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Five things Jewish-American leaders must know about college students

If you want young Jewish Americans to listen to you, start by not dumbing-down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into catch phrases like Hamas=ISIS.

By Benjy Cannon | Sep. 18, 2014 | 9:34 PM |  6

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The American Jewish Committee recently published a list of “5 Things College Students Should Know About Israel.” Unfortunately, this list demonstrated that the AJC has a poor understanding of the state of the debate on college campuses. Here are five tips that the AJC and other communal leaders should keep in mind when addressing Jewish-American college students, to help make us more receptive to your suggestions.

1) Don't expect re-messaging to make us more pro-Israel

You clearly understand that young Jews see Israel differently to older Jews. That's good, and we're on the same page about it. The Pew Poll released last year showed that just 23 percent of non-Orthodox Jews between the ages of 18 and 29 think the Israeli government is making a sincere effort toward peace, compared to 44 percent in the 65+ range. Yet, you seem to think this comes from poorer messaging. Wrong. The American Jewish establishment has insisted that Israel is unequivocally committed to a two-state peace for as long as I've followed the issue. We're skeptical because of new settlement announcements, demonization of the Palestinians and a lack of political will in the Netanyahu government to advance peace negotiations. You can't explain those issues away with clever messaging; we're not going to be satisfied until we see a change in the policies - and that means taking serious steps toward ending the occupation.

2) Stop polarizing and pointing fingers

You paint a pretty stark picture of college campuses: on the one side are defenders of Israel, grounded in humanitarian and nationalist values, who understand the Middle East and Israel's tough situation; on the other is the pro-Hamas crowd. It's a ludicrous dichotomy, because no “pro-Hamas camp” actually exists on campus. Many students are struggling with the Israeli government's conduct during and after the latest conflagration. Telling those students that by questioning Israel they're empowering Hamas is ridiculous. Students can deeply disagree with the actions and policies of Israel's government while still abhorring terrorist violence. In fact, many students are challenged by Israeli conduct precisely *because* its actions empower Hamas. Most of our opinions involve some criticisms of both Israel and Palestinians; most of your statements blame the Palestinians alone.



Pro-Palestinian demonstrators in New York, July 9, 2014. (Photo: AP)

3) Ditch oversimplifications

We get that it's really easy to say things like " Hamas and ISIS come from the same family tree" to try and garner sympathy for your position. Sure, Ted Cruz (R-Texas) put it: "Sometimes we are told not to loop these groups together ... that we have to understand their so-called nuances and differences. But hate is hate, and murder is murder." But there's a reason why most American Jews wouldn't dream of voting for Cruz – we tend to be very liberal. Rejecting the notion that all evil, regardless of context, is for all intents and purposes the same is part and parcel of that worldview. Hamas is an Islamist nationalist group using terror to secure its twisted "solution" to the Palestinian issue, whereas the Islamic State group is slaughtering its way across Iraq and Syria to establish a global caliphate. We deplore Hamas, the Islamic State group and the violence each group espouses, but it insults our intelligence when you eradicate their important geopolitical differences to make the widely accepted point that Hamas is a nasty organization.



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4) Engage us on our terms

A good first step to engaging us in conversations about Israel would be to ask us, rather than tell us, what we think and what we should think. We have a host of passions, emotions, questions and ideas about the ongoing political situation. If you want to tap into that, just ask, and then listen carefully. But don't be surprised when you get a diverse array of responses, many of which are likely to contain some criticism of Israeli actions and policies. We don't need you to tell us what the right answers are; it's our job to work that out for ourselves, and we have no reason to believe the answers you offer are the right ones.

I understand that you're trying to help those Jewish students who want to defend Israel on campus but don't know how. Your list may well arm them with a few arguments that they can retort to an anti-Israel offensive. But when you arm those students, you should acknowledge that there are many ways to talk about Israel, and there is no one "right" answer. Once you've listened to our thoughts and values, you would be able to incorporate our suggestions into your communications.



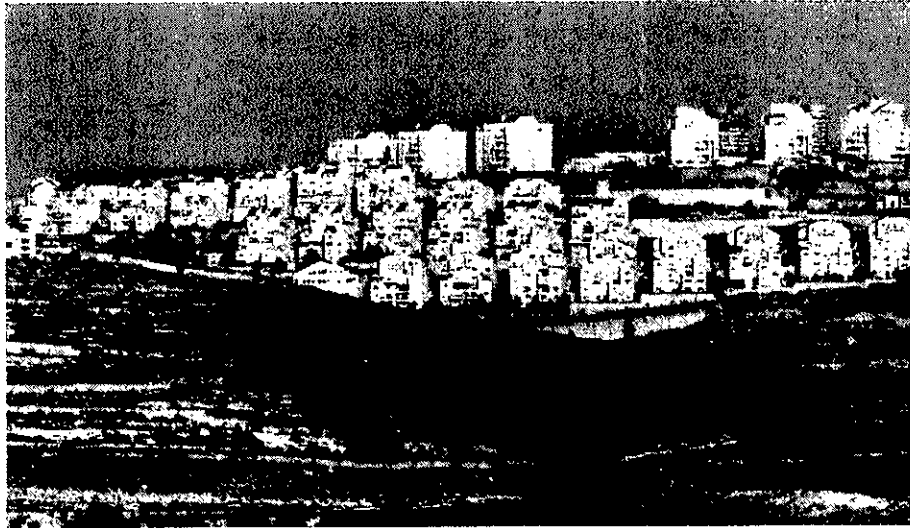
Soldier in Tafah, near Hebron on June 15, 2014. (Photo: AFP)

5) Be balanced leaders

You do a great job of addressing some things that we're concerned about, like anti-Semitism and defending Israel's right to exist, but you don't show much leadership on other issues that affect Israel's future, like settlements. Most Jews (especially young Jews) think that the continued building of settlements is detrimental to Israel's security interests. Many of us feel ashamed of Israel's actions, which is hardly surprising given the occupation and its injustices. For many of my peers and me, it is a moral blight on a country we love.

You can and should address those concerns. For example, last week, Israel made a destructive announcement that it would annex 1,000 acres of land as payback for the brutal murder of three Israeli teenagers, Eyal Yifrah, Gilad Shaar and Naftali Fraenkel, in a move that completely undermined Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and further isolated Israel internationally. Your silence in the face of this announcement was deafening. If you want us to listen to you, like you, and finance your future, you can't ignore problems of this magnitude. We don't want to just see you blame the Palestinians and console the conservative pro-Israel echo chamber; we want you to hold Israel's leaders accountable and

show leadership toward a sustainable peace.



The West Bank settlement of Efrat is seen on September 1, 2014. (Photo: AFP)

Both you and I want American Jewry to thrive, but, if you want me – and my college peers – to feel a part of Jewish institutions, you will need to change. I'm sure there'll be controversy when you decide to do so, but, when you do, we'll be behind you every step of the way.

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