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Campus Hatred



Fear on campus?
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The battle for America

Special: Israeli, Jewish students fighting back as hostility grows on leading campuses in America

Tzipi Shmilovitz

It happened at the end of a Sabbath eve supper of a group of Jewish students. Amir Lev, Jewish Agency emissary at UC San Diego, went out for a smoke. He saw two cars wrapped with Palestinian flags. "I took a few steps in the direction of the cars and they left," Lev recalls. "Two days later an Israeli student came over to his car and discovered that they spray painted the words 'Zionist terrorist.'"

"This does not happen every day, but there is definitely an escalation in the [anti-Israel](#) atmosphere in this university. And this is happening because for the first time Israeli students are responding," he says. "There is an approach which says it is preferable not to respond, because if we make noise we only give the other side more public relations. But we cannot continue giving them the stage. Some 90% of the students don't understand what this is about at all. We need to fight in order to bring them to our side. Now they see us; we are active."

This is exactly what is happening in the last two years in universities throughout the US and in particular in southern California – anti Israeli movements are no longer playing on an empty field. There are [Israeli](#) and Jewish American students who are fighting back against the heart of the intellectual elite in the US.

California, one of the most liberal and left-wing states in the US poses a particularly difficult challenge: Most of the universities here are anti-Israel among both professors and students. On the other hand, Los Angeles alone is the largest Israeli population center outside of Israel, and all the universities have a relatively high percentage of Jewish students. So there is a big vacuum.

The emissary program of the Jewish Agency entered this vacuum, and it includes at this stage 50 young people in their 20s, who come on service for a year to three years in the largest universities in the US. The objective is to impose order on Israeli public relations efforts on the campuses. The financing comes jointly from the Jewish Agency, Hillel and private donors. In the case of California the main donor is the Israel Leadership Council (ILC,) a five year old Israeli organization that became a significant player in advancing Israel's interests in southern California.

Under the wings of Adam Milstein, a real estate tycoon who is one of the wealthiest men in the Israeli community, the organization also finances the Ambassador project, which trains local students to serve as a public relations force for Israel on campuses under the supervision of Israeli monitors. These are young people who are already located at the universities, usually US natives or some who came at a young age, and in fact most of them love the US and do not consider immigrating to Israel – but one visit to Israel is all that they need to form a deep emotional bond.

Anti-Semitism

Jews unwelcome on campus / Giulio Meotti

Op-ed: Western universities becoming frightening bastions of anti-Israel, anti-Jewish hostility

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“Everything most of these university students know about Israel is so distorted and baseless they are positive we are Nazis,” says Sagi Balasha, director of ILC. “But when they see our representatives, they see human beings – young people, educated, civilized. Very few people work on campuses with tens of thousands of students. It is a full-time job facing people some of whom are Jews who oppose Israel. These are Israel’s reserve soldiers on the campuses.

Boycotting hummus

Representatives of this “reserve unit” gathered in the beautiful living room of the home of Adam and Gila Milstein one cold evening. All impressive, strictly polite, perfect speaking fluency, tremendous desire, and impressively level-headed. Defining them isn’t important, salt of the earth or Silicon Valley, these representatives give Israel an appearance that is 180 degrees different than what the average American absorbs from television. Most of them, by the way, hold left-wing political opinions.

“In the period of Operation Defensive Shield I served at the IDF Spokesman’s Office and worked with foreign journalists”, says Neri Johnson, the emissary to UCLA. “It was almost impossible to talk to them. The pictures that came from the field were difficult and it was impossible to say something in their defense, but no one even tried to understand the context. Everything was black and white. I couldn’t forget it even after the army, so I came here.”

“The other side is much better than we in relaying its messages, and this is frustrating,” says Lian Kimia, who came to the US with her parents at age 7, studied in UCLA, and now at age 25 is immigrating to Israel.

“They have Apartheid Week, which takes place in almost every American... the entire week is overflowing with effective gimmicks. Once they set up a roadblock in the middle of the campus, so one of us got dressed like a Palestinian, went there and told the students gathered there: ‘Imagine that I was a terrorist, this place would have blown up already.’ But we generally don’t behave like that but try to create a dialogue. The question is always whether to go down to their level, because this propaganda is so strong.”

This is also the week in which pro-Palestinian organizations try to pass a resolution supporting the BDS movement, which was founded in 2005 for the purpose of reviving the economic boycott against Israel. A significant part of its activities is held on campus, with Palestinian students and supporters seeking to cancel deals with Israel.

“This boycott proposal passed only once until today, at Berkeley,” says Ido Adulami, the USC emissary. “It passed unanimously, but the university president cast a veto. They tried to remove Sabra hummus from the cafeteria, claiming that the owners, Strauss, contribute to the IDF. It gets down to the level of boycotting hummus.”

IN UC San Diego there is a relatively new phenomenon – in recent years there has been a pronounced rush against Israel that reached the point where Israeli students preferred not to wander the main paths of the campus during Apartheid Week.

“Two months ago we heard that the demand to impose a boycott will come up this week,” says Amir Lev. “From the moment that we discovered this we charged at members of the student government of the university with aggressive lobbying. This is a political effort in every way. Now it is clear to everyone that we are here.”

“We got there at 5:30 pm and left at 2:00 am. We sat in a small room with 250-300 students who were divided clearly into two sides... some 90% of the people in the room were never in Israel, don’t know anything about the conflict, it is doubtful if they can even identify Israel on a map. They conduct a debate full of fire and shouts as if they have any idea of what they are talking about. This is a university with more than 30,000 students, and all the lists that take part in the next elections to student government are running on one platform only – whether they are for or against a boycott against Israel. So what if

most of the students don't know what this is even about?" he says.

"The proposal lost by a 20-13 majority. If we had not been there, the resolution no doubt would have been passed. They were in shock. They wept as if we prevented the establishment of their state at that moment."

Exposing the extremism

The force of anti-Israel feeling is something that changes from campus to campus and sometimes also at the campus itself from year to year. Everything depends on the students who study there at any particular moment. In Berkeley it was always hot – in the past year students built models of West Bank roadblocks in the middle of campus, but this year it is relatively quiet there.

Irvine College in Orange County was considered until a few years ago as one of the most hostile campuses to Israel in America. Two years ago pro-Palestinian students disrupted a lecture by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, and as a result of this the number of Jews studying at Irvine reached a new low for the last 15 years.

"They come to the lectures we organized, sit in the first row, and at the moment the lecture starts they get up and leave," says Eren Hoch, the Jewish Agency emissary to the university. "Once we brought a lecturer, a former IDF officer who said plainly that he is in favor of two states, and they got up and left anyway."

When asked whether the pro-Israel activists interact with the other side, Amir Lev responds: "Definitely. We manage to keep it respectable. This is America. Everything is terribly politically correct and you must keep it polite. This is not about persuading them. When I sit with one of them in a café, I do not speak to them but to the people sitting around and listening. There are people who don't agree even to speak with me because I served in the army, I am an oppressor. But we try to prompt others not to see us one-dimensionally."

"They are clever," adds Ido Adulami. "They are careful to say they are not anti-Jewish, but rather, anti-Zionist. They also use the word Zionism all the time. They made it a word of contempt and this is propaganda that also influences us. But the innovation we bring is focusing on things that are not tied to politics."

"We try to place a human face on what they know about Israel. For example, we have a group that deals with Israel only from the high-tech business angle. It is most important to cause people to understand the gap between what they see on television and reality. At least they will know what they are talking about. In a world in which your life is summed up by your status on Facebook this is a big challenge," he says.

Lev concludes: "It is only 5% of the students, but these are the activists; they make the noise. And what is most important is that they are also the next generation of American leaders. Our objective is to expose the extremism of the other side and we feel we are succeeding, because suddenly now for the first time the organization of black students is trying to make contact with us and people feel at ease walking on campus."

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