

# Anti-Semitism Goes to School

Ruth Wisse writes in [Crossing the Line 2: The New Face of Anti-Semitism on Campus](#) faithfully captures scenes of the violence that often attends this new academic experience.

Nor are students the only targets. At Connecticut College, to cite but the most recent example, a quietly pro-Israel professor of philosophy has been maliciously singled out and hounded as a “racist” in a campaign instigated by Palestinian activists, endorsed by numerous faculty members, and at least tacitly complied with by the college administration and the campus Hillel organization. At the annual meetings of prestigious academic associations, boycott resolutions against Israel and Israeli academic institutions are routinely aired and often passed.

As one of its first acts in December 1945, the Arab League called on all Arab institutions and individuals to refuse to deal in, distribute, or consume Jewish and Zionist products or manufactured goods. Seventy years later, calls for boycott of Israel, under the acronym BDS—boycott, divestment, and sanctions—have become a staple of American university agendas, extending not only to Israeli companies like SodaStream but to Israeli scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Last year, a petition by “anthropologists for the boycott of Israeli academic institutions” garnered the signatures of the relevant department chairs at (among others) Harvard, Wesleyan, and San Francisco State. The American Studies Association attracted the “largest number of participants in the organization’s history” for a vote endorsing a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.

In his introduction to a timely volume of essays, *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, Paul Berman provides a witty summary of the efforts by university boycotters to

frame their campaigns as “modern and progressive” when in fact they are “disgraceful and retrograde.” But the truth is that anti-Semitism never needed a sophisticated veneer in order to win susceptible recruits among the educated and the allegedly enlightened. Urgent as it is to expose the undeniably disgraceful and retrograde nature of the boycott movement, some of its ancillary effects are already playing themselves out in modern institutions and in “progressive” ways.

**One of those effects** is the scandalous insult—the undreamed-of *this!*—that cracked the patience of my academic colleague quoted at the head of this article. The “*this!*” emanated in reports first from UCLA, then from Stanford. At both universities, Jewish students running for election to the student government had been challenged on the grounds that their “strong Jewish identity,” manifested by travel to Israel, made them untrustworthy candidates for office. For my colleague, who had tried until now to treat anti-Israel agitation as a legitimate political activity, this now-naked move to place Jewish students under automatic suspicion for being *Jewish* made it impossible to maintain any longer the distinction between anti-Zionism (permissible) and anti-Semitism (impermissible). To be sure, there had always been some kind of link between incitement against Jews in Israel and incitement against Jews elsewhere, but how was she now to distinguish between the two when her colleagues, peers, and students blithely insisted on conjoining them?

For the moment, most of the American public seems free—solidly free—of the anti-Semitism that infects American universities. According to the most recent Gallup poll, seven in ten Americans view Israel favorably, up substantially from the 47 percent that viewed it favorably in 1991 around the time of the first Gulf war. It would be

hard to imagine greater enthusiasm for a foreign leader than that shown to Benjamin Netanyahu when he spoke at a joint session of Congress in 2011 and again this year. Appreciation for Israel seems secure when the *Wall Street Journal*, widely considered America's most influential newspaper, is also its most effective editorial champion of Israel, with the FOX News channel not far behind.

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Which is not to say that grounds are lacking for larger concern. In addition to the catalog of academic offenses I've briefly summarized here, a growing number of anti-Jewish incidents—from a swastika-desecrated Jewish cemetery in New Jersey to fatal shootings at a Kansas City Jewish community center—has been registered by agencies like the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee. At the government level, more ominously, and perhaps for the first time in recent American history, it is the White House, rather than the once notoriously Arabist State Department, that has taken the lead in threatening to isolate the Jewish state. President Obama's frankly contemptuous treatment of Israel's prime minister smacks more of the university than of the Senate in which he once served, but he *is* the president, and his words and actions give license to others.

At any rate, the basic truth is this: Israel and the United States, unlovingly paired by their Islamist enemies as the Little Satan and the Big Satan, are prime targets of the same antagonists. It remains to be seen, then, whether the rise of anti-Semitism in America—itsself an extension of the Arab- and Muslim-led war against Israel and the Jewish people—will fatally penetrate America's thick constitutional culture, in which some of us still place our trust.

Universities are the obvious place to begin investigating that question.

## I. Anatomy of an Attack

Although no single scenario can represent the workings of the anti-Israel syndrome among the educated, a recent UCLA initiative demonstrates how the movement achieves its goals. The steps go more or less like this:

(1) A consortium of self-declared pro-Palestinian student organizations devises a "statement of ethics" asking candidates for the student council to pledge that, if elected, they will not participate in trips to Israel organized by groups like AIPAC, the Anti-Defamation League, or Aish International's Hasbara Fellowship on the grounds that these trips are discriminatory or, in student shorthand, "Islamophobic." (At UCLA, the consortium comprises Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, Muslim Student Association, Afrikan Student Union, Armenian Students' Association, and Samahang Pilipino; at Stanford, the umbrella group is the Students of Color Coalition [SOCC], which is formally aligned with Students Out of Occupied Palestine [SOOP].)

(2) Most candidates at UCLA, and the largest student party, decline to sign the pledge, but among the signers is the student who is elected student-council president.

(3) Before and after the elections, Israel's defenders on campus urge UCLA's chancellor to condemn the pledge in the name of the university.

(4) After the elections, in an email to students, faculty, and staff, Chancellor Gene Block (a) offers reassurance

that the pledge was strictly a voluntary affair: "No one was barred from running for office, participating in the election, or serving on the council as a result of not signing the pledge"; (b) defends the pledge on the grounds that the core issue is one of free speech: "The decision to circulate this pledge and the choice to sign it or not fall squarely within the realm of free speech, and free speech is sacrosanct to any university campus"; (c) nevertheless goes on to say that he is personally troubled: constitutionally protected speech is not necessarily "wise, fair or productive," and he is "personally concerned any time people feel disrespected, intimidated, or unfairly singled out because of their beliefs."

(5) The chancellor's statement is followed by an expression of "shared concern" from Janet Napolitano, president of the University of California.

On the face of it, the outcome at UCLA might seem to indicate a "win" by the pro-Israel side, since administrators, even if they did not condemn the pledge outright, as they were asked to do, did bring themselves to express a degree of discomfort with it. At least, that is the positive face that the pro-Israel groups on campus chose to put on the affair. A similar sense of satisfaction issued from events at the annual meeting in January of the prestigious American Historical Association, where, after strenuous efforts by pro-Israel members, it was finally decided (by a vote of 144 to 55) not to pursue further resolutions denouncing the Jewish state. Jeffrey Herf, a historian at the University of Maryland who spearheaded the opposition, took rightful pride in reporting that "a group of determined scholars fought the good fight and . . . won far beyond our expectations. . . . The momentum of BDS," Herf concluded, "runs up against academic integrity and respect for evidence."

But what kind of a victory is it, and how much integrity

and respect for evidence are on display, when every anti-Israel referendum, exhibit, assembly, protest, and campaign reinforces the air of *normalcy* that this political minuet has acquired? Regardless of their outcome, anti-Israel allegations achieve their aim by negatively singling out the Jewish state from among all others and forcing its supporters onto the defensive. Aggression against Israel is by now reminiscent of the joke that circulated after World War I. The mayor of a town tells his deputy to round up all the Jews and all the bicyclists. The deputy replies: "Why the bicyclists?" Those who don't get the joke apparently find nothing remarkable about Jews being apprehended. Yet just as it was never "normal" to single out European Jews for roundup, so it is not "normal" to single out Israel for censure.

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Contrary to the claims of administrators like the chancellor of UCLA, prosecuting the war against the Jews is not an issue of free speech, "sacrosanct to any university campus." Had UCLA's chancellor and president faced a campaign to reinstate segregation, recriminalize homosexuality, or bar women from the faculty club, they would have reacted with more than "concern." Yet behind the banner of free speech, they tolerate, however squeamishly, campaigns to undo the Jewish homeland and to demonize the already most mythified people on earth. Anti-Jewish politics are no more innocent when pursued by left-wing American SOCCs and SOOPs than when they were prosecuted by right-wing European blackshirts.

Indeed, institutions that enforce "sensitivity training" to insure toleration for gays, blacks, and other minorities may inadvertently be bringing some of these groups together

in common hostility to Jews as the only campus minority against whom hostility is *condoned*. On almost every campus in the land, the norms of political correctness are rigorously enforced; punitive speech codes proliferate; a phalanx of administrative functionaries labors so that nothing said, or read, will ever offend the sensibilities of any student—with one licensed exception. Multiculturalism has found its apotheosis in a multicultural coalition of anti-Zionists: a uniquely constituted political phenomenon with its own functions, strategies, and goals.

Surprising as this may sound to today's activists, freedom of speech and the practice of anti-Semitism are not necessarily bedfellows. Both the United States government and Israeli courts have found ways of drawing the line between liberty and incitement. In the mid-1970s, at the height of the Arab boycott of Israel and at the very time when the Arab-Soviet coalition succeeded in passing United Nations Resolution 3379, which demonized Zionism as racism, the U.S. enacted laws to prevent citizens and companies from participating in other nations' economic boycotts or embargoes. By prohibiting compliance with the boycott of Israel that had been enforced by the Arab League since 1945, the United States greatly reduced the damage being done to Israel through this branch of warfare.

More recently, the hyper-liberal supreme court of Israel upheld the provisions of Israel's own "Anti-Boycott Law," which withdraws accreditation from actors pursuing boycott campaigns by means of false and distorted legal or factual claims. Although the United States is reluctant to thwart American trade, and Israel prides itself on free speech, both recognize that democracies must also protect the freedoms they enshrine.

So, too, universities and the academic community, without limiting the free-speech rights of groups that promote

anti-Semitism, whether through BDS or demonstrably false accusations leveled at Jewish students or faculty, could deny them accreditation and university funds. Student groups that justly demand respect for their own particular religions and ethnicities should be held to the same standards of mutual respect that govern formal group behavior toward gays and women. Newton's first law of motion operates equally in politics: anti-Semitism in motion will remain in motion—and will pick up ferocity—unless stopped by resistant power.