

March 10, 2021

The main headlines



**Netanyahu touts achievements from record vaccinations to boosting regional ties, security**

ISRAEL KASNETT / JNS

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JOSH HASTEN / JNS

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BRIEF

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**After the BDS fight ...**

Have we made a case to Jews and pro-Israel allies on campus as to why they should support Israel once the attacks against the Jewish state become fewer and less impactful?



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(December 18, 2020 / JNS) Sohrab Ahmari's Dec. 15 piece in the *New York Post*, "Trump's peace deals mean the anti-Israel boycott movement is dead" makes an important point. The already ludicrous idea of European and American "Middle East experts" and activists telling Arab states who wish to engage with Israel that they shouldn't from their offices in New York and Geneva now seems a little absurd. As more Arab and Muslim countries sign on to the Trump-initiated Abraham Accords, the foundation for a call to boycott, sanction or divest from Israel crumbles.

It was always a cynical political agenda, but now it has begun to lose its audience. Those screaming on the campus green are revealed to be speaking for themselves, not the people they claim to be defending.

This will be good news for several Jewish communal organizations whose devotion to the fight against BDS on campus, in European Parliaments and in city councils around America has kept them extraordinarily busy these last few years, often playing a terrible game of whack a mole. Their efforts will still be needed as no one milking the BDS machine for funding will give up overnight, and every fight must be fought. But their calendar may lighten over the next few years, and they may well have to pivot to address the next anti-Israel/anti-Semitic tactic surely already being planned as part of the larger strategy against the Jews.



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What's interesting about the changes taking place are the implications for the campus anti-BDS effort, which in many ways has dominated the hearts and minds of the Jewish communal philanthropic class for years. As we have emphasized and focused on the anti-BDS fight, we have spent far less time thinking about what will be left as the fight recedes into the background. Have we made a case to Jews and pro-Israel allies on campus as to why they should support Israel once the attacks against the Jewish state become fewer and less impactful? If most students understand their Israel engagement on campus as a fight, what is left once the fight is over?

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This is a concern that has receded into the background, taken up only by a few organizations on campus. Largely labeled "religious," these groups have not been the recipients of serious Jewish communal funding or interest. But they represent an important, long-term Jewish and Israel-engagement resource on campuses that may (and hopefully, will) look different for young Jews in years to come.

Chabad Houses, Olami programs and some Hillel houses offer Jewish programming that defines Jewish student connections to Israel well beyond a defensive posture and an angry battle with groups like J Street and IfNotNow. They help Jewish students understand thousands of years of Jewish history in the Land of Israel and our spiritual connection to the state, grounded in our traditional texts. They provide a proud and positive narrative that stands alone, irrespective of the slings and arrows of the BDS movement's attacks.

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Christian groups on campus have also done an important job of grounding their interests in Israel in the Bible, as well as in ancient texts and connections to the land. Even as they fight the mass murder of ancient Christian communities across the region, they reflect openly on their faith's deep connection to the Middle East that remains important whether or not others are trying to erase them.

And, of course, Birthright Israel's work has allowed hundreds of thousands of students from around the world to understand Israel beyond the conflict and to see themselves as part of a narrative that existed well before the words "Palestinian refugee" ever did. This self-realization is useful armor when the anti-Israel fight is being hotly contested, but maybe even more importantly, it provides an opening for a young Jew to be a part of something beyond the battle: the Jewish people.

We were always remiss in weighting our interest in the fight—and spending less time and money on the message about what we are fighting for. What we want are students who can see their Jewish identities and Israel associations as meaningful and enriching parts of their lives. If we help young Jews to see themselves as inheritors of an important ancient tradition connected over thousands of years to the Israeli homeland, then they will have sustainable identities that last long after this fight is over. It will also gird them for the next one, which we can be assured will arise.

*Rebecca Sugar is a freelance writer and philanthropic consultant in New York.*

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