

**Speech read on the UVM Campus, September 21<sup>st</sup> 2022 by John Heermans, an active member of Vermonters for Justice in Palestine (VTJP.org)**

On Sept. 13, 2022, The Vermont Digger reported:

*The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights has opened an investigation into a complaint alleging incidents of antisemitism at the University of Vermont.*

*The [complaint](#) — filed by two nonprofit advocacy groups, the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law and Jewish On Campus — details alleged vandalism of UVM's Hillel building, online harassment of Jewish students by an unnamed teaching assistant and exclusion of Jewish students supporting Israel from a sexual assault survivors' group.*

First, to be clear, VTJP is against all forms of discrimination: we believe that all forms of oppression, including antisemitism, are connected and must be fought collectively in order to achieve justice and freedom for all people.

In the face of these accusations, however, we see the complaint as part of a larger-scale, bad-faith attempt to weaponize the reality of antisemitism in order to advance a goal of silencing a conversation about justice for Palestinians.

*For two decades, Israel advocates have worked to embed a new, Israel-focused definition of antisemitism in institutions around the world, from national governments to campuses. This effort is snowballing rapidly. As a result, advocacy for Palestinian rights is being threatened, curtailed and even criminalized as 'hate.'*

Peter Beinart, a Jewish professor of journalism at the City University of New York. Has written: “Over the past 18 months, America’s most prominent Jewish organizations have done something extraordinary. They have accused the world’s leading human rights organizations of promoting hatred of Jews.”

The article goes on to show how pressure from the powerful Jewish lobbying organizations has pushed to State Dept. to employ a definition of antisemitism whose examples include opposing Israel’s existence as a Jewish state.

“This year the Senate confirmed Deborah Lipstadt as Biden’s special envoy to combat antisemitism. Ms. Lipstadt has said that Israel’s ‘continued holding of the West Bank is problematic’ but has also claimed that Amnesty International’s report about Israeli apartheid is ‘part of a larger effort to delegitimize the Jewish state’ and thus ‘poisons the atmosphere, particularly for Jewish students on college campuses.’

The Amnesty International Report does not target Jewish students on campuses. It accuses the State of Israel of the Crime of apartheid, a grave violation of

internationally protected human rights and a crime against humanity under international law.

As more and more students on campuses across the US understand the history and ongoing human rights violations of the brutal apartheid state of Israel, the Israel lobby has ramped up its propaganda machine to target campuses and silence students who criticize Israel. Those students are subjected to harassment and lasting damage to their reputations and future prospects.

Returning to the Louis D. Brandeis Center complaint against UVM, the complainants allege that the university is targeting “Jewish students for whom Zionism is integral to their Jewish identity.” Note that in 1971 the UN passed a [resolution](#) stating that Zionism is a form of racism (eventually revoked in 1991 under intense US and Israel lobbying). Many Jewish people across the world do not hold Zionism to be central to their identity and proudly identify as non- or anti-Zionist. The Brandeis Center with its casual interchanging of the words “Jewish” and “Zionist,” represents a dangerous conflation of these terms; and suggests that UVM should follow suit.

The Brandeis Center also proposes several very troubling so-called “remedies” including:

- *UVM must adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance Working Definition of Anti-Semitism and its contemporary examples.*
- *UVM must issue a statement denouncing anti-Semitism in all its forms and recognizing that Zionism is a key component of Jewish identity for many students at UVM.*
- *The University must conduct mandatory training for the University community regarding its revised Policy that includes a specific focus on the different manifestation of anti-Semitism including anti-Zionism and national origin-based discrimination.*

President Suresh Garimella has provided a forceful response to the Brandeis Center allegations, and we urge him strongly not to accept these outrageous demands on the University.

Students and Faculty who speak up for the rights of Palestinian people are subjected to harassment and even loss of employment. Groups such as Canary Mission seek specifically to target students, faculty, and staff at colleges and universities. This has happened at UVM and at Middlebury College, and nationally. The stakes are already incredibly high for those activists, and adopting definitions of antisemitism that paint, with broad strokes all criticism of Israel and Zionism as antisemitic raises those stakes to untenable levels and risks seriously encroaching on the free speech rights of any

individual. **These smear campaigns are simply intended to distract from the ongoing suffering of Palestinians.**

UVM has done its part; it investigated the complaints and either determined that antisemitism was not part of the actions reported or acted within its control to resolve the situation. This should be the end of the story. Instead, the complainants are following their strategy: they are attempting to turn any whisper of antisemitism into a PR campaign that scares universities into adopting a highly-contested, widely-condemned definition of antisemitism that is specifically designed to target Palestinians and their allies—not to keep Jews safe.

The long term vision of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is :  
“We’re going to make certain that pro-Israel students take over the student government. That is how AIPAC operates in our nation’s capital. This is how AIPAC must operate on our nation’s campuses.”

[As the world opens its eyes](#) to the violence and oppression of the Israeli occupation and the suffering of the Palestinian people, those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo strive not to achieve justice or peace, but to silence those who wish to speak the truth. Please do not be distracted by their efforts. Critiquing Israel is not antisemitism; standing alongside Palestinians in their fight for dignity is not a form of hate.