

How Should Pro-Israel Voices Tackle the War of Ideas on College Campuses?

Recent ordeals for Jews on college campuses include being probed on their religious identity in student government hearings, seeing swastikas sprayed on their fraternity houses, and the presence of a student-initiated course accused of anti-Semitism.

Pro-Israel voices are fighting back, but who is winning this war of ideas? An episode at Columbia University, a historic hotbed of anti-Zionism, illustrates the complex dynamics at play.

Last month, Christians United for Israel (CUFI), America's largest pro-Israel organization with more than 2 million members, planned a lecture at Columbia concerning the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his support for Israel. CUFI says that the school administration meddled with the event in a way that unfairly singled out the pro-Israel group. The university imposed an "unprecedented level of bureaucratic scrutiny in an effort to intimidate," says David Walker, CUFI's national campus coordinator.

Walker tells that the university moved the lecture to a much smaller venue at the last minute, demanded to know the names of all off-campus individuals expected to attend, and denied the general public entry—all of which he calls evidence of "bureaucratic bullying." Some organizations partnering with CUFI on the event proceeded to withdraw their support in the aftermath of the administration's actions.

Despite the obstacles, CUFI's diversity outreach coordinator, Pastor Dumisani Washington, was permitted to speak at Columbia during the April 30 event. He began by refuting a statement

issued by the Columbia Black Students Organization (BSO) in which the group condemned Aryeh, a pro-Israel student organization at Columbia, for using “the image and words” of Martin Luther King to promote Zionist views and co-opting “the black liberation struggle for the purposes of genocide and oppression.”

“When I see black students saying these things I know there is a great deal of confusion,” Washington says. His lecture offered a history of the civil rights movement in the U.S., demonstrating how King and his closest followers were always aligned with Israel, both spiritually and politically. By citing the shared experience of slavery as epochs uniting Jews and blacks, recalling songs about Moses, and highlighting excerpts from New Testament and Old Testament psalms that figure prominently in King’s speeches,

Washington defended Christian Zionism and King’s legacy as a pro-Israel voice.

In his presentation, Washington also included a short video that illustrates BSO’s “confusion.” The video recalls the 1975 United Nations General Assembly resolution that declared Zionism as racism. Noting the maxim “follow the money,” the video connects the dots of a complicated political strategy devised by the former Soviet Union. At the height of the Cold War, the USSR sought to manipulate and intimidate poorer member states (mostly African) into passing anti-Israel resolutions. The real target of this strategy was not Israel, but rather America, the Soviets’ chief rival. Since the U.S. and Israel are close allies, the Soviets reasoned, any discrediting of Israel’s reputation as a humane democracy reflected negatively on the U.S., creating ideological conflicts of interest.

With CUFI’s event going on planned, the pro-Israel side at Columbia University managed to have its voice and narrative heard—at least for that day. Columbia, as it turns out, sits

atop a recently published list of 10 American college campuses where anti-Semitism is most rampant. The list was compiled by , an initiative launched earlier this year whose mission is to engage directly with students at institutions of higher learning where pro-Palestinian student groups are using school funding to launch aggressive anti-Israel and anti-Jewish propaganda campaigns. The new website publishes a regular newsletter and provides a portal for reporting anti-Semitic incidents.

“Fifty-four percent of Jewish students on college campuses feel they’ve witnessed anti-Semitism,” says well-known conservative writer David Horowitz, the founder of . “The problem is that Jews aren’t fighting back.”

But *how* should they fight back? A 2010 incident involving Horowitz sheds light on the activist’s strategy of choice. In a post-lecture Q&A session hosted by the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Horowitz asked a UCSD Muslim student, Jumanah Imad Albahri, to condemn Hamas and Hezbollah as genocidal terrorist organizations. Albarhi’s answer shocked the audience, and the video of their heated exchange quickly went viral.

In the video, Albarhi asks Horowitz “to explain the purported connection” between UCSD’s Muslim Student Association chapter and “jihadist terrorist networks.” Horowitz doesn’t answer directly. Instead, he counters by pressing Albarhi to refute the documented statement by the head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, expressing his desire for Jews to gather in Israel so that “it will save us the trouble of going after them worldwide.” Albarhi appears rattled. She worries that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security will label her a terrorist if she sides with Hezbollah, but denies that pro-Palestinian organizations are aligned with doctrines of hate.

“For it or against it?” Horowitz persists, demanding an answer regarding Albarhi’s opinion on Hezbollah’s rhetoric. Finally,

Albarhi leans toward the microphone and says decisively, "For it." (Though Albarhi later denied supporting Nasrallah's comments.)

Indeed, similar YouTube clips and social media debates reveal the intensity of student opinions regarding Israel, as well as the animosity directed at Jewish students and professors. Horowitz believes that one common Israeli public relations strategy—the spotlighting of "all the wonderful things Israel has accomplished, from medical inventions and agricultural advances to being tolerant of gays"—falls short as a proper defense of the Jewish state's policies. From his perspective, history is what provides a legitimate justification for Israel to exist under its present borders. He cites the original Palestinian Liberation Organization slogan declaring a fundamental intention to "push [the Jews] into the sea" as clear-cut evidence that Israel does not have a partner for peace.

"You have to call it what it is," Horowitz tells . "You cannot make peace with people who want to kill you. These are literally Nazis ... planning another Holocaust openly."

Against the backdrop of that sense of urgency, Horowitz advocates a robust and unapologetic public relations campaign on the part of pro-Israel advocates as the only way to repair the damage done to Israel's image by its enemies. The press release that launched initiative lists anti-Jewish acts such as "Israeli Apartheid Week" (the annual anti-Israel showcase on campuses around the world), the interruption of university activities by staging mock "checkpoints" on campus, the hosting of speakers on campus that call for the destruction of the Jewish state, and harassment and violence against Jewish and pro-Israel students.

Horowitz's efforts to counter anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric has sparked many contentious debates at the more than 400 college campus visits he says he has made. CUFI speakers

are similarly accustomed to meeting fiery opposition. On the same day as the recent Columbia event, CUFI Outreach Coordinator Kasim Hafeez—a British Muslim of Pakistani origin and a jihadist-turned-Zionist—had Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) activists walk out on a speech he gave at the University of Toledo.

Horowitz concedes that the current debate over Israel on campus is a shallow shouting match to which he contributes his own propaganda. He expresses his desire for an “informed scholarly debate,” but says of pro-Palestinian advocates, “I don’t believe there is an honest way for them to argue their cause... [when their] side wants to annihilate the other.”

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