



# PRIDE IN

## Old Guard and New Support Israel in Good Times and Bad

Above: Students in the Los Angeles area participate in a pro-Israel rally in January 2009.

Below: Students gather at the University of California, Irvine in May 2010 to encourage peace and protest hate.



**A**gruesome poster displayed at the University of California, Berkeley in 2003 shocked Jewish students, even by the standards of anti-Israel protests on campuses.

The caricature depicted then-premier Ariel Sharon digging a fork and knife into a Palestinian baby he allegedly was devouring. The image put Jewish students on the defensive—but it would spur the creation of an organization with a fresh approach to on-campus pro-Israel activism.

Today, a staff of four, operating as BlueStarPR, produces provocative and vibrant posters, postcards, videos, flyers, and bus and billboard advertisements projecting an Israel to which people can relate. Its visual themes include the serious (minority, gay, and women's rights), the fun (happy hour, skiing, tennis), and the mundane (five women crossing a Tel Aviv street, a boy holding a can of Hebrew-script Coke). Some designs develop in-house, others from consultations with students about a campus's needs. All aim to reveal that, as some posters state, "the real Israel is different than the Israel in the news."

The San Francisco-based organization is one of several national nonprofit groups that emerged at the height of the Second Intifada. The expanded landscape includes The David Project (based in Boston), StandWithUs (Los Angeles), and Aish International's Hasbara Fellowships (New York), which all provide training in Israel advocacy, publish educational materials, and offer talking points on their websites.

All sprang up to bolster college students' ability to defend against anti-Israel charges and to seize the initiative by conveying *Yisrael hayafa* (the beautiful Israel). The organizations continued to be active during incidents of anti-Israel campus activity the past two years.

The newest campus organization is J Street U, founded last year as the reconstituted subsidiary of the Washington-based organization that promotes open debate on Israel and an aggressive American role to negotiate a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.





# ADVOCACY

By Hillel Kuttler

These groups have joined such stalwarts as Hillel and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in devoting resources to forging meaningful ties between Israel and Jewish and non-Jewish college students.

The newcomers' approaches represent a recalibration of strategies for neutralizing Israel's critics, said Stephen Kuperberg, executive director of the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC), an eight-year-old umbrella group of 33 national organizations.

"The pro-Israel community as a whole has learned, in my view, to fight smarter—that countering anti-Israel theatrics on the campus quad is counterproductive. Shouting may make us feel good in the short term, but it doesn't advance the cause of creating a pro-Israel environment on campus," Kuperberg said.

"Instead of casting a spotlight on this fringe population," he added, "the pro-Israel community has learned that it's better to engage positively on the campus to develop a pro-Israel relationship."

Both the established and newer organizations also invest in leadership development. StandWithUs, The David Project, and Hasbara offer seminars and fellowships that last year trained a total of 354 students in pro-Israel activism. In 2009–2010, Hillel's partnership with the Jewish Agency for Israel placed 19 young Israelis on campuses to assist students with programming. When the school term ended in May, J Street U ran a student leadership seminar in Baltimore to discuss building its campus presence. AIPAC's training this fall will reach 1,500 college students and 500 high school students.

Michelle Golan cherry-picks for her Israel-promotion needs. The San Diego State University senior consults the websites of The David Project for counterpoints to rhetorical challenges and of Stand-WithUs to read news articles and to order pro-Israel pamphlets to distribute to students.

This past spring, the campus Hillel's Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day) celebration adopted an "Israel Going Green"

theme to coincide with San Diego State's GreenFest. Golan displayed three BlueStarPR posters touting Israel's environmental leadership. They provoked positive discussions with students about the country's cutting-edge biofuel and solar energy initiatives.

"It definitely made me feel proud to support Israel, to know that Israel is doing these things and to let people know about it," Golan said. "Hopefully, they will become Israel supporters as well."



The new groups emerged early in the decade, when Palestinian terrorists routinely bombed Israeli buses, hotels, restaurants, discotheques, and public gatherings. Palestinian sympathizers simultaneously brought propaganda campaigns to American streets and campuses, often exploiting universities' free-inquiry, free-speech ethos and benefiting, several of those interviewed for this article said, from professors antagonistic to Israel.

Indeed, two years after Roz Rothstein's founding of StandWithUs in 2001, her daughter returned from a lecture in tears. Her anthropology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles attributed poverty among Palestinian women to Israel Defense Forces soldiers' raping them. Soon after the straight-A student challenged his claim, her grade dropped to a D.

In the one-and-a-half-year period beginning with Operation Cast Lead (Israel's December 2008–January 2009 war to halt Gaza rocket attacks on the country's south), the Israel scene on campus again was marked by a cluster of high-profile attacks against the Jewish state and her representatives.

They included the ugly heckling of former premier Ehud Olmert at the University of Chicago; the shouting off the San Jose State University stage of Akiva Tor, consul-general for the northwest states; and the arrest of 11 demonstrators who repeatedly interrupted Ambassador Michael Oren at the University of California, Irvine. In June,





A student takes photos during Michael Oren's Feb. 8, 2010, speech at UC-Irvine. Eleven students were arrested for interrupting Oren's speech by shouting "killer" and other insults at the Israeli ambassador to the United States.

UC-Irvine suspended the Muslim Student Union for one year after it concluded the group had planned the disruption in advance, based on evidence the organization's lawyer disputed. Oren's appearance at this spring's graduation ceremony at Boston's Brandeis University—a school with Jewish roots—was denounced by some on campus, although student body presidents elsewhere supported Oren.



In addition, the anti-Israel boycott-divestment-sanctions campaign, known as BDS, landed on some campuses. Last term, Berkeley's student senate passed a resolution calling on the university to divest from U.S. companies doing business with Israel. The student body president vetoed the resolution, and two attempts to override his veto failed. University of California, San Diego's student council postponed a vote on a similar resolution in the spring. The previous year, Massachusetts' Hampshire College voted to divest from six companies.

Things deteriorated to the point that, last May, the University of California system ordered its 10 campuses to establish committees to examine challenges to tolerance and inclusion.

Tor, who lobbied to uphold the Berkeley veto, called the result "a big success" that is "very encouraging not only for pro-Israel [forces] but for being pro-rationality."

When the BDS campaign intensified last year, J Street U launched a counter-effort, Invest, Don't Divest. It encouraged donations to West Bank microentrepreneurs and to a Herzliya organization promoting Jewish-Arab economic cooperation in Israel. J Street U also provided its campus representatives with talking points "on why BDS doesn't work, why it harms Israel, and why it harms the Palestinians," said its spokesperson, Amy Spitalnick. The anti-BDS effort, she said, "engaged people in a proactive, constructive way."

Israel is now fighting a war "in different dimensions," in which opponents "focus on the defamation and delegitimization of Israel

on campus," said Lawrence Muscant, until recently acting executive director of The David Project. This indicates "a trend, a larger movement" aimed at demonizing Israel, and the situation is "generally getting worse," he said.

Rothstein believes, too, that "the push to create a demon out of Israel is greater" now, and that recent campus anti-Israel activity augurs a "growing movement." But not all agree that this wave differs markedly from previous ones or necessitates new strategies or additional organizations.

Often missing in assessing the recent attacks on campus, said Jonathan Kessler, AIPAC's leadership development director, is historical context.

Kessler, who cultivates Jewish and non-Jewish college students as advocates for the U.S.-Israel relationship, said that AIPAC has followed the phenomenon since the 1960s and sees consistency in the motives and tactics of Israel's opponents: defaming Israel to erode Americans' traditional support.

"These challenges have been part of the campus landscape since the founding of the State of Israel. The delegitimization of Israel following Cast Lead followed a predictable pattern," he said. "These themes are of a very old vintage, albeit in shiny new bottles."

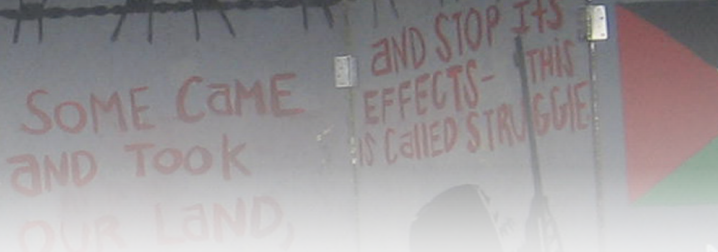
The wine long ago turned sour, helping spoil Jewish students' college experience, said David Makovsky, a former diplomacy reporter for *The Jerusalem Post* and *Haaretz*, and now an analyst for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank established by AIPAC in 1985. Three years ago, the ICC sent him to speak on college campuses.

What Makovsky observed at first threw him for a loop. The rhetorical charges against Israel and challenges to her legitimacy, Makovsky said, were "superfluous" and "an anomaly" given the changed



Photo courtesy of The David Project

Two New York University students participate in a BuyCott campaign to combat divestment from Israeli companies during Israeli Apartheid Week earlier this year.



Background: The “aparthoid wall” that anti-Israel protesters assembled at the University of California, Irvine in May 2010. Photo courtesy of StandWithUs

Right: A poster from BlueStarPR featuring Israeli soccer player Baruch Dago.

reality since the 1993 Oslo breakthrough: that Israelis and Palestinians themselves were working to resolve their differences.

Makovsky proposed a joint speaking tour with former Palestinian Authority advisor Ghaith al-Omari, now a Washington-based official for the American Task Force on Palestine. The ICC agreed. During the 2009–2010 term, the men appeared together eight times.

“We felt that on the campuses, there’s too much heat and too little light,” Makovsky said.

“We want to alert them to the fact that there should not be a situation in which campuses are the center of delegitimization of Israel, and that there’s a need to build partnerships for a two-state solution. There’s a consensus on that in Israel. The way to do that is to bring moderates together so the radicals do not prevail.”

Al-Omari said he hopes that their example provides “a cover” for Jewish and Muslim students “to be engaged in a more conciliatory” manner.

“David and I come from organizations that are mainstream, establishment,” he said. “We approach peace from a more cautious perspective. We’re trying to say that advocating for a two-state solution is not only for the leftists, but for the policy wonks like ourselves.”

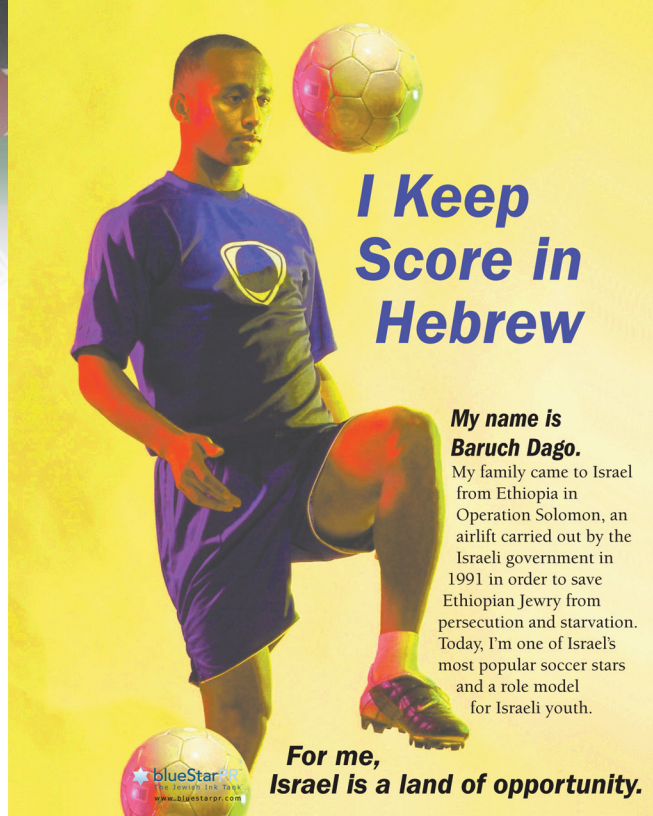
Before each public appearance, Makovsky and al-Omari meet privately with Jewish and Muslim campus leaders. Makovsky’s and al-Omari’s first joint appearance, at the University of California, Santa Barbara last fall, drew 15 leaders to the closed-door meeting and 600 to the public event.

“It almost brought me to tears,” Makovsky said.

Al-Omari also hit on a powerful way to disarm skeptics: Every question hostile to Israel, he answered; questions hostile to the Palestinians, Makovsky handled. “We’re trying to say: We’re here to work together,” Makovsky said. “We hope that some student activists will take this message and run with it,” al-Omari added.

Muscant considers the latest anti-Israel incidents the exception because the Middle East just doesn’t top any campus’s agenda. College students, he said, “are concerned with football and beer, not Israel”—an observation echoed by Jeff Rubin, associate vice president of communications at Hillel, which is a member of, and rents space to, ICC in downtown Washington.

“Most of the campuses in the United States are quiet vis-à-vis Israel,” Rubin said. “They’re apolitical. As far as the ideological politics of the 1960s and ’70s—it just doesn’t exist. For some campuses, there’s anti-Israel activity at times. If you think that



Irvine is a case study—no, it’s an aberration. When it comes to anti-Israel stuff, the anti-Israel community has not been as effective as they portray themselves to be. It’s not accurate to say that there’s a storm of anti-Israel activity or anti-Semitism on campus. It’s just not true.

“Which is not to say that we’re complacent. But Jewish students do not feel that the campus is a hostile place for them.”



At the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) student center, Luanna Azulay, Jordan Kritt, and Rich Goldman lounged around a coffee table, glancing through the glass walls at classmates strolling about on a lovely spring afternoon.

Israel-centric events at UMBC “tend to be apolitical [and] positive,” Goldman said. The three, all involved in Jewish campus life, shake their heads in unison when asked whether Irvine- or Berkeley-like troubles have occurred here.

The heckling of Oren and the divestment initiatives were “disturbing and a shame,” said Goldman, a kippah-wearing doctoral student, but “here, they would be very out of character. I think it would be ignored ... I would hope it would be seen as silly.”

Noticing a student named Gerald, the Muslim Student Union leader sporting a green head covering, Goldman waved.

“We share the Interfaith Center with them and the Christian organizations,” he continued. “We’ve had a good relationship with them. We probably have as good a relationship as ever.”

**“Shouting may make us feel good in the short term, but it doesn’t advance the cause of creating a pro-Israel environment on campus.”**

*—Stephen Kuperberg,  
executive director of the  
Israel on Campus Coalition*





Just up the road, in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University also is a "very happy, active Israel campus," Brooke Katz said. Oren spoke there last spring without disturbance, she said. Jewish and Muslim groups enjoy "a good relationship," and "it's not a campus where anti-Israel people use fear and intimidation to advance their goals," she explained.

Katz, who concluded her junior year in June and planned to make *aliyah* in August, served as vice president of CHAI: Coalition of Hopkins Activists for Israel and was one of last term's 34 Emerson Fellows for StandWithUs.

"What I do is advocate for Israel so we don't have to be defensive," Katz explained. "We can be proactive, promoting positive images of Israel. That's the best way."

Free food is key, evidently. At last spring's Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration, Katz helped distribute 500 blue and white cupcakes arranged to form a Star of David. Another time, she gave out 500 Elite kosher chocolate bars whose wrappers featured facts about Israel.

Neither time did Katz encounter anti-Israel remarks. She admitted having it easy compared to friends at Berkeley and at Canada's Carleton University who related harsher realities.

"I specifically picked a place [to attend] where I wouldn't have to defend Israel and what I believed in every day," she said. "I'm not sure if, having the ability to choose, that was the moral thing to do."

A month earlier in Atlanta, Georgia Institute of Technology Hillel's IsraelFest featured the Ethiopian-Israeli band Axum. At the center of campus, students petted a camel while Hillel members handed out falafel, hummus, T-shirts, and flyers about Israel's high-tech scene.

IsraelFest accentuated the positive to "show a largely apathetic campus how fun Israel is, how capitalistic it is, the culture. Without it, people wouldn't have the perspective," said sophomore Eran Mordel.

"I trust people. If I present Israel in a certain light, they'll judge it according to their own morals for what it is: a modern society, involved in the world, giving freedom to all its citizens. Those who came into the conversation opposed to Israel—I'm not going to change what they think."

In San Diego, Golan encountered troubles that she turned to Israel's advantage.

Last November and again in March during Palestine Awareness Week, Students for Justice in Palestine erected a cardboard structure they called an "apartheid fence."

Golan said she felt "tense and nervous" on the central walkway where the structure stood. She and her friends downloaded a StandWithUs fact sheet that explained how Israel's security fence and checkpoints have dramatically reduced Palestinian terrorist attacks and Israeli deaths.

Wearing Israel Defense Forces and Star of David T-shirts, they leafleted and engaged passersby in order, she said, to refute the structure's "false claims" about Israeli repression.

The "apartheid fence" definitely united us to come out and support Israel," Golan said. "We got [passing] students who said that



Students at Northeastern University in Boston participate in Israel Fest, also known as iFest, in April 2010, where they helped promote the positive aspects of the Jewish state.

the wall was offensive, biased, and full of propaganda. At the end of two days, we felt that we were successful and had let people know that this wall would not go unchallenged."

The experience also prompted Golan and her pro-Israel friends to reconstitute a defunct organization, Aztecs for Israel, named for the school sports teams, which had petered out in 2007. Its Facebook page states that the group's central goal is "to promote unity and joint action among pro-Israel students."

This year, Aztecs for Israel will bring speakers to campus, screen Israeli films, and organize awareness-raising events on Israel's technological and scientific leadership.

"Not many students were willing to commit" to reviving the group early last term, "but once those two apartheid wall events were held, students realized that there is a need to commit and to take responsibility to support Israel," said Golan last May. "We're excited for next year. We hope that the growth of this organization will allow us to be proactive in supporting Israel and not merely reactive."

Jewish organizations are hardly letting down their guards, though. Last spring's scares at Berkeley and San Diego likely will embolden Israel's enemies this term, said Hillel's Rubin.

Photos courtesy of Hillel of Orange County



"We are anticipating that there will be a push in the fall by anti-Israel groups to increase their activities. We have to be very vigilant," he said. "Anti-Israel divestment resolutions are symbolic, but the symbolism is potent. We have to educate our students, and the students have to educate their campus legislators." ☺

## BBM ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

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