

An Analytic Approach to Campus Pro-Israeli Activism. Case Study: Johns Hopkins University

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Anti-Israeli campus groups have made inroads at American universities by using the campus media, creating strategic partnerships with mainstream left-wing groups, and supporting certain members of the faculty and staff. Pro-Israeli activists who wish to combat this threat must respond to all three of these avenues by getting organized, utilizing the media, and maintaining relationships with organizations, campus influentials, and the Jewish community. The Coalition of Hopkins Activists for Israel (CHAI) was created in September 2000 to enact these steps in seeking to preempt potential anti-Israelism on the Johns Hopkins University's Homewood campus.

Background: Johns Hopkins University

Johns Hopkins University (JHU) was founded in Baltimore City, Maryland, in 1876. It comprises the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, the Whiting School of Engineering, the School of Professional Studies, Business and Education (all located on the undergraduate Homewood campus), various schools on the medical campus, the School of Advanced International Studies (located in Washington, DC), and a number of other schools. The undergraduate population comes to about four thousand students, though including graduate students there are approximately double that figure on the campus. In 2000, about 10 percent of the undergraduates were Jewish; by 2004, that number reached 13 percent. The students as a whole tend to be politically conservative. The largest events on campus are lacrosse games; Diwali Dhamaaka, a Hindu cultural event; and two symposia dealing with domestic and foreign policy.

Introduction: Conflict on Campus

The current Arab-Israeli armed conflict, fought in a region far from the United States, has developed a new front bisecting the university quad. During the past four years this conflict has generated political expression and activism at the American university. This article strategically assesses the situation and examines the methods used by both anti- and pro-Israeli activists, with JHU serving as a case study.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is one of the few international issues currently being debated on college campuses. The way in which these controversies arise, and the goals of the anti-Israeli activists, are matters of concern.

The first important component of any sort of activism is organization. Activists on both sides of this issue have joined together on individual campuses to plan strategy as well as forming networks between various locales. At the Homewood campus on JHU, the Coalition of Hopkins Activists for Israel (CHAI) was created in September 2000 to work to preempt potential anti-Israelism. In general, these newly mobilized groups have learned to influence the mood on campus by using various tools.

Tools of Activism

University Newspapers

Most American universities have some student-controlled media including an independent college newspaper, radio station, or television station. These outlets, while affiliated with their university and covering events that occur on campus, receive no funding from the institution. Hence, the independent campus media becomes the voice of the student body, but bears no accountability either to the school or the students (who usually do not pay a subscription fee). In other words, this media covers the university but cannot be limited or penalized by it.

The campus media plays other important roles. Prospective students often look to the university newspaper to gain better understanding of the institution, and alumni tend to use the campus media to stay connected. Thus, the campus media acts as a link between many generations of students.

Like mainstream media outlets, the university media closely covers the events of the Middle East.¹ Campus newspapers, radio, and television feature news reports, opinion statements, and communications to the editor. Because the university media both reflects and generates interest and opinions, campus groups use it as a tool. Hence, this media's focus on the Middle East, and particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has fostered campus activism.

At JHU as at other universities, anti-Israeli bias in the media provoked the founding of a pro-Israeli group. After a series of news and opinion pieces in the student *Newsletter* glorifying Palestinian terrorism and maligning Israel's very existence, and after pro-Israeli students' attempts to submit articles were repeatedly rebuffed, CHAI opted for strategic targeting of the *Newsletter*. Pro-Israeli activists who were also interested in journalism and foreign policy were encouraged to apply to be weekly or biweekly columnists for the publication. This proved effective.² At the conclusion of CHAI's first year, a cofounder who had become a columnist for the *Newsletter* was named editor of the opinion section, and on his staff were three columnists also involved

in CHAI, ensuring that an article or column expressing a pro-Israeli view would appear every week.³ Indeed, by CHAI's third year, members of the group who were active writers for the *Newsletter* were elected editor-in-chief and managing editor of the publication.

Partnerships

Strange bedfellows. Detractors of the Jewish state have also used partnerships to promote their cause. These strategic partnerships are made with other political or cultural groups on campus that are considered more mainstream than the anti-Israeli groups themselves, including human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, feminist organizations, groups affiliated with mainstream political parties, and even some faculty organizations. The anti-Israeli activists exploit naïveté, using anti-Israeli propaganda to imply points of commonality. They have thereby made the "Palestinian issue" a focal point of debate on American campuses, as many groups that are considered protectors of equality and fairness become mouthpieces for the "Palestinian cause."

An appropriate response to these partnerships is targeted education campaigns. By holding meetings and events with groups susceptible to these partnerships, pro-Israeli groups can preempt a united anti-Israeli front. Some groups have brought Israeli women in leadership positions to forge a sense of commonality with feminist groups; representatives of Jewish refugees from Arab countries have helped demonstrate shared interests with human rights groups.

The antiwar movement. The power of these partnerships became evident in the wave of antiwar rallies on American campuses during the run-up to the Iraq War. Many of these rallies (like those in other settings) combined antiwar statements with anti-Israeli rhetoric, linking the two stances.⁴ While relatively inconsequential at JHU, which had a small antiwar movement, this proved an important means of spreading the "Palestinian cause."⁵ At JHU the response was an article appearing in the *Newsletter* that identified this phenomenon.

Individual partners: identifying influentials among the students. Partnerships are not only forged between campus groups but also between individuals. Since the character of campuses differs significantly, so does the type of student who becomes influential. At some schools, leaders of the student government are the influentials; at others, leaders of the fraternities and sororities play that role; at still others, such as JHU, leaders of specific groups, such as those who conduct symposia, or athletes, have the greatest influence.

Relationships with such influentials can greatly affect the atmosphere on a campus. There are two ways to exercise influence via campus leaders: to develop good relations with these individuals, and to encourage members of a pro-Israeli group

to *become* these leaders. At JHU, both paths were followed. First, CHAI sought to foster ties in a pro-Israeli context among a number of different campus groups. Thus, while the leader of an athletic team and the leader of the college Democrats may not share the floor at many events, they could stand together at a pro-Israeli gathering. Events were planned that would further CHAI's pro-Israeli agenda and establish its role as a leading organization. The first such event was the CHAI Leadership Dinner, a private affair in which leaders of influential campus groups met with the local congressman, Benjamin Cardin, the executive assistant to the president, and the secretary of the Board of Trustees.⁶

Next, pro-Israeli activists who had an interest in joining other groups were encouraged to do so and attain positions of responsibility. By becoming leaders in activities outside those narrowly defined as pro-Israeli, CHAI members were able to reach a larger audience. Thus, pro-Israeli messages reached students with no particular interest in the issue, helping to change the general atmosphere on campus. This approach also prevents detractors from using campuswide events as opportunities to attack Israel. CHAI members also took part in planning and participating in the campus's Milton S. Eisenhower Symposium and Foreign Affairs Symposium. Whereas, over the past three years, these symposia had become open to anti-Israeli and anti-American rhetoric, the CHAI involvement helped make them more balanced. These events were particularly difficult to influence because the chair of each year's symposium is selected by the outgoing chair, with some applicants claiming that the nominations are based on political inclinations, thus allowing anti-Israeli activists to maintain these positions of influence (a practice also familiar at other universities). For 2004-05, however, both symposia are being led by CHAI activists.

University Jewry: a "natural" home? On most campuses the organized Jewish community has been supportive of a pro-Israeli agenda, at least to a limited extent. In these situations, the Jewish community is a natural home for pro-Israeli activism and offers several advantages. This more established community can provide assistance, financial and organizational, with setting up a new group. Moreover, the founders of a pro-Israeli political group are likely to come from the campus Jewish community. At JHU, the eventual founders of CHAI met via Rabbi Joseph Menashe, director of the campus Hillel organization, with whom each had spoken privately. Leaders of the Hillel community, in particular, often play this role of helping create a pro-Israeli organization. Moreover, the established Jewish community had already forged relationships with other campus groups and with leaders of the university, such as officials in the President's Office.

Such activism can also help connect nonreligious Jewish students with the Jewish community at large. Many of the pro-Israeli activists are not particularly religious, but in this way become more integrated with the Jewish community.⁷

Sometimes the Jewish community itself poses a challenge to pro-Israeli activity. Jewish political views on campus are hardly monolithic, and at some universities the Jewish student organizations have contributed to anti-Israeli rhetoric. Jewish students have

even been leaders of anti-Israeli organizations. Although such anti-Israeli activists are beyond the realm of inclusion, pro-Israeli groups need to attract members of the pro-Israeli camp with diverse views. Many groups, however, become too identified with a particular political "solution" to the conflict and alienate part of the pro-Israeli camp. CHAI has chosen to support the democratically elected leadership of Israel, and tends to take a middle-of-the-road political stance.⁸

Involvement from the ivory tower. A university's tone is set not only by the student body and their activities but also by professors. Not surprisingly, schools that are home to outspoken anti-Israeli professors tend to produce violent anti-Israeli activities among the students, divestment petitions, and virulent anti-Israeli rhetoric. In the University of California system in particular, professors have sacrificed the disinterested search for truth to anti-Israeli indoctrination.⁹ Intimidation in classes needs to be fought, and records of all anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic occurrences should be kept for analysis by activists and professionals.

Professors can also offer significant assistance to activist groups. At JHU, some professors have links to academics in Israel or are themselves involved in pro-Israeli activity. In some cases, such as the University of California at Santa Cruz, professors have banded together to fight the anti-Israeli bias on their campus.¹⁰ Professors can offer perhaps the most crucial assistance by working to ensure that defamation of Israel is removed from classrooms.

The university itself, as an institution, is critical in setting the tone on campus. Recently, university presidents have become increasingly involved in dismissing divestment petitions.¹¹ The change in atmosphere sometimes results in part from activities unrelated to the conflict in particular - for example, joint ventures by JHU and the Technion in Haifa, or the inauguration of the Jewish studies program in JHU's Krieger School of Arts and Sciences.

Transgenerational activism. Alumni also have an influence on campus, mainly via philanthropy. Jewish alumni tend to financially support their alma mater to a disproportionate extent.¹² Like alumni associations in general, Hillel organizations keep records of alumni contact information. Alumni tend to be interested in campus activities, in the academic and social experiences of current and future students, and in the school's reputation. Moreover, as donors to the university they can demand that certain issues, such as those of intimidation and academic integrity, are addressed.

Through Hillel, CHAI was able to gain the attention of alumni who had graduated before the group's inception. CHAI managed to attract alumni to the community - Jewish and universitywide - who had shown no previous commitment to the campus or Hillel but were interested in Israel-related activities on campus. Alumni support can be "positively" financial - sponsoring a group or funding some of its activities, or "negatively" financial - withholding donations to the university until it deals with anti-Israeli rhetoric or activities. Assistance from alumni can also come via connections and networking. CHAI benefited

from meetings organized by alumni who drew on their own work and community relationships with other national and local Jewish organizations.

The role of the "off-campus" community. Universities are not isolated, and the surrounding community influences politics and activities on campus. Since the upsurge in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, community and national organizations have mobilized in an attempt to affect national politics, and their target audience includes university students. Groups such as SUSTAIN (Stop U.S. Tax Assistance to Israel), Jews for Peace in Palestine and Israel, and others have targeted campuses to promote anti-Israeli rhetoric from the outside.

Conversely, certain Jewish and political organizations have created departments to advance pro-Israeli and antiterror causes on various campuses. AIPAC, Hillel International, AEPi fraternity, Hagshama, The AVI CHAI Foundation, the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and others have been at the forefront of providing assistance and advice to student pro-Israeli activists. It is important that the leaders of these organizations understand the character of each specific university and tailor their aid accordingly.

Pro-Israeli activists need to work off-campus as well. Many influentials in the city or town of the university, in its Jewish and general community, are quite open and welcoming to college students. Participation in local groups such as the Jewish Federation and the Jewish Community Center, and also in non-Jewish clubs and organizations, can draw attention and assistance to the pro-Israeli group. Moreover, many community members have some link to the university as alumni, staff, or faculty and can play a role in affecting the mood on campus.

For instance, CHAI has developed a close relationship with the Hillel of Greater Baltimore and, through it, with the Associated Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore. Such relationships provide access to influentials in the broader Jewish community. Furthermore, these relationships have helped make JHU a venue of community pro-Israeli activities such as concerts and lectures, in addition to university-based activities.

Conclusion

Anti-Israeli activism - often called pro-Palestinian activism - stands on three legs: strategic relationships, professors, and the media. Each must be addressed systematically by pro-Israeli activists. Although CHAI, like most other pro-Israeli organizations on American campuses, began as an ad hoc, quick-response group addressing bias and misinformation, it quickly developed a larger mission. It geared its strategy to the specific character of JHU and concentrated on the types of activity most likely to succeed there. Since JHU tends to be cerebral and not actively political (that is, while many students study politics, they are not involved in political protests, debates, and large-scale campaigns), education campaigns, with emphasis on exposing bias in

the media, were deemed the best approach.¹³ At the same time, CHAI established its niche in the university's Jewish community.

Once the on-campus approach proved successful, it was important to forge relationships within the university and the larger Jewish community. By involving university officials in the planning and execution of events, CHAI maintained a significant profile within the university. By planning events that drew the larger Jewish community to the campus, CHAI became an integral part of the Baltimore pro-Israeli community. Relationships with alumni and professors have also been critical in effecting long-term change on the campus. Finally, CHAI's connections with a broader pro-Israeli network have proved important for training activists and for planning and refining the group's activities.

Four years after CHAI's creation, all its original founders have graduated and left the area. However, the mark of success is that CHAI members now play a role in all the major campus organizations, and have maintained the ties with the university officials and faculty. Indeed, this campus has never become prone to extreme or violent anti-Israeli activity.

The main lesson from CHAI's experience is that it is crucial that pro-Israeli activism be conducted strategically.

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Notes

1. Many university newspapers use Associated Press and Reuters articles as news sources.
2. Personal correspondence, 4 August 2004.
3. It is legitimate for campus groups to have a voice in these media. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the university media itself to enable such expression. CHAI members may have been encouraged to write for the *Newsletter*, but they obtained positions of responsibility because of their journalistic talent.
4. Brooke Neuman, "Is Anti-War E.ort Anti-Israeli?" *The Newsletter* (Johns Hopkins University), 28 February 2003.
5. At many antiwar rallies, crowds chanted: "One, two, three, four, we don't want your racist war, five, six, seven, eight, Israel is a racist state." Furthermore, many of the activists donned pins such as "Zionism is Racism" alongside pins such as "No blood for oil." *Ibid.*
6. *The Gazette* (Johns Hopkins University), 11 November 2002.
7. Although two of the original five founders of the organization had attended a Jewish day school, all but one considered themselves secular-cultural Jews. All had spent significant amounts of time in Israel, living and studying there.
8. www.jhu.edu/chai.
9. Personal correspondence from Dr. Leila Beckwith, professor of psychology, University of California at Santa Cruz, 10 July 2004.
10. *Ibid.*
11. In an address, Harvard President Lawrence Summers discussed the links between the divestment movement and the growth of anti-Semitic incidents. Lawrence Summers, Address at morning prayers, Memorial Church of Harvard University, 17 September 2002.
12. At Northwestern University, for example, nearly 25 percent of alumni donations come from Jewish graduates, whereas only 17.5 percent of the undergraduate student body is Jewish (1997 statistics).

13. The *JHU Campus Guide* notes that approximately one-third of the students major in the fields of international relations and political science.

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