

The Pro-Israel Push to Purge US Campus Critics

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Palestinians riding a donkey-drawn cart past a mural calling for a boycott of Israel, Khan Yunis, Gaza Strip, 2016

There are signs that we've reached a tipping point in US public recognition of Israel's suppression of the rights of Palestinians as a legitimate human rights concern. Increasingly, students on campuses across the country are calling on their universities to divest from companies that do business in Israel. Newly elected members of Congress are saying what was once unsayable: that perhaps the US should question its unqualified diplomatic and financial support for Israel, our closest ally in the Middle East, and hold it to the same human rights scrutiny we apply to other nations around the globe. Global companies such as Airbnb have recognized that their business practices must reflect international condemnation of the illegality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Natalie Portman, Lorde, and other celebrities have declined appearances in Israel, acknowledging the call to boycott the Israeli government on account of its human rights violations. And The New York Times published a column arguing, with unprecedented forthrightness, that criticism of ethno-nationalism in Israel (for example, defining Israel exclusively as a "Jewish state") isn't necessarily anti-Semitic.

At the same time, discussions on college campuses about the complexities of freedom, history, and belonging in Israel and Palestine are under increasing pressure and potential censorship from right-wing entities. In fact, new policies adopted by the US and Israeli governments are intended to eliminate any rigorous discussion of Israeli-Palestinian politics in university settings. Not since the McCarthyite anti-Communist purges have we seen such an aggressive effort to censor teaching and learning on topics the government disfavors.

Especially chilling, the US Department of Education recently adopted a new definition of anti-Semitism, one that equates any criticism of Israel with a hatred of Jews. This new stance was evident when the Department's Office for Civil Rights recently reopened an investigation of anti-Semitism at Rutgers University regarding a complaint that had been examined and closed by the Obama administration. The case, which was brought by the Zionist Organization of America, alleged that Rutgers should not permit students to hold events at which the human rights record of the state of Israel is criticized. The ZOA applauded the

reopening of the case by Kenneth Marcus, the new head of the Office for Civil Rights and a long-time proponent of the view of that all criticism of Israel is necessarily anti-Semitic.

In another recent case, the University of Michigan disciplined a professor who declined to write a letter of recommendation for a student who sought a fellowship in Israel. I would do the same if the situation arose, because I would regard it as ethically inappropriate to recommend students for an educational opportunity for which my other graduate students who are Palestinian or Arab would be prevented from applying.

Denials of entry to and deportation from Israel are becoming common for those who speak out against the government's policies. Lara Alqasem, an American student from Florida who planned to do graduate research at Hebrew University, is a salient example. The Israeli government held her for two weeks in a bedbug-ridden detention cell at Tel Aviv airport on the grounds that she has been involved in campus organizing critical of Israel. She sued the Israeli government, challenging the denial of entry and noting that she had already been granted a student visa. The Israeli courts ruled in her favor, but only after she promised not to criticize Israel and disavowed support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement—essentially waiving her free speech rights as the price of entry to “the only democracy in the Middle East,” as pro-Israel supporters like to describe Israel.

Newly disclosed official documents show that the Israeli government prohibited Alqasem from entering the country based on a Google search that found her name on a blacklist of students and faculty members who have raised concerns about Israel's human rights record. The list is published by Canary Mission, a right-wing website that critics have called “McCarthyesque.” Its intended audience is employers who do a web search of job applicants only to find their names tagged as anti-Semitic. Canary Mission has been funded by the Jewish Community Federation in San Francisco, an organization that has also funded the Tea Party, as well as far-right and Islamophobic groups.

Like Lara Alqasem, I was detained at Tel Aviv airport last April when I traveled to the region to meet with my Israeli and Palestinian graduate students, and to lead a delegation of civil rights leaders from the US. While I was interrogated at the airport, border control officials yelled at me, “You are here to promote BDS in Palestine—confess!” When I said I wasn't, the interrogator held up his cell phone, showing an entry about me on the Canary Mission website. I told him that this site trades in ugly and bigoted lies about US academics, yet he just kept yelling at me. I was held in the airport for fourteen hours before being deported and permanently banned from entering either Israel or Palestine.

Two weeks ago, Marc Lamont Hill, the Steve Charles Professor of Media, Cities, and Solutions at Temple University, delivered a speech at the United Nations that laid out in granular detail the ways in which Israeli state policy violates the rights of individual Palestinians and the Palestinian people's right to freedom and self-determination. In a clear example of what has come to be known as “the Palestine exception to Free Speech,” pro-Israel organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the Zionist Organization of America inundated CNN with calls to terminate Professor Hill. The next day, CNN canceled Hill's contract as a political commentator.

What did Hill say that was so objectionable—indeed, anti-Semitic, according to the ADL and the ZOA? Hill had closed his remarks with a call to action “that will give us what justice requires and that is a free Palestine from the river to the sea.” This last phrase has been misconstrued as a call for destruction of the state of Israel, allegedly signaling Hill's alignment with Hamas. Yet the phrase is a commonplace in Israeli–Palestinian politics, and is used as a rallying cry by right-wing Zionists and settlers to signal the unification of Eretz Yisrael, or “greater Israel.” Professor Hill's call amounted simply to a statement of support for a one-state solution, which may be controversial to those who still support the creation of two states, but it certainly isn't bigoted.

Yet the ZOA's president denounced Hill's speech as “Jew-hating, violence-inciting,” and “genocidal,” and the charge of anti-Semitism aimed at Hill swiftly reached beyond his

position at CNN. The chair of the Temple University board of trustees joined the furor two days after Hill's UN speech, commenting that "People wanted to fire him right away... We're going to look at what remedies we have." Temple University's president jumped in, adding that the speech's "river to the sea" reference was seen by many as a "perceived threat."

Even when the Temple University board announced on Tuesday that it would not sanction Professor Hill because his remarks to the UN were made as a private citizen and therefore had First Amendment protection, the trustees condemned Hill's views. This leaves open the question of whether the board would have terminated Hill had he questioned Israel's human rights record when speaking in his capacity as a Temple University professor.

The effort to vilify, if not blacklist, Marc Lamont Hill should be understood as part of a much larger campaign, so far focused primarily on university campuses, to shut down any discussion of Israel or Palestine that casts a critical light on the state of Israel. Each year, I teach a class to high school and college teachers called "Citizenship and Nationality in Israel–Palestine." The course provides an introduction to the history of political Zionism, pre-World War II visions of a Jewish state in Palestine, the founding of Israel in 1948 as a "homeland for the Jews," the competing claims to both dispossession and belonging that are at stake for Jews and Palestinians in Israel–Palestine, and careful consideration of the question of how a state can manage a commitment to being a democracy while also declaring itself a homeland for one ethnic-religious group.

When I taught the course for the first time three years ago, Columbia University received aggressive demands from the Zionist Organization of America that the course be cancelled because the group was certain it would be biased against Israel, even though the ZOA had not seen the syllabus or materials, all of which were Israeli. Its complaint was based primarily on the title of the course, which included reference to a place it claimed did not exist—namely, Palestine. The group threatened to file a charge against me and Columbia under Title VI of the Higher Education Act. The threats from the ZOA escalated to such a degree that I had to hire security to guard the door of the classroom.

When I teach the course this spring, I now worry that efforts to censor the academic discussion of dispossession and belonging in Israel and Palestine will come not only from a rightwing advocacy organization but from the US Department of Education. Since I taught the course last year, the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) passed the Nation-State Law, which moved the state of Israel further from its secular-democratic tradition and solidified its definition as a Jewish state. Some of the provisions of the new law merely clarify policies that have been in place for many years; others build into the law new provisions that reinforce a two-tiered conception of citizenship.

For instance, the law declares "the right to exercise national self-determination" in Israel–Palestine to be "unique to the Jewish people." Another provision effectively overrules an Israeli Supreme Court decision that some regard as Israel's *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Aadel Kaadan v. Israel Lands Administration*, which found that the state's policy of allocating land only to Jews violated a fundamental commitment to equality. The Nation-State Law explicitly repudiates the Kaadan decision, not only permitting the state to establish Jewish-only communities in Israel, but actually prioritizing the building of these settlements as a national value.

I always include the Kaadan case in the materials I use in my "Citizenship and Nationality in Israel–Palestine" course. Under normal circumstances, I would update my syllabus to include the Nation-State Law, which raises serious questions about whether the Israeli Knesset has built a form of discrimination into its Basic Law (its equivalent of the Constitution). Palestinian members of the Israeli Knesset, a number of European political leaders, and prominent human rights organizations maintain that the new law formalizes a kind of apartheid in Israel. This is, to be sure, a serious charge. But it seems likely that I might be accused of anti-Semitism under the new Department of Education guidance if I were even to discuss the merits and flaws of this position in my class.

Watching how Temple University leaders failed to defend Professor Hill when the pro-Zionist right went after him, I wonder: Will Columbia University stand up for the academic freedom of its faculty when these same forces recruit the Department of Education to accuse Columbia's instructors of anti-Semitism because we teach and write critically about the policies of the Israeli government?

All of these incidents are part of a larger effort by both the US and Israeli governments and their supporters to undermine the university's civic role as a crucial forum of democratic engagement. The First Amendment's guarantee of free speech as well as fundamental principles of academic freedom are violated when governments that profess to be democratic declare certain topics off-limits. The capacity to critically evaluate the way in which state power is exercised—in the US, in Israel, and in other places around the world where human rights are under threat—is vital to responsible citizenship and is central to our mission as educators. The American and Israeli governments alike should stand up for, rather than stand in the way of, open and vibrant academic debate on Israel–Palestine, just as they should for debate about any contentious subject essential to democracy.

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