

Canadian 'Special Envoy' to give keynote address at settlement university

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By Yves Engler

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Irwin Cotler has long been an aggressive proponent of Israeli apartheid. But the crass nature of his anti-Palestinian activism may be thwarting the efficacy of his position as Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism, which is designed to not-so subtly protect Israel from criticism.

On Monday I discovered that Cotler is scheduled to deliver the keynote address at an upcoming conference hosted by Ariel University. Deep in the West Bank, Ariel is on land stolen from surrounding Palestinian villages in 1978 and the university claims “a major role in the development of the [colony] of Ariel.” Speaking at Ariel University normalizes Israel’s de facto annexation of the West Bank, which the Canadian government officially considers in violation of international law. It also further exposes the hollowness of Cotler’s stated support for “two states for two people”.

Ariel University and its staff have been the target of multiple boycotts. In 2011, 165 Israeli academics announced they wouldn’t engage with the university since, “Ariel is not part of the sovereign territory of Israel.” The university is excluded from receiving funds from a number of European scientific bodies and in 2018 a group of prominent international physicists called on fellow academics not to attend a conference at Ariel University that would “normalise the occupation of Palestinian territories.” For their part, a number of Palestinian academic bodies have asked scholars to “withdraw any existing recognition of and end all institutional relations with Ariel University.”

News of Cotler’s speech circulated widely on Twitter. Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), Independent Jewish Voices and the Coalition of Canadian Palestinian Organizations all called on Cotler to withdraw from his November 15 speaking engagement. “It is absolutely scandalous that a Canadian Special Envoy would legitimize Israel’s illegal settlement presence by giving an honorary address to a university located on stolen Palestinian land,” noted Michael Bueckert, Vice President of CJPME, in a press release.

The Ariel speech is the latest in a string of controversies over Cotler that weaken the special envoy’s ability to deflect growing criticism of Israel’s system of Jewish supremacy.

At the start of the year Cotler hired an individual found by a McGill University inquiry to have fabricated claims of antisemitism to smear Palestine solidarity activists. With taxpayer funds Cotler hired Noah Lew as a Policy and Program Analyst to support his work. But, as I

recently detailed, Lew may be the only Canadian shown by an official university inquiry to have fabricated claims of antisemitism to smear Palestine solidarity activists.

A few days after four members of a Muslim family were killed in a hate crime in London, Ontario last June, Canada's Special Envoy on Combatting Antisemitism retweeted a Toronto Sun article titled, "There is no Islamophobia in Canada." Following criticism, Cotler deleted the tweet, claiming it was an "accident".

Despite criticism, Cotler maintains public ties with close friend Alan Dershowitz who was Donald Trump's lawyer and an important figure in the Jeffrey Epstein pedophilia/rape scandal. Accused of raping two of Epstein's sex slaves, Dershowitz remains a "senior fellow" at Cotler's Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights.

A speech Cotler delivered at the University of Toronto's Temerty Faculty of Medicine in January prompted 45 faculty members to send the dean a letter saying the event "reinforced anti-Palestinian racism." The professors complained about Cotler's promotion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) anti-Palestinian working definition of antisemitism.

Amidst a protest against racism by Palestinian students at an Ottawa high school, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) reportedly postponed a workshop Cotler was scheduled to deliver last month. OCDSB staff were concerned about his promotion of the anti-Palestinian IHRA.

Cotler has a long anti-Palestinian history. He backed attacks that left nearly 4,000 dead in Gaza in 2014 and 2009 as well as Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006. Cotler has sought to pressure the International Criminal Court against investigating Israeli war crimes, supports moving Canada's embassy to Jerusalem and attends fundraisers for the explicitly racist Jewish National Fund.

While he's generally benefited from his anti-Palestinian activism, Cotler should regret agreeing to speak at Ariel university. The backlash has already been significant and it is likely to grow. While they would not say so publicly, Liberal government officials are likely unhappy with Cotler for exposing them to unnecessary criticism.

Cotler could simply withdraw from the Ariel conference, but the Special Envoy would be loath to concede to pressure from antiracists. On the other hand, if the controversy grows it undercuts the effectiveness of the special envoy position. It's of little use if those paying attention conclude the special envoy post is simply designed to deflect from criticism of Israeli apartheid.

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