

[University of California Takes Aim at Human Rights Activists](#)

From the Vietnam War to the Central American revolutions to apartheid South Africa to the East Timor occupation to the invasion of Iraq, university campuses have been an important venue for concerned scholars and activists to raise issues regarding human rights, international law and US foreign policy.

However, in an effort to stifle this tradition, University of California President Mark Yudof has launched a campaign targeting human rights activists and others challenging the Israeli occupation and colonization of the West Bank and other policies of the right-wing US-backed Israeli government.

In March, Yudof posted a recent [public letter](#) in which he referred to protests on UC campuses against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza as “hateful incidents” on par with defacing LGBT centers, hanging nooses to intimidate African-American students and painting swastikas on campus buildings.

As UC Davis Professor Bob Ostertag [noted](#), under the University of California administration’s new criteria, “student protests against the segregationist policies of southern states during the civil rights movement would be considered ‘hateful events’ against whites, while protests against Serbian policies in Bosnia would be considered ‘hateful events’ against Serbs.” Indeed, the conflating of the right-wing Israeli government with the Jewish people is dangerous on a number of levels, including its apparent objective of invalidating any criticisms of any policies of this key Middle Eastern ally of the United States.

This campaign is already having an impact. UCLA Professor David Shorter, who teaches a course in Indigenous Studies, had curated on a course site available only to students in his class scores of links to possible references for a number of proposed topics for term papers. They included links to essays and other reference materials supportive of various indigenous struggles as well as some that were in opposition, including essays critical of the BDS campaign (boycott/divestment/sanctions) over Israel’s occupation policies. However, because it included a link to a group supportive of BDS, Professor Shorter was [publicly reprimanded](#) by the chair of the Academic Senate. This is believed to be the first time the University of California has ever admonished a professor for simply including a link by a human rights group.

One of the incidents which prompted Yudof’s initiative took place on the Davis campus when representatives of the Israeli military gave a public presentation during which they denied and rationalized for well-documented war crimes and criticized reputable human rights organizations. In response, a coalition of student groups – including Students of Justice and Peace in Palestine, Jewish Voices for Peace and the Latino/a student group MECHA – engaged in a silent walkout followed by “a small, peaceful discussion outside the building where they discussed the realities of life under occupation.” A university employee unaffiliated with those groups and their protest heckled the speakers and was appropriately removed from the room by campus security, but – [according to faculty members](#) present – the student protesters “did not disrupt the event, nor did any members of this diverse coalition interrupt the speakers.”

[Yudof’s letter](#) nevertheless characterizes the silent non-disruptive student protest as “verbal attacks,” comparing them to hate crimes against Jewish, African-American and GLBTQ students.

[Yudof also announced](#) that the university is now working with two organizations allied with the Israeli government – but notably no human rights groups or organizations supportive of the Israeli peace movement or

the Palestinians – “to improve campus climate for all students and to take full advantage of our marvelous diversity.”

It is particularly ironic that Yudof has brought in the right-wing Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which – while originally a reputable civil rights group – has in more recent years placed much of its energy on defaming legitimate critics of Israeli policies. Given that the ADL has lost a number of court cases regarding spying, harassment and libel in recent years, the decision to bring them in as consultants on this sensitive matter is particularly disturbing. Those who have been victims of such ADL attacks have included scholars who categorically support Israel’s right to exist in peace and security and who have spoken out against unfair attacks against Israel, but happen to object to particular policies of the Israeli government which violate international humanitarian law. Other professors have been singled out simply for research which included evidence that happened to contradict positions taken by the Israeli government.

(For example, despite my consistent and categorical opposition to terrorism and advocacy of nonviolent forms of resistance, the ADL put out a widely circulated article about me entitled “[professor justifies terrorism](#)” following my [2005 article](#) on the Lebanese Hezbollah movement. Though the article fully acknowledged the group’s sordid history of terrorism and extremist ideology, I noted – based on reports from the US State Department and the Congressional Research Service – that they had not engaged in any terrorist attacks during the previous decade and had refocused their energies on their network of social services and on electoral politics.)

Despite personally informing President Yudof of the ADL’s lack of credibility on such matters, he has declined to reconsider the university’s decision to grant the right-wing group this important consultative role.

Yudof also organized a meeting with the Hillel Foundation directors from the UC’s campuses – who are generally acknowledged to be well to the right politically relative to most Jewish students in the university system – to discuss their “observations regarding how Israel is faring on campus, how the Jewish community perceives the university’s actions and inactions and, most important, how Jewish students are feeling about the situation.” It appears he has not made any comparable initiative to learn how Palestine is faring on campus, how the Palestinian or the human rights community perceives the university’s actions and inactions, or how Palestinian or other Arab students feel about the situation.

The University of California’s bias toward allied right-wing governments of the United States and opposition to human rights activists who challenge them is further illustrated by the university administration’s tolerance of actions by right-wing groups allied with the Israeli government, including attacking bystanders with [pepper spray](#), wielding stun guns at a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Berkeley and fabricating quotes by moderate professors who support human rights in the Middle East to falsely depict them as anti-Israel extremists.

Anti-Jewish bigotry (“anti-Semitism”) – like racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression – is unfortunately ubiquitous in contemporary society and sometimes does raise its ugly head among a minority of activists involved in movements supporting Palestinian rights. Whenever it does, it should be challenged forcefully and unreservedly condemned.

This is not what these recent actions by the University of California administration are about, however. These are nothing short of McCarthyistic attacks to suppress debate and free speech on human rights abuses by governments allied to the United States. And it is ironic that it this is taking place on university campuses, traditionally a center of such discourse – particularly at the University of California.