

# **STIFLING DISSENT**.ORG

**HOW ISRAEL'S  
DEFENDERS USE  
FALSE CHARGES OF  
ANTI-SEMITISM**

**TO LIMIT  
THE DEBATE  
OVER ISRAEL  
ON CAMPUS**



Jewish Voice  
for Peace

# STIFLING DISSENT

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Jewish Voice for Peace*

*Fall 2015*

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*The decades-old Israeli military occupation, the refugee status of millions of Palestinians, and the expansion of Israeli control over Palestinian life and land are among the most urgent social and political issues of our time.*

Across the world, social justice activists are organizing campaigns to challenge Israel's policies towards Palestinians and to challenge the international political support that enables Israel to continue its 48-year occupation without consequences. Activists are creating momentum for change through education, direct political action, protests, boycotts, and divestment, especially on college campuses, and especially in the United States in response to decades of failed U.S.-backed peace talks.

In recent years in particular, organizations aligned with the Israeli state have invested enormous resources into countering this solidarity movement for justice and equality on college campuses. For example, in June of 2015, Sheldon Adelson, the US-based casino magnate and owner of the Israeli newspaper *Israel HaYom*, held a secret Las Vegas summit that raised up to \$50 million dollars to fight

the nonviolent Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement on campuses.<sup>1</sup>

For years, under the banner of defending Israel, advocacy organizations have launched attacks against those who advocate for Palestinian rights and express political criticism of Israel, often deploying spurious charges of anti-Jewish bigotry, shutting down conversations, and policing the boundaries of legitimate Jewish identity and acceptable debate. Seeing campuses as a "battleground," they have helped shape problematic definitions of anti-Semitism in order to limit open debate on college campuses, and intimidate students, faculty, and administrators. The intent of these silencing tactics is to shut down conversation before it can even begin, limiting the range of political inquiry, expression and debate on campuses.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Guttman, "Secret Sheldon Adelson Summit Raises up to \$50M" *Forward.com* June 9, 2015 <http://forward.com/news/israel/309676/secret-sheldon-adelson-summit-raises-up-to-50m-for-strident-anti-bds-push/>

## Stifling Dissent

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Far-right political organizations, like StandWithUs and the Zionist Organization of America, as well as many prominent Jewish organizations with much broader communal mandates, such as Hillel International, Jewish Federations (specifically their Israel on Campus Coalition), and the Anti-Defamation League, intervene on campuses in efforts to muzzle political criticisms of Israeli policies. As a result, constitutionally protected speech and academic freedom — essential to learning, teaching, and rigorous inquiry — are under increasing threat.

These groups use a variety of methods that include, but are not limited to: filing complaints with the federal government that campuses are “hostile environments” for Jewish students; conflating some Jewish students’ emotional discomfort with targeted harassment; contacting administrators in an effort to have events cancelled and speakers disinvented; blacklisting professors; and launching public campaigns around faculty hires.

By framing much activism on behalf of Palestinian rights and criticism of Israel as “anti-Semitic,” these Israel advocates cause confusion over what is truly anti-Jewish bigotry versus political positions that cause

discomfort to the Israeli government and its supporters. Students and faculty who are targeted for their political beliefs hesitate to participate in public discourse out of fear of the consequences of exercising their right to free speech.

Each new complaint, and every campaign against a faculty hire, invited speaker, or student protest succeeds in raising an uproar on campus – and increasing tension and fear around speaking out on issues relating to Israel and Palestine. Israel advocacy organizations use these efforts to wear down administrators, intimidate faculty, and frighten students. Students who are already targeted by strict scrutiny and surveillance, particularly those from Palestinian, Arab and/or Muslim communities, adjunct and untenured faculty and progressive Jewish students bear the brunt of this bullying.

# The Strategies

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The central message and strategy used by Israel advocacy groups has been the effort to redefine criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism. One of the major problems with this framework is that it falsely equates all Jews with the State of Israel and treats critiques of a government with attacks on an individual.

Put simply, not all Jews are Israeli nor do they always support the policies of the Israeli government (and furthermore, not all Israelis are Jewish—over 20% of Israeli citizens are of Palestinian descent). Perpetuating the frame that the State of Israel represents all Jews actually often encourages anti-Semitic tropes, and falsely paints activism for Palestinian rights as anti-Semitic. In effect, when Israel's defenders label as anti-Semitic the efforts by Students for Justice in Palestine members to call out the building of new settlements (a constitutionally protected speech act), they equate the criticism of a governmental body – the State of Israel – with a religious and cultural identity. Activism for Palestinian rights does not inherently threaten Jewish identity, and political use of the charge of anti-Semitism threatens to void the term of any meaning at all.

It is important to note that Israel's defenders are very transparent about their intention to

use the charge of anti-Semitism to silence criticism of Israel policies. For example, in an interview with *The Forward* in June of 2015, Tammi Rossman Benjamin, Director of the AMCHA Initiative, stated that her efforts to get the University of California system to adopt the State Department definition of anti-Semitism were part of a larger effort to define activism advocating for Palestinian human rights as anti-Semitic. She stated: “BDS would, in principle, be seen as anti-Semitic with the adoption of the State Department definition. So would protests in which activists erect a wall to symbolize Israel's separation barrier, which is used to block Palestinians in the occupied West Bank from entering Israel and parts of the West Bank itself.”<sup>2</sup> As this campaign to codify criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic intensifies on campuses, it has the potential to stifle research in multiple fields, including International Relations, Middle Eastern Studies, and Political Science.

Another new phase in the repression of speech critical of Israeli policy is the

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2 Nathan Guttman, “Could California Ban Anti-Israel Campus Protests as “Anti-Semitic” Hate?” *The Forward* (June 10, 2015).  
<http://forward.com/news/national/309450/what-is-anti-semitism/> - ixzz3dLwyYe00

insistence on “civility” as a requirement for exercising the right to free speech. In 2014, the Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign rescinded a tenured faculty position that had been granted to Professor Steven Salaita over claims that his disrespectful social media posts violated a basic principle of “civility,” a case that resulted in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) recommending censure.<sup>3</sup> In their report on the case, the AAUP stated that the Salaita case “cast a pall of uncertainty over the degree to which academic freedom is understood and respected.”<sup>4</sup>

In other settings, political expression is judged and condemned according to standards of “civility.” The civility standard operates as a tool to limit freedom of speech, as noted by the University of California’s Committee on Academic Freedom.<sup>5</sup> As a

coalition of civil rights groups, including Palestine Legal, the Asian Law Caucus, the National Lawyers Guild, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and the Council on American Islamic Affairs, put it,

*Debate, disagreement, and free expression, including protests, demonstrations, and other expressive activities, embody the highest values of a free university and a democratic society. We hope your university—through its policies, public statements, and actions—will treat freedom of speech not as a burden or a legal limitation, but rather, as a foundational value that enables searching scholarship and democratic governance.*<sup>6</sup>

Within Jewish communities on campuses, Israel-aligned organizations have imposed strict limitations on the scope of the debate over Israeli policies. The effect is marginalization of Jewish students from Jewish communities, exclusion of Palestinian, Muslim, Arab and other students who support Palestinian rights from Jewish spaces,

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<sup>3</sup> Colleen Flaherty, “Sending A Message” *Inside Higher Ed* (June 16, 2014). <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/06/16/aaup-votes-censure-northeastern-illinois-u-over-academic-freedom-dispute>

<sup>4</sup> American Association of University Professors, *Academic Freedom and Tenure: The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*. (April 2015) [http://www.aaup.org/file/UIUC\\_Report\\_0.pdf](http://www.aaup.org/file/UIUC_Report_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> University Committee on Academic Freedom, “US Academic Council Position on Academic Freedom and Civility” (April 1, 2015). <http://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/reports/docu>

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[ments/MG\\_ChairsDirectors\\_AcademicFreedomState ment.pdf](https://www.palestinelegal.org/news/2014/12/02/ppls-and-partners-submit-letter-to-universities-warning-there-is-no-civility-exception-to-first-amendment)

<sup>6</sup> “PSLA and its Partners Caution over 200 Universities against Censorship” (December 3, 2014). <http://palestinelegal.org/news/2014/12/02/ppls-and-partners-submit-letter-to-universities-warning-there-is-no-civility-exception-to-first-amendment>

and restrictions on programming relating to Israel. For example, in April of 2014, Jewish students at UCLA formed a Jewish Voice for Peace chapter, and applied for affiliation with Hillel, the official, institutional Jewish center on campus. After several meetings with the leading Hillel rabbi, they were asked to answer a list of forty-two questions before being rejected for membership. The questions included the following; for the full list, see Appendix 1.

- Is Zionism racism? Please explain.
- Can Israel be a Jewish state?
- Is Omar Barghouti an anti-Semite? Please explain.
- Did Israel sterilize Ethiopians? Please explain.
- How would you describe the tactical orientation of your potential membership and allies? We are specifically interested in whether or not members and allies would consider themselves sympathetic to militancy as a social action orientation.

These questions are clear evidence of the political litmus test Jewish students are expected to undergo in order to be considered part of the organized Jewish community on campuses.

While students who stand up for Palestinian rights are under special scrutiny regardless of

their identity, Palestinian students, along with Muslim and Arab students, bear the brunt of this intimidation and demonization. They are often deliberately “named and shamed” publicly for standing up for Palestinian rights, and are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion in campus communities. This is nowhere more clear than when looking at the recent “Canary Mission” database, which claims to expose student activists as “hate-fomenting individuals” by compiling dossiers of their pro-Palestinian political activities with the explicit intent of hurting their employment prospects.

## The Purpose of this Report

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Jewish Voice for Peace produced this report in the service of protecting and promoting freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of political expression on college campuses for all students. This report describes the primary methods that these Israel-aligned organizations use to control or stifle debate about Israel/Palestine on North American college campuses. We are deeply alarmed by the ways in which Muslim and Arab students in particular are particularly targeted by intimidation and false claims of anti-Semitism, and the ways in which political use of the charge of anti-Semitism devalues the term’s meaning. We are also

deeply concerned with the ways that the growing number of Jewish students who question Israeli policies are marginalized by campus Jewish institutions for expressing political opinions that diverge from the conservative norm. The increasingly coordinated efforts to quell advocacy for Palestinian rights on campuses threaten the freedom of speech, academic inquiry and unfettered engagement with ideas that are integral to the university as a space of learning.

The report is not an exhaustive catalog of events relating to Israel/Palestine on campuses but rather an inquiry into the central tactics and strategies that are being deployed to stifle criticism of Israel on campus. This report should serve as a resource for administrators, faculty, students, journalists, activists, and others who care about meeting the needs of a diverse student body and protecting academic freedom. The threats against open debate and discussion of this critical issue affect not only the lives of Israelis and Palestinians but also the stability and safety of the entire Middle East and, arguably, the entire world.

It is important to note that despite this rise in intimidation and threats against open debate, this is also a time when student and activist coalitions are building at an unprecedented rate. Diverse groups working across the

entire spectrum of social justice, human and civil rights, gender and anti-racism issues have joined together with local and national student groups to organize alongside Palestinian rights activists.

A new consensus is emerging - one in which equality and basic human rights for Palestinians is not only widely supported but also integrated into global struggles for justice, liberation, and self-determination. Young people who reject racism in American society also oppose racist social order in other countries, including Israel. From across a political, ethno-racial, and religious spectrum, criticism of Israeli oppression and Palestinian rights activism are on the rise on campuses.

We see examples in many places, such as: the decision by the American Studies Association and other academic institutions to boycott Israeli academic institutions that are complicit in occupation, recognizing that boycott is a tool to achieve social change motivated by political analysis and not anti-Semitism;<sup>7</sup> the thousands of academics and prominent academic associations that rose to

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<sup>7</sup> American Studies Association, "Council Statement On the Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions" (December 3, 2013) [http://www.theasa.net/from\\_the\\_editors/item/asa\\_members\\_vote\\_to\\_endorse\\_academic\\_boycott/](http://www.theasa.net/from_the_editors/item/asa_members_vote_to_endorse_academic_boycott/)



energetically oppose the de-hiring/firing of Professor Steven Salaita from University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, recognizing that speech need not be comfortable to be permissible;<sup>8</sup> and in the growth of student groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine,<sup>9</sup> a multi-ethnic coalition active for Palestinian rights across the country, and Open Hillel, the organization of Jewish students who reject the limitations that Hillel International places on their debate of and engagement with Israel.<sup>10</sup>

## Overview of the Report:

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The *Bullying inside the Jewish Community* section discusses the marginalization and exclusion of Jewish students and faculty who are openly critical of the state of Israel. Being a full-fledged member of the organized Jewish community often now entails passing a political litmus test, due to the guidelines that Hillel imposes with regard to Israel engagement on campuses, as well as the

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<sup>8</sup> Corey Robin, "Over 5000 Scholars Boycotting the UIUC" <http://coreyrobin.com/2014/09/09/over-5000-scholars-boycotting-the-uiuc/>

<sup>9</sup> Students for Justice in Palestine, <http://www.sjpnational.org>

<sup>10</sup> Open Hillel, <http://www.openhillel.org>

threats and intimidation of Israel critics and Palestinian rights supporters.

The section on *Student Government Intervention* addresses efforts by Israel-aligned groups to intervene in campus politics, including student government, in order to stifle debate on campus and counter campaigns for Palestinian rights. Among the tactics used are cultivating and training Jewish and non-Jewish Israel defenders among the student body.

*The Redefining anti-Semitism section* of this report illustrates how Israel advocacy groups use policy and regulations to suppress debate on campuses. By changing or creating rules that can be used to punish critics of Israeli policies and using legal tactics to implement them, Israel advocacy groups are undermining and limiting legitimate voices in the debate on campus. Included in this section is a discussion of the use of Office of Civil Rights regulations to claim that criticism of Israel perpetuates a "hostile environment" for Jewish students on campus; threats against administrators and faculty; attempts to codify a particular definition of anti-Semitism to encompass criticism of Israel and activism for Palestinian rights, including the use of boycott, divestment, and sanctions as political tactics; and attempts to instate "civility" standards on campus; and a discussion of disciplinary measures and criminal

prosecution of student groups, particularly Muslim and Arab student groups.

*The Employment section* looks at the targeting of faculty through tenure and hiring battles, providing an overview of such cases across the country.

An *overview of Israel-aligned organizations* working on campuses across the US provides a wide view of the map of these organizations, including some of the key players and their networks.

Finally, this report includes a list of *resources for advocacy*, advice, and legal support to protect academic freedom, cultivate freedom of speech, and promote political expression on campuses.

## Recommendations:

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- 1.** Strive to create an open campus climate that is inclusive of all student perspectives, including Palestinian, Muslim, Arab American, and politically progressive Jewish students. Organizations like Hillel that benefit from campus resources or official endorsements have a special obligation to support a diverse student body and refrain from censorship, deploying politically motivated charges of bias, or policing students' religious or cultural identity.
- 2.** When incidents occur, take the time to talk in person to *all* involved parties. Time and time again, rumors or misunderstandings, or narratives pushed by outside organizations, often derived from classic anti-Muslim or Arab tropes, can quickly escalate to "fact" and find their way to the media or campus policy.
- 3.** The answer to controversial speech is almost always more speech, not less. In lieu of shutting down organizations or taking down protests, which inevitably simply make other students and faculty feel unsafe, opt instead for

open forums, dialogues, and even outside speakers.

4. As a learning institution, when students learn how to engage in political arguments and criticize government policy, discomfort can be a necessary part of the process. The issue of discomfort can never be solved by exchanging the emotional 'safety' of one group with another. Even or especially when students are uncomfortable, it is important to assert the value of critique under the principles of democracy and human rights, which require that dissent be freely articulated.
5. Avoid policies that conflate the state of Israel with Judaism or the Jewish people, which risks furthering the anti-Semitic claim that Israel and Zionism and Jews are one and the same and places Israel in a uniquely protected category as a state.
6. When dealing with Jewish communal organizations, please keep in mind that there is an incredibly diverse range of Jewish opinions on Israel, and that no one group can fairly claim to represent Jewish opinion. In fact, many long-established Jewish

communal organizations are suffering from a diminished membership among younger Jews in part because of outmoded policies that support Israel unconditionally.

7. Avoid implying that the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and also Students for Justice in Palestine are anti-Semitic. In fact, many Jews, including Jewish Israelis, are members of SJP and active supporters of the movement. The BDS movement is a rights-based movement that calls for respect for international law, and the BDS movement and SJP explicitly oppose all forms of bigotry, including anti-Jewish hatred.