages of the National Post and newspapers across Canada can attest, our universities continue to act as microcosms of our wider society. Nowhere does this axiom play out more acutely than in the realm of human rights.

Upon resuming classes this fall, Canadian students were confronted with propaganda posters promoting a “White Students Union” — a loaded phrase if ever there was one. Toronto universities clearly understood this tactic as an offensive and inappropriate ploy suggestive of white supremacy movements, and correctly pulled the posters down.

As a human rights advocacy organization, the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (FSWC) disagrees with divisive propaganda on Canadian campuses. We do support free speech, but with limitations on spreading hate and intolerance — particularly when it is directed toward one particular group of people. Unfortunately, many Canadian universities maintain a remarkable level of hypocrisy in deciding which groups are entitled to the level of empathy and understanding that lead to the tearing down of the above-mentioned posters; and nowhere is this hypocrisy worse than at York University in Toronto.

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In York’s Student Center hangs a pro-Palestinian poster, which promotes the use of violence against Israel and has been sanctioned by the university and the student union. Despite complaints by scores of Jewish students who feel victimized each time they see this poster, and requests to tear it down because it promotes violence and reinforces anti-Semitic attitudes already rampant at the university, Jewish students on campus continue to be subjected to the hatred implicit in this poster. On behalf of students concerned that their voices were not being heard, FSWC lodged the following (summarized) complaint:

“The subject of this complaint is the mural entitled ‘Palestinian Roots’ that is currently displayed in the York University Student Centre. The mural depicts a young man staring off at a bulldozer that is facing an olive tree. The scarf that hangs over his shoulder displays a Palestinian flag next to a borderless map of Israel. The man is seen holding rocks in his hands behind his back. The artist’s explanation states that the images represent the ‘defenceless, the antagonist and the other.’

“The symbolism and meaning behind these images is indisputable. To Jewish students and supporters of Israel, the mural represents a form of intimidation and warfare

extending from the highly anti-Israel and anti-Semitic climate on campus. It serves as justification for the violent rock-throwing that occurs daily in Israel against the Jewish community, and as support for the delegitimization of the State of Israel as indicated by the image of the map on the man's scarf. When viewed in context, (in the student centre of a university already overflowing with tension and hate related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, and where physically and emotionally violent incidents against Jewish and pro-Israel students have occurred), this mural is hardly innocuous."

**This poster is more than a mere piece of art — it is propaganda, and a clear call to murder.**

As of this past weekend, there have been at least 23 rock-throwing or Molotov-cocktail attacks against Israelis by Palestinians throughout the country; one large rock landed in a car right next to a baby in its car seat. Had its trajectory been slightly different, the baby would have been killed. This poster is more than a mere piece of art — it is propaganda, and a clear call to murder.

Logic would dictate that if the White Students Union posters must come down, so too should the Palestinian Roots poster. Standards for free speech should be applied in a consistent and non-discriminatory way. At York University, students feel there is a double standard employed both by student leaders and by the administration where Israel and Jewish students are concerned. At York and many other universities, tolerance for hate speech has actually increased — but only where Israel and the Jewish community are concerned.

I do not believe that university campuses should become bastions of hate propaganda of any kind. When one group feels assaulted year after year (as Jewish students on numerous university campuses do), it is symptomatic of rampant hate and discrimination, not free speech. When it comes to free speech, there should be an equal playing field for all — and university administrations must be held accountable if they promote inconsistent and discriminatory standards. York's reputation is in a precarious position; its administration should take immediate steps to do the right thing and tear the poster down.

National Post

***Avi Benlolo is the president and CEO of the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies***