

Letter from the Campus Front
by
David A. Harris
Executive Director, American Jewish Committee
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A number of colleges and universities have become the front line in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle in the United States. Pro-Israel college students are in the thick of that struggle and need our understanding, support, and help.

Nowhere else in this country have the battle lines been drawn as sharply or has the atmosphere turned more poisonous. Nowhere else do pro-Israel activists experience such intense forms of hostility, and even intimidation and harassment.

Among the recent incidents:

At the University of California at Berkeley, the *Los Angeles Times* reported (April 11, 2002):

A spate of anti-Semitic vandalism has stung Jewish students, leading some to question their safety at the school....The glass door at Berkeley Hillel, the center of Jewish life on campus, was smashed with a cinder block March 27, as Jews marked the first night of the holy days of Passover....A group of students was pelted with eggs 18 months ago as they emerged from services celebrating the Jewish New Year.

Moreover, two Orthodox Jewish students were assaulted this spring one block from the Berkeley campus. And an anti-Israel rally – deliberately scheduled to coincide with Holocaust Remembrance Day, April 9 – featured signs equating Israel with the Third Reich and the apartheid regime of South Africa. Seventy-eight demonstrators from the rally were arrested for occupying a university building.

At San Francisco State University (SFSU), an American Jewish Committee eyewitness described a chilling scene in which nearly 1,000 people, also gathered on April 9, cheered those who likened the Star of David to the swastika, lauded suicide bombers, and called for a one-state solution that would liquidate Israel. “Occupied Palestine is all of Palestine,” said a speaker. Also heard were such statements as: “The Germans should hook you all up”; “You should go back to Germany”; and “It’s the rise of the Jewish Cracker.”

But wait, there’s more. On May 7, Hillel students organized a “Peace in the Middle East” rally. Dr. Laurie Zoloth, the Director of Jewish Studies at SFSU, described the scene:

As soon as the community supporters left, the 50 students who remained praying in a *minyan* for the traditional afternoon prayers, or chatting, or cleaning up after the rally, or talking – were surrounded by a large, angry crowd of Palestinians and their supporters. But they were not calling for peace. They surrounded the praying students, and the elderly women who are our elder college participants, who survived the Shoah, who helped shape the Bay Area peace movement, only to watch as a threatening crowd shoved the Hillel students against the wall of the plaza...

As the counter demonstrators poured into the plaza, screaming at the Jews to “Get out or we will kill you” and “Hitler did not finish the job,” I turned to the police and to every administrator I could find and asked them to remove the counter demonstrators from the Plaza...The police told me that they had been told not to arrest anyone, and that if they did, “it would start a riot.” I told them it already was a riot.

A few days later, Robert A. Corrigan, the university’s president, sent an open letter in which he said that in his 14 years at SFSU: “I have never been as deeply distressed and angered by something that happened on this campus as I am by the events of last week.” He spoke of “a small but terribly destructive number of pro-Palestinian demonstrators, many of whom were not SFSU students, who abandoned themselves to intimidating behavior and statements too hate-filled to repeat.” He went on to say that “if we identify violations of public law, we will refer cases to the District Attorney.”

At New York University last October, Nadeen Al-jijakli, the president of Arab Students United, sent an e-mail to the members of the group that included an article by former Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon David Duke excoriating the Jews for every sin under the sun, including responsibility for September 11.

Asked about the piece by a reporter for the *Washington Square News* (October 8, 2001), Al-jijakli responded: “I read the article by David Duke and I’m not going to deny that I agree with some of its content...I feel like the article is valid. I don’t feel like whether the article is anti-Semitic is something I need to explain.”

On April 9, Ms. Al-jijakli received the university’s prestigious President’s Service Award.

At Hunter College, a Hillel official reported, an attempt by students to organize an affiliate of AIPAC was prevented when pro-Palestinian activists blocked entry to the meeting room.

At the University of Colorado this spring, “There was a wave of highly abusive graffiti daubed around the campus, bearing the same message: ‘Zionazis’” (*Ha’aretz*, June 18, 2002).

And at Columbia University, according to the campus newspaper (April 18, 2002), a pro-Palestinian rally on April 17 included the participation of several faculty members. Joseph Massad, a professor of Middle Eastern languages and cultures, decried Israel as “a Jewish supremacist and racist state” and stated that “every racist state should be threatened.” Not to be outdone, Nicholas de Genova, a professor of Latino studies, declared: “The heritage of the Holocaust belongs to the Palestinian people. The state of Israel has no claim to the heritage of the Holocaust.”

To be sure, there are thousands of American colleges and universities, and the situation varies from place to place.

No two campuses are identical. Some are harmonious or just plain quiet, even indifferent to events in the Middle East. (A recent survey of college students nationwide, reported on MSNBC last week, revealed a strikingly high level of ignorance about current affairs generally. Fewer than 20 percent of the students, for example, could properly identify either Condoleezza Rice or Donald Rumsfeld.)

On a handful of campuses, observant Jewish and Muslim students share dining facilities and, in doing so, seek to break down barriers. On some campuses, the principle of a “hate-free zone” prevails, and violations are dealt with severely. But there are quite a few schools that have become hotbeds of pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel activity, and these bear close scrutiny.

What is indisputable is that pro-Palestinian activists have targeted the campuses and see them as particularly ripe for building support. Is there one central body organizing the effort? Hard to tell, but doubtful. Are funds coming from overseas or their proxies here? Again, difficult to say, but it wouldn't come as a complete surprise if they were.

I've spent a good chunk of time over the last two years trying to understand the campus situation. Having led a graduate seminar at a large university during the past two academic years, I interacted with dozens of students. Serving, until recently, as a trustee of a New England liberal arts college offered me another perspective. Traveling to a number of diverse campuses as a guest of pro-Israel students, I have met with many students and talked with them late into the night about their concerns. I've also benefited from the presence at the American Jewish Committee of thoughtful interns who attend a broad range of undergraduate and graduate schools. And as the father of two college-age sons, I have also seen the situation through their experiences.

Who are the pro-Palestinian activists?

First and foremost, they are drawn from the growing number of Arab and Muslim students to be found on American campuses, whether foreign students on student visas, or immigrants, or the children of immigrants.

Usually, they are not alone. Their claims that Israel is a “colonialist, racist, occupying” power find a receptive ear among the sometimes overlapping anti-globalization crowd, other minority communities, human rights activists, the far – and, sometimes, not so far – left, and the America-can-do-no-right believers. These individuals are drawn from the ranks of students and, in the case of large, urban campuses, sometimes from part-time, older students, and non-students as well.

More surprising, on a number of campuses, some Jewish, even Israeli, students have openly identified themselves with pro-Palestinian groups.

As the *New York Times* reported (April 8, 2002):

The groups have attracted support from non-Muslim and non-Arab students. At Berkeley, Mr. Shingavi said, less than one-fifth of the core 70 members of his organization [Students for Justice in Palestine] are Arab or Muslim. They have also drawn support from Jewish students.

“I always had this view that Jews wouldn’t do anything bad,” said Laura Pearl, a Jewish student who is a member of the Palestine Committee at the University of Michigan. “Once I started to question that assumption, I saw how many things there were that Israel had done that were really bad.”

One pro-Israel activist at a leading law school indicated that a majority of the Jewish students in her year took the Palestinian side in the current conflict with Israel.

For me, the pièce de resistance was an evening spent this winter with students at a prestigious college near New York. The meeting was organized by the pro-Israel group on campus, but was open to all. Three students affiliated with a campus group known as FIST – Fight Israeli State Terrorism – showed up and participated in the discussion. It turned out that one of them, in fact the most assertive, was a Jew.

After several hours of responding to questions from the students, I turned to this particular student from FIST.

“Before I go, do you mind if I ask you just one question?” I inquired.

“Sure,” he replied.

“You’ve talked a lot this evening about Israeli confiscation of Palestinian lands, settlements, IDF brutality, denial of health care, and other allegations. Let’s assume for a moment, though, that the Palestinians and Israelis could reach a peace agreement. If so, would you accept Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign Jewish state in the Middle East?”

He did not answer. Instead, he met my question with silence and averted his eyes.

I don't know the number of pro-Israel activists on each campus, but surely they constitute a minority of the total number of Jewish students in each instance. In effect, the Jewish students are divided into three groups – the pro-Israel activists, the anti-Israel activists, and the silent majority (except, perhaps, in that law school cited above, where the silent majority appears to be a minority).

The pro-Israel campus community has stepped up its efforts over the past year and merits tremendous admiration. These courageous and principled students are being helped by various Jewish groups, most notably Hillel and AIPAC. Other Jewish organizations and foundations are also paying increasing attention to the campus, providing, among other things, speakers and information. The American Jewish Committee, for example, has prepared several basic fact sheets on the Arab-Israeli conflict that have been widely circulated on campuses.

All these initiatives are laudable and necessary. However, as more and more actors involve themselves in trying to address the campus situation, there will be a need for greater coordination, not always the Jewish community's strongest suit.

Remember the story about the rowing team at Yeshiva University?

University officials decided they wanted to upgrade the school's public image. They conducted a study and learned that many of the major American universities, including the members of the Ivy League, had rowing teams, so they decided to start a team of their own.

In the first race, though, the Yeshiva crew barely got going when the Harvard crew was already crossing the finishing line. Embarrassed university officials ordered their new coach to observe the training techniques of the Harvard crew before the next regatta. The coach did as he was told and then reported back: "We've got it all wrong. In the Harvard crew, eight men row and one guy shouts orders. In our crew, eight guys shout orders and only one man rows!"

The key challenge is how to reach the silent majority of Jewish students. Ranging in age from, say, 18 to 22 or 23, they were born long after the seminal events that shaped the identity of many adult Jews – 1948, 1967, and 1973.

To the extent they know anything about the Middle East – and most have never been to the region – they see the conflict largely as presented through the media, namely in strictly political or human rights terms, but not as a larger existential struggle of the Jewish people.

Few, it appears, have been exposed to Zionism or are sufficiently knowledgeable to debate the intricacies of the Middle East conflict. Sadly, as I've learned, in some of their families Israel did not loom large, if at all, so there's an underlying question about why Israel should even matter.

And the debate is especially tough these days because Israel is seen as an “illiberal” cause, even if the Jewish state is the only democracy in the region and the only society in the Middle East that protects free expression – not to mention feminism, gay rights, and multiculturalism – which is an essential part of the liberal agenda here at home.

Many of our Jewish children are raised in homes where they are encouraged to be open to all ideas, to consider the many sides of an argument, and to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

Thus, they can find it very difficult to know how to defend Israel against the unending barrage of accusations and condemnations. When one of the chants of the anti-Vietnam period, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” gets morphed into “How many kids did Israel kill today?” some Jewish kids simply do not want – or know how – to respond, so they don’t. Instead, they take a pass.

They aren’t necessarily eager to find themselves in a position where they are forced to defend a “right-wing” government in Israel, or the actions of an “occupying” army, or the litany of Israel’s alleged human rights violations, or to be associated with Evangelical Christians or campus conservatives who are often the main, if not the only, allies of pro-Israel Jewish activists today.

Faced with Arab students who come from the region, they are simply no match in a debate. What is the well-intentioned but largely uninformed Jewish student supposed to say if a Palestinian student claims that his own family has experienced Israeli “brutality?” Call him a liar? Justify the IDF action?

Yet, this silent majority, for whatever reason, also doesn’t choose to join the anti-Israel Jewish activists. Rather, it remains on the sidelines.

Incidentally, it’s not just the silent majority who can be off duty. One of the students I met this year, who was pursuing a master’s degree in politics, had spent several years working for AIPAC. Although both knowledgeable and committed to Israel, she told me matter-of-factly that she was taking a breather during her two-year program. The level of debate was so intense and bitter, she said, that she feared it would spoil her experience and, so, with some reluctance, she simply opted out.

As more Jewish institutions line up to help out on the campuses, it will be important to do some analysis about intended audiences and objectives.

In political campaigns with which I am familiar, a candidate segments voters more or less into five blocs – enthusiastic supporters, mild supporters, uninformed or undecided, mild opponents, and zealous opponents.

The object of the exercise, of course, is to get elected by cobbling together a majority of voters on Election Day, but to do so requires sophisticated knowledge of what

makes each of the groups tick, especially the first three – the continuum from the most ardent supporters to the middle group. There’s no point in wasting time on trying to change the minds of your most determined adversaries, though there could possibly be utility in trying to soften the hostility of the fourth group.

In some respects, it’s the same on the campuses. There are multiple constituencies, and therefore multiple strategies are required. One outside speaker may be needed to reach the “silent Jewish majority” or motivate the “mild Jewish supporters” to get active, while another might be more effective with the committed activists.

Some speakers will be far more effective than others for campus-wide events that seek to attract large numbers of uninformed or undecided students. Some speakers, by dint of their reputation and credibility, will have far more drawing power to attract not only students but also faculty. One kind of pamphlet – or CD, poster, or campus newspaper ad – may work better than another, depending on the individual campus and the specific audience being targeted.

A moment ago, I mentioned faculty. This is a subject unto itself, but terribly important to the discussion.

At some colleges, pro-Israel students have faculty advisers or mentors; at others, they don’t.

As a monthly visitor to a graduate program, I unexpectedly found myself in the role of mentor, largely because the Jewish students had no full-time faculty member to whom to turn, yet it was clear that they desperately needed someone with whom to talk.

For some students, it was to get additional information and talking points, as well as advice on outside speakers; for others, it was to explore their relationship to their Jewish identity against the backdrop of rapidly unfolding events in the Middle East that were seeping into the life of the school. All too typical of the latter group was one student who posed the following question to me: “Other than remembering the Holocaust, what is it about being Jewish that I should know?”

In some cases, faculty members who specialize in the Middle East in particular, including a few Jews, openly side with the pro-Palestinian cause, and much less frequently with a pro-Israel position. This is not necessarily limited to campus rallies. At times, it penetrates the classroom. But for those who have read Martin Kramer’s important book, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, this will come as no surprise. In assessing the state of Middle Eastern studies on American campuses, Dr. Kramer, the editor of *Middle East Quarterly* and a distinguished scholar, concluded that:

Middle Eastern studies used to resemble a quaint guild, emphasizing proficiency. Now they more closely resemble a popular front, demanding conformity.

Or take the example of a course announcement in the English Department at Berkeley for Fall 2002, entitled “The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance.” The official course description reads as follows:

The brutal Israeli military occupation of Palestine, an occupation that has been ongoing since 1948, has systematically displaced, killed, and maimed millions of Palestinian people.... This class takes as its starting point the right of Palestinians to fight for their own self-determination.

It earlier included an additional line – “Conservatives need not apply” – but that was dropped under pressure.

And the reading list, predictably, includes at least one book by an obviously Jewish author – in this case, the infamous Norman Finkelstein, who stands alongside MIT professor Noam Chomsky in the pantheon of self-hating Jewish academics – presumably to provide “cover” against any possible accusation of anti-Semitism.

Or take the case of a Columbia University professor far removed from Middle Eastern studies who sent an e-mail to his students encouraging them to miss his class so they could attend the April 17 rally against Israel.

Incidentally, by way of stark contrast, my son just took a semester-long course on the Arab-Israeli conflict with Martin Kramer at Brandeis University. Although Dr. Kramer has strong political views that he doesn’t hide off campus, my son and his classmates insist that there wasn’t even a hint of the professor’s own leanings on the conflict during four months of teaching. He presented all sides in a dispassionate academic fashion, exposed the students to conflicting viewpoints, and left it entirely to the students to reach their own political conclusions. In other words, he did precisely what we want to believe still happens as a matter of course in the college classroom.

In the summer of 2001, pro-Palestinian groups prepared themselves for a stepped-up effort in the fall. As the *New York Times* reported (August 25, 2001):

Arab-American groups plan a campaign this fall, modeled on the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980’s, to urge universities to divest themselves of holdings in companies doing business with Israel.

These plans, of course, were disrupted by the events of September 11 and their aftermath, but only temporarily. Strikingly, within a few months Arab and Muslim groups once again sought to flex their muscles, aided by an atmosphere on many campuses that bent over backwards to demonstrate respect and tolerance for those from Arab countries or who espouse the Muslim faith. Thus, this spring we saw the first signs of the delayed campaign to turn Israel into the new pariah state, which follows the playbook from the popular campus campaign to oppose apartheid.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the South African Nobel Peace Prize recipient in 1984, confirmed the objective – and the analogy – in a recent op-ed in the *International Herald Tribune* (June 14, 2002):

If apartheid ended, so can the occupation, but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction.

At Princeton University, the *Bergen Record* reported (June 10, 2002):

A petition demanding that Princeton, which has about \$8 billion in investments, divest from Israeli-connected companies gained the support of more than 300 students and 42 faculty members, including the history department chairman. Some of the companies identified by the group include General Electric, Lucent Technologies, McDonald's Corp., Merck & Co., and Lehman Bros.

The divestment petition prompted at least 100 students to sign an opposing petition, delivered the same day, urging the university to retain its Israeli-connected stock. In addition, 43 professors signed a letter to *The Daily Princetonian* condemning their colleagues for endorsing the divestment campaign.

Meanwhile at Berkeley, the campus newspaper, on June 4, carried a story that a divestment campaign was starting with support from some faculty and students. One professor associated with the campaign was quoted as saying that “the petition seeks to change public opinion and, in this way, to influence the course of political debate.”

Other universities have witnessed similar developments, most notably Harvard and MIT, but strong countermovements have emerged, not only among faculty and students but also among alumni. As the Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz warned:

Any effort to divest from Israel would fail because it would destroy any university that attempted it. Faculty would leave, students would refuse to attend, and the contributors would refuse to contribute.

Barring unforeseen circumstances, come September, when colleges start the academic year, we can expect more rallies and demonstrations, more petition drives for divestment, and more harassment of pro-Israel groups on campus.

Friends of Israel need to be prepared on every level. Fortunately, when it comes to America's colleges and universities, we are not without considerable resources of our own. There are many outstanding college presidents and numerous well-disposed trustees, donors, active alumni, and professors who are becoming increasingly alert to the dangers not only for Jews, but also for such fundamental college values as mutual respect and tolerance of this campus blitz. And, not least, there is a significant group of caring and committed students.

With them stand Jewish organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, ready to harness their experience, expertise, and relationships to ensure that our nation's cherished colleges and universities are never used – or, should I say, misused – as a battering ram to damage Israel or intimidate its supporters.

Note: This is one in a series of occasional letters written on current issues of particular concern to the Jewish community. Copies of previous letters can be obtained by contacting Alina Viera of the American Jewish Committee at vieraa@ajc.org or (212) 751-4000, ext. 203.