

Report of Richard Falk Book Launch

I attended the book launch of Richard Falk's *Palestine's Horizons* on Monday at LSE in NAB 1.04 on 20 March.

The room was full and entry was well and politely controlled by LSE security staff. Richard's presentation was heard in reasonable peace as was Chris Doyle's response.

I was the first member of the audience called to ask a question, which was about the impact of the IHRA definition of antisemitism on the ability to have events critical of Israel and to ask Richard and Chris how we can adopt measures to protect that necessary space and maintain free debate. I was constantly interrupted while I was asking my question by members of the audience and this so disrupted the flow of the meeting that I did not receive a considered response from the speakers.

The next people called to ask questions were all passionate defenders of Israel who did not engage at all with Richard's argument but was a mixture of ad hominem abuse and a series of complaints that no one who agreed with them was on the platform: they appeared to have no sense of the difference between a book launch and a debate. They reviled the speakers for what they mysteriously perceived as attempting to indoctrinate vulnerable students and thus disrespected our students by denying their ability to evaluate the arguments they heard for themselves.

Richard attempted to respond to their interventions but they constantly and loudly interrupted him. They deployed no argument against Richard's analysis of Israel as an Apartheid state but insulted him as antisemite while never providing any evidence for that very hurtful characterisation of a Jew.

There was a small group in the room who appeared to have no agenda but to prevent any serious engagement with Richard's interesting and important perspective, albeit it is not one that should not be critiqued and Richard's record as a teacher demonstrates he welcomes serious contest of his ideas.

Mary Kaldor had great difficulty in maintaining any order in the face of this intolerant behaviour. She asked a person two thirds of the way back in the room to ask a question who, unknown to Mary, was Gilad Atzmon. Atzmon is a controversial person who is considered to exhibit antisemitism not just by Zionists but also by many supporters of Palestinian rights. Atzmon is an Israeli who has renounced Judaism and does not consider himself a Jew. While Atzmon's question was not, as far as I could hear it above the shouting by the disrupters, out of order although it advanced an argument I do not support. It was later reported that he made antisemitic comments towards some people at the back of the room but, sitting at the front, I did not hear them and they would have also been inaudible to Mary and the speakers so they have no culpability in not intervening to halt any unacceptable behaviour.

A student who recounted his experience of visiting the Occupied West Bank received only insults and derision from the disrupters who were unwilling to allow any narrative other than their own.

The disruption steadily increased in intensity and eventually Mary asked LSE security staff to intervene.

This was a difficult event for Mary and the organised disruption greatly reduced the benefit the audience could gain from engaging with such a distinguished and knowledgeable speaker. Their intention of the Israel defenders was not just to disrupt this event but, as is apparent from the partisan reporting dependent on their accounts in the Jewish press, to establish a narrative that addresses by Falk are so unruly that other Universities should refuse to host them on public safety grounds. This is evidenced by the item in today's Daily Headlines

Date: 21/03/2017 23:30

Jewish students angry over treatment at LSE meeting

Snippet: *Officials at the **London School of Economics** have launched an investigation after a public lecture on the Middle East conflict descended into acrimony, with a clash between Jews in the audience and the anti-Israel musician Gilad Atzmon. Mr Atzmon, who has described...*

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The event was stewarded with discipline and professionalism by LSE's security staff, which is what I have come to expect from Paul Thornberry's team.

Mike Cushman

23 March 2017