

The Conflict over the Conflict: The Israel/Palestine Campus Debate

By Kenneth S. Stern

Foreword by Nadine Strossen

***The Conflict over the Conflict* chronicles one of the most divisive and toxic issues on today's college and university campuses: Israel/Palestine.**

Some pro-Palestinian students call supporters of Israel's right to exist racist, and disrupt their events. Some pro-Israel students label pro-Palestinian students terrorists, and the Jews among them traitors. Lawsuits are filed. Legislation is proposed. Faculty members are blacklisted and receive death threats. Academic freedom is compromised and the entire academic enterprise is threatened. How did we get here and what can be done?



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Discussion Guide Questions

1. The book starts with a vignette: a small Jewish community in the Pacific Northwest, unwilling to work with progressive partners against a common threat – neo-Nazis – because the progressive group supports the boycott/divestment/sanctions movement against Israel. Can you understand the dilemma? Why and how did they overcome it? Can this model be used in your community?
2. Can one be Jewish without supporting Israel?
3. Do you think that campuses should shelter students from disturbing ideas, or go out of their way to make students wrestle with difficult ones? What's the difference between heated disagreement and harassment?
4. The book's first chapter isn't about Israel and Palestine, but rather how human beings process information and form opinions, especially when their identity is closely tethered to an issue of perceived social justice and injustice. What did you learn from this chapter? Do you agree that moral positions "bind and blind"? That we all try and seek evidence to support our positions, rather than test them by evidence we may prefer to ignore? Do we seek certainty over critical thinking?
5. The Israel/Palestine debate reflects intense divisions – people sometimes view those on the other side as wrong, bigoted, or worse. How important is it to imagine how you might view the equities differently if you were born into the other "team"?

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6. Stern argues that each side in the campus debate is trying to censor the other. Do you think that's true? If so, how do you believe each side justifies what it does, and what problems are there with the justifications?

7. What do you think about the fact that Stern both drafted the definition of antisemitism and opposes its use on campus? Can you articulate his reasons? What do you think of them?

8. Stern points out that some young Jewish activists are anti-Zionists in large measure because of their understanding of Judaism and its imperative to do justice. Do you think these young Jews from Students for Justice in Palestine, Jewish Voice for Peace, and IfNotNow are promoting antisemitism?

9. If you are Jewish, and in a room with people who have strongly opposing views about Israel/Palestine, but a shared concern about another issue (poverty, immigration, the environment, racism, etc.), what are the lessons from this book that might help you work together without being derailed by differences over Israel?

10. Stern argues that principles are important, and that if you insist on academic freedom and free speech for "your side" you have to defend the other side's ability to make its case. Do you agree or disagree, and if so, why?

11. Are you less likely to criticize an expression or action you'd call antisemitic if it comes from someone who has the same strong opinion about Israel as you do? Do you ever stop and think what your reaction would be if the same words or behaviors came from someone with the opposite view about Israel?

12. Stern directs a Center for the Study of Hate, and uses some ideas from "hate studies" to explain our strong passions about Israel/Palestine. Do you agree with him that hate is a normal part of the human condition, and that we need better answers about how to understand and combat it? Is there an opportunity to bring "hate studies" to an academic institution in your home town, or one with which you or a family member have a connection?