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The Israel-Affiliated Organization Leading the Backlash Against Student Protests

The Israeli-American Council has worked in tandem with Israeli intelligence agencies for years. Last month, its leaders vowed to shut down the encampment at UCLA.

JAMES BAMFORD



Pro-Israel demonstrators play a video called “This is Hamas” across from the pro-Palestinian encampment at the UCLA campus on April 29, 2024.

(Qian Weizhong / VCG via Getty Images)

It was time to fight back on America's college campuses. And the little known Israeli-American Council (IAC), an organization with close ties to Israeli intelligence, and made up mostly of Israeli expats, decided that it would lead the nationwide charge. On Sunday, April 28, as members of the group arrived on UCLA's grass-covered Dickson Plaza, the IAC's CEO, Elan Carr, took the stage. A Republican politician, former member of the National Council of AIPAC, and special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism in the Trump administration, he had little regard for anyone who disparaged Israel. In the past, he had compared the call for an economic boycott of Israel to actions by the Nazis. And he has said that the group Jewish Voice for Peace, whose members were taking part in the protest, "openly traffics in anti-Semitism."

Among those addressing a crowd of Israeli-flag-waving counterprotesters, with the encampment holding the pro-Palestinian demonstrators directly behind them, was Israel's Consul General to the Pacific Southwest, Israel Bachar. Also speaking was Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League. Then came Carr, who announced that the fight had begun. "We will take back our streets. We will take back our campuses from Columbia University to UCLA and everywhere in between," he said. The question is, given IAC's long history of close links to Israeli intelligence organizations, for whom are they taking the campuses back?

During the rally, a supporter of Israel pulled out a switchblade and slashed through a pro-Palestinian poster while others confronted pro-Palestinian demonstrators, and a protester's face was bloodied. Earlier that morning, some counterprotesters attempted to climb over the barricades of the pro-Palestinian encampment and a security guard was pepper sprayed. Danielle Carr, an assistant professor, said she witnessed "truly unbelievable" aggression against the pro-Palestinian protesters.

Earlier, the group had set up a massive video screen within clear view of the encampment. They would start with a psychological warfare technique similar to one used by the US military against accused terrorists at Guantánamo Bay. An FBI inspector assigned to the detention camp reported in a memo that he once saw a "detainee sitting on the floor of the interview room with an Israeli flag draped around him, loud music being played and a strobe light flashing." The inspector left the room, noting in a memo that his understanding was that "such techniques were not allowed, nor approved by FBI policy."

Such policy apparently does not apply to the IAC. During the rally, they blasted the Israeli national anthem, and later, on the giant screen they set up, pro-Israel

counterdemonstrators projected loud videos of Hamas militants. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the videos also included “a running torrent of loud, disturbing sounds over a stereo—an eagle screeching, a child crying—and blasted a Hebrew rendition of the song, ‘Baby Shark’ on repeat, late at night, so that campers could not sleep.” “Unfortunately, we experience the harassment and the terrorizing at night, which can be really upsetting,” a 28-year-old grad student in the encampment told a reporter.

Then just two days later, the pro-Israel counterdemonstrators returned to fulfill the IAC’s vow to shut down the encampment in what university Vice Chancellor Mary Osako called “horrific acts of violence.” At 10:48 pm, the pro-Israel group moved close to the encampment and blared “Harbu Darbu,” an Israeli wartime anthem calling for retribution of October 7. Los Angeles writer Piper French said the Israel supporters played “gruesome footage from the October 7 attacks. They also played, on a loop, a children’s song that IDF soldiers have reportedly blasted at Palestinian prisoners for hours on end as a form of torture,” as well as an Israeli song about the Israel Defense Forces campaign in Gaza. They then returned after midnight.

Soon they began ripping down the barriers protecting the pro-Palestinian protesters and violently attacking those inside. “The violence had been instigated by dozens of people who are seen in videos counterprotesting the encampment,” said an investigative report by *The New York Times*, after reviewing more than 100 videos. “The videos showed counterprotesters attacking students in the pro-Palestinian encampment for several hours, including beating them with sticks, using chemical sprays and launching fireworks as weapons.... One was thrown in the direction of a group of protesters who were carrying an injured person out of the encampment.”

Others, wearing masks, attacked with wooden planks, plastic pipes, metal poles, pepper spray, and bear mace. According to Piper French, “A mob of men...swung two-by-fours with nails sticking out of them, and uttered death and rape threats. They punched and maced four student journalists, brought one to the ground, and beat him at length.” Twenty-five pro-Palestinian protesters were taken to the hospital.

Nor was there any assistance from local police, who oddly waited for more than three and a half hours before breaking up the one-sided violence. “A horde of anti-Palestinian vigilantes attacked the students’ encampment,” said a notice on the website of Jewish Voice for Peace. “Campus security, LAPD, and administrators stood back and watched as mobs waving Israeli flags stormed the encampment, beating students with blunt objects,

shooting fireworks at them, and assaulting them with chemical weapons, resulting in dozens of serious injuries.” The violence continued “for hours and hours, with nobody stepping in,” said Bharat Venkat, an associate professor. “I thought a student would be killed.”

Among the group of police was Aaron Cohen, a well-known civilian police instructor who teaches Israeli-style counterintelligence tactics. At one point, he disguised himself with a keffiyeh, a traditional Palestinian checkered scarf, that hid his face except for his eyes, and infiltrated the encampment. According to his website, Cohen formerly worked for Israel’s *mista’aravim* or “Arabist” unit, a group “specifically trained to assimilate among the local Arab population and...tasked with performing high risk terrorist arrests, intelligence gathering, and targeted assassinations; and use disguise and surprise as their main weapon.”

He later said, “So last night I did a little special investigation.... So I broke out the old keffiyeh, which has become the new hipster Nazi symbol, wrapped it around my face correctly...and made my way down to UCLA as soon as it got dark and infiltrated right up to that encampment. Spent about an hour there around the perimeter.” He said he had been invited to join the sheriff’s office “behind the wire with their Special Response Team,” a clear indication of the close ties between former members of Israeli intelligence and US law enforcement.

Long before the protests and demonstrations on the UCLA campus, the Israeli-American Council had its beginnings on a restaurant cocktail napkin in 2006. It was the idea of Israel’s Los Angeles consul general at that time, Ehud Danoch. He wanted to bring together Israel’s large expat population in the US, thus forming a powerful pressure group in support of the policies of the Israeli government. Among its key founders, past national chairman, and current board member is Israeli-born Adam Milstein, a multimillionaire Los Angeles real estate developer, and felon. In 2008, he pleaded guilty and served prison time for two counts of federal tax evasion. He was part of an elaborate conspiracy run by a New York grand rabbi that stretched from Israel to New York to Los Angeles. It used phony charities, including a yeshiva—an Orthodox Jewish school—to evade taxes and launder millions of dollars. Prosecutors called it “an astonishingly complex and sinister enterprise.” And the IRS said, “This was not a case about religion, tradition, or charitable giving. This was simply a case about greed.” Soon after his release, Milstein made a very odd request to the Justice Department. He wanted to fly to Israel where, among other things, he would “meet with Israel’s prime minister,” Benjamin Netanyahu. The Justice Department granted the request.

For years, the IAC was largely financed and led by Las Vegas mega-billionaire Sheldon Adelson, the top contributor to the 2020 Trump campaign. The organization also came to have close connections to Israeli intelligence. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been increasingly concerned by the growing pro-Palestinian activism on American college campuses, and especially its boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement targeting Israel. The more the movement took hold on campuses, the more Netanyahu was worried about losing America's billions in aid and its critical support in the United Nations. It had to be stopped. He therefore put Gilad Erdan, a close confidant, in charge of the shadowy Ministry of Strategic Affairs, with the top priority of launching covert operations within the US to crush the pro-Palestinian movement and to secretly go after its supporters, any way he could.

Erdan's secret headquarters was hidden away on the 29th floor of a high-rise office building, Champion Tower, in the Tel Aviv neighborhood of Bnei Brak. And in 2016, Erdan's deputy at the ministry, director-general Sima Vaknin-Gil, told a government committee that the goal of her ministry was go after American's pro-Palestinian boycott movement so that the "narrative of the world won't be that Israel equals apartheid." At another point, she made it clear how the ministry would accomplish that goal. "In order to do that," she said, "we must use tricks and craftiness." Which would translate into covert operations and clandestine activities in the United States.

Key to their US operations was a highly sophisticated intelligence unit that targeted innocent Americans around the country. It was described to the IAC members in 2016 by Sagi Balasha, a former senior Israeli official who was the CEO of the IAC from 2011 to 2015. He then moved back to Israel and took over Concert, a secretive front organization operated by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs where he calls Vaknin-Gil, "my partner." And among its projects was Israel Cyber Shield. "We started to establish a project called Israel Cyber Shield," he said. "This is actually a civil intelligence unit that collects, analyzes and acts upon the activists in the BDS movement, of its people, organizations, or events. And we give it everything we collect. We are using the most sophisticated data system, intelligence system in the Israeli market."

And everything they collect, according to Vaknin-Gil, includes surveillance on students, churchgoers, and laborers around the country—any group that might support or be sympathetic to the Palestinian and boycott causes. Describing the various elements of the covert operations, she said, "The first one is intel, intelligence.... What we've done is mapped and analyzed the whole [pro-Palestinian] phenomena globally. Not just the United States, not just campuses, but campuses and intersectionality, labor unions and

churches.” And secrecy was critical. “We are a different government working on a foreign soil, and we have to be very, very cautious,” she said.

There was good reason for Israel’s secrecy. Among the key targets was Linda Sarsour, a leader in both the Palestinian movement and Black Lives Matter, which endorsed the boycott in 2016. She was also one of the primary organizers of the Women’s March following President Donald Trump’s inauguration. According to an investigation by the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, among the material the Cyber Shield unit was able to secretly obtain from Sarsour was a password-protected file “containing information on her parents, and another file with more than 10 pages all marked ‘Confidential.’... The dossier concluded with an executive summary that highlighted her apparent weak points.” Once collected, the data was then turned over for use by another secretive Israeli unit targeting Americans, one known as Act.IL, that could then exploit Sarsour’s “weak points.” Act.IL had an unusual birth.

On June 4, 2017, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo appointed Erdan “Honorary Grand Marshal” of the Celebrate Israel Parade, despite the fact that he was Netanyahu’s chief of covert operations in the United States. But Cuomo had spent much of his governorship pandering to the Israel supporters among his nearly 2 million Jewish voters and invited Erdan to march next to him through midtown Manhattan. Hours later, Erdan repaid Cuomo for that honor by launching his newest operation: a web of secretive troll farms across the US directed from Israel. The idea was to encourage pro-Israel students to download an Israeli app through which they could respond to Israeli government-directed “missions” to secretly target and harass critics of Israel and Palestinian supporters, such as Sarsour.

The app soon had over 20,000 online potential trolls, many of them Jewish Americans, and a budget of \$1.1 million. While developed and controlled by Erdan’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs, it was largely supported by the IAC’s Adelson and Milstein, who served on its board. The war room for the operation was just outside Tel Aviv and the man in charge was Yarden Ben-Yosef, a reserve major in what he called “an elite intelligence unit.” “We work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, consult with them and manage joint projects,” he told an Israeli publication. “The same with the intelligence agencies,” he added. “We talk with each other. We work together.”

By 2018, the operation had opened Israel-directed troll farms across the US and was completing 1,580 missions a week. At one point Boston’s troll farm created a mission to

target a local church that was showing a documentary they felt was unduly critical of Israel. The proposed text of the e-mail drew comparisons with the white supremacist riot in Charlottesville, Virginia, and called the narrator of the film “a well-known antisemite.” What often happens in such cases is the war room then directs the trolls into a social media swarm. They then disguise their links to Israel and attack the targets—in this case the Christian churchgoers. The idea is to “cancel” the documentary.

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Among those pleased by the troll farm’s success was Shoham Nicolet, one of the founders of the IAC and its CEO at the time. “Nicolet,” according to an Israeli reporter who was there, “was visibly excited as he spoke to the team at the new operations room via Skype. ‘Imagine 20 more rooms like this, not just in the United States but all over the world,’ he enthused.”

Once the war room obtained Linda Sarsour’s confidential files, along with ways to exploit her weaknesses, the organization’s American trolls were then directed to attack her. Using

the data, they prepared a letter that was distributed via its trolls in an attempt to cancel her from future appearances at colleges and universities, which largely succeeded. Eventually, Ben-Yosef confirmed to *Haaretz* that Act.IL does receive material passed to it from the Israel Cyber Shield unit. “Our cooperation with [ICS] is similar to that which we have with other groups, and includes sharing data,” he said.

Still another organization linked to the IAC that targets American students critical of Israel or supportive of Palestine is the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC). Based in Washington, D.C., it is supported by the IAC’s Milstein, who sits on its board and helps fund it through his family foundation. The ICC acts as a sort of nationwide clandestine student surveillance center on behalf of Israel. As with the troll farms, it confidentially receives intelligence on pro-Palestinian students from cooperative pro-Israeli students at colleges and universities around the country. Much of this information is then included in an “intelligence brief” and reported back to the Ministry of Strategic Affairs. Based on that intelligence, the ICC then goes after the student targets. “We built up this massive national political campaign to crush them,” Jacob Baime, the organization’s executive director, once boasted on a hidden recorder.

In order to target thousands of students across the country, the ICC’s war room is lined with flat-screen monitors and some of the most advanced intelligence technology on the market. At one time, it employed the software Radian6, which monitored online conversations in real time from more than 150 million social media sources. “We’re phasing that out over the next year and we’re bringing on more sophisticated technology that is developed in Israel,” said Baime. Secrecy, however, is paramount. “Ninety percent of the people who pay attention to this space very closely have no idea what we’re actually doing, which I like,” he said. “We do it securely and anonymously, and that’s the key.”

Now, the IAC has announced the latest front in Israel’s ever-expanding war on American students: to crush the protests and demonstrations that seek an end to Israel’s genocide in Gaza, and its brutal military occupation of Palestine. It is a war long fought in secret by Minister of Strategic Affairs Erdan, and long advocated by Milstein, the IAC’s cofounder. He has gone so far as to call the fight for Palestinian rights and the boycott of Israel “a sophisticated hate movement committed to the destruction of the Jewish people,” in *The Times of Israel* in 2017. “We need to go on the offense,” he said in a speech that year at the Center for Entrepreneurial Jewish Philanthropy summit. “We should teach them that anyone that attacks us, there is a price, there is accountability. We need to go on the attack.” Judging from the hours of beatings and violence directed at the UCLA students by

the metal-pole-welding counterdemonstrators last week following the IAC rally, Milstein and Erdan, now Israel's ambassador to the UN, appear to have finally gotten their wish. ■

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