

Science not yet without borders

The May 2008 issue of PHYSICS TODAY contains an Opinion piece (page 51) written by Barry Sanders and titled "Science Without Borders." Sanders's belief that science should transcend politics led him to help organize the International Iran Conference on Quantum Information, which was held in 2007 in the free zone of Kish Island, Iran.

Sanders raises an important issue. It is deeply unfortunate that political intrusion into scientific conferences, such as American punitive measures against Cuban scholars, is all too common. It is also deeply unfortunate that the conference put together by Sanders perpetuated precisely the same intrusion: Israeli citizens were barred from attending.

What would have happened had Sanders's group threatened to cancel the conference over the barring of Israeli scientists? That action seems not too much to ask of a conference whose *raison d'être* is "bringing together the best science worldwide, independent of politics," thereby allowing formation of "a bond between humans from all societies." Would the Iranian government have found a way to make an exception to its exclusionary policy? We'll never know, but a rare opportunity for Israeli and Iranian intellectuals to come together and see each other's humanity may have been missed.

I do not advocate a boycott of Iranian scientists, and I have no quarrel if Sanders wishes to hold a conference in Iran. But that conference has done nothing to reduce political intrusion into scientific discourse. It simply provided an-

other venue where a particular nation's scholars, Israelis in this case, were excluded. The self-congratulatory tone of the piece, and especially its title, hardly seems merited.

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We share the vision Barry Sanders outlined in his Opinion piece "Science Without Borders." However, we were saddened by the obvious failure of the 2007 International Iran Conference on Quantum Information to live up to that vision, as attested by the barring of Israeli scientists from the conference. What disturbed us even more was that the "unfortunate" barring of Israelis did not seem to influence either the running of the conference or Sanders's upbeat report.

Did the organizers of the conference—including Sanders—try to get permission for Israeli scientists to attend? Did they protest to the Iranian government in the (obvious) case of refusal? Was the issue brought up during the conference, in the framework of the reported "lively and unconstrained" discussions?

As much as Sanders wanted to keep politics out of the conference, it did enter in the form of the Iranian government's control over who could attend and who was excluded. It reminds us of the story of the gorilla parked in the middle of a cocktail party, whom everybody is conscientiously ignoring while carrying on a spirited conversation. In fact, we imagined adding "Find the missing Israeli scientists" to the caption with the picture of conference attendees on coffee break.

According to Sanders, another International Iran Conference on Quantum Information is planned for 2009. Will Israeli scientists be allowed to attend that conference as equals with the Australians, Canadians, French, and Japanese and have the conference live up to the ideals of "science without borders"? What are the organizers doing today to make that happen in 2009, or will the political and exclusionist gorilla again sit in the middle of the party? In our opinion, Sanders should "walk his talk"

and tell his Iranian hosts that as much as he wants to help Iranian scientists and students, it will not happen a second time at the price of sacrificing scientific freedom.

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I was extremely displeased with the Opinion piece by Barry Sanders in which he described an international conference he recently organized in Iran. Taking an apparent holiday from history, Sanders proposed that "the complicated politics between Iran and the West is a compelling reason to support conferences in that country." In his view, a scientific conference "reminds us through our shared discourse that we are all human and all fundamentally the same on our journey of discovery." Sanders further notes that "the goodwill from the conference . . . will ensure Iranians are able to learn the latest and greatest that quantum information has to offer."

To hear all this, one would scarcely realize that Iran is the leading terror state in the world, with one of the worst human rights records, which includes such practices as the killing of blasphemers by stoning and the prescribed execution of infidels and homosexuals. Sanders even declines to consider whether the information Iranian scientists learned from his conference may be immediately applied to the regime's stated goal of attaining nuclear might, wiping Israel off the map, demolishing America, and hastening the apocalyptic return of the Mahdi.

Sanders's quest reminds me of an oft-repeated pattern in history: liberal intellectuals attempting to make things better by appealing to lofty callings—joint science projects, gatherings to "discuss our differences," and so forth. Unfortunately, that kind of devil's bargain has little proven track record. For instance, it is well known that one desperate course taken by some European Jews in order to survive the Holocaust

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