

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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Illiberal, bewildering and worrying; three incidents are cause for concern - IRR

Three incidents last week reflect illiberal, bewildering and worrying thinking in South Africa.

First, seven Israeli academics have been “disinvited” from a five-day conference at Stellenbosch University from 5 December, entitled ‘Recognition Reparation Reconciliation: The Light and Shadow of Historical Trauma, due to “threats made to disrupt” the conference by Boycott Sanctions Disinvestment (BDS) and ten affiliate organisations. It’s a very large conference with over 200 presenters, so a threat of disruption is a nightmare.

Rector and Vice-Chancellor Prof. Wim de Villiers denies “disinviting” the speakers. He says that organiser Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela told them their names were removed from the itinerary, and that they were sent a letter of apology. Gobodo-Madikizela said “they have all since rescinded their participation at the conference and will no longer be part of the program”.

Indeed, their names are not on the programme. The ironies here are stark: a university compromising on its commitment to free speech due to the threat of disruption by a group whose modus operandi is to shut down free speech and whose fundamental aim is to achieve the disappearance of the Jewish state.

If any people could address the subject of the conference it would be the Israelis.

Only Prof. Thuli Madonsela, who lectures in law at Stellenbosch, spoke out against the boycott.

Second, the Johannesburg City Council has decided to rename Sandton Drive after Leila Khaled, a member of the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine and, as a participant in the Black September campaign, one of the hijackers (and the first female hijacker) of TWA 840 in 1969.

In 1970, Khaled was one of two who hijacked of EL Al 219. Her co-hijacker was killed and Khaled was overpowered while carrying two hand grenades. Khaled was briefly imprisoned in the United Kingdom, but was released as part of a prisoners-for-hostages swop.

Black September was the terrorist group which, in September 1972, took 11 Israeli athletes, coaches and officials hostage, which resulted in their deaths.

The renaming motion was proposed by the single council member from Al Ja'ama with the support of the ANC and the EFF.

This motion is grossly insensitive to many in the Jewish community. It venerates a person who had nothing to do with South African history and certainly isn't of any stature worthy of recognition. What's more, the street to be renamed has no political connotations.

Third, was the arrival of yet another Hamas delegation to South Africa. Hamas has been here before a number of times, feted by the ANC, and now has an office in Cape Town. Hamas's fundamental principle is the destruction of Israel and the creation of a single, Muslim, state in its place.

In view of this, the ANC must explain how it squares its supposed support for a two-state solution of the Israel/Palestine crisis with its support for Hamas. Why does Hamas have an office in South Africa? And what does it do from here?

These incidents collectively warn that anti-Jewish sentiment has been normalised in our society – in government, academia and politics. This concerns us.

Ends