

Israel advocacy among U.S. college students: *Who are the activists?*

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Israel advocacy has been recognized as a priority area by a variety of U.S. Jewish organizations. The college campus, in particular, has been identified as perhaps the major source of anti-Israel sentiment in the United States. As a result, several efforts in the last few years have been directed at rectifying the problem through active programs directed at college students. These programs range from providing speakers to Jewish groups on campus to educating students in the basics of the Israel-Arab conflict.

As a result of these various programs, a corps of “activists” has been formed across the United States academic community. These students become the leaders on campus who coordinate Israel advocacy efforts and counter the widespread anti-Israel sentiment that is pervasive in many campuses.

While the existence of Israel advocacy is uniformly viewed as essential and important, little research has been conducted into its nature or, for that matter, its effectiveness. Moreover, in order to further promote awareness of the issues in the Israel-Arab conflict among students, particularly Jewish students, we need to recognize those factors that lead to activism and a desire to become more involved in advocacy efforts.

Who, therefore, are the activists? What is their background, both in terms of Jewish identification and Jewish education? These are the students who, arguably, are most likely move on to leadership positions in the Jewish community and eventually serve as both professional and lay members of organizations that will lead the efforts to promote a fair and just view of the Israel-Arab conflict among the American public and higher political echelons.

The survey

In order to answer some of these questions, a preliminary survey was constructed that sought information on a variety of demographic factors, particularly Jewish education and religious identification. Information was also sought on college coursework in the area, amount of time devoted to reading about Israel, participation in Birthright trips, other visits to Israel, memberships in Zionist youth movements, attendance at Jewish summer camps and frequency of synagogue attendance. There was also an optional “fill-in” space for comments on why these students are involved in Israel-related activities on campus. A copy of the survey follows this report.

The activists

Our sample was randomly selected from a pool of several hundred students who serve as campus leaders for Israel-advocacy projects. A total of 72 students (ages 18-25, 33 males, 39 females) from 17 different states or (Canadian) provinces and 51 different schools completed the anonymous survey. Only a handful (6) of the “activists” were first year students. There were 18 second year students, 27 third year students, 15 fourth year students and 5 post-graduates in the sample. Data was gathered over a 3 month period from April through July 2005.

The data

All the students devoted regular weekly time to reading material pertaining to Israel. There were 27 who spent 1-2 hours a week, 25 who spent 3-5 hours a week and 20 who spent more than 5 hours weekly. Forty students had taken college-level coursework in Middle East studies, while 32 had not. Forty-one students participated in Birthright trip, and 53 said they they had visited Israel

on other than a Birthright trip. Twenty-two of those that participated in Birthright also had other Israel visits.

Only 17 students claimed membership in a Zionist youth movement, although 44 attended Jewish summer camp.

With regard to Jewish religious observance and Jewish education, 24 identified as Orthodox, 30 as Conservative, 7 as reform and 11 as "other" or "unaffiliated". Twenty-seven students attend synagogue services weekly, 15 monthly, 8 less than monthly, 19 for holidays only and 3 said they attended "rarely".

Thirty-six students in the sample completed Jewish day school at the high school level. Another 15 completed elementary Jewish day school. Ten students received only after-hours religious education, 8 had Bar or Bat Mitzvah training only and 4 had no Jewish education whatsoever.

Forty-five students offered some sort of comment in the fill-in section as to why they are involved in Israel related activities.

Interpreting the data

The greatest single group with a defined religious identification are students who see themselves as "Conservative". These 30 students in our survey represent over 41% of the sample. Orthodox students comprised over 33% of the sample. The 7 students who defined themselves as "Reform" represent 9.7% of the sample, while those who did not have a particular identification (11) comprised a bit over 15% of the sample.

A UJC survey in 2001 provided the following results for Jewish students on campus: 17 percent of Jewish college students identified themselves as Conservative, 10 percent as Orthodox, 35 percent as reform, 10 percent as secular, 25 percent as "just Jewish" and 4 percent as other.

What is clear, thus, is that while Conservative and Orthodox students seem to take a greater role in Israel advocacy relative to their proportion in the larger student population, Reform or unaffiliated students, take a smaller role. We cannot say, however, what percentage of college students in any particular affiliation eventually become active in Israel advocacy.

When one looks at the education variable, however, religious affiliation seems to be understood differently. For example, while one-third of our sample considers themselves "Orthodox", one-quarter of these Orthodox activist students did not actually attend a Jewish day school on a high school level, something that ordinarily would be expected of someone who identifies with Orthodox Judaism. Conservative students accounted for 41.6 % of the total activist sample, and 36.6% of them attended Jewish high school, something that also may be out of proportion, but in the opposite direction, for this group. It would appear that, for these Conservative activists, more attended Jewish high schools that would be expected of the general Conservative student population. The Conservative sample accounted for 30.5% of the Jewish high school sample, while the Orthodox students accounted for 50% of that sample. This would not appear to mirror the proportions of Orthodox versus Conservative students in Jewish high schools, and certainly not the proportion of Orthodox versus Conservative affiliated Jewish high schools.

One possible explanation for this finding is that Israel activism is related to raising one's overall Jewish consciousness and thus would account for more affiliated behavior in general. It may be that it was Israel activism that led some students to increased observance, either Orthodox or Conservative, and not that one's observance led to being more active in Israel-related areas.

Being a member of a Zionist youth movement also seemed to have minimal influence, as only 17 of the 72 students in the sample said they were a member of such a movement. With regards to

Jewish summer camp, however, a large number of these activists said that they did attend camp at least one summer.

While "Birthright" ("Taglit") has been credited with increasing Jewish awareness among college age youth, our sample appears to stand out in that while many (41 of the 72 in the sample) participated in a Birthright trip, many more (53 of the 72) visited Israel on other than a Birthright trip at some time.

Conclusions

So what can one conclude from this sample of activists? What appears to be clear is that a strong Jewish education is related to interest in Israel advocacy. Half the sample (36) attended Jewish high schools while another 15 attended Jewish (elementary) day schools. Actual religious observance appears to be correlated with activism, but it is far from clear whether there is any causal relationship here. Students who identify with Conservative Judaism appear to be especially over-represented in the sample. Although Orthodox identification is also significant, it is unclear if activist students who currently see themselves as "Orthodox", always saw themselves as such. What is striking in this sample is the relatively small number of Reform students, relative to their proportion on campus, who opt to become activists.

For those respondents on the survey who provided comments (45 of the 72 respondents), responses were varied, but most followed a consistent theme. While some students did not have an articulated response regarding their activism (e.g., "Israel is amazing!", "I want to meet Jewish friends") most responses focused on a desire to be involved in the campus debate on Israel or contribute to their identified community.

As noted earlier, both Orthodox and Conservative students made up the bulk of these activists, and most of these students (although not all) attended Jewish high schools. It would appear, however, that the relative proportion and participation of Conservative students exceeded what would be expected relative to their proportion in Jewish high schools across the United States. Although we see that most activist students define themselves as Orthodox or Conservative, the survey does not tell us anything about the relative number of Orthodox or Conservative students who opt to be activists.

Certainly more data is required in order to arrive at more solid conclusions related to student activism. Previous surveys (see: http://www.lookstein.org/resources/israel_students.pdf, http://www.lookstein.org/articles/followup_survey.pdf) have pointed out deficits in Israel-related knowledge and motivation among Jewish high school graduates. It is clear, however, that there is certainly a subset of students for whom activism is important, and these students appear to be those who have had a serious Jewish educational background. While many questions remain, it appears that this survey has identified a trend that seems to indicate that Jewish education, more than any other variable, would account for who is and who is not an Israel activist on campus.

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