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**Israel’s War on American Universities**

[**http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/israels\_war\_on\_american\_universities\_20140316/**](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/israels_war_on_american_universities_20140316/)

**Posted on Mar 16, 2014**

By Chris Hedges



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks to the AIPAC meeting on March 4 in Washington, D.C. (AP/Carolyn Kaster)*

The banning of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at Northeastern University in Boston on March 7, along with a university threat of disciplinary measures against some of its members, replicates sanctions being imposed against numerous student Palestinian rights groups across the country. The attacks, and the disturbingly similar forms of punishment, appear to be part of a coordinated effort by the Israeli government and the Israel lobby to blacklist all student groups that challenge the official Israeli narrative.

Northeastern banned the SJP chapter after it posted on campus replicas of eviction notices that are routinely put up on Palestinian homes set for Israeli demolition. The university notice of suspension says that if the SJP petitions for reinstatement next year, “No current member of the Students for Justice in Palestine executive board may serve on the inaugural board of the new organization” and that representatives from the organization must attend university-sanctioned “trainings.”

In 2011 in California, 10 students who had disrupted a speech at UC Irvine by Michael Oren, then the Israeli ambassador to the United States, [were found guilty](http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-muslim-students-convicted-20140310,0,2243315.story" \l "ixzz2w3gTWxxQ ), put on informal probation and sentenced to perform community service. Oren, an Israeli citizen who has since been [hired by CNN](http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Michael-Oren-joins-CNN-as-analyst-and-contributor-338146%20) as a contributor, has [called on Congress](http://mondoweiss.net/2013/12/congress-blacklist-boycotters.html%20) to blacklist supporters of the campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel and to prosecute those who protest at appearances by Israeli officials. Some activists at Florida Atlantic University were stripped of student leadership positions after walking out of a talk by an Israeli army officer, and they were ordered by school administrators to attend re-education seminars designed by the Anti-Defamation League. Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (CSJP) was abruptly placed on suspension in the spring of 2011 and barred from reserving rooms and hosting events on campus. The university administration, before the ban, had a practice of notifying the campus [Hillel](http://www.hillel.org/about/what-is-a-hillel%20) in advance of any CSJP event. The suspension was eventually lifted, after a protest led by attorneys for the CSJP.

Max Geller, a law student and a SJP member at Northeastern whom I reached by phone in Boston, accused the university of responding “to outside pressures,” including that of alumnus Robert Shillman, who is the CEO of Cognex Corp., and hedge fund billionaire Seth Klarman, both supporters of right-wing Israeli causes.

“To prohibit students from holding leadership roles and student groups simply because they engaged in a peaceful political protest is antithetical to the university’s mission to educate students,” he said. “It erases any pedagogical value disciplinary process might seek.”

“In the last year,” Geller went on, “I have received death threats, been publicly and unfairly maligned, and have been threatened with disciplinary measures. This has made engaging in speech about an issue about which I care deeply, both as a Jew and an American, a fear- and anxiety-causing prospect.”

Israel’s heavy-handed reaction to these campus organizations is symptomatic of its increasing isolation and concern about waning American support. The decades-long occupation and seizure of Palestinian land and the massive military assaults against a defenseless population in Gaza that has left hundreds dead, along with growing malnutrition among Palestinian children and enforced poverty, have alienated traditional supporters of Israel, including many young American Jews. Israel, at the same time, has turned into a pariah in the global community. If it were to become devoid of American support, which it largely buys with political campaign contributions funneled through groups such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Israel would be adrift. There are a growing number of banks and other companies, especially in the European Union, joining the boycott movement, which refuses to do business with Israeli concerns in the occupied territories. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, speaking before AIPAC on March 4, surprisingly devoted much of his talk to attacking the nascent BDS movement, which he said stood for “Bigotry, Dishonesty and Shame.” He called for BDS supporters to “be treated exactly as we treat any anti-Semite or bigot.” He warned that “naive and ignorant” people are being recruited as “gullible fellow travelers” in an anti-Semitic campaign.

Israeli officials are also apparently [attempting to infiltrate](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4001765.ece%20) the BDS movement and are using subterfuge to link it to Islamic extremism, according to The Times of London. The Israeli government in addition is pushing censorious, anti-democratic bills in the state legislatures of New York, Maryland and Illinois that would impose financial sanctions on academic organizations that boycott Israeli institutions. Meanwhile, the United States and others enthusiastically impose sanctions on Russia for an occupation that is much less draconian than Israel’s long defiance of international law.

The ADL-designed indoctrination classes for university activists are, according to those who have been required to take them, shabby attempts to equate any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism.

“Myself and two other members of SJP were forced to attend the ADL-sponsored ‘diversity training’ course or we would have violated the terms of our probation and in turn we would be suspended and/or expelled,” said Nadine Aly, a Florida Atlantic student activist who with other activists walked out of a lecture given at the university by an Israeli army officer, Col. Bentzi Gruber, who had helped devise the rules of engagement for [Operation Cast Lead](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaza_War%20), the horrific attack on Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009. I reached her by phone at the Florida campus. “The very idea that the administration is implying that it is racist to criticize Israeli policy is ludicrous. We were put on ‘indefinite probation,’ banning us from holding leadership positions in any recognized student organizations, including student government, at the university until our graduation. I was stripped of my position as president of SJP as well as a student senator, and the former vice president of the SJP lost her position as a Student House representative. It is a shame that this university, like most universities, bows to the pressure of the Zionist lobby and wealthy Zionist donors, when they should be protecting the rights of their students.”

The persecution of scholars such as [Joseph Massad](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/mesaas/faculty/directory/massad.html%20) and [Norman Finkelstein](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Finkelstein%20) who challenge the official Israeli narrative has long been a feature of Israeli intervention in American academic life. And the eagerness of university presidents to [denounce](http://legalinsurrection.com/2013/12/indiana-wash-u-st-louis-gwu-northwestern-cornell-reject-academic-boycott-of-israel/%20) the American Studies Association call for an academic boycott of Israel is a window into the insatiable hunger for money that seems to govern university policy. The current effort to shut down student groups, however, raises traditional Israeli censorship and interference to a new level. Israel seeks now to openly silence free speech on American college campuses—all of these student groups have steadfastly engaged in nonviolent protests—and has enlisted our bankrupt liberal elites and college administrators as thought police.

The failure among academics to stand up for the right of these student groups to express dissenting views and engage in political activism is a sad commentary on how irrelevant most academics have become. Where, in this fight, are the constitutional law professors defending the right to free speech? Where are the professors of ethics, religion and philosophy reminding students about the right of all to a dignified life free of oppression? Where are the Middle Eastern studies professors explaining the historical consequences of Israel’s violent seizure of Palestinian land? Where are the journalism professors defending the right of dissidents and victims to a fair hearing in the press? Where are the professors of queer and gender studies, African-American studies, Native American studies or Chicano studies acting to protect the voices and dignity of the marginalized and oppressed?

This assault will not end with groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine. The refusal to hear the cries of the Palestinian people, especially those 1.5 million—60 percent of them children—who are trapped by the Israeli military in Gaza, is part of the wider campaign by right-wing operatives like [Lynne Cheney](http://rightweb.irc-online.org/profile/Cheney_Lynne%20) and billionaires such as the Koch brothers to stamp out all programs and academic disciplines that give voice to the marginalized, especially those who are not privileged and white. Latinos, African-Americans, feminists, those in queer and gender studies also feel this pressure. Under a bill signed by Republican Gov. Jan Brewer, books by leading Chicano authors have been banned from public schools in Tucson and elsewhere in Arizona on the ground that such ethnic studies promote “resentment toward a race or people.” It is language similar to what former Ambassador Oren has used to justify his call for criminal prosecutions of BDS activists—that they are advancing “bigotry.” The neoconservatism that grips Israel has its toxic counterpart within American culture. And if other marginalized groups within the university remain silent while Palestine solidarity activists are persecuted on campuses, there will be fewer allies when these right-wing forces come for them. And come they will.

Those of us who denounce the suffering caused by Israel and its war crimes against the Palestinians and who support the BDS movement are accustomed to sleazy Israeli smear campaigns. I have been repeatedly [branded as an anti-Semite](http://www.nysun.com/new-york/baruch-requires-students-read-book-some-are/37616/%20) by the Israeli lobby, including for my book “War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning.” That some of these dissident voices, such as Max Blumenthal, who wrote “Goliath: Fear and Loathing in Greater Israel,” one of the best accounts of contemporary Israel, are Jewish does not seem to perturb right-wing Israeli propagandists who see any deviation from the Israeli government line as a form of religious heresy.

“I have been on tour discussing [my book](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/imploding_the_myth_of_israel_20131103), ‘Goliath,’ since October 2013,” said Blumenthal, with whom I spoke by phone. “And on numerous occasions, Israel lobby groups and pro-Israel activists have attempted to pressure organizations into canceling my events before they took place. I have been slandered by teenage pro-Israel students, prominent magazine columnists and even Alan Dershowitz as an anti-Semite, and my family has been attacked in right-wing media simply for hosting a book party for me. The absurd lengths pro-Israel activists have gone to stop my journalism and analysis from reaching a wide audience perfectly illustrate their intellectual exhaustion and moral poverty. All they have left is loads of money to buy off politicians and the unlimited will to defend the only nuclearized apartheid state in the Middle East. As young Arabs and Muslims assert their presence on campuses across the country and Jewish Americans reel in disgust at Netanyahu’s Israel, we are witnessing pro-Israel forces wage a fighting retreat. The question is not whether they will win or lose, but how much damage they can do to free-speech rights on their way towards a reckoning with justice.”

“It would be heartening if prominent liberal intellectuals would agree with all of my conclusions, or would accept the legitimacy of BDS,” Blumenthal went on. “But the only reasonable expectation we can hold for them is that they speak up in defense of those whose free-speech rights and rights to organize are being crushed by powerful forces. Unfortunately, when those forces are arrayed in defense of Israel, too many liberal intellectuals are silent or, as in the case of Michael Kazin, Eric Alterman, Cary Nelson and a who’s who of major university presidents, they actively collaborate with fellow elites determined to crush Palestine solidarity activism through anti-democratic means.”

Hillel chapters, sadly, often function as little more than Israeli government and AIPAC campus outposts. This is true at Northeastern as well as [at schools such as Barnard College and Columbia](http://youngist.org/post/79469339434/barnard-college-censors-students-for-justice-in%20). And university presidents such as Barnard’s Debora Spar see nothing wrong with accepting [Israel-lobby tours of Israel](http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/.premium-1.533831%20) while Palestinian students [must risk imprisonment](http://electronicintifada.net/content/i-risked-imprisonment-israel-and-death-study-united-states/13189%20) and even death to study in the United States. The launching of campuswide defamation campaigns from supposedly religious houses is a sacrilege to the Jewish religion. In seminary I read enough of the great Hebrew prophets, whose singular concern was for the oppressed and the poor, to know that they would not be found today in Hillel centers but would instead be protesting with SJP activists.

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A Progressive Journal of News and Opinion Publisher, Zuade Kaufman Editor, Robert Scheer

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