

Blowback and Campus Anti-Semitism

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Conference on Palestine, Israel and the Assault on Academic Freedom

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*Note: This essay is an expansion of our March 2015 article in [Mondoweiss](#) “**New anti-Semitism” on college campuses is largely blowback against orchestrated Israel advocacy***

As we write, the University of California Regents are developing Principles Against Intolerance, their guide to student activism and classroom discussion. Prominent commentators from a, [LA Times editorial](#) to UC Irvine Law School Dean Erwin Chemerinsky in a [LA Times Op-Ed](#), sidestepped the issue of classroom discussion, but tell us that the Regents are acting to protect students from bigotry, with a particular focus being “whether campus protests against Israeli policies have contributed to a hostile environment for Jewish students.” According to the [Los Angeles Times](#), the Regents are responding to claims by some Jewish groups that there have been “rising numbers of anti-Semitic incidents on U.S. campuses.” We think that is a false claim.

Other groups, most notably AMCHA (Hebrew for “Your people”) have issued [lists of so-called anti-Israel professors](#). Their intention is to stifle classroom discussion, especially in courses related to the history of the modern Middle East, through allegations of anti-Semitic rhetoric in the classroom.

When we examine the supposed anti-Semitic incidents, they mostly disappear. As Dima Khalidi already explained at this conference, and as Tallie Ben Daniel will soon explain, and as documented in their reports, most claims of anti-Semitism on college campuses are really presentations or actions critical of the Israeli government’s occupation policies. These accusations of anti-Semitism are used by pro-Israel groups to stifle campus discussions of Israel-Palestine that deviate from the Israeli government’s talking points.

After eliminating these incidents, there still remain a few, isolated events that look much more like anti-Semitism. But even they don’t represent a rash of anti-Semitic hate speech or hate crimes. Rather, they are totally isolated events, and they appear to be ignorant blowback against aggressive actions by pro-Israeli government student groups fighting divestment resolutions. The supposed “anti-Semites” could not differentiate between the state of Israel, its occupation policies, and American Jews. Considering that the Israeli government repeatedly claims that Israel is the state of the entire Jewish people, not just of Israeli citizens, this confusion has some basis.

Before assessing these incidents, we should, be clear on what comprises anti-Semitism.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) [defines anti-Semitism](#) as hostility to, prejudice against, or discrimination against Jews based on hatred of Jews “just because they are Jewish.”

The ADL further writes, “Anti-Semitism is the belief or behavior hostile toward Jews **just**

because they are Jewish. It may take the form of religious teachings that proclaim the inferiority of Jews, for instance, or political efforts to isolate, oppress, or otherwise injure them. It may also include prejudiced or stereotyped views about Jews.”

The ADL [annual audit of anti-Semitic incidents](#) in the United States documents that anti-Semitism at US college campuses is at a historic low point. There are very few actual anti-Semitic incidents, and the long history of discrimination against Jews in academia has disappeared. There are no more glass ceilings for Jewish professors to become department chairs, deans, or college presidents. Admission quotas, including for medical schools, are long gone. And, fraternities and sororities have all dropped discriminatory clauses barring Jews from membership. Finally, students interested in Jewish or Israeli studies, as well as Hebrew and Yiddish, now have multiple options at many campuses in the UC system, including degree granting graduate programs.

These developments are fully observable at UCLA, where Chancellor Gene D. Bloch and many deans are Jewish. UCLA offers abundant opportunities to take Jewish-related courses, engage in Jewish or Israel focused academic research, earn advanced degrees, write for Jewish publications, or participate in Jewish organizations. Former UCLA Hillel Executive Director Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller described these trends in full detail for one of his 2014 High Holiday sermons.

So, in light of this back-story, how much actual anti-Semitism has occurred at the nine University of California campuses in recent years? In spite of the rhetoric, there have been only two known anti-Semitic incidents on UC campuses– the painting of a swastika on a Jewish fraternity at UC Davis, and a member of the UCLA Student Senate questioning the qualifications of an undergraduate candidate for student judge because she was Jewish and active in Hillel and a Jewish sorority.

We condemn these racist incidents. They are taken as evidence of anti-Semitism by officials who do not, or will not, see the extenuating circumstances that we explain here. Our movement suffers.

That said, these two incidents are what we call “apparent anti-Semitic incidents.” We will show that they are blowback to anti-divestment actions on these two UC campuses.

Blowback is the unintended and adverse result of a political action or situation. It was an internal CIA term for counter-attacks after CIA/U.S. government military and quasi-military operations. The term was brought into the open by historian Chalmers Johnson in his 2000 book [“Blowback, The Costs and Consequences of American Empire.”](#)

We suggest that the blowback concept helps understand what triggered the apparent anti-Semitic acts on two UC campuses.

In the **UC Davis incident** a swastika was painted on an outside wall and another on the concrete walkway of the Alpha Epsilon Pi fraternity house in the wee hours of February 1,

2015, a few days after the [UC Davis student government passed a resolution](#) calling on the UC Board of Regents to divest UC endowment holdings from “corporations that aid in the Israeli occupation of Palestine and illegal settlements in Palestinian territories.” Alpha Epsilon Pi is a predominantly Jewish fraternity that was deeply involved in opposition to the resolution.

The fraternity claimed this incident was the work of pro-Palestinian BDS activists in retaliation for the fraternity’s **unsuccessful** opposition to the divestment resolution. The police and university administration consider the incident an anti-Semitic hate crime,. But after an extensive investigation, the campus police could not find a perpetrator or a motive. Whoever it was, their identity and impetus is still unknown. The claim of an anti-Semitic response to the fraternity’s political actions remains pure speculation. Furthermore, we wonder why the winning side in this campus dispute would attack the losing side. It would be far easier to understand the losing side taking revenge on the winners

In the **UCLA incident**, Rachel Beyda, a Jewish undergraduate who is a campus Hillel officer, applied to become a student judge on the Judicial Board of the Undergraduate Students Association. In her February 10, 2015, interview before student officers, one of them asked, “Given that you are a Jewish student and very active in the Jewish community, how do you see yourself being able to maintain an unbiased view?” ([NY Times](#), March 5, 2015) The issue of dual loyalty was raised in the same interview, according to the [Daily Bruin](#). Beyda’s application was rejected.

Beyda was confirmed as a student judge the next day when the UCLA staff advisor, Debra Geller explained that an applicant’s ethnic or religious identity could not be used to evaluate his or her candidacy. Nevertheless, this incident was labeled as anti-Semitic by UCLA Jewish leaders, the organized Jewish community in Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Times, and the New York Times.

The context of both incidents, especially at UCLA, shows they are connected with Israel-related activism on campus. Furthermore, there is no evidence that either was motivated by hatred for Jews because they are Jewish. The lack of similar incidents on either UC campus before or after those just discussed bolsters our contention that there is not a wave of anti-Semitism on UC campuses. In fact, the two incidents do not even meet the ADL’s threshold of anti-Semitism.

There is a valid issue with Beyda’s candidacy that transcends the improper questioning. What the student officers really wanted to know was if Beyda’s involvement with a campus Jewish organization that vociferously opposed divestment resolutions, specifically UCLA Hillel, allowed her to impartially serve on the student Judicial Board.

UCLA Hillel’s role in advocating for the Israeli government and against student divestment resolutions must not be underestimated. It includes the active support from Adam Milstein, an off-campus real estate mogul and convicted felon. He is connected to right-wing Zionist

groups and has left [a paper trail](#) of funneling money through UCLA Hillel to influence student elections and [oppose divestment campaigns at UCLA](#).

The connection between Beyda's position in Hillel and Hillel's role, backed by Milstein's money, in opposition to student divestment resolutions, indeed raises questions about Beyda's judicial impartiality.

Mechanics of Blowback

This brings us to the ultimate irony of these real and imagined anti-Semitic incidents on American campuses. They are largely push back against [externally orchestrated Israel advocacy](#), usually through Jewish institutions that receive [support from the Israeli government](#), Israel-connected organization like the [Jewish National Fund](#) and [AIPAC](#), or outside donors, [like Milstein](#). In many cases they operate well-funded programs, such as [Hasbara Fellows](#), that train campus operatives to parrot Israeli government talking points.

Some pro-Israel groups go even further by condemning pro-Palestinian groups with the goal of discrediting them. The right-wing David Horowitz Freedom Center [accuses two groups](#), the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), of supporting Islamic terrorism.

While pro-Israel student groups oppose pro-Palestinian groups, the line between the Israeli government policies and Diaspora Jewish communities has been deliberately blurred by all Israeli Prime Ministers since David Ben Gurion, and especially the present Prime Minister, Netanyahu. They regularly claim that they are acting for all Jews worldwide and not only for Israeli Jews, and some Israelis claim [a religious basis for settlement expansion](#) and other aspects of the occupation, they justify stealing Palestinian land as a Jewish value.

This confusion is amplified through the U.S. government's full throttle support of Israel, as well as well-financed opposition to Palestinian activism by establishment American Jewish groups such as Hillel, AIPAC, Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, and Stand With Us.

The point is that few if any anti-Semitic incidents would have occurred on college campuses if pro-Israel advocates did not confront pro-Palestinian groups in the name of "the Jewish State" while clouding the distinctions between the Israeli government and the Diaspora Jewish communities.

The Big Picture

As overall trends of anti-Semitism continue downward in the United States, the appearance of a few isolated anti-Semitic incidents on college campuses is simply blowback against clumsy efforts by Jewish student groups to oppose BDS divestment campaigns.

The Zionist movement established Israel to escape what it viewed as eternal anti-Semitism, but, ironically, Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people and its efforts to quash public criticism of these practices have resulted in pushback that has included several quasi-anti-

Semitic incidents on college campuses, as well as many incidents of political activism that Israeli proxies mislabel as "anti-Semitism." But, other than a few white supremacists hiding in the off-campus woodwork, none of this is based on hatred of Jews. Rather, all are triggered by opposition to Israel's occupation because it denies Palestinians individual and group rights.

Paradoxically, Israel and its extremist supporters in the United States are undercutting the work of Jewish defense organizations, such as the [Anti-Defamation League](#), that have had extraordinary success over the past century in eliminating real anti-Semitism in the United States. One of their achievements was to rebut widespread allegations that American Jews had divided loyalties between the United States and Israel. Recent Israeli declarations, from Prime Minister Netanyahu himself, that Israel is the [state of the entire Jewish people](#), have revived these suspicions. When pro-Israel activists claim they speak for all Jews, it stigmatizes Jews everywhere with the biases of those pro-Israel activists. That perception was, in fact, the basis for the Rachel Beyda incident at UCLA.

As we examine these and related cases, we come to an inescapable conclusion. Defenders of the Israeli government are fostering incidents of what they claim is anti-Semitism even though Israel was intended to protect Jews from anti-Semitism.

No Excuse

We emphasize that there is no excuse for real or apparent anti-Semitic acts. They are racist and we condemn them. They are not excused if they were blowback triggered by pro-Israel operatives.

An anti-Semitic act will be labeled as anti-Semitism by authorities, regardless of how or why it was instigated. We must recognize that an anti-Semitic act by any member of a pro-Palestinian group will be taken as hate-speech, and it will reflect badly on our movement.

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