



California State Assembly Seeks to Stifle Debate on Israel

A new resolution casts such a wide net over anti-Semitism it includes legitimate opposition to Israeli policies.

The California State Assembly has just passed a bipartisan resolution ([HR 35](#)) by voice vote which constitutes a serious attack on academic freedom and the rights of students and faculty to raise awareness about human rights abuses by U.S.-backed governments. While purporting to put the legislature on record in opposition of anti-Semitism on state university campuses, it defines anti-Semitism so widely as to include legitimate political activities in opposition to Israeli government policies.

The resolution was opposed by a wide variety of groups, including the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Asian Law Center, Jewish Voice for Peace, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, yet the Republican-sponsored measure received wide bipartisan support in the Democratic-controlled legislature.

The non-binding resolution – which was sponsored by 66 of the 80 members of the lower house – demands that what it calls “anti-Semitic activity” should “not be tolerated in the classroom or on campus, and that no public resources be allowed to be used for anti-Semitic or intolerant agitation.”

The resolution lists a number of examples of genuine anti-Semitic activities, such as painting swastikas outside Hillel offices. However, much of the text is focused upon criticism of the state of Israel. Among the examples given of “anti-Semitic activities” included in the resolution are:

-- accusations that the Israeli government is guilty of “crimes against humanity”

This would mean that a speaker from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other reputable human rights groups which have documented such violations of international humanitarian law by the Israeli Defense Forces could not be provided space or honoraria to talk about their research.

-- accusations that Israel has engaged in “ethnic cleansing”

This would mean that Israeli scholars who have studied and published documents from Israeli archives pertaining to the 1947-49 conflict in Israel/Palestine which demonstrate that there was a calculated policy of ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian population in some regions would similarly be barred.

-- “student and faculty-sponsored boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns against Israel”

This would prohibit efforts to boycott goods made in illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, support international sanctions on Israel over its ongoing violations of a series of UN Security Council resolutions, or have the university divest from its endowment stock in companies supporting the Israeli occupation.

The resolution also declares a number of other political activities that, while clearly objectionable – such as disrupting a speech by a supporter of the Israeli government – as “anti-Semitic,” based on the assumption that hostility toward such a speaker is not based on opposition to policies of Israel’s right-wing government, but because the country is Jewish.

Indeed, throughout the resolution, opposition to Israeli government policies is equated with bigotry towards Jews. There’s no question that some pro-Palestinian activists do sometimes cross the line into what could reasonably be called anti-Semitism, which should indeed be categorically condemned, as should all manifestations of prejudice. Unfortunately, this resolution makes no distinction between this tiny bigoted minority and the majority of activists who oppose the Israeli occupation and other policies of that country’s right-wing government on legitimate human rights grounds.

Not only does this constitute an attack on academic freedom, it compromises legitimate efforts against the scourge of anti-Semitism which – while not as widespread a phenomenon on California campuses as the resolution implies – is still very real.

College campuses, particularly those in California’s large public university systems, have long been a center of agitation for human rights and in opposition to U.S. policies which support violations of human rights, whether it be the war in Vietnam, investment in apartheid South Africa, intervention in Central America, or support for Israel’s wars and occupation.

This bipartisan effort appears to be an attempt to stifle this tradition. Indeed, if the California state legislature succeeds in shutting down debate regarding U.S. policy toward Israel and its neighbors, it will only be a matter of time before debate on other aspects of U.S. foreign policy will be suppressed as well.