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Antisemitism and Israel Delegitimization on the US Campus

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Most campuses in the United States are not awash in antisemitism, nor are they hotbeds of antisemitic forms of anti-Zionism. As the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) notes in a 2019 report, “hysteria around anti-Israel activism on campus is unwarranted. Jewish students are not suffering from persecution on a daily basis, and physical assaults are extremely rare.” Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) activism, which contributes to a campus climate where tropes and canards about Jewish power, money, and undue influence can more easily take root, also tends to be geographically concentrated on the East and West Coasts and in the Midwest in the Chicago, Illinois hub—leaving many American campuses untouched by anti-Jewish hostility. Still, on hundreds of campuses, among them some of the country’s most prestigious and those with high Jewish-student enrollments, a new set of realities has emerged for Jewish students, the majority of whom self-define as Zionist.

The far-right is increasingly coming on to these campuses from the outside. This typically takes the form of swastikas etched into bathroom stalls or on the sides of dormitory halls. Antisemitic flyers have also been plastered across campuses accusing Jews of driving globalism, pushing multiculturalism and immigration, secretly infiltrating government, and destroying the “White Man’s” America.² University and college officials typically address this type of antisemitism well, with swift and unequivocal denunciations. However, campus administrators do not typically handle far-left antisemitism nearly as well. On the whole, they have been unresponsive, often dismissing Israel-related bigotry and harassment as political speech that does not warrant any university intervention (Rossman-Benjamin, 2018).

Today, far-left antisemitism on US campuses manifests as self-defining antiracists, often from minority communities themselves, expressing a view of Israel that traffics in anti-Jewish conspiracies. Like antisemitism on the far-right, it also views the Jewish

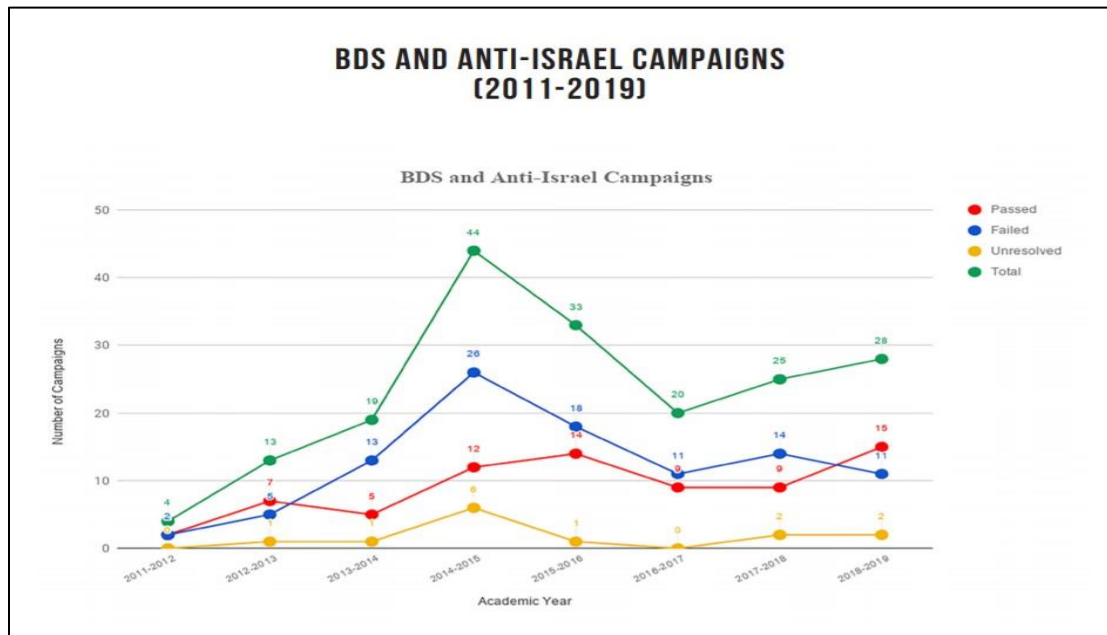
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² Antisemitic vandalism frequently coincides with sustained student-led BDS activism and anti-Israel campaigning. It has been increasingly common to find swastikas or neo-Nazi fliers appearing on campuses in the wake of BDS resolutions and referendum, for example, as recently occurred at Columbia University (Bandler, 2020).

experience in terms of power and privilege. In this campus climate, overlapping categories of identity based on perceived shared experiences of oppression and discrimination have created a toxic atmosphere where antisemitism can thrive behind a veil of social justice and human rights. It is this brand of antisemitism that has already made considerable headway, especially among young American voters and those who self-identify on the left. It has also increasingly become normalized on US campuses, by student groups and faculty that promote and endorse it and by campus leaders who do not speak out nearly enough against it.³

The Challenge of Campus Antisemitism

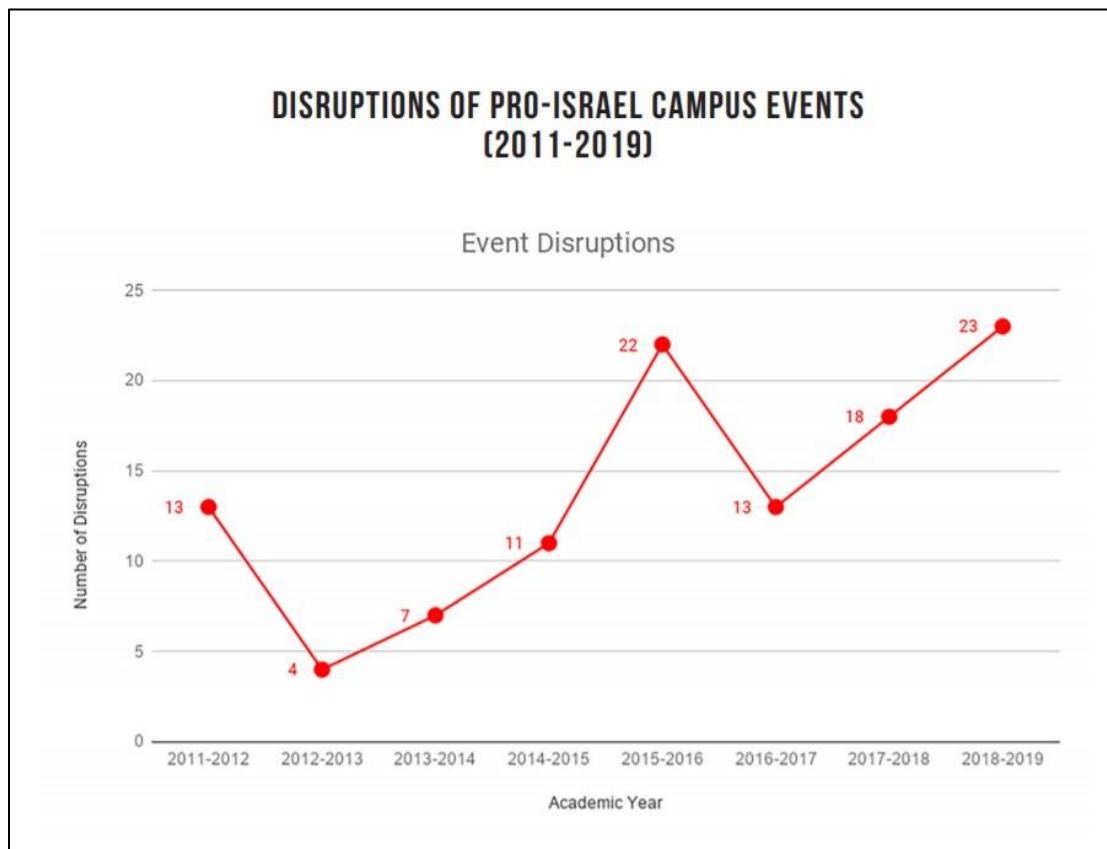
Nearly 20 years after the 2001 conference of nongovernmental organizations in Durban, South Africa called for Israel's "complete and total isolation" from the global community, campaigns to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel continue to feature regularly on campuses across the United States—even though most such resolutions and referendums fail to pass, and no universities have divested from Israel. Israel continues to be delegitimized and cast as a pariah state. But what is currently taking place on many campuses is something more insidious as Jewish students are being demoralized as imperialists, racists, and even Nazis and white supremacists (Flayton, 2020; Zieve, 2017). On some campuses, their fitness to serve in leadership positions has been questioned on account of their perceived Zionist beliefs and identification with Israel (Ritch, 2020).



³ It is, of course, possible to identify a more responsible criticism of Israel and Zionism, which would eschew any extreme hostility or fear of the very concept of a Jewish right to self-determination. University administrators and faculty can work to promote such a discourse for pro-Palestinian student activism on campus by showcasing pro-peace coexistence efforts and regional economic and cultural integration and innovation. Investing in educational exchange programs that bring more Israeli students to US campuses is also necessary. After all, it is much more difficult to hate or to be afraid of someone when you interact with them in classes, in the cafeteria, in student clubs, and in sports.

Source: Israel on Campus Coalition, 2019 Campus Trend Report, p. 4

On college campuses, students have increasingly reported that they are afraid to express their Jewish identity, including their support for Israel, lest they be excluded from campus life and the causes that they care deeply about. Hillel International reported that antisemitic incidents reached an all-time high during the 2019–2020 academic year at the 550 US colleges and universities that it serves (Anderson, 2020), and despite the unprecedented impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on higher education, antisemitism has persisted. Jews and Israel have been scapegoated and held responsible for the Covid-19 virus (Mendeles, 2020). On some campuses, classes and events have been “Zoombombed” with barrages of antisemitic images and messaging; on others, Jewish students have been targeted and harassed on social media platforms (Krupnik, 2020).⁴



Source: Israel on Campus Coalition, 2019 Campus Trend Report, p. 5

There is also a more pernicious form of BDS campus activism that ranges today from attempts to exclude Jewish-Zionist students from participating in progressive coalitions to obnoxious campus campaigns that discredit American-Jewish organizations, including

⁴ Virulent anti-Israel activism on campus operates largely through in-person theatrics—event disruptions, rallies, teach-ins, and the ubiquitous “Apartheid Wall” displays on campuses. The shift to remote learning as a result of Covid-19 has resulted in the cancellation of many of these activities.

the ADL, Birthright, and Hillel, and seek to prevent or limit their activity on campus (Fish, 2019; Lewin, 2019; Lipstadt, 2019; Solomon, 2019). In the wake of the killing of George Floyd in 2020, strengthened allyships between supporters of BDS and the movement for Black Lives Matter are also contributing to troubling new campus efforts that play on anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, e.g., events and campaigns centered on the false accusation that mainstay American-Jewish organizations are funding Israel to train America's police forces to behave in inhumane ways are surfacing with increasing frequency (Richman, 2020b; Elman, 2019).

Antisemitism is also bubbling up in the classroom, where it is masquerading as a legitimate discourse on Israel and the Middle East. Vehemently anti-Israel professors continue to publish virulently anti-Israel materials in leading peer-reviewed outlets (Mikics, 2018; Nelson, 2019b) and academic departments are increasingly sponsoring events that demonize Israel, condone and glorify violence against Israeli civilians, or call to eliminate the Jewish state (Kerstein, 2020; Richman, 2020a).

Within professional associations and on their campuses, faculty are brazenly pushing the academic boycott of Israel and are willing to punish their own students by refusing to recommend them in pursuit of educational opportunities offered through study abroad programs in Israel (Stanley-Becker, 2018; Falk et al., 2018). In certain disciplines, faculty—especially junior faculty unprotected by tenure—are hiding their pro-Israel viewpoints in order to succeed professionally. Cases of Jewish faculty members being shunned, intimidated and harassed because they are perceived to be sympathetic to Israel are starting to accumulate (Landes, 2020; Murray, 2020; Nelson, 2019a; Pessin & Ben-Atar, 2018).⁵

Countering Campus Antisemitism: Recommendations and Best Practices

More speech rather than censorship. In combating antisemitism in US academic institutions, the major assumption is that more speech, rather than enforced silence, is the answer (Abrams & Paresky, 2020). This is a winning strategy as most academics and leaders in higher education believe strongly that vigorous debate and free expression of ideas are abiding fundamental principles of the academy. While defamation, vandalism, shouting down speakers, and engaging in violence or true threats to physical safety are not protected by the First Amendment, most forms of intolerant and offensive speech targeting Jewish identity and belief falls into the category of protected speech (Paresky & Harris, 2019). Consequently, the guideline most frequently adopted by organizations working to counter antisemitism on campus is that anti-Jewish expression needs to be better explained—the remedy to be applied is more speech rather than censorship.⁶

⁵ The underlying if unstated aim in most of these instances is to isolate Jewish and Zionist students and faculty. Those who do speak out against antisemitic forms of anti-Zionism on their campuses frequently are accused of acting in bad faith to silence criticism of Israel.

⁶ Some 100 not-for-profit organizations, operating both locally, regionally, and at the national level, are today working to combat antisemitism and Israel delegitimization on US campuses. The majority of these

Faculties must engage in frank discussions about academic freedom, open inquiry, and free expression in the context of BDS and the academic boycott of Israel. Faculty-comprised campus bodies, such as the Academic Senate, need to engage in the issue of classroom indoctrination (faculty using their academic positions to promote personal anti-Israel agendas) as well as in the use of university channels and resources—official university websites and listservs, and academic department speaker series—for the dissemination of virulent anti-Israel and antisemitic propaganda. It should be self-evident that professors should not be abusing their authority in the service of political or ideological indoctrination, nor should they belittle, intimidate or silence students who express views with which they disagree (Bandler, 2019).

Better vetting of the antisemitic pseudoscholarship now being published by some academic university presses is also needed. Certain university presses and academic journals that publish material on Israel/Palestine need to be held to a higher standard, as they have been shown to have an unprofessional peer review process (Mikics, 2019; Nelson, 2019b). There is also a need for a better vetting of courses.⁷ Faculty have the academic freedom to present the BDS narrative, to teach it, and to share their pro-BDS views in the classroom, should they wish to do so. At the same time, BDS-advocating faculty also have an obligation, as do all faculty, to foster an atmosphere of civility, respect, and tolerance. Department and faculty curriculum committees could certainly recommend correctives to one-sided, politically motivated courses—and they should. Administrators too are not bereft of options. Afterall, academic freedom does not entitle a professor to teach a particular course. As Cary Nelson (2019b) writes, “If a department decides that you are a ruthless ideologue about Israel, they can assign you to teach something else.”⁸

Antisemitism-awareness training programs should be implemented as part of anti-bias programming. Antisemitism-awareness training should be mandatory for student-

groups are student-facing, providing information and tools, training, and support to Jewish and Zionist students who are, in turn, working to counter vehement anti-Israel activism on their campuses. Many of these organizations operate as watchdog groups. They are dedicated to exposing campus antisemitism, reporting on it to the media, and urging action by the university. A number of these organizations offer legal advice and guidance to students and several (e.g., Lawfare, Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, Zacher Legal, StandWithUs) have recently filed lawsuits or complaints on behalf of students with the Department of Education (for example, at Columbia University, the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, New York University, UCLA, and San Francisco State University). Very few of these groups, however, focus on informing and mobilizing concerned faculty. Notable exceptions are the Academic Engagement Network, the Alliance for Academic Freedom, and Scholars for Peace in the Middle East.

⁷ One recent study of fifty syllabi at forty US public and private colleges and universities over a ten-year period found that faculty advocating for the academic boycott of Israel had an average of 78% of their course readings authored by fellow BDS supporters. By contrast, faculty opposed to the academic boycott had only an average of 17% of their assigned course readings authored by BDS-supporters. See AMCHA Initiative, 2020.

⁸ Administrators also need to ensure that they are providing balance across the curriculum. New faculty can be hired to teach different courses with perspectives on Israel and the Middle East that are different to those espoused by BDS-supporting faculty.

government leaders, and heads of student organizations; materials and workshops also should be offered for midlevel staffers and officials in Offices of Student Affairs and in the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) spaces on campus. These administrators often are not fully aware of and do not understand antisemitism, and they may not see that the needs or concerns of Jewish students are directly within their purview.

The Trump Administration's Executive Order on Combating Antisemitism puts universities on notice that they cannot dismiss discriminatory conduct against, or harassment of, Jewish students by simply labeling it criticism of Israel.⁹ The challenges facing Jewish students on campus, however, are best addressed not by lawsuits or by federalizing the problem but rather by offering support, resources, and guidance to campus leaders. They need help in better identifying and responding to situations where a critique of Israel or Zionism goes beyond political disagreement and becomes, in fact, a dangerous form of antisemitism.¹⁰

University leaders need to speak out against antisemitism just as they would against racism and other bigotries on campus. It is important that equal treatment for all be a shared goal, with no double standards. Just as they would condemn other forms of hate speech, campus leaders must respond promptly to instances of antisemitism, including antisemitic forms of anti-Israel expression, by forcefully and unequivocally condemning it as inconsistent with the academy's values of civility, respect, tolerance, and inclusivity. As Pamela Paresky and Samantha Harris (2019) rightly note, "when a university consistently denounces protected racist or sexist speech while remaining silent in response to protected anti-Jewish speech, what message does the university send?"

Equally important, Jewish and Zionist students must be able to define and say who they are and be able to express their views and beliefs without being silenced or subjected to smear campaigns (Johnson, 2019; Yudof et al., 2019). No Jewish student should be mistreated or denied equal opportunities to serve their campus solely by virtue of their Zionist identity or their relationship to Israel (Krylov & Warshel, 2020). University leaders can use painful incidents of intolerance and identity-based prejudice as teachable moments to educate the campus community about the nature of contemporary

⁹ This Executive Order (EO) issued on December 11, 2019 requires that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act be enforced to protect Jewish students from discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. It also requires that federal agencies consider the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which identifies examples of antisemitic forms of anti-Israel expression, when enforcing Title VI. Thus, the EO introduces a new means for determining whether unlawful conduct might have been motivated by antisemitism. That said, antisemitic hate speech on its own would not trigger Title VI liability absent the accompanying discriminatory action. While, like any legislation, the EO could be abused to silence protected speech, including anti-Zionism and antisemitic forms of anti-Israel expression, the intent of the order is to ensure a non-hostile learning environment for Jewish students, including protection from persistent harassment and from discriminatory actions taken against them on account of their support for Israel or their Jewish beliefs and identities.

¹⁰ For more on several new educational initiatives launched by Hillel International and the educational nonprofit Academic Engagement Network to address the campus climate for Jewish students by empowering university leadership to better understand contemporary antisemitism and to directly address it, see JNS, 2020; Mirsky, 2020.

antisemitism, including the “new antisemitism” characterized by an irrational fear and loathing of Israel and Zionism. Here, the IHRA definition of antisemitism can be useful as a resource tool and frame of reference (Harrison, 2019). An important goal is for existing mission statements and campus policies to explicitly incorporate a condemnation of antisemitism.¹¹

University leaders need to understand that it is possible to forcefully and unequivocally condemn antisemitism without running roughshod over the principles of academic freedom and campus free speech. Administrators can distance their campuses from events and campaigns that involve bigoted antisemitic rhetoric by denouncing rather than blocking or canceling them (Algemeiner, 2019). While universities should adhere to the principles of academic freedom and public institutions moreover are bound by the First Amendment to the Constitution not to take steps to inhibit campus free expression, administrators need not apply a content-neutral standard to their own speech.

Campus administrators can signal their commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive campus when they exercise their own right to free expression by condemning hate speech that is inimical to the academy’s mission. Administrators can and should challenge the BDS platform and its policy positions and more are now doing so. In the past several years, chancellors and presidents at Pitzer, Vassar, Cornell, University of Minnesota, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Columbia University, and more have spoken out publicly in opposition to BDS—not only because it violates the central tenets of academic freedom and campus free speech but also because it often involves expressions of hatred that leave Jewish and Zionist students feeling demoralized and isolated.¹²

¹¹ Students or student groups that engage in antisemitic hate speech should be offered mentoring and guidance. Those engaging in antisemitic conduct should be disciplined for violating university rules and policies. In some cases, the rights and privileges of a registered student group should be suspended or revoked if it engages in hateful and hurtful rhetoric that creates a climate of fear and disrespect. Structures and protocols for reporting bias incidents against Jewish students need to be created or may need to be better implemented to properly track bullying and harassment.

¹² In recommending non-censorial strategies to combat hateful speech, former ACLU head Nadine Strossen (2018: 165) notes that those “committed to equality and individual dignity have a moral responsibility to condemn ‘hate speech’ and to express support for people whom it targets.”

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