

## LDB Urges University of Texas to Condemn Recent Attack on Free Speech

November 17, 2015, Washington, D.C: Yesterday, the Louis D. Brandeis Center urged University of Texas at Austin President Gregory L. Fenves to condemn a recent attack on free speech on his campus. [The Brandeis Center](#) is a national civil rights legal advocacy organization, best known for its work fighting anti-Semitism in higher education. The Center wrote in response to an event on Friday, November 13, in which an anti-Israel student group brazenly disrupted an academic discussion of Israel.

[LDB President Kenneth L. Marcus](#) commented, “This incident unfortunately reflects a nationwide trend in which campus radicals attempt to silence, disrupt, or intimidate one side of the debate in higher education. More often than not, these incidents involve discussion of Israel and the Middle East. It is critical for university leaders to stand up for freedom of speech and academic freedom in the face of such assaults.”

The Brandeis Center charged that [free speech at UT Austin is being imperiled by anti-Israel extremists](#). The details are as follows: last Friday, November 13, Professor Ami Pedahzur, the Founding Director of the Institute for Israeli Studies at UT Austin hosted an event with Stanford University’s Dr. Gil-Li Vardi, to present a study on, “The Origin of a Species: The Birth of the Israeli Defense Forces’ Military Culture.” Twelve members of a so-called “Palestine Solidarity Committee” reportedly disrupted the event, creating a human wall in the back of the room, not allowing the event to begin. According to video evidence, anti-Israel activists tried to prevent the speaker from presenting her viewpoint by heckling her with canards such as “The IDF represents the ethnic cleansing of over 800,000 indigenous Palestinians.” When Dr. Pedahzur and Dr. Vardi attempted to quiet them down and asked them to listen to the presentation, they made statements including, “You are a former IDF soldier, we do not listen to you.” Dr. Pedahzur repeatedly stated, “Sit down and listen, sit down and learn... Listen to a professor...,” however the students would not cease disrupting the presentation. Before leaving the room, the video shows students screaming a series of troubling chants: “Free Free Palestine!,” “Long live the Intifada!,” and “We want [19]’48, we don’t want two states!”

LDB’s Kenneth L. Marcus explained that “such brazen efforts to silence Dr. Pedahzur and Dr. Vardi not only violate basic civility norms but, more troublingly, also represent a threat to academic freedom and the freedom of speech. This is an affront to the right of all members of the university community to express their opinions in accordance with the First Amendment.” Moreover, the Brandeis Center argued that the hecklers’ call for an “intifada,” a term long-associated with violence against Jews, could reasonably lead to incitement to violence, raising concerns about the safety of Jewish and Israeli students on campus.

Unfortunately, the silencing of pro-Israel speakers by anti-Israel groups on college campuses appears to be part of an unfortunate trend in recent years. Two weeks ago, at the [University of Minnesota Law School](#), an event featuring Israeli professor Moshe Halbertal was notoriously interrupted by anti-Israel extremist protestors, who reportedly yelled anti-Israel slurs for nearly forty-five minutes before Professor Halbertal could begin. Several of the protestors were apparently arrested for disturbance of a public meeting. At UC Irvine several years ago, anti-Israel students prevented Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren from speaking, in violation of California law, and were prosecuted and found guilty for their actions.

Marcus added, “University leaders must be forceful in standing up for freedom of speech and academic freedom against such assaults. If this is allowed to stand at the University of Texas, we will be seeing such tactics increasingly throughout the country.”

The full text of LDB’s letter can be found below:

November 16, 2015

President Gregory L. Fenves  
Office of the President  
The University of Texas at Austin  
110 Inner Campus Drive  
Stop G3400  
Austin, Texas 78712

VIA E-MAIL ([president@utexas.edu](mailto:president@utexas.edu))

Dear President Fenves,

We write on behalf of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law (LDB), a national public interest advocacy organization established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. We fight campus anti-Semitism through legal advocacy, and often work with university administrators nationwide to offer best practices on how to combat and prevent anti-Semitism on their campuses. LDB President Kenneth L. Marcus was pleased to visit your campus several years ago to deliver the keynote address at a civil rights conference, and was deeply impressed with your institution. We write today over concern regarding a recent attack on free speech at UT Austin.

We are concerned that free speech on your campus is imperiled by efforts to silence one side of current debates concerning the Middle East. We understand that last Friday, November 13, Professor Ami Pedahzur, the Founding Director of the Institute for Israeli Studies at UT Austin hosted an event with Stanford University's Dr. Gil-Li Vardi, to present a study on, "The Origin of a Species: The Birth of the Israeli Defense Forces' Military Culture." However, twelve members of a so-called "Palestine Solidarity Committee" reportedly disrupted the event, creating a human wall in the back of the room, not allowing the event to begin. According to video evidence released by this "Palestinian Solidarity Committee," anti-Israel activists tried to prevent the speaker from presenting her viewpoint by heckling her with canards such as "The IDF represents the ethnic cleansing of over 800,000 indigenous Palestinians." When Dr. Pedahzur and Dr. Vardi attempted to quiet them down and asked them to listen to the presentation, they made statements including, "You are a former IDF soldier, we do not listen to you." Dr. Pedahzur repeatedly stated, "Sit down and listen, sit down and learn... Listen to a professor..." however the students would not cease disrupting the presentation. Before leaving the room, the video shows students screaming a series of troubling chants: "Free Free Palestine!"; "Long live the Intifada!"; and "We want [19]'48, we don't want two states!"

The brazen efforts of the Palestine Solidarity Committee to silence Dr. Pedahzur and Dr. Vardi not only violate basic civility norms but, more troublingly, also represent a threat to academic freedom and the freedom of speech. This is an affront to the right of all members of the university community to express their opinions in accordance with the First Amendment. Moreover, we would note that the hecklers' call for an "intifada," a term long-associated with violence against Jews could reasonably lead to incitement to violence, raising concerns about the safety of Jewish and Israeli students on campus.

Unfortunately, the silencing of pro-Israel speakers by anti-Israel groups on college campuses appears to be part of an unfortunate trend in recent years. Two weeks ago, at the University of Minnesota Law School, an event featuring Israeli professor Moshe Halbertal was notoriously interrupted by anti-Israel extremist protestors, who reportedly yelled anti-Israel slurs for nearly forty-five minutes before Professor Halbertal could begin. Several of the protestors were apparently arrested for disturbance of a public meeting. At UC Irvine several years ago, anti-Israel students prevented Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren from speaking, in violation of California law, and were prosecuted and found guilty for their actions. Silence from your administration on this incident would be interpreted as tacit approval of hateful, and potentially illegal, speech. We suggest the following:

- 1) We urge you to issue a strong statement affirming the freedom of speech and condemning such infringements. In this, you would do well to follow the example of your UT predecessor, Mark Yudof, when he served as President of the University of California and denounced the repeated disruption of a presentation by pro-Israel speakers at UC Davis. "What is not acceptable," Yudof wrote, "are acts meant to disrupt the speech of others. What is not acceptable are hate-driven physical, and yes, verbal attacks on any group or individual that are meant to silence or intimidate those who would express differing opinions." He continued, "[a]ttempting to shout down speakers is not protected speech. It is an action to deny others their right to free speech."
- 2) When speakers engage in hateful speech, administrators can use such situations as teachable moments and issue a strong public statement, reiterating the values of the campus community and showing the administration's support of targeted or affected students or professors. The best such responses tend to share certain characteristics, such as responding with specificity, prominence, balance, and courage; putting the event into context; following up and firmly applying sanctions; and providing outreach to the targeted group. This is discussed in LDB's "Best Practice Guide for Combating Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israelism" ([see attached](#)).
- 3) We urge you to investigate the actions of the students and student groups involved in this protest. If you find that the facts indicate that students have violated the University of Texas Standards of Conduct or applicable state and local law, we urge you to take appropriate disciplinary action and, if appropriate, refer the matter to local prosecutors for criminal prosecution.

Please do not hesitate to call on us if we may be a resource to you in dealing with such matters. Thank you in advance for your prompt reply and consideration of this matter.