

Jul 11, 2024

To: Ebrahim Osman-Mowafy | President of the Oxford Union Society

I am responding to your invitation to participate in the series of debates that the Oxford Union is organising on the application of the labels “apartheid” and “genocide” with respect to the more than 190 nation-states that are members of the United Nations, including the UK, Iran, France, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar, Spain, and Egypt.

Although your invitation refers only to Israel, I assume that the Oxford Union would not contribute once again to poisonous hatred by joining those who immorally single-out Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people, for demonization. The over 30 nation-states that identify themselves as Christian, many with official churches funded by the state budget and featuring crosses on their flags, or 56 that declare themselves as Islamic including membership in Organization of Islamic Cooperation, would be appropriate topics for debates on claims of discrimination against ethno-national or religious minorities or similar terms.

The cover letter that accompanied the invitation referenced the infamous 1933 Oxford Union debate that voted in favour of the motion “That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country,” citing this positively as part of “the tradition of confronting the boldest questions of our time.” That tradition is also described as exploiting the Oxford Union as a platform for crude political propaganda. The histories of this event highlight the fact that the debate took place shortly after Hitler became the German leader, and the Nazis launched the actions and laws targeting the Jewish population. Winston Churchill described the Union’s behaviour in 1933 as an “abject, squalid, shameless avowal... It is a very disquieting and disgusting symptom.” Among many other responses, Oxford Professor Alfred Zimmern wrote to the Union president who presided over the travesty: “I hope you do penance every night and every morning for that ill starred Resolution. ...” A repetition of this notorious history, recalled with disdain almost a century later, is surely not your intention.

Your letter also cites the 1962 debate - “The Creation of the State of Israel is One of the Mistakes of the Century”. To the extent that this event is remembered, it is an early example of “the new antisemitism” in which the centuries-old theological hate practiced in the framework of Christianity and Islam and directed at individual Jews has been replaced by attacks against the Jewish collective in Israel. The gratuitous labels of “apartheid” and “genocide” add to this edifice, and some might conclude that the leaders and members of the Oxford Union seek to repeat and reinforce the travesties of 1933 and 1962.

Other terms in your cover letter include settlements, barriers, military tactics and policies, etc but, notably, there is no mention of Palestinian terrorist atrocities or repeated declarations of genocidal intentions, also from the Iranian regime – further examined below. The letter also cites “findings [sic] from Human Rights groups and United Nations Reports, concerning Israeli conduct ...” highlighting the complicity of these ignoble institutions in the campaigns of lies and political warfare that accompany the brutality of the attacks against Israeli civilians.

Additional questions arising on the debates you are planning concern the terms of reference – specifically the heinous crimes of “apartheid” and “genocide.” The former was coined and applied exclusively to the notorious South African regime. The cynical attempt to mis-apply the “racism” and “apartheid” propaganda labels to Israel and Zionism began under the Soviet Union and Stalin in the 1950s, in alliance with the members of the Arab League. Clearly, the multi-generational Arab-Israeli conflict, including the failed invasion of 1948 by 5 Arab states with the explicit goal of eliminating Israel, has no commonality with South Africa. The attempts to twist the principles of human rights and construct pseudo-international law to weaponize the term trivialize the actual suffering of millions of people under South African apartheid – a moral stain which the Oxford Union, one would hope, would avoid.

The word “genocide” was created in reference to the systematic and mass killing committed by the Nazis, primarily of the Jewish population in Germany and all the territories that fell under control of the German and their antisemitic allies. It has subsequently been applied regarding Cambodia, Rwanda, and Myanmar. Under the façade of international law, and reflected in your proposed debate headline, this term is now exploited to delegitimize responses to military aggression, asymmetric warfare and atrocities directed at civilian populations, such as committed by Hamas and its allies. In contrast, the stream of declarations from Hamas and from the Iranian regime on the intention to destroy Israel (including a digital countdown clock in Tehran), accompanied by extensive military preparations and attacks by the Hezbollah proxy forces, are de facto examples of genocidal objectives. Therefore, in addressing the appropriateness of the “genocide” and “apartheid” labels, the Oxford Union has a number of dimensions and cases to consider and compare.

Lastly, in addressing the leaders and members of the Oxford Union, I express the deep concern that many of us have regarding the [attacks against Jewish students and faculty at Oxford University](#), and ask what you are doing to effectively counter this ugly display of abusive power.

In accordance with “the tradition of confronting the boldest questions of our time,” the Oxford Union would be well advised to address this question: This house recognises that its own history of Jew-hatred in different forms is fundamentally immoral and offers its apologies.

I look forward to your considered response,

Prof. Gerald M. Steinberg