



Accusations of Anti-Semitism Used to Deter Advocacy for Palestinian Rights

The conflation of criticism of Israeli policies with anti-Semitism as a tool to silence activism in support of Palestinian rights is increasingly widespread – and widely reported – on U.S. college campuses. At the same time, accusations of support for terrorism are commonly used to malign activists for Palestinian rights – a phenomenon that has gone largely unreported.

In the first four months of 2015, Palestine Solidarity Legal Support (Palestine Legal) responded to 102 requests for legal assistance and reports of incidents on campuses across the country.

In addition to instances of censorship and other forms of suppression of speech activities, these cases included anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slurs and death threats against activists. Accusations that students criticizing Israeli policies were anti-Semitic and supported terrorism pervaded the overwhelming majority of these incidents.

In the four months from January 1 to April 30, 2015, Palestine Legal documented:

- **60 incidents involving accusations of anti-Semitism made against students or faculty, based solely on speech critical of Israeli policy.**
- **24 incidents involving accusations of support for terrorism made against students or faculty, based solely on speech critical of Israeli policy.**

These accusations subject students and scholars to tremendous personal and professional harm, deterring them from publicly criticizing Israel's actions for fear of being attacked. They are also used to encourage campus authorities to restrict and punish protected speech.

Such accusations ignore the track record of students and scholars who advocate for Palestinian rights as part of a larger commitment to equality and justice for all people. Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapters [stand](#) against racism and discrimination in all forms and typically organize in broad campus [coalitions](#) with social-justice oriented groups.

Palestine Legal conducts intakes confidentially and therefore cannot name all of the campuses where incidents occurred. Below is a selection of incidents illustrating the above trends that have been publicly reported or that Palestine Legal has permission to report.

- **At Stanford University**, the Students of Color Coalition (SOCC), which supported a divestment resolution earlier in the semester, was [accused](#) of evaluating a student government candidate's fitness for office based on her Jewish identity. The accusation that SOCC engaged in anti-Semitic questioning of a candidate was based on one person's word against nine others who

said it had no basis. There were also accusations that SOCC required endorsed candidates to sign a contract prohibiting them from associating with Jewish organizations on campus – an allegation that was [proved false](#). Multiple news outlets [published](#) the accusations, despite the lack of evidence. In the midst of the controversy, swastikas were spray painted on campus, and attributed to advocacy for Palestinian rights, despite there being no evidence of a connection. Although some [expressed](#) dismay at the abuse of the term “anti-Semitism” to malign advocacy for Palestinian rights, this perspective was not covered in the mainstream media.

- At **Columbia University**, speakers at a [panel discussion](#) titled “Media, Solidarity and Palestine,” were [targeted with a violent threat](#). A Twitter user - operating under the username [@ProudJewYr3833](#)—tagged the speakers and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), stating: “all you neo-nazis in one place makes a good target for an IED. ;).”



Credit: Columbia SJP

- At **Northwestern University** in Chicago, SJP [held](#) a mock border demonstration that led to accusations of anti-Semitism. The action was co-organized with a Chicana/o student group to demonstrate against military abuses at the Israel-Palestine and United States-Mexico borders. In response, a student filed a harassment and verbal assault complaint for racial and religious bias. According to the *Daily Northwestern*, the student explained that he was videotaping SJP members and had notified them that he planned to send the video to a friend in the Israel Defense Forces. He alleged that one SJP member responded, “You’re sending it to killers, great.” The student said he “felt the act of calling his friend a killer was harassment and made him feel uncomfortable being Jewish on campus.”
- At the **University of Toledo (UT)**, Israel advocacy organizations [claimed](#) that a divestment resolution would create anti-Semitism on campus. In response, the UT student government [barred](#) the public’s attendance at a hearing, in violation of Ohio’s Open Meetings Act, restricted the attendance of SJP, forced SJP members to sit in a separate room from Hillel students, and [blocked](#) student senators from voting on the resolution. After [significant outcry](#), the resolution was allowed to go forward and was passed by the student government.
- At **Northeastern University** in Boston, the student government [blocked](#) the student body from voting on a divestment referendum because students, [backed](#) by Israel advocacy groups, argued that even discussing divestment creates an anti-Semitic climate.
- At the **University of California Riverside**, the Israel advocacy group the AMCHA Initiative [called](#) for the elimination of a student-led course on “Palestinian Voices” because the course set out to explore the political and cultural history of Palestinians and was taught by a Palestinian-American student. AMCHA called the course anti-Semitic, and argued that discussion of the Palestinian narrative should not be permitted because it is one-sided.
- **Pitzer College** in Los Angeles [tried to prohibit](#) SJP from erecting a mock Israeli separation wall after pro-Israel students complained that the wall was anti-Semitic for its criticism of Israel.

- **The University of California Santa Cruz SJP** [enacted a mock checkpoint](#) to raise awareness about Israeli military checkpoints in Palestine. In response, the university [announced](#) that “hate/bias reports” were under review. The complaints allege that the action was anti-Semitic, and accuse students of “sporting fake weapons” (referring to a cardboard cut-out with the word “gun” written on it). Accusations that SJP members are “terrorists” were made verbally during the demonstration, written in Facebook comments after the fact, and repeated in the bias complaints filed with the university.
- At the **University of California Davis**, after a divestment resolution [passed](#) in the student government, there were widespread accusations of anti-Semitism and a surge of Islamophobic hate messages on the university Facebook page. The hate messages included, for example, “wipe out these vermin now”; “wipe out these Islamic savages now”; “Palestinians are an invented people. They are the same savages as their role model ‘Mo the Savage’”; and “Send every one of these foreign students who had anything to do with the vote and graffiti hate speech home to their native land.” There was also an incident of swastika graffiti that was [attributed](#) to advocacy for Palestinian rights without evidence of any connection, and despite the fact that students supportive of divestment [condemned](#) the graffiti.
- At **Occidental College** in Los Angeles, a memorial for Palestinian lives lost in the 2014 military operation in Gaza was [vandalized](#) with the phrase “Not all Muslims are terrorists, but most terrorists are Muslim today.”
- The David Horowitz Freedom Center plastered campuses across the country with [posters](#) depicting violent images of executions from the Arab world, linking the violence to SJP with the words “#JewHatred” and “Stop SJP because it supports terror groups.” The poster is part of a larger [campaign](#) called “Combat Jew Hatred on College Campuses” featuring a website, [videos](#), and [teach-in events](#) that target SJP as pro-terrorist. Horowitz claimed that the posters appeared on fifty campuses around the country, including UCLA, UC Irvine, DePaul University, and University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- At the **University of California Berkeley**, during a mock checkpoint demonstration, [the Hillel rabbi asked](#) Palestinian American student activists “why the average Palestinian wants to blow himself up on a bus.”

The surge in accusations of anti-Semitism to silence advocacy for Palestinian rights relies on the conflation of anti-Semitism with criticism of Israeli policy. Israel advocacy groups often cite what they call the “State Department Definition.” This refers to an [overbroad definition of anti-Semitism](#) on the U.S. Department of State’s [website](#) that would include advocacy to hold Israel accountable for violations of Palestinian human rights, as Palestine Legal [explained in a recent FAQ](#). This definition was recently endorsed in resolutions by student governments at UC Berkeley and [UCLA](#). Over 250 members of the Jewish Voice for Peace Academic Advisory Council are [demanding](#) that the State Department “revise its definition of anti-Semitism to reflect its commitment to opposing hate and discrimination without curtailing constitutionally protected freedom of speech.”

Blurring the important difference between anti-Jewish hate and criticism of the Israeli state undermines the fight against genuine anti-Semitism. Attacking critics of Israel as “anti-Semites” or “terrorists” promotes censorship that is fundamentally antithetical to our Constitution and our educational values of unfettered inquiry. It also distracts from the human rights questions that critics are trying to raise.