

## Face off in Vari Hall

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Israeli and Palestinian supporters hold simultaneous rallies at Vari Hall

Pro-Palestinian Daniel Freeman-Maloy (left) and Pro-Israeli Mark Rootenberg (right) are two of many demonstrators who faced off at Vari Hall on Feb. 12

Ethnic tensions at York University continued to escalate as students on opposing sides of the Israel-Palestine conflict met in Vari Hall. On Feb. 12, pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian student groups held simultaneous protests with only a wall of campus security guards separating both sides. Students in solidarity with the Palestinians stood together to contribute to what they call a global movement that asks international governments to support a boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel. "The world has watched over the course of recent months as Israel not only brutally assaulted Gaza — killing 1,300, wounding many more and destroying 22,000 buildings in a territory that was already devastated — but also then moved to impose a siege that is effectively starving Palestinians," said Palestinian supporter Daniel Freeman-Maloy.

"In this context there is an urgent need for international action to impose constraints on the Israeli state so that it ceases these violent policies and its policies of occupation and discrimination." Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA) member Hala Farah said the pro-Palestinian demonstrators are asking York University president Mamdouh Shoukri to release a statement condemning Israel's bombing of educational institutions in Gaza.

A clash of ideologies York security forms a human barrier between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian student protesters. "Our most important goal here on campus is to promote an academic boycott of educational institutions in Israel. By implementing an academic boycott against Israeli institutions, we can pressure the Israeli government to stop the atrocities they are committing in Gaza," Farah said. Jewish student groups at York University, including Hillel at York and Hasbara Fellowships at York, organized a counter-demonstration in response to the pro-Palestinian rally held by SAIA. Aaron Rosenberg, co-president of Hasbara Fellowships at York, said Palestinian supporters are spreading fear among Jewish students at York University. "SAIA and other groups that want to spread hate on this campus decided to hold a protest to intimidate and harass Jewish and Israeli students. Jewish groups decided to stand up and say we're not going to take this type of terror on campus."

Not all members of the Jewish community, however, feel threatened by Palestinian supporters.

"This isn't a Jewish versus Palestinian conflict. There are a lot of Jews in the world in growing numbers who oppose Israel's oppression of Palestine. The Jews who are afraid on campus, I think, are afraid of the extreme pro-Israel lobby. They are afraid of expressing their opinion. They feel that they might be shunned. I think that's the real fear going on, not fear of Palestinians," said Andy Lehrer, a member of the group Independent Jewish Voices. "The only time I've experienced hatred because I was Jewish was when I attend a counter-demonstration against a pro-Israel rally, and they've said, 'You're not really Jewish' and 'Blow yourselves up,'" he said. Palestinian supporters then marched to the office of the York University Foundation — the university's fundraising arm — to present a letter asking them to provide more transparency in their financial transactions.

Freeman-Maloy criticized Hillel and Hasbara for creating an atmosphere that worked to drown out the voices of Palestinian supporters. "There is a constituency, in this case organizations like Hillel and their associates off campus, who react fanatically to any concern being expressed for Palestinian human rights and any criticism being made of Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity. Here we saw a demonstration trying to bring attention to these crimes, confronted with a counter-demonstration that seeks to make it impossible to hear speeches and to make it easier to sideline the issue by making the demonstration seem unpleasant so people ignore it," he said. Jewish students have complained of alleged increases in anti-Semitism at York University in recent weeks.

"I think it's an incredibly violent protest. I think that the intimidation factor is anti-Semitic, and I think it's anti-Zionist," Rosenberg said. Police were not called and there were no arrests made. Samuel Nithiananthan, a second-year political science student who attended the rally, denied Rosenberg's allegations that Palestinian supporters were engaging in anti-Semitic behaviour. "This is not something against Jewish people. This is against the killing of the people in Palestine. This is against the Israeli government, not the Jewish people," he said. Rosenberg accused SAIA of spreading the message that Israel did not have the right to exist. He also accused minority groups supporting Palestine of supporting terror. "The protest is inherently anti-Zionist. Their message is to destroy the Israeli state and Israeli Jewish people. Anti-Zionist is being against the Jewish state, being against the Jewish right to have a homeland and their right to exist," Rosenberg said. "I think anybody that came to support the Palestinian protest came here to promote terror, to promote hatred. I don't care where you are from, your ethnicity, your background. That will not be tolerated." SAIA spokesperson Adonis El-jamal disagrees.

"Palestinians are not questioning a Jewish homeland. They just want equal rights just like Jewish people

want," El-jamal said.

"We are trying to say that Zionism is different from Judaism. Zionism is a political ideology that hinges on the expulsion of the indigenous people of Palestine, who are the Palestinians. It is not rooted in religion; it uses religion to further political ambition," he said. Israeli supporters claim they want peace and that they support Palestine's right to exist. "I think that Palestinians have a right to exist as a state. I believe the Palestinian people have territory. There is no occupation of Gaza and in majority of places in the West Bank," Rosenberg said. "The problem remains that the Palestinian leadership have not built an infrastructure for a state." Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a military campaign against Hamas in the Gaza strip in December 2008. Israel stated the strikes were in response to repetitive rocket and mortar attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel. The IDF targeted Hamas bases and police training camps. Civilian infrastructure, including mosques, houses and schools, were also attacked. "What we have seen over the years is that there has been a direct considerate effort to destroy Palestinian infrastructure. When Gaza was under siege, where no medical supplies, no food rations or no other outside aid was being supported, it was a direct attack on Palestinian infrastructure," El-jamal said.

Palestinian supporters questioned the motives of Israel supporters who came dressed in IDF paraphernalia.

"When people are speaking of peace and wearing the paraphernalia affiliated with armed forces that are engaged in ongoing crimes against humanity, those statements ring quite hollow and can essentially be dismissed as propaganda," Freeman-Maloy said. Rosenberg defended the choice of clothing. "IDF is a peaceful organization. I think that Jewish students need to stand together behind their army that protects them," Rosenberg said.