

Anti-Semitism on campus linked to BDS, report says

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(RNS) Anti-Semitism goes hand-in-hand with anti-Zionist activities at U.S. colleges, according to a new report that one critic called a “crude rhetorical cudgel” against the so-called Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement.

The report was released on Monday, (March 14) by the Amcha Initiative, a group founded by two professors in the University of California system in response to anti-Semitic incidents on campuses.

Amcha, which means “your people” in Hebrew, focuses on colleges of all sizes with significant Jewish student populations, and concludes that “the primary agents of antisemitic activity are anti-Zionist students and faculty boycotters and that Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) is the strongest predictor of anti-Jewish hostility on campus.”

The BDS movement calls for economic pressure to be put on Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian lands.

The Amcha Initiative says BDS protests, organized by Student for Justice in Palestine and other pro-Palestinian groups, often go beyond criticizing Israel. The study finds that pro-Palestinian activists on campus are frequently anti-Israel activists who demonize the Jewish nation as an apartheid state that has no right to exist, compare Israelis to Nazis, and verbally and physically harass Jewish students.

“No student should ever be targeted for harm because of his or her perceived religious or ethnic identity, and yet, at far too many schools, Jewish students are routinely threatened because of their identity,” said Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, AMCHA’s director.

According to the report, entitled “Antisemitic Activity in 2015 at U.S. Colleges and Universities With the Largest Jewish Undergraduate Populations,” those schools experienced a total of more than 300 incidents of anti-Semitism that year, from anti-Semitic graffiti to physical threats against Jewish students. The report ties the presence of anti-Zionist groups on campus to these incidents, finding that 99 percent of schools with such an organization had one or more incidents of anti-Semitic activity, as opposed to 16 percent of schools with no active anti-Zionist student group.

Edward Curtis, a professor of religion at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and chair of the school’s pro-BDS faculty and staff group, said Amcha’s study lacks credibility.

“Because the report equates any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, it is a fundamentally flawed and deeply cynical piece of propaganda,” he said. “The Amcha report takes a serious problem, anti-Semitism, and uses it as a crude rhetorical cudgel against the group’s political opponents.”

Curtis said the report also ignores “the victimization of pro-BDS activists, including Jews” and called for an open debate on BDS in which no one is intimidated.

In February 2015, a comprehensive survey of anti-Semitism at American colleges from Trinity College and the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law showed that 54 percent of Jewish students experienced anti-Semitism on campus in the first six months of the 2013–2014 academic year.

Mounting reports of anti-Semitic activity on colleges in recent years moved the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Jewish civil rights group, to create “CombatHateU,” an app for college students to report both anti-Semitic and anti-Israel activity.

In 2005 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights declared that campus anti-Semitism had become a “serious problem” and called for more research on the issue.