

# Members of the Western New York Peace Center Use Guise of Peace to Enable Hatred and Misunderstanding in the Middle East

Results of a Study by Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, Buffalo Chapter

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## Background on SPME's Buffalo Chapter

Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) is a nonprofit organization composed of academic faculty members worldwide, with 20 university chapters (see [www.spme.net](http://www.spme.net)). Representing many political persuasions, our members share the belief that the anti-Israeli distortions and slanders increasingly promoted on campuses, often through tendentious characterizations of Israel as the source of the Middle East's problems, serve to poison debate and undermine prospects for peace.

Members of the academic community in Buffalo established the local chapter after an anti-Semitic speech at the University at Buffalo in April 2004 by Norman Finkelstein, who was sponsored in part by the Western New York Peace Center. Our chapter includes members from the University at Buffalo (UB), Erie Community College, SUNY College at Buffalo, and SUNY at Brockport, along with community supporters.

This document expresses our organization's concern about the Western New York Peace Center (WNYPC), which has become a forum for virulently, sometimes militantly, anti-Israeli views, often directed at students and the academic community. WNYPC expresses its views at formally sponsored or co-sponsored college events, or through statements of its members, some of whom are college faculty members and use their academic status to propound their views. Violating academic traditions of honest debate and scholarly integrity, these activities promote hatred and contribute to the perpetuation of violence in the Middle East.

## Our General Assessment

From the WNYPC timeline provided, we conclude as follows.

1. WNYPC has consistently taken a position of strident advocacy for one side, the anti-Israeli side, in a complex conflict that has lasted at least 60 years. It has consistently sponsored speakers who provide selective and distorted information meant to blame Israel for the conflict. It has not blamed Arab states or Palestinian groups for persistent refusal to accept sovereignty alongside Israel.
2. WNYPC members and speakers ignore Israel's peace offers and sacrifices for peace, ignore the context of terrorist war against Israel, ignore relentless states of war maintained by most Arab states and Iran against Israel, ignore the plight of Israeli citizens living in fear for decades, serve as apologists for racist and annihilationist

groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, and ignore atrocities by repressive dictatorial regimes like Iran and Syria. They ignore the fact that Israel's Arab citizens have full civil rights, benefits, and electoral freedoms, in contrast to Arab citizens' plight in most Arab states.

3. WNYPC's extraordinarily disproportionate targeting of Israel constitutes a further bias. This targeting serves to obscure genocidal activities and catastrophic human rights violations, such as the genocide in Darfur, North Korea's repression of its citizens, China's repressive occupation of Tibet, Saddam Hussein's ethnic cleansing of the Marsh Arabs, murders of tens of thousands of moderate Muslims in Algeria, Iranian persecution of Bahais and gays, and gender apartheid in many Arab states.
4. We do not know whether WNYPC positions are widely supported by its members in general or are rather promoted by members associated with its Israel/Palestine Task Force.
5. We are concerned about the links between Western New York's Network of Religious Communities and WNYPC. We request that the Network explicitly state whether it condones the tendentiously anti-Israeli stand taken by WNYPC.
6. Some WNYPC activities have been implicitly anti-Semitic (in holding Jews to a higher standard than the rest of the world despite the wars and siege that Israel faces) and explicitly anti-Semitic (in expressing or condoning neo-Nazi concepts of Jewish conspiracy). In effect, WNYPC activities promote misunderstanding, hatred, ongoing siege, and permanent conflict.
7. We conclude that the Peace Center, despite its name, has violated its mission as a peace organization. It has become so thoroughly partisan that in effect it has incited hatred, enabled militancy, and undermined peace.

#### The Peace Center Record on the Arab/Iranian-Israeli Conflict

- Undated document still being distributed in early 2006: The "Western New York Peace Center's Statement on the Israel/Palestine Conflict," uses inflammatory language and highly selective and distorted information to advocate cessation of US support for Israel. The document:
  - Repeats discredited claims that Israel perpetrated war crimes in Jenin on the West Bank (careful investigations since then have shown the care with which Israel minimized civilian losses and put its own soldiers at risk).
  - Impugns the Oslo Peace Process and declares Israel the impediment to peace, while failing to mention the Israeli offers of peace through the offer of 90-97% of the West Bank and Gaza. This was an offer that the Palestinian Authority rejected in 2000 with no counteroffer, while the Authority condoned and permitted—at the very height of the Israeli peace offer—terrorist outrages against civilians.

- Ignores the context of terrorist war against Israel, the pervasive anti-Israeli incitement practiced in Arab media and education, the well-documented popularity in Arab countries of Israel's elimination, and the ongoing declared states of war by Israel's many enemies.

WNYPC has refused to revise this document despite friendly offers of documentation by members of the Western New York Jewish community.

- November 11, 2003: At a panel debate at Daemen College, WNYPC member Edward Cuddy said that Israel bears responsibility for the Middle East conflict, demonized Israel, and omitted context of war and terrorism against Israel.
- April 28, 2004: WNYPC, along with UB's Graduate Group in Marxist Studies and Arab and Muslim student groups, sponsored a speech delivered at the University at Buffalo by Norman Finkelstein. The speech prompted the Buffalo Board of Rabbis and Buffalo Chapter of the American Jewish Committee to write letters of complaint to the UB administration.
  - At that speech, Finkelstein:
    - Claimed that the Holocaust literature since the 1960s has been concocted by Jews to excuse the Israeli oppression of Palestinians;
    - Ridiculed Jewish authors including Elie Wiesel and Jewish institutions including the Simon Wiesenthal Center
    - Claimed that Israelis were trying to turn themselves into an Aryan race and that the Jewish name "Ari" (which means "lion" in Hebrew) stands for "Aryan"
  - Finkelstein is known for his view that Holocaust writings are meant to make money for Jews; for writing that one or two isolated cases of fabricated Holocaust memoirs represent what the Holocaust literature is all about; for supporting anti-Israeli terrorist organizations; and for calling American Jews "parasites."
  - He is celebrated by neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups. He has collaborated with Latuff, a neo-Nazi cartoonist, who recently won second prize in Iran's Holocaust-denial cartoon contest for showing Harvard Professor Alan Dershowitz masturbating in front of a scene of dead Lebanese civilians, while a pictured television set displayed the Star of David.
  - Finkelstein was warmly introduced by WNYPC member and UB Professor James Holstun, who, after the lecture, sent a letter (posted on Finkelstein's web page) praising him for his "superb" lecture.
- April 21, 2005, WNYPC co-sponsored a presentation at Buffalo State College by Nadia Hijab, director of the Palestine Center in Washington, DC, and co-founder of the US Campaign to End the Israel Occupation. Hijab urged students to punish Israel through economic, cultural, and ideological isolation. She praised Arafat; dismissed criticism of suicide bombers.

- May 2005, Colin Eager, Executive Director of the WNYPC in letter to Buffalo News urged that peace activists place high priority on punishing Israel; compared Israel to South Africa.
- November 17, 2006. Joanna Drzewieniecki wrote on behalf of the WNYPC urging attendance at a presentation to be held the next day by Allison Weir as part of a fund raiser by Arab and Muslim students. Weir is known for silently showing a series slides of dead or injured Palestinians. She omits the context of Israel's exceptional efforts to reduce Palestinian civilian casualties (despite explicit terrorist targeting of Israeli civilians) while having to protect itself against implacable enemies. Funds were raised for the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund, whose director politicizes the organization by promoting anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist ideas of Jewish world influence. The group has received assistance from The Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, Global Relief Foundation, and The International [Islamic] Relief Organization--all of which were closed down by the U.S. government for funding terrorist groups.
- May 22, 2006: WNYPC sponsored John Lloyd to speak at the Network of Religious Communities. On July 20, 2006, in a commentary broadcast on Buffalo's NPR station WBFO, Lloyd vehemently attacked Israel, accusing it of "herding people [in Gaza] into camps and using them as target practice."
- October 9, 2006: In a letter in the Buffalo News, former WNYPC director Walter Simpson accused the "local Israel lobby" of promoting media censorship.
- October 10, 2006. WNYPC co-sponsors Phyllis Bennis, co-founder of US campaign to end the Israeli Occupation, in a talk at the University at Buffalo, with students invited to attend from UB academic classes.
  - Bennis blamed Israel for Middle East conflict, for misery among Palestinians, and for alleged atrocities in Iraq. She called for pressure against Israel; dismissed questioner's concern about indoctrination of Arab children into hatred; gave no credit for Israeli withdrawal from Gaza or other Israeli peace initiatives; ignored context of terrorism and multinational enmity against Israel
  - In an interview published shortly afterward in the Buffalo weekly "Artvoice," Bennis accused Israeli policy of being driven by racism; claimed Israelis discriminate against African Jews (despite Israeli airlift to rescue Ethiopian Jews); disregarded Israel's democratic record; made distorted accusations about the Israeli educational system; made tendentious and exaggerated accusations about causes of the Palestinians refugee crisis in the Israeli War of Independence; falsely accused Israel of preventing Arab Israelis from serving in the armed forces; and even attacked Israeli culture and cuisine.

## Conclusions

The root causes of the war are the Arab and Iranian rejection of Israel's right to exist; rejection of a two-state solution in which Israel would be allowed to live in peace within secure borders; acts of aggression against Israel and its citizens; and imposition of a constant state of siege against Israel. A most egregious rejection occurred at the peak of the Oslo peace process, when Israelis offered a political solution, including the West Bank and Gaza for Palestinian statehood, only to be met with a new round of aggression against Jews. Leaders of Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas now once again threaten to liquidate Israel as a nation and its Jewish citizens as a people. Such threats, when accompanied by the terrorist murders of Israeli civilians, constitute genocidal acts under international law—yet these are acts that the WNYPC has never condemned.

The critics that WNYPC has sponsored in Buffalo forgive the organizations that plot Israel's elimination and engage in genocidal acts against Israelis. And they forgive the countries that shelter the perpetrators, though these countries practice totalitarianism, militarism, human rights violations, oppression of women, suppression of minorities, and indoctrination of children into hatred. WNYPC ignores this context, while obsessively attacking only Israel.

WNYPC claims on its web page that it works “toward a future without violence in all its manifestations [sic] and toward a future without bigotry, oppression, intolerance, and exploitation.” It claims to do so by “Encouraging people to envision, create and use nonviolent solutions to conflict,” and “Providing a meaningful and active response to intolerance, bigotry and violence.”

However, its record belies these claims. Through its virulently anti-Israeli activities and its lack of even-handedness, WNYPC has taught intolerance and bigotry, exacerbated hatred, and espoused ideas that perpetuate violence in the Middle East. Despite such disgraceful behavior by some members of WNYPC, the Buffalo Chapter of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East hopes that some members of WNYPC are genuinely committed to the pursuit of peace and justice.

In keeping with the view that progress toward peace requires interaction between adversaries, SPME remains open to dialog. However, dialog is hopeless with intransigent promoters of hatred. Hence, SPME has a precondition: WNYPC must take a first step toward dissociating itself from promoters of hatred, by explicitly and unambiguously stating its apology for its co-sponsorship of Norman Finkelstein's talk in Buffalo and stating its abhorrence of the bigoted views that Finkelstein expounds.

With such a start, additional steps could include (1) expectation of Palestinian leaders to acknowledge Israel's right to exist in secure borders, (2) condemnation of terrorism, in which terrorism is understood as a specifically definable kind of war crime committed by non-state entities, (3) a resolution condemning suicide bombing as a crime against humanity, (4) condemnation of the teaching of national and religious hatred by some schools, religious institutions, and media organizations in the Arab world and (5) condemnation of Iran's genocidal threats against Israel.

Academic Signatories from Western New York

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Isaac Ehrlich, SUNY and UB Distinguished Professor, Economics; Melvin H. Baker  
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Gerhard Falk, Professor, Sociology, SUNY College at Buffalo

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