

Israel, no-platforming – and why there’s no such thing as ‘narrow exceptions’ to campus free speech

Eric Heinze argues that it is contradictory to the principles of free speech to criticise the Israeli ambassador to Britain online and then no-platform him at a university talk.



If there’s one place where students are sure to spend time rehearsing arguments [against Israel](#), then it’s SOAS, the London-based School of Oriental and African Studies (although [plenty of universities](#) run a close second).

So you’d expect them to salivate at the chance to tear some juicy bites out of anyone representing Israel – not least a prize catch like Israel’s ambassador to the UK, [Mark Regev](#), who served as government spokesman during the 2014 Gaza conflict.

And yet when the man himself was delivered to them on a silver platter, how did they respond? They sent him back to the chef, demanding something less spicy.

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If so many staff and students around the globe find the Palestinians justified in violent resistance even against ordinary Israeli [civilians](#), then you'd think they'd gladly help out with a round or two of purely verbal ammunition.

Instead they all went AWOL. No sooner was Regev's visit announced than were the ever-predictable shouts of "Boycott!" circling the globe. "The environment that Mr Regev would create on our campus for the event is unsafe for us," [wrote](#) some Palestinian students to SOAS director Valerie Amos. But Baroness Amos, a veteran human rights expert and former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, wisely remained unimpressed – and allowed the event to go ahead.

Provocative? Of course. In universities designed for adults, that's what controversial viewpoints are supposed to be. But unsafe? As it happens, the only person to face the [firing line](#) that night was Regev.

I have publicly and unequivocally defended everyone's right to protest a campus speaker. As [chair](#) of the Regev event, I continued to defend that right, and shall do so in future. But what was the protesters' aim?

'Narrow' exceptions

Every time I write something against campus [no-platforming](#), I'm told: "We're entirely in favour of free speech, but some lines must be drawn. A few narrow exceptions won't harm anyone's free speech."

So let's take a look. Exactly how "narrow" are those "exceptions"?

In an effort to assure me that opposition to Regev was not antisemitic, I was told by protesters that they would equally oppose speakers from regimes like Iran and Saudi Arabia. As it happens, when the former Pakistani dictator [Pervez Musharraf](#) gave a [talk](#) at SOAS, pretty much no one protested – let alone on the instantaneous and massive scale that the Jewish state always so magically incites.

Indeed, if the anti-Israel brigade were sincere about their "we oppose all nasty states" credo, speakers sympathetic to upwards of a hundred states would have to be excluded, any number of them far more brutal than Israel.

But the no-platformers don't stop there. In a further bid to prove they've got nothing against Jews, they tell me that they would also boycott all forms of racism, sexism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia ... Like the ["little list" of the Lord High Executioner](#), in Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, suddenly the "narrow" exceptions grow to encompass the views of a few billion people on the planet.

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That's the absurdity of no-platforming. If we keep the exclusionary grounds genuinely narrow, they become random and arbitrary: we exclude one odious speaker while admitting another. And yet if we do maintain ethical consistency, banning all objectionable worldviews, the list of exclusions balloons beyond any serious boundaries.

A university's mission, it seems, is not merely to accept the ugly world as it is, but to create a better world. And I agree. The question is whether we create that world by shutting our doors on the bits we dislike.

Being both gay and Jewish, I'd have absolutely no objection to hosting a panel of antisemites or homophobes. To the contrary, they would tempt me to ramp up whichever stereotype confirms their puny worldviews, just for the sheer fun of it.

Rather, what frightens me is the prospect that staff and students have lost the ability to tackle such views. I often put to students a hypothetical question: Should states be free to separate races, on the strict premise that each race gets equal goods, services and opportunities? Of course, such situations rarely exist – separate is [rarely equal](#). Yet aside from the obvious manoeuvre of simply refusing to accept that premise, the students are constantly unable to respond, insisting in a huff that such a policy is “just wrong”.

That's not reason. It's sheer assertion. The students had not learned to reason about equality. They had merely been shamed by lecturers and peers into condemning inequality as “obviously” wrong. The most dangerous ideas arise not from stupidity, but from enforced cleverness.

Power hierarchies

Another common claim waged to shut down debate is the charge that a speaker embodies some oppressive power hierarchy. After all, endless socially divisive disputes involve [power discrepancies](#): debates about poverty, immigration, racial profiling, police brutality, theft, violent crime, rape, abortion, education policy, workplace harassment, access to legal representation, or access to health care – and most questions of foreign policy.

But power relations operate on various planes. Israel certainly does impose military might in the Occupied Territories. But for countless other forums – notably [the UN](#) and much of Western [academia](#) – it's ludicrous and borderline conspiratorial to argue that discursive power dynamics favour Israel. Even on campuses ultimately rejecting boycotts, the fact that the Jewish state has for years remained the only nation subject to such votes speaks volumes about dominant attitudes.

At many academic conferences concerning the Occupation, critics of pro-Palestinian stances are either excluded or invited in the tiniest numbers as sheer tokens of “intellectual balance”. The very act of according equal time to such critics, we are told in the adolescent jargon, would “entrench

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existing hierarchies”. Yet bullying doesn’t become fair play simply by flaunting a Che Guevara t-shirt. If we were to bar speakers based on real power dynamics within Western universities, friends of Palestine would scarcely endorse no-platforming.

Any number of other claims are made to exclude speakers. Rumours circulated that Regev’s speech was a rigged event. It was even suggested – echoing centuries-old stereotypes of [Jewish manipulation](#) of communications and media – that the Israeli embassy planned to stuff the room with its own staff.

In reality, I doubt that a single speaker in recent years has confronted the barrage of critical questions fired at Regev. The more usual campus guests are invited precisely because their views echo staff’s and students’ political preferences. Lectures peddled as “critical theory” are often little more than cheerleading sessions.

Universities purport to offer more than an environment of bromidic self-satisfaction – but the insular micro-climates we are increasingly fostering are bad for staff and worse for students.

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