

On BDS, Bring More Minority Students to Israel

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Articles & Testimony

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Over the last eight years I have made more than 120 campus visits around the country, from large state universities to small colleges, talking about Israel, the Palestinians and the Mideast conflict. I have seen how in recent years BDS (the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel), while not yet having a massive impact, is spreading. No longer confined to Middle East Studies departments, the cause is being taken up more in social sciences and the humanities, and discussed in national academic conferences. Its adherents tend to include student leaders of non-Palestinian minority groups on campus, which often view Jewish students as associated with "white privilege." This is probably news to Jewish students, whose self-image tends to be that of a minority. As one Jewish student said to me at UCLA, "I was brought up to see myself as a minority. Now I am told that I am part of the white majority. This is a surprise to me."

My goal when I visit a campus is threefold. First, educate students about why this conflict has been so hard to solve: What are the underlying problems that have blocked a resolution to this conflict? What are the dilemmas of each side? Why does Israel have valid security concerns especially at a time of supreme turbulence in the Mideast? Why do the Palestinians worry their grievances will not be addressed? What would be problem-solving ways to move forward, even if the entire conflict cannot suddenly be resolved?

Second, beyond imparting information, I want to impart a message of civility on campus. The irony, as I try to note on campus, is that Israeli and Palestinian security officials are coordinating on a daily basis back in the Mideast. Israel and Sunni Arab states are also drawing closer when it comes to an array of security issues ranging from Iran, ISIS and Hamas. So why are American campuses more polarized? If the adversaries in the Mideast have found ways to deal with each other, why not campuses in the Midwest?

Third, I want to convey a message of hope. I worry college students will give up on Israel and its ability to resolve this conflict. College students today were not born in the heyday of the 1990s, a time when Arab-Israel progress was

made from the Madrid peace conference to the Jordan-Israel peace treaty. My hope is that the students see the idea of a strong Israel and the resolution of the Palestinian issue not as antithetical but as self-reinforcing.

Advocates for Israel cannot ignore the demographic changes in the U.S. According to polls from the Pew Research Center, about 43 percent of millennials are not white, and many are increasingly liberal. This is seen in growing sympathy to the Palestinian cause among Americans under 35.

Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), which now has chapters on 150 campuses even if its Israel Apartheid Week tends to reach limited audiences, has been adroit in building coalitions with minorities, especially Black Lives Matter (BLM). It has sought to frame the Palestinian issue as part of a broader set of human rights concerns.

At some campuses, Palestinian flags could be seen at protests relating to race discrimination. The campus buzzword of "intersectionality," alleging that "oppression is indivisible," is often heard. During a visit to the University of California at Santa Cruz, Angela Davis delivered a prominent lecture sponsored by the university administration entitled: "Racism, Militarism, and Poverty: From Ferguson to Palestine." The packed room had 1,800 people.

It is a mistake, though, to treat anybody who supports BDS as a pariah. Many of the students I met who support BDS are civil; demonizing them is wrong and counterproductive.

However, the debate is not always fair. The core groups of pro-Israel students who try to fight BDS resolutions often rely on facts and figures, only to be challenged by those who couch their arguments in emotional terms. "You are either with the oppressor or the oppressed," one student at Northwestern told me, conveying the confrontation there.

There are more disruptions of Israeli speakers today, according to statistics of the Israel on Campus Coalition, which monitors developments around the country. Many Jewish students do not want these uncomfortable clashes, preferring to walk away rather than engage in adversarial situations.

Visiting urban campuses in New Mexico, Oregon and Ohio this past year has made me appreciate that the suspicion with which many minority students view Israel is magnified in places where minorities make up a majority on campus, and where the organized Jewish presence is relatively tiny. These Jewish students feel they are overwhelmed. They do not have the infrastructure to combat anti-Israel activity like at bigger state schools with large Jewish populations.

The bottom line in all this is that as the demographics of the U.S. change, the American Jewish community needs to be more conscious of that shift and study its implications as it relates to Israel on campuses. A few ideas come to mind.

Foundations that focus on this issue should consider pooling their efforts, just as many already do for Birthright. There needs to be a concerted effort to bring minority students to visit Israel and the West Bank and expose them to a variety of views. Anything that is organized to be propagandistic is very likely to fail. However, if students hear different Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints, they are bound to have an appreciation for the complexity of this conflict and realize it cannot be summarized as a protest chant. There are a few groups that do bring minority student leaders, but the order of scale required is far beyond what is done today.

The focus should not be just on bringing minority leaders to see the problems up close, but also on building coalitions between Jewish and minority groups on campus. If you want a friend, you need to be a friend on a variety of issues that are important to minority groups in the U.S., including minimum wage, racial justice and environmentalism. This approach builds on the legacy of Jews who have been committed to social justice causes for generations, including the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Investing in causes important to minorities gives the Jewish community the credibility to make its views known.

There needs to be a greater focus on practical coexistence as an alternative to BDS. College students want to do coexistence, and not just talk coexistence. There are a variety of grassroots groups that are devoted to Israeli-Palestinian coexistence where students participate in summer camps for teenagers, joint educational endeavors and social justice programs. It is clear that such practical coexistence programs could unite a variety of student groups on campuses across the spectrum.

Some SJP chapters strongly oppose having their members meet with members of pro-Israel groups, which they derisively refer to as "normalization." Campuses should not be importing the politics of confrontation, but rather exporting the politics of dialogue, which should define the mission of American universities -- namely, free exchange of ideas from a variety of perspectives.

Of course, policy modification by the parties on the ground, the Israelis and the Palestinians, is critical. I disagree with the view that whatever Israel does with Palestinians in the West Bank is irrelevant. My experience is that BDS has a hard core, but it attracts people when they see no diplomatic progress. Israel might not be able to eliminate BDS, but Jerusalem's actions could help shrink it down to its less effective hard-core. Israel could assist with its own peace initiative in 2017, one that might not solve all problems but could take steps toward a goal consistent with a two-state solution. The Palestinians could do the same. Imagine if Israel announced that it was not going to engage in settlement activity beyond the security barrier so its settlement policy is in sync with its declared two-state policy? What if the Palestinians would convince Israel that they are partners by fighting against incitement, demonstrating their professed desire for two states?

Most American college campuses are not hostile to Israel and coexistence. Most students are willing to be convinced. The way to persuade them is not by an 'us vs. them' approach, but rather by widening potential partners for a broader coalition. Coming up with a wider strategy by engaging minorities in the drive for Israeli-Palestinian coexistence is essential.

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