

BDS ON AMERICAN COLLEGE CAMPUSES**I. Background on the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement**

The BDS movement markets itself as a non-violent movement to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel to get it to withdraw to its pre-1967 borders. While many rank and file members of the movement sincerely want peace and are lured in by this human rights façade, BDS leadership in fact seeks nothing less than the elimination of Israel as a Jewish state.

BDS seeks to isolate Israel diplomatically, academically and economically in an effort to undermine Israel's very legitimacy. It demonizes and discriminates against Israel through a campaign of misleading propaganda that too often crosses the line into outright antisemitism. Indeed, while over the years Israel has demonstrated a willingness to return to the negotiating table to find a long-term resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, BDS co-founder and leader Omar Barghouti has said, "We oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine."

The aims of the BDS movement support that stance. BDS does not recommend a path forward towards a peaceable solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; rather it casts blame for the seemingly intractable conflict solely on Israel and demands that Israel withdraw completely from the West Bank and the Golan Heights and from control of the border of Hamas-controlled Gaza. It demands the dismantling of the separation barrier in the West Bank, which has protected scores of Israelis, both Jewish and Arab, from terror attacks. And, it demands the full "right of return" for all Palestinian refugees from Israel's 1948 War of Independence (in which the nascent Jewish state was attacked by Arab residents and surrounding Arab nations) and all their descendants. These conditions, taken together, would lead to the end of Israel. By trying to demonize Israel within the world and undermine the Jewish state, BDS supporters hope to gain momentum for the imposition of one-sided solutions on Israel.

For not ceding to their demands, the BDS movement seeks to punish Israel by advocating for cessation of foreign and military aid, dissolution of free trade agreements, suspension of Israel's membership in international fora, and boycotts of Israeli academics and Israeli institutions of higher education. The movement pressures academic, sporting, and cultural institutions to boycott Israel. Adherents urge states, banks, pension funds, and universities to withdraw investments from Israel and Israeli companies. Beyond these calls for nations, businesses, and academic institutions to sever ties with the only democracy in the Middle East, the BDS movement also rejects efforts for Israelis and Palestinians to build bridges and reduce tensions through people-to-people interactions and joint economic development, claiming that such actions would "normalize" Israel. A lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians will never evolve under these conditions. Indeed, BDS is counterproductive for those who want peace and the creation of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel.

While criticism of Israel is accepted and even welcomed, as it would be for any other country, discussions should operate on the premise that Israel's right to exist is not up for debate. When a movement seeks to delegitimize Israel's right to exist, singles Israel out for censure while holding no other nation to the same standard, or demonizes the world's only Jewish state, criticism of Israel ceases to be legitimate.

American Jews and indeed American citizens as a whole reject BDS, seeing through its posturing as a peaceful movement for “freedom, justice, and equality.” [AJC’s 2022 State of Antisemitism in America Report](#) found that 86% of American Jews and 88% of the general public believe the BDS movement is either “mostly antisemitic” or that it has “some antisemitic supporters.” In addition, it is important to keep in mind that 87% of American Jews and 90% of the general public believe that the statement “Israel has no right to exist” is antisemitic.

Universities and institutions of higher education should reject any attempts to exert undue economic pressure on Israel in lieu of constructive efforts to reach a two-state solution through direct negotiations. Numerous campuses, including some of the nation’s leading academic institutions, have taken this important stance by firmly denouncing BDS efforts.

II. BDS on College Campuses

College campuses in the United States tend to be the loci where social movements and appeals for social justice arise. The BDS movement understands this, and has couched discussions of Israeli politics in human rights terminology that is meant to appeal to progressives. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), a branch of the larger BDS movement, has inserted itself into university life, among student groups, faculty, and staff, and in professional associations.

The discourse fostered by PACBI and the BDS movement as a whole has led to clear displays of antisemitism on campus. While Israel, like all other nations, should not be immune to criticism, BDS organizations engage in antisemitic and anti-Israel rhetoric through demonizing and delegitimizing Israel, often while invoking classic antisemitic tropes and applying double standards to Israel. They also traffic in antisemitism when they exclude pro-Israel or Zionist students, who make up the majority of Jewish students, from campus spaces because of their identities.

BDS measures, introduced by students, have gained momentum on university campuses in the United States in the last decade with the passing of BDS resolutions in student-led organizations (like the Harvard *Crimson* or the *Wellesley News*) and some student governments. Such resolutions are typically instigated by student groups with overt anti-Israel agendas such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), and at times supported by far left faculty members. In addition, various academic associations, such as Middle East Studies Association (MESA), the American Studies Association (ASA), the Association for Asian American Studies, the Critical Ethnic Studies Association, the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, and the National Women’s Studies Association, have passed BDS resolutions.

However, BDS on campus is far from universally accepted. BDS resolutions such as these are met with much backlash from students, professors, and Jewish communal organizations. A number of MESA institutional partners cut ties with MESA after the BDS resolution was passed. When ASA’s first resolution passed, more than 200 American colleges and universities denounced the boycott and stated that it introduced “a political constraint on academic activity” and that it was “inimical to the mission of higher education.” Moreover, many campus student groups [reject BDS resolutions](#) when they are proposed, as do some academic associations. The Modern Language Association (MLA), for example, rejected pro-BDS resolutions in 2017 and passed an anti-BDS resolution, which was ratified with a 2 to 1 vote. Lastly, university presidents such as [Case Western Reserve University President Eric Kaler](#) and [Harvard University President Lawrence Bacow](#), and many others have spoken out against BDS as an infringement on free academic inquiry. To date, no American university has institutionally cut ties with Israel; indeed [dozens of universities have publicly rejected BDS](#).

Nonetheless, even when BDS resolutions are rejected, their impact is felt by Jewish students. The AMCHA Initiative, which is an American campus group that monitors and combats BDS activities on campuses, wrote a [report](#) in 2016 stating that “95% of schools with BDS activity had one or more incidents of antisemitic expression, whereas of the schools with no evidence of BDS activity, only 33% had antisemitic expression. Schools with more incidents of BDS activity tended to have more incidents of antisemitic expression.” Likewise, AJC’s 2021 State of Antisemitism in America Report found that 54% of American Jews believe that anti-Israel campaigns such as the BDS movement are a problem for Jewish students in the United States today. According to a recent [AJC survey of American Millennial Jews](#), 22.9% of American Jewish Millennials said that they have been forced to hide their Jewish identity because of the anti-Israel climate on campus or elsewhere. Gen X students also feel compelled to hide their Jewish identity in certain circles. Indeed, the Spring 2021 study of thousands of members of the largest national Jewish fraternity and sorority in the United States, conducted by the [Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law](#), suggests that a significant number of Jewish students feel pressure to hide their Jewish identity on college campuses. Approximately one in five of the students report that they “sometimes” or “often” hide their Jewish identities in campus settings.

Discourse on Israel spearheaded by pro-BDS organizations on campus can also lead to exclusion of Jewish students from progressive student groups or organizations because they are Zionists or pro-Israel. Being pro-Israel does not imply being against Palestinians or Palestinian rights. Yet, on numerous college campuses, social justice and progressive issues are seen as incompatible with pro-Israel stances. Anti-Israel activists also promote the view that support of Israel is inherently racist and that Jewish students, through their connection to Israel, are complicit in any mistreatment of Palestinians. Progressive Zionists who care deeply about LGBTQIA issues are accused of “pinkwashing” (using Israel’s inclusive LGBTQ+ policies to distract from any alleged or real human rights abuses against Palestinians). Similarly, Zionist Jews who care about the environment and veganism have been verbally attacked for “greenwashing.” The spread of this type of discourse has contributed to Jewish students feeling unsafe to express themselves as Jewish on college campuses.

III. BDS is Antithetical to Academic Values

College and university campuses are places that honor deep thinking, learning, academic integrity, healthy debates, and civility. Thus, there is a profound contradiction between the BDS movement and the mission of higher education. BDS paints in deceptively broad strokes a conflict that is deeply complex and nuanced. It condemns the entire country of Israel and shuns all of its considerable human, technological, medical, and material capital, including academics, regardless of political orientation or exceptional utility. And of course, BDS has become, more often than not, a convenient excuse to delegitimize or denigrate Jewish identity on American college campuses.

College and university leadership must ensure that respectful and healthy debate flourish on campus, turning antagonistic opinions into productive learning opportunities. Efforts should be made to offer more speech in a respectful environment rather than shut down free speech. At the same time, institutions of higher education cannot allow antisemitic discourse to flourish while hiding behind the veil of free speech. As Justice Louis Brandeis wrote in his opinion in *Whitney v. California* (1927), “If there be time to expose through discussion, the falsehoods and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.” Higher education institutions should be aware that pro-BDS speakers will impact their Jewish constituents as well as create a hostile climate on campus; they must ensure that other narratives and accurate factual information are offered in response. College and university leadership should have zero-tolerance policies towards BDS that turns into antisemitism and that tokenizes their Jewish student population, regardless of their actual position towards Israel.

We encourage college and university leadership to model for their students on campus what productive dialogues around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should look like and forcefully condemn antisemitism when it arises on campus.

IV. Recommendations

As an organization with many years of experience in the campus space and a strong reputation as a nuanced broker in conversations about Israel, AJC recommends the following to university leadership and administration:

1. **In response to BDS resolutions on campus or in the academic world as a whole, University presidents or other administrators should issue strong and unequivocal statements against BDS to set an example on their college campus.** While they cannot—and indeed should not—shut down the activities of their student groups or prohibit a pro-BDS speaker from addressing their students, they must clearly take a stand against BDS and distance the university administration from this insidious movement. They should also affirm a continued commitment to the safety and wellbeing of Jewish students, faculty, and staff—groups that necessarily include a range of viewpoints on Israel. Presidents should endeavor to clarify that the position of a single group or passing of a lone resolution on campus is not a sign that Jewish students are unwelcome or less welcome on campus; rather, it represents a single snapshot of a select group at a moment in time, one that may resonate for certain individuals or groups on campus, but is by no means a barometer of widespread support for an extremely polarizing position on a complex issue.

Here are some relevant points:

- Academic boycotts are at odds with the principles of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas in democratic countries.
 - Ending all academic exchange programs and other initiatives with Israel is contrary to a university's core mission to introduce students to a world that might be vastly different from their own and to teach them how to build bridges between people of different backgrounds. The complexity of Israel's history and current geopolitics makes nuanced inquiry and discussion essential. Academic exchange programs remain a vital component of thoughtful engagement with Israel's complexity, and serve to work against the perpetuation of inaccurate, polarizing discourse.
 - Zionism is an integral part of the Jewish identity of the majority of Jewish students. The line can easily be crossed between valid criticism of Israel and an anti-Zionism that turns into antisemitism. The latter creates an unsafe environment for Jewish students who oftentimes feel unwelcome and marginalized.
 - While boycott and divestment can seem like innocent means of protest, they in fact single out Israel for retribution and no other country.
2. **AJC, in collaboration with Hillel International and the American Council on Education (ACE), held a summit for university presidents on combating antisemitism in April 2022, bringing together more than 40 schools.** During that summit, we made three critical recommendations for campuses, including building proactive relationships with Jewish students on campus, ensuring clear policies on reporting antisemitism, and including prevention of antisemitism as part of the university's DEI agenda. For more on these recommendations, click [here](#).

3. **Consider offering your students, staff, and faculty a training on antisemitism.** AJC has extensive experience in designing antisemitism trainings for a wide range of audiences, including higher education institutions and universities. We would be happy to work with you to tailor a training that fits the needs of your campus.
4. **Encourage Vice Presidents of Student Life and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officers on your campus to travel with AJC professionals on an educational and non-partisan Project Interchange delegation to Israel in order to learn first-hand about Israel and the situation on the ground.** Click [here](#) for more information about AJC's Project Interchange.
5. **Foster dialogue between student groups, faculty, and staff on campus to understand various perspectives and learn from one another.** AJC is happy to serve as a resource and help facilitate discussion.
6. **Meet with Jewish student leaders on your campus to understand their experiences and potential concerns surrounding BDS and antisemitism and showcase your support.**

For a full complement of strategies and resources to prevent and combat antisemitism on campus, consult [AJC's Recommendations for Educational Institutions](#), which are a part of AJC's *Call to Action Against Antisemitism in America*.