

Pushed by alumni claiming anti-Semitism, Vassar officials oppose BDS and promote 'Israel-positive' programs

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The battle over Israeli policies is heating up on campuses around the country, and one focus is Vassar, the liberal arts college in the Hudson Valley, New York.

Three weeks ago the Wall Street Journal [published an op-ed by](#) two vocal opponents of the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign, Marc G. Yudof and Ken Waltzer, characterizing Vassar as a hotbed of anti-Semitism.

Anti-Israel sentiment mixed with age-old anti-Semitism has reached a fever pitch at Vassar College. It is time that faculty and administrators take a stand against this toxic brew on behalf of academic values.

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The article mentioned several anti-Israel incidents on campus, including a t-shirt reportedly sold at an off-campus Students for Justice in Palestine event featuring hijacker [Leila Khaled](#) and a recent guest lecture at which Rutgers gender scholar Jasbir Puar described the “biopolitical” aspects of the Israeli occupation, notably the stunting of children’s growth in Gaza and charges of [organ-harvesting](#) from Palestinians killed by Israeli forces.



Existence is resistance t-shirt

Though I haven’t heard the Puar lecture, both incidents surely represent vehement criticisms of Israel that are consistent with the leftwing discourse on the neverending occupation. Indeed, the WSJ authors said that Jewish Studies Program faculty at Vassar had sponsored the Puar lecture and sat quietly through it, thereby demonstrating the “spell that anti-Israel dogma, no matter its veracity, has spread over the campus.”

The article was soon picked up by other pro-Israel sites and caused a crisis at Vassar not unlike the crisis at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign in 2014 over Steven Salaita’s Gaza massacre tweets. On that occasion, the Illinois chancellor met with big Jewish donors who had been riled up by pro-Israel groups before she fired Salaita. This time, nine Vassar leaders, including its president Catharine Hill and board chairman William Plapinger, held an online call-in “[webinar](#)” attended by 900 people, aimed at calming alumni about a supposed anti-Semitic climate at the school. Anti-semitism was mentioned 12 or 13 times by my count during the call-in; but Vassar officials said they were not going to limit free speech on campus. They were just going to make sure there were a lot of pro-Israel events.

The thrust of the call was to deny the anti-Semitism charge. Vassar is a welcome place for Jewish students. They feel comfortable celebrating religious holidays on campus. But in a new climate of social media, all students are afraid to express non-left-wing positions, including on Israel/Palestine. So the school is going to do its utmost to promote “Israel positive” programming.

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Several faculty on the call listed all the pro-Israel events and speakers. Mia Mask, a film professor, boasted about two forums at the campus that featured Arabs who oppose BDS, including one who said that Palestinians are responsible for the Palestinian political problem.

Vassar executives, including President Hill and deans, said they would oppose BDS. This after they said that they would not “take sides” in the Israel/Palestine conflict.

Plapinger did complain about the pro-Israel lobbying:

While I accept the validity of some of the criticism of the college, I ask you to also remember that the recent cacophony of criticism has come from a relatively small number of alumni who in some cases have distorted the facts and have been successful in enlisting concerned but not fully informed outsiders to amplify their views in publications that have not even bothered to ask the college for comment on their articles. Whatever you think, that is not how fairminded people act.

And Marc Epstein, a religious scholar at the school, was careful to describe the climate as one of “anti-Israel sentiments and anti-Zionist rhetoric.” Though Epstein added that he and his wife are both Zionists.

I found the call disturbing for a couple of reasons. The sense of the call was that anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism; and while we can't control “hateful and offensive” speech, we're going to put on a lot of pro-Israel programming and stomp on BDS to stop this anti-Semitism. Professor Epstein did say that “actually” some Jewish students are anti-Zionists; but his was the sole reference to such a tradition during a 47-minute call. The main idea was that Jewish students are afraid to express support for Israel, but we're going to provide them a comfort zone with lots of pro-Israel events on campus. Yes— and one official thanked alumni “donors.”

Much of the call detailed the “robust” Jewish life on campus, notably religious practices, from Shabbos dinners to learning how to wrap the Tefilin to building a Sukkot and making mezuzot (doorpost prayer scrolls). While this is a reasonable counter to the charge of anti-Semitism, the theme often seemed at odds with a liberal arts education. I wouldn't want my kid going to a school that bragged about creches and crucifixes. (And as [the Pew poll demonstrates](#), racism in Israel correlates with religiosity.)

Also during the call, a college dean wrote off Students for Justice in Palestine as a fringe group of just a dozen members; and said that SJP had agreed not to work with Existence is Resistance, which had supplied the t-shirts of Leila Khaled. That's a lot of pressure on a student group.

Listen [for yourself](#), but the call demonstrates that the battle over Israel is coming to a campus near you, and soon. Vassar is hardly alone. Progressive students are virtually of one mind on the question and feel a political urgency about doing something. Pro-Israel students tend to keep their mouths shut; and so the alumni have become the pro-Israel activists, using all the smashmouth tools of the Israel lobby. Roger Cohen [echoes the theme in the New York Times](#), calling campus anti-Zionism an “anti-Semitism of the left.” Cohen justly lands on ugly statements from an anti-Zionist at Oberlin; but along the way he valorizes the “long Jewish presence in, and bond with, the Holy Land” as somehow justifying Zionism. And I thought Cohen was a secular.

These forces are not going to defeat BDS. The occupation is nearly 50 years old and a gall internationally; and the only way to preclude the inevitable resort by the oppressed to political terrorism (remember John Brown) is

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through the nonviolent BDS movement.

In the face of the administrators' call, Vassar's student [government passed a resolution](#) earlier this week supporting the BDS movement by 15-7. Though it failed to pass a companion resolution that would have had real consequences, boycotting Caterpillar, Ben & Jerry's, Elbit, G4S, Ahava, Sabra Hummus, etc.

[Vassar BDS](#) reports that the school's administration threatened to end the student association's autonomy if it voted to boycott those goods.

The [BDS Resolution](#), which calls for the [Vassar Student Association's] political statement of support of the BDS movement, passed by a vote of 15 in favor and 7 opposed. The organization did not pass the concurrently submitted [BDS Bylaw Amendment](#), which would have prevented VSA funds from being spent on products listed on the resolution because of their ties to human rights abuses. The amendment needed a 2/3 majority but failed by a vote of 12 in favor to 10 opposed.

Following a visit from the Vassar Board of Trustees last week, senior level administrators [told the VSA](#) that if it passed the BDS Bylaw Amendment, the Administration would assume control over the VSA's \$900,000 activities budget. Such an act would have altered the structure of the VSA fundamentally and starkly diminished student powers of government. The threats from the Board of Trustees and senior level administrators are a coercive tactic and represent a clear betrayal of the principle of shared governance between students and administrators central to the VSA and the functioning of the College more broadly.