

## Free Speech at Risk

By Jeff Warner and Dick Platkin, August 18, 2013

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Despite many assaults, past and present, the First Amendment of the United States constitution broadly guarantees freedom of speech. But it is threatened by a slanderous campaign to discredit or silence American critics of the Israeli government. The Israel Lobby, guided by the Israeli government, with the help of Israeli think tanks, is organizing this effort. In fact, Malcolm Hoenlein, the Executive Vice Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, has publicly announced this campaign for the 2013-4 school year.

A key component of this attack on freedom of speech is the “new anti-Semitism,” the claim that criticism of Israel is based on hatred of Jews. But the real purpose of the new anti-Semitism is to discredit and silence Israel’s critics in the U.S. and elsewhere, even though comparable criticisms are common place in Israel, especially in such renown newspapers as *Ha’Aretz*, the “*New York Times of Israel*. “

A recent victim of this smear is Sadia Saifuddin, the University of California student recently appointed without any opposing votes as the first Muslim student representative to the University of California Board of Regents. Even though Ms. Saifuddin is clearly qualified, with a great resume, Israel Lobby stalwarts Stand with Us, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and David Horowitz attacked her nomination. Why? Not

because Saifuddin was unqualified. It is because she has opposed the Israeli government's occupation of the territories it conquered in 1967, including the resulting dispossession of Palestinian property and violation of Palestinian human rights guaranteed through international law. For these reasons she cosponsored a divestment resolution at the UC Berkeley Student Senate, and the AIPAC types -- using the template of the new anti-Semitism -- then claimed she was unfit to be a UC Regent because she threatened UC Jewish students

Indeed, Jewish students and faculty were once victims of real anti-Semitism on American campuses from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century through the early 1970s in the form of admission quotas, glass ceilings on high academic and administrative positions, and discriminatory practices by fraternities and sororities. But these types of anti-Semitic social discrimination were successfully fought back and have been absent from American college campuses for over 40 years. In fact, Jewish organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) no longer measure anti-Semitic discrimination in the United States. This is why the ADL's annual count of anti-Semitic incidents is restricted to verbal harassment, assaults, and property crimes, none of which have the slightest connection to Sadia Saifuddin.

With hardly any real anti-Semitism in sight, the Israel Lobby concocted a new form of anti-Semitism: criticism of the Israeli government's policies and practices. They argue that any criticism of Israel is really a call for the destruction of the state, the alleged secret agenda of the country's critics. Nonsense! And the Israel Lobby knows that that is nonsense because nearly all American critics of Israel are driven by

opposition to a nominally Western country that – on one hand – “shares our values,” while – on the other hand – has maintained a 45 year military occupation over four million people in conquered territories, depriving them of human, civil, and economic rights. Furthermore, in blatant violation of the 1949 4<sup>th</sup> Geneva Convention, Israel continues to construct illegal towns, cities, and factories in these areas. These segregated “settlements”, including their access highways, are limited to Jewish Israelis. Furthermore, these settlers are subject to Israeli civilian law, not the Israeli military law imposed on their immediate Palestinian neighbors.

Another case of the new anti-Semitism targeting speech on California campuses is California State Assembly Resolution HR-35. HR-35 characterizes any criticism of Israel as “cloaked” anti-Semitism. Carlos Villarreal, director of the San Francisco chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, called this resolution irresponsible and dangerous because it fails to distinguish between legitimate support for the Palestinian people and real anti-Semitism (i.e., verbal harassment and physical attacks on Jewish individuals and institutions). This is why the ADL does not include these campus political events in its annual list of anti-Semitic activity in the United States.

HR-35 did not become California law, but it does encourage university administrators to enact restrictions on campus political events critical of the Israeli government. Under an HR-35 inspired campus policy, some political speech would be silenced. Any person or group that stood-up against an obvious human rights abuse, like Israel’s 2008-09 assault on Gaza with banned phosphorus bombs, would be charged with anti-Semitism. These bogus charges could ruin someone’s reputation and

bring sanctions against university-affiliated student organizations. Most individuals and campus groups would, therefore, remain silent. After all, who wants to be identified and then punished as a bigot?

The intent of HR-35 is to undermine free speech when that speech entails criticism of Israel.

So what happens next? California is about to witness a major effort by the Israeli Lobby, financially supported and directed by the government of Israel, to discredit campus groups that work for the end of Israel's direct and indirect occupation of the land it conquered in 1967. As active members of LA Jews for Peace, we strongly oppose this misuse of charges of anti-Semitism, and stand with those, Jewish and non-Jewish, who criticize the practices of the Israeli government and the support of those practices by the United States government. Attempts to muzzle groups for political speech should be stopped in the bud.

### *Bios*

*Jeff Warner and Dick Platkin are Jewish peace activists in southern California and leaders of LA Jews for Peace. They have organized many demonstrations against Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory in general and the siege of Gaza in particular. Warner has been on humanitarian missions to Gaza. He is a retired research geologist and now works on environmental and climate change issues. Platkin is a retired city planner and now works to stop "mansions" of residential neighborhoods.*