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## Injunction sought to force Mohawk College to allow lecture

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Valerie Hauch

A judge will determine whether controversial Jewish-American author and political scientist Norman Finkelstein will speak Saturday at Mohawk College about Israel and Palestine.

Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East will seek an injunction Friday to allow Finkelstein — a vocal critic of Israeli policies — to give his lecture after the Hamilton college refused to let him speak unless the group pays \$1,500 for security.

That would be on top of the \$512 the group has already paid Mohawk to rent a 190-seat auditorium for the event, the last of five lectures in southern Ontario.

If the group wins the injunction, the event goes ahead as planned and Mohawk would have to cover security.

The contract made no mention of paying for security, said Grace Batchoun, vice-president of public relations for the non-profit group which advocates for peace, justice and security in the Middle East, including a sovereign state for Palestinians.

On Feb. 11, the group was presented with a bill for the extra security (four pay-duty police officers and four security guards).

"You don't have the right to breach the agreement," Batchoun said. "And we're not against security. Some places they ask for security and we assess if it makes sense or not, and if we're willing to pay the costs, but we do it in advance. You do not do it last minute."

She believes that Mohawk's request is "politically motivated . . . just because people have been calling and saying, 'We want you to cancel it,' people who don't want any discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian question."

Finkelstein spoke to a peaceful, sold-out crowd of about 500 Wednesday evening at York University. Toronto police officers and private security guards were a low-key presence at the event. There were no protesters.

Finkelstein spoke Tuesday at Queen's University to a similarly placid crowd. Communications officer Christina Archibald said the university "didn't organize any security and neither were the sponsoring group required to provide security. There weren't any incidents or demonstrations."

Mohawk College spokesman Jay Robb said the college's "preference would be that the organizers pick up the security tab and the event goes ahead."

"The folks who took the booking had no idea who they (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East) were," said Robb, adding they did not ask who was giving the lecture or what the topic was.

However, last week "we started to get calls from the community, including the Jewish community, but not limited to them, saying, 'Do you know who is coming to the college? Why did you book him? Cancel the event or give us time at that event.' And we said no."

Robb said when the college researched Finkelstein they realized that "this was a controversial topic. In renting the room we're liable, so I think we'd rather overreact at the front end than be culpable at the back end."

He said the college supports freedom of speech and "if next month someone has the exact opposite view of Dr. Finkelstein and wants to talk at Mohawk, by all means. But you're going to get the same security bill. So for us it's not freedom of speech, it's security of our students, staff and guests. We don't think \$1,500 for security is unreasonable."

*With files from Peter Edwards*