

Hundreds Attend Program on Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

Written by John Chadwick | SAS Senior Writer



Jack Shaheen is an authority on images of Arabs and Muslims in popular culture.

Faculty Focusing on the Connections Between Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia

An unusual public program focusing on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia drew nearly 400 people Monday night to Traves Hall in the Douglass Campus Center.

"Oh my, look at this crowd!" said Clement Price, a Rutgers Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor at the Newark Campus, who served as moderator of the event. "At Newark, we tend to think not very much goes on in New Brunswick, but we will have to revise our impressions."

The October 17th event—"[Going Viral: Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and the Role of the Media](#)"—reflected what the organizers said was an urgent need to inject reason, tolerance, and thoughtfulness into an increasingly rancorous conversation taking place on college campuses, in the media, and in the political arena.

"The goal was to raise the discourse to a much higher level than it had been heretofore," said Nancy Sinkoff, chair of the Jewish Studies Department. "As academicians and scholars who are deeply invested in tolerance, we want to make sure we project that onto the community."

The event featured two nationally-renowned speakers, [Jack G. Shaheen](#), and [Kenneth Stern](#).

Shaheen, a professor emeritus at Southern Illinois University, told the audience he had been studying how Arabs are portrayed in popular culture since the mid-1970s.

"At that time, all things Arab were considered vile, despicable," he said. "It's like a poison virus that in one way or another has infected our hearts and our minds."

But he said it was after the 9/11 attacks that Islamophobia really emerged, and it was aided and abetted by popular culture.

"Not only were all Muslims (considered) guilty, but American Arabs and American Muslims were tossed into the mix," he said. "Why? Shows like "24" and "Sleeper Cell." Special interest group that have an agenda to demonize all things Islamic, all things Arab."

Stern, the American Jewish Committee's specialist on anti-Semitism and hate groups, said there's a need to study and better understand how hate develops in a person.

"We know much too little about how hate works," he said. "Hatred really is a normative part of human experience. As long as there have been human beings, we have had the capacity to divide and define the other; vilify that group, and sometimes that can lead to genocide."

Stern said anti-Semitism is typically expressed as a conspiracy theory.

"It's a conspiracy theory that charges Jews with harming non-Jews," he said.

The event developed from a collaborative effort between School of Arts and Sciences (SAS) faculty specializing in [Jewish Studies](#) and their colleagues in [Middle Eastern Studies](#) who focus more on the Arab and Islamic world.

Peter Golden, a professor emeritus of history, and an expert on Middle Eastern and Central Asian history, said that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are "two ugly twins."

"They are not two discrete things," Golden, former director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program, said. "They are related, and they can be discussed in a rational way with a notion of gaining some understanding of the historical roots."

Yael Zerubavel, director of the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, said faculty need to set an example.



Kenneth Stern is the American Jewish Committee's specialist on anti-Semitism and extremism.

“We should act as role models, demonstrating that these issues can be discussed and can be discussed in a dispassionate way,” said Zerubavel, a professor of history and Jewish Studies.

The program was sponsored by the Bildner Center, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies; the Department of Jewish Studies; the Middle Eastern Studies Program; the Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience, and the Department of Journalism and Media Studies.

Rutgers has a history of promoting dialogue on such issues.

The Middle East Coexistence House, for example, is a living learning community that promotes women's involvement in international conflict negotiation and encourages understanding between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women at Rutgers.

But like other schools, Rutgers has also had to deal with some tension between students with differing views of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The event added depth to students' understanding of the current controversies, said Charles Haberl, director of the Center for Middle East Studies.

“It's important to remove this issue from the immediate situation and talk about it in terms of its broader context,” Haberl said. “Rather than simply address this from the perspective of polemics, our intention was to broaden the discussion and talk about the history of these two phenomena, and how they relate to one another.”



Clement Price, a Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor, moderated the program.

Offensive images of Arabs in contemporary popular culture are eerily similar to anti-Semitic propaganda in Nazi Germany, Haberl said.

“It’s the same caricatures from the 1930s, but applied to a different group,” he said.

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