



NEWS TORONTO & GTA

York University accused of allowing anti-Semitism to spread



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An anti-Israel mural hangs in the Student Centre at York University on Friday March 4, 2016.
(Stan Behal/Toronto Sun)

TORONTO - Shelley Yachaev has watched the anti-Israel propaganda at York University evolve over the four years she's been there from being very much in one's face to a well-crafted "strategic" effort that has infiltrated the entire system.

Yachaev, who moved to Canada from Israel at age 12 and is president of the Israeli Students Union at York, says "every little part" of the university has been infiltrated with anti-Semitism.

In fact, she says, some of her own professors have endorsed the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement — an international Palestinian-led movement that seeks to demonize the Jewish state.

This past October, the York Federation of Students (YFS) formed an official alliance with the Students against Israeli Apartheid group, she adds.

Complaints about the protests and the intimidation are mostly ignored, says Yachaev, who is pursuing a degree in human resources management.

“I don’t walk into anywhere at York (anymore) where I trust the fact I can speak freely,” she says.

York grad Zina Rakhamilova, now campus co-ordinator for the Stand With Us (in support of Israel) organization, says the YFS have made no secret in the past year of their support for anti-Israel rallies and protests, often appearing and participating themselves.

“It’s very difficult for Jewish students (at York) to have a full academic experience,” she said.

She adds that York happens to be one of the “most hostile campuses” in North American, but, sadly, Ryerson is not far behind.

Avi Benlolo, president of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, says York University today is a “very toxic environment” and with faculty — professors and librarians — also taking a firm stand on the BDS movement, the anti-Semitism is “just pervasive.”

Those students who feel strong ties to their Jewish identity are feeling “alienated and marginalized” on campus, he says.

“In the last year, the environment has gotten worse for Jewish students and faculty ... the administration and the president (Mamdouh Shoukri) have just let it happen,” Benlolo said.

The tensions came to a boil in the past two months over a mural situated in the Student Centre that depicts a well-muscled man wearing an Arab scarf (containing an image of an Israel without borders). The man, holding two stones behind his back, has set his gaze on an Israeli settlement under construction.

Calling the mural “pure hate,” film mogul Paul Bronfman recently withdrew the “thousands of dollars” of film equipment he provides to York film students, along with workshops and seminars, because Shoukri and his administrators refused to take it down.

A little more than a week ago, award-winning producer Robert Lantos also sent an open letter to Shoukri contending York has been transformed into “an incubator of hate and violence” against Jews and reprimanding the president for staying on the “sidelines” instead of taking a firm stand.

Benlolo says Bronfman’s decision to withdraw his funding has “entrenched” the administration even more — even though York has lost funding support from 90% of the Jewish community in Canada.

Efforts to reach Gayle McFadden, v-p operations, and Methilen Mathipalan, president of YFS — whose organization owns the mural, were unsuccessful. The two did not acknowledge my detailed emailed questions or my personal visit to their offices Friday.

But Shoukri sent an extensive response, refuting contentions that he hides behind free speech.

He said he’s concerned that any student — Jewish or from another group — would feel “excluded or unwelcome” and he takes this “very seriously.” He adds that he’s committed to a review of existing university policies and the Code of Student Rights and has asked the exec of the Student Centre to establish procedures for hearing complaints from students about use of the public space.

He insisted the “overwhelming majority” of donors have reaffirmed their ongoing support for York.

'UNWILLING TO TAKE MURAL DOWN'

The mural at the centre of controversy for the past two months is called Palestinian Roots and is hanging near a spiral staircase just outside the cafeteria of the York University Student Centre.

It was painted by former student Ahmad Al Abid, who claims on the York Federation of Students (YFS) website that his inspiration for the piece is the ongoing issue in Palestine “where illegal settlement expansions have become common.”

The mural was supposed to come down this past September.

Zina Rakhamilova, campus co-ordinator for the Stand with Us organization, said the mural, which got put up during her final year at York and is owned by YFS, has not come down because the YFS is so actively involved in anti-Israel activities.

“They’re unwilling to take the mural down despite all the controversy surrounding it,” she says. “YFS is willing to let their own constituents feel marginalized in order to just build this narrow-minded political agenda.”

But Lorne Sossin, who is Jewish and dean of the law faculty at York, said not all Jewish students feel the same way about the art in the Student Centre. In fact, he says some he has spoke with “feel at home at York” and believe there are “supportive environments” at the university in which to study.

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