

New York Times Insinuates Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaign “Threatens” and Marginalizes Jewish Students

Student troubled by reporter’s “Jewish litmus test”

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Students interviewed for a [New York Times](#) article about campus Palestine solidarity activism say they were asked leading and inappropriate questions by reporters. In one case, a student says he was subjected to a troubling “Jewish litmus test.”

The students who spoke to The Electronic Intifada also expressed surprise that none of the statements they gave appeared in what they see as a heavily skewed article, which appeared on Saturday with the headline “[Campus Debates on Israel Drive a Wedge Between Jews and Minorities](#).”

Lead reporter Jennifer Medina, who co-wrote the story with Tamar Lewin and Ronnie Cohen, referred questions to *New York Times* assistant national editor Jennifer Kingson.

In an email to The Electronic Intifada, Kingson said that *Times* reporters “behaved professionally and that the story we published was both fair and accurate.”

“Our reporters spoke to multitudes of students on many campuses, and the story depicts the range of viewpoints that they encountered,” Kingson wrote. She pointed out that the story mentions that “divestment activists say they are concerned about retaliation and the stifling of their views.”

“In a 1,600 word story, not all voices can be included, so many people who were interviewed were not mentioned – on both sides of the issue,” Kingson added.

Some of the students interviewed for the story, however, told The Electronic Intifada that the questions they were asked were driven by a specific agenda.

Hammering a “wedge”

The *New York Times* article hews closely to the narrative promoted by Israel lobby groups that the [boycott, divestment and sanctions](#) (BDS) movement is “threatening” and marginalizing to Jewish students. The story insinuates that BDS campaigning is the cause of various alleged incidents of anti-Jewish bias on campus.

The motivations of students supporting BDS are dismissively described as “what they see as Israel’s mistreatment of Palestinians” – a phrasing that construes facts about Israeli human rights abuses and decades of military occupation and colonization as a matter of mere

perspective.

[Sarah Schulman](#), professor and faculty advisor to Students for Justice in Palestine at the College of Staten Island, [commented on Facebook](#) that “there is a lot that is wrong with this article.”

U.S.

1334 COMMENTS

Campus Debates on Israel Drive a Wedge Between Jews and Minorities

By JENNIFER MEDINA and TAMAR LEWIN MAY 9, 2015



Celebrating Israel's Independence Day last month at U.C.L.A. Some students said that while they had never hidden that they were Jewish, they felt uncomfortable voicing their support for Israel. Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Students say New York Times reporters posed inappropriate questions for story on campus divestment movement.

She pointed out that the article claims “hundreds” were killed in Gaza during Israel’s attack last summer, when in fact the number of Palestinian dead was more than 2,200.

Schulman rejects the article’s central assertion that campus divestment movements are “driving a wedge between many Jewish and minority students.” She points out that “many Jews, like Jewish Voice for Peace [JVP], are part of these divestment movements.”

But apart from a passing mention of JVP, these voices are silenced in the article in favor of Israel lobby-aligned students such as Natalie Charney at the [University of California, Los Angeles \(UCLA\)](#). In the *New York Times* story, Charney asserts that students making connections between the Palestinian struggle and protests against police violence in [Ferguson](#), Missouri, are “hating” something that is “central to who I am and what I stand for.”

“There’s more poison in the rhetoric than we’ve ever felt before,” the *Times* quotes Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller, director of [Hillel](#) at UCLA, saying.

The article fails to note that Seidler-Feller is himself a major purveyor of poisonous rhetoric. In 2014, for instance, Seidler-Feller accused [Omar Barghouti](#), a prominent Palestinian BDS campaigner, of giving a speech resembling “[the anti-Semitic propaganda of 1930s](#)” Nazi Germany.

Stanford University professor [David Palumbo-Liu](#) says the headline on the *Times* article can be seen as “[race-baiting](#).”

“Weird question”

Safwan Ibrahim, an undergraduate student at UCLA, spoke to Jennifer Medina by telephone in mid-April, after the *Times* reporter emailed the campus Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) group.

“She asked me questions about divestment, about the campus climate, but not actual questions about the workings of the divestment tactic and why we’re doing it,” Ibrahim told The Electronic Intifada. “She just wanted to know what I thought about people saying it was anti-Semitic. She kept asking about Jewish students feeling unsafe.”

Ibrahim says he told Medina that he could speak to her about the experience of Palestinians on campus and the harassment that Palestine solidarity activists have faced from off-campus groups. He mentioned flyers that recently appeared on several campuses depicting images of executions and calling SJP “Jew haters.”

It later emerged that [the person behind the flyers](#) was [David Horowitz](#), a key player in the [Islamophobia industry](#) who is also notorious for vitriolic hate speech against Palestinians and [African Americans](#).

Ibrahim said it was unsettling how passive the university administration had been about the flyers and the atmosphere of intimidation they created for students like himself on campus.

But, according to Ibrahim, *The New York Times*’ Medina did not appear very interested, and asked to be put in touch with someone with no “ancestral ties” to the region.

Medina also spoke with Agatha Palma, another SJP at UCLA member and a doctoral student in anthropology. Palma described a similar experience.

“I’d expected to hear questions about divestment, but she didn’t ask about that,” Palma said. “She just wanted to hear about anti-Semitism and wanted to try to dig to see if there’s any information that we’re hiding from the public as SJP.”

Palma says Medina then asked her a “weird question.”

“She asked me if there was anything as an organization that we believe in and tell our members not to say publicly,” Palma recalled.

“If there were, why would I tell her? But there isn’t,” Palma said. “Everything we believe, we say publicly; it’s very carefully laid out in our positions and our constitution.”

Jewish “litmus test”

An even more troubling interaction occurred between *Times* reporter Ronnie Cohen and David McCleary, a Jewish member of SJP at the [University of California at Berkeley](#).

He spoke to Cohen for more than an hour, phone records seen by The Electronic Intifada show, after the *Times* had contacted SJP specifically asking to speak to Jewish members.

McCleary also provided copies of text messages between him and Cohen.

"We talked about everything – why as a Jew I was supporting BDS, why this wasn't singling out Israel, all the standard questions, but there were all these weird questions about my Judaism," McCleary told The Electronic Intifada. He said he felt like he was being subjected to a "Jewish litmus test."

According to McCleary, Cohen asserted that his name "didn't sound Jewish." Cohen also asked him if he had had a Bar Mitzvah – the Jewish ritual for adolescent boys.

"I had to explain that Judaism goes through the mother," McCleary recalled. "I went to Jewish Sunday school growing up. I'm about as Jewish as you get."

But the question McCleary found even more disturbing is when Cohen asked him: "Do you look Jewish?"

In an exchange of text messages after the conversation, McCleary told Cohen that her "questioning of my Jewish identity was deeply troubling."

"I am sorry," Cohen responded.

Minimizing Jewish role

The text messages seen by The Electronic Intifada also show Cohen apparently trying to shape McCleary's statements to minimize the role of Jewish students in SJP. The exchange begins with a message from Cohen asking the student if he is "the only Jew in SJP."

"No. I can think of three other active core members off the top of my head, likely more at the general meetings," McCleary responds.

"One of less than a handful of Jews?" Cohen then asks.

"If you're trying to find a phrase to minimize Jewish participation I can't help you," McCleary shoots back. "There are a disproportionately large number of Jews in SJP based on campus demographics."

But as far as McCleary is aware, he is the only Jewish SJP member at Berkeley that the *Times* approached.

McCleary felt that the *New York Times* article – which did not quote him or any of the other students interviewed for this post – "completely misrepresented my experiences as a Jewish student at Berkeley."

"In my experience at Berkeley I have never experienced anti-Semitism," McCleary said. "What I have experienced is being called a terrorist, a Nazi, a kapo – which is the most anti-Semitic thing you can call a Jew – but only by other Jews in opposition to BDS."

Kapo is the word used to refer to Jews who collaborated in the Nazi extermination camps during the Second World War.

McCleary also spoke about the atmosphere of intimidation provoked by a David Horowitz [article](#) published in the campus newspaper *The Daily Californian*. Horowitz characterized SJP as "Jew-haters," part of a wave of anti-Semitism "not seen since the

1930s, when Hitler was laying plans for the final solution—the physical extermination of European Jewry.”

But in the end, according to McCleary, none of his concerns were deemed fit to print by the *Times*.

“It was very clear that what I had to say about BDS and Jews’ relationship to BDS complicated their narrative,” McCleary said. “For them to find out that SJP at UC Berkeley is disproportionately Jewish interferes with that narrative that they are trying to invent.”

Questions from an iPhone

Paul Hadweh, a Palestinian student at UC Berkeley, met with Ronnie Cohen. His experience corroborates that of the other students: that instead of reporting, the *Times* was attempting to shape a very specific narrative, looking for anti-Semitism where it didn’t exist.

At one point, according to Hadweh, Cohen told him, “I don’t know how to rephrase these questions so I’m going to read out the questions my editors told me to ask.”

She then pulled out her iPhone and read questions that to Hadweh’s recollection included: To what extent is BDS used as a fig leaf for anti-Semitism? Why is it that you are singling out Israel when there are multiple Arab countries that violate human rights and women’s rights?

Hadweh says that in his responses he stressed that the BDS movement was not about Judaism, but about a settler-colonial project and ending the abuses of military occupation. He also stressed that SJP has members of all faiths and backgrounds, including many Jewish students.

That is a message *Times* reporters heard consistently from the SJP activists they interviewed – and would certainly hear speaking to students in the Palestine solidarity movement across the country.

But it is not a message that fits with the bogus narrative of Jews on campus besieged by “angry brown and Black students,” as UCLA’s Agatha Palma put it.

The experience has left a dirty feeling that *Times* reporters attempted to manipulate these students, and when their words didn’t fit a preordained story, their voices were excluded altogether.

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