

UC Considers Condemning Anti-Zionism as Anti-Jewish Bigotry

The governing board of California's flagship public university system is to vote next week on a statement condemning anti-Zionism as a form of anti-Jewish bigotry, a proposal sparking sharp faculty debate over the line between free speech and intolerance.

The controversy playing out at the University of California reflects a broader clash between pro-Israel groups and Palestinian rights activists over what constitutes legitimate criticism of Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The UC's Board of Regents is slated to act next Wednesday on a draft document produced by a working group to address the issue. Both sides in the debate say they believe that if adopted it would be the first such policy statement by the leadership of a major U.S. public institution of higher education.

The University of California is considered one of the most prestigious public university systems in the country, comprising 10 campuses, among which are the University of California, Berkeley and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Supporters say the document grew out of a recent rise in anti-Semitism on UC campuses stemming from heated anti-Israel protest frequently expressed as anti-Zionism, which supporters define as calls for Israel's destruction or denials of its right to exist.

According to proponents of the draft, such rhetoric constitutes a contemporary brand of anti-Semitism that is

often accompanied by or escalates into more explicit forms of anti-Jewish hatred.

Foes of the proposal say it would trample on academic freedom. Some call it a thinly veiled attempt to squelch political criticism of Israel, including student movements pressing for divestiture or boycotts against the Jewish state.

A letter of opposition signed by more than 250 UC faculty members argued that anti-Zionism is a “loose term and is often deployed against any number of political positions” that should “not to be conflated with anti-Semitism.”

“We urge you not to adopt a position that will censor political viewpoints that are rightly considered to be constitutionally protected speech,” the letter said.

A separate letter from 130 other faculty insisted the proposal was necessary to address “a lack of understanding of when healthy debate about Israel and the Middle East ends, and anti-Semitism begins.”

Critics, however, says the draft’s very formulation is ambiguous.

As currently written, references to Zionism are confined to a brief introduction stating: “Anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and other forms of discrimination have no place at the University of California.”

But the term is omitted from the 10 “Principles Against Intolerance” that follow, with anti-Semitism condemned, along with forms of bigotry based such factors as race, national origin, religion and gender.

It remained unclear whether the regents would vote on the principles alone or adopt the entire document as enforceable policy. {eoa}