

# Phony Claims of Anti-Semitism at UC Campuses

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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 [Mondoweiss](#) article rebutting the claim that campus-based Palestinian advocates are engaged in anti-Jewish hate speech and related hate crimes.*

As we write, the University of California Regents are developing a policy document, [Principles Against Intolerance](#), their guide to student activism and classroom discussion. Prominent commentators, such as UC Irvine Law School Dean Erwin Chemerinsky, claimed in a [LA Times Op-Ed](#), that the Regents are protecting students from bigotry, with a particular concern “whether campus protests against Israeli policies have contributed to a hostile environment for Jewish students.” In a related editorial, the [Los Angeles Times wrote that](#) the UC Regents are responding to claims by some Jewish groups that there have been “rising numbers of anti-Semitic incidents on U.S. campuses.”

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.

We contend that all of these claims are false. In particular, Jewish students at UC campuses are not subject to bigotry in and out of the classroom; campus protests against Israeli policies have not created a hostile environment toward Jewish students, there have not been a rising numbers of anti-Semitic incidents on U.S. college campuses, and Palestinian activists are not perpetrators of anti-Jewish hate crimes.

When we examine the supposed anti-Semitic incidents cited by Israel’s campus proxies, they mostly disappear. As Dima Khalidi of Palestine Legal ([The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in the US](#)) and Tallie Ben Daniel of Jewish Voice for Peace ([Stifling Dissent: How Israel’s Defenders Use False Charges of Anti-Semitism to Limit the Debate over Israel on Campus](#)), have documented in their carefully compiled reports, alleged anti-Semitic speech or actions at US college campuses, including the University of California, are really presentations or actions critical of the Israeli government’s occupation policies. The repeated accusations of anti-Semitism -- that their respective reports debunk -- are used by pro-Israel groups that make these accusation to stifle campus discussions of Israel-Palestine that deviate from the Israeli government’s talking points.

After eliminating these incidents, there still remain two isolated events at UC campuses that look much more like anti-Semitism. But even they don’t constitute a wave of anti-Jewish hate speech or hate crimes, and there is no evidence that pro-Palestinian activists perpetrated them. Rather, they

are totally isolated events. By their timing they could be blowback against aggressive actions by pro-Israeli government student groups fighting campus divestment resolutions, but even this accusation is conjecture advanced by these same pro-Israeli government student groups.

Before assessing these two incidents, we should, however, clearly define anti-Semitism. For this we turn to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the foremost Jewish defense organization.

The 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’s [annual audit of anti-Semitic incidents](#) in the United States documents that anti-Semitism at US college campuses is at a historic low point. Actual anti-Semitic incidents are extremely rare, and the long history of [discrimination against Jews in academia](#) has disappeared. There are no more glass ceilings barring Jewish professors from becoming 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 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.

In light of this back-story, how many actual anti-Semitic occurred at the nine University of California campuses in recent years? In spite of the rhetoric, there have been only two such incidents: the painting of a swastika on a Jewish fraternity house at UC Davis, and officers of the UCLA Undergraduate Students Association questioning the qualifications of an undergraduate candidate for a student judgeship because she was Jewish and active in Hillel and a Jewish sorority.

We condemn these racist incidents. But campus officials erroneously present them as evidence of anti-Semitism linked to pro-Palestinian activists.

That said, neither of the two incidents at a UC campus readily conform to the ADL’s definition of anti-Semitism. First, there is no evidence that the remarks of the UCLA student officers interviewing Rachel Beyda were based on hatred of Jews. Second, neither event was preceded or followed by any similar anti-Jewish incidents, but they did immediately appear after anti-divestment campaigns by Jewish student groups at both 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 since there is no direct evidence they are linked to anti-Jewish prejudices or organizations.

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 early 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 anti-Semitic 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, they could not find a perpetrator or a motive. Whoever it was, their identity and impetus is still unknown. The fraternity’s allegation that the swastikas were an anti-Semitic response by anti-Jewish Palestinian activists to the fraternity’s Israeli advocacy remains their unsubstantiated speculation.

In the **UCLA incident**, Rachel Beyda, a Jewish undergraduate who is a campus Hillel officer, applied to serve as a judge on the Undergraduate Students Association’s Judicial Board. In her February 10, 2015, interview before student government 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 also raised in the same interview, according to the [Daily Bruin](#). Beyda’s application was initially rejected.

But, Beyda was confirmed as a student judge later that evening when the UCLA student government advisor, [Debra Geller](#), explained that an applicant’s ethnic or religious identity could not be used to evaluate his or her candidacy. The organized Jewish community in Los Angeles, the [Los Angeles Times](#), and the [New York Times](#) then quickly contended that [this anti-Semitic incident was linked to Palestinian advocacy](#) on the respective campuses.

The context of both incidents, especially at UCLA, shows they are correlated with Israel-related activism on campus. The lack of similar incidents on either UC campus before or after these two events bolsters our contention that there is no wave of anti-Semitism at UC campuses. There is, however, a valid issue with Beyda’s candidacy that transcends the student officers’ improper questioning. What they really wanted to know was if Beyda’s leadership role in a campus Jewish organization, Hillel, that vociferously opposed campus divestment resolutions 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 clandestine financial support from Adam Milstein, an off-campus real estate mogul and convicted felon. He is connected to right-wing Zionist groups, and the UC Berkeley Daily Cal uncovered [a paper trail](#) of Millstein illegally 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 tainted money, in opposing 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, especially the University of California. 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 backers, [like Milstein](#). In many cases they operate well-funded programs, such as [Hasbara Fellows](#), that train campus operatives to parrot Israeli government talking points, in particular that criticisms of the Israeli government are motivated by anti-Semitism (i.e., hatred of Jews).

Some pro-Israel groups go even further by condemning pro-Palestinian groups with the goal of discrediting them as anti-Jewish terrorists. The right-wing David Horowitz Freedom Center [accuses two campus groups](#), the Muslim Student Association (MSA) and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), of supporting Islamic terrorism. Horowitz also claims that they are behind an epidemic of anti-Semitism on U.S. college campuses.

All Israeli Prime Ministers, especially Benjamin Netanyahu, have deliberately blurred the line between the Israeli government's policies and diaspora Jewish communities. He regularly claims that he is acting for all Jews worldwide and not only for Israeli Jews, and some Israelis also cite [a Jewish religious basis for settlement expansion](#) and other aspects of the occupation.

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 alleged anti-Semitic incidents would have occurred on college campuses if pro-Israel advocates had not confronted pro-Palestinian groups in the name of "the Jewish State" while clouding distinctions between the Israeli government and the Jewish community in the United States.

### **The Big Picture**

As overall trends of real anti-Semitism continue steadily downward in the United States, the appearance of a few isolated and not easily categorized anti-Semitic incidents are hardly a trend of anti-Jewish hate speech or violence on college campuses. In all likelihood we are witnessing 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 student 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](#). They have had extraordinary success over the past century in eliminating real anti-Semitism in the United States. In one of Jewish history's greatest contradictions, these defense agencies have disproved the most basic tenet of Zionism, that Jews cannot survive in the Jewish diaspora because [anti-Semitism is pervasive and ineradicable](#). Thanks to them, Jewish life and community in the United States proves exactly the opposite.

For example, one of the ADL's major 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 long dormant 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 unexpected 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 excusable, even when they appear to be 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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