

How to Navigate the Politics of Israel on Campus: Advice from a Parent

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Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff offers parents and students practical advice on how to address anti-Israel activism on campus and engage constructively on the politics of the Middle East.

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Video Transcript:

Hello -- I'm Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute.

There's a lot going on in Washington but I'm here to talk with you about something closer to home.

It's that time of year when thousands of parents pack their cars and drive their daughters and sons to college. If your child is a freshman, like mine is this year, the experience is both exhilarating and terrifying -- for parent and child alike.

One of the most confusing and difficult issues students and their parents will confront is the politics of Israel on campus.

This is a video for both students and parents. Watch it together if you can; separately, if you must.

First, a message to parents: relax. American colleges and universities are still the finest, safest, most exciting institutions of higher education in

the world. You're not sending your child off to Dante's seventh circle of hell -- far from it!

Second, that said, this problem is serious. On some campuses, the environment can be hostile and threatening. The BDS movement -- the movement that advocates boycott, divestment and sanctions on Israel -- is powerful and scary.

Newsflash for both parents and students: College is not exactly like the rest of the world. That applies in many areas but also in terms of the Middle East.

Your hometown newspaper may be filled with op-eds about the nuanced details of the Iran nuclear agreement. But on campus, many students are debating whether Israel even has a right to exist. They hear nice-sounding terms like "one-state solution" and "democratic state for all Arabs and Jews" and obviously don't realize that these are code words for the destruction of Israel.

There can be a lot of cognitive dissonance in this debate. Who, for example, are often the leaders of the most virulently anti-Israel groups on campus? Who often run groups calling for Israel's destruction? A surprising number are Jews or Israelis. This can be very confusing for a freshman. Let's be candid, this can be confusing for anyone.

Also, the local politics of campus groups may be different than the politics on the national level. In Washington, groups may fight each other over specific policy issues, such as the wisdom of the Iran nuclear deal or whether to pressure Israel on the peace process. On campus, though, the situation can be very different because the debate is often on much more fundamental issues, such as Israel's right to exist. The result is that groups that disagree in Washington may work together on campus to fight the delegitimization of Israel. And depending on the specific campus, they may share common adversaries, groups with quaint, appealing names like Students for Justice in Palestine and the Jewish Voice for Peace.

So, what sort of practical advice can I offer? Students, this is especially for you.

First, get informed. When you choose courses, it makes sense to find out if your professor has endorsed the academic boycott of Israel. To do that, check out two websites: More than 1200 professors and instructors are listed by name as endorsing the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel here: <http://www.usacbi.org/endorsers/>

You can find another 100 of the most prominent scholars in America listed on this website as endorsing the boycott of Israeli academic institutions: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/18811/over-100-middle-east-scholars-and-librarians-call->

I don't necessarily urge boycotting these people as a way to counter their boycott of Israel. Some of these are fine professors. I know: sadly, both my favorite undergraduate professor of Arabic and my doctoral dissertation advisor are on one of these lists.

But be aware. Be informed. Check with other students about how these professors teach. And if you experience the slightest problem in class connected to this issue -- if your professor advocates a boycott of Israel in your class or if your professor singles you out with extra assignments, low grades, or public ridicule because you expressed sympathy for Israel -- speak up; talk with your advisor; tell campus authorities; let Hillel know or contact the Israel on Campus Coalition (www.israelcc.org).

And parents, when you hear about an incident like that from your kids, contact the dean, provost, or president of the university. After all, you are paying good money for your child's education.

What about campus life? Engaging in debate, challenging others, and being challenged in your own views -- that's what education is all about. And Israel is a legitimate topic. Israelis debate Israel, the peace process, and the conflict with the Palestinians all the time; it's ok for students to debate these issues, too. But there is a time when debate crosses a line.

How do you know when that line is crossed? When speakers start calling Israelis "Nazis," it's easy. But it's not always so cut and dried. In my view, there are three tests. I call them the "Three C's."

- First, is the argument correct? Are the facts right? For example: If someone starts talking about ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, raise your hand and ask "How could there be ethnic cleansing if the Palestinian population of the West Bank and Gaza is about three times more today than in 1967, when the Israeli occupation started?"

The problem is that checking facts isn't easy. The person spouting the lie will probably speak with confidence and certainty.

- So that leads me to the second C -- context. Does the argument put the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in its proper context? For example: If a speaker condemns Israel for killing Gazans in the conflict last summer, does he also mention the thousands of Hamas rockets that triggered the fighting? Or if a speaker criticizes Israel for the excessive use of force toward Palestinians under occupation, does she say anything about the unspeakable crimes committed by Middle East regimes against their own people, such as the hundreds of thousands of innocents killed by the Assad regime in Syria in just the last three years?

Again, the goal here isn't to stifle debate. It's to make sure it is fair. But sometimes even demanding context is difficult. So that's why I suggest you apply the third test. It requires no special knowledge of the Middle East, no advanced degree in history, politics or public policy. It comes from your gut.

- The third C is "constructive": Is what the speaker saying constructive? Is it about bringing people together and building for peace, or is it divisive,

ripping communities apart and tearing down one side as the way to build up the other? Remember -- you can rely on your own conscience and good judgment. You can decide if what you hear is constructive or destructive.

These are the three tests:

- Is it correct?
- Is it in context?
- Is it constructive?

None of this is easy. In fact, it can be downright hard. For lots of students, it is so much easier to see a movie or go to a party than get involved in the politics of Israel on campus. But to do that comes at a cost: It may cede the playing field to the extremists, who are committed, motivated, and happy to claim to speak for your entire college community.

And if you do get involved, remember that these rules apply to you too. Be correct, keep it in context, and always, always stay constructive.

So, parents -- if your daughter or son has the urge to get engaged, encourage them. Urge them to seek advice. Have them contact people they trust -- on campus and in your community. If they have questions, they are also welcome to contact The Washington Institute at this special address: campus@washingtoninstitute.org

I am proud that two of my colleagues -- David Makovsky, a former State Department official, and Ghaith al-Omari, a former Palestinian negotiator -- travel coast-to-coast with each other talking on college campuses. Their goal is to counteract the destructive ideas of the "one-state" crowd with constructive dialogue about real peacemaking. They and others like them have a powerful message students need to hear.

Most importantly, support your child as she or he navigates this difficult and often confusing terrain. They just need a little help.

Please feel free to share this video with your friends, on campus and in your community. And remember: this is not just a Jewish issue. The vast majority of Americans -- young and old -- supports a strong U.S.-Israel partnership and support a real and secure peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism on campus is an issue that affects everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike. ❖

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