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Will Dempster: Campus extremism must end

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During the spring semester of 2002, the Palestinian Intifada was at its height. Multiple suicide bombings occurred every week in Israeli cafés and on buses. Israel reoccupied Palestinian population centers, bulldozing houses and launching missiles aimed at top figures in Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The Israeli military had just undertaken its controversial raid into Jenin, which critics labeled a massacre. As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reached its height in the region, so too did it reach a peak on college campuses across the country.

At GW, pro-Israel activists and pro-Palestinian activists nearly came to blows. There were rallies, counter-rallies, protests and events where nothing was accomplished. Since that time, however, our campus has been relatively peaceful.

In the past week, however, actions initiated by the director of Hillel and the student leadership of Students for Justice in Palestine threaten to destabilize our relatively peaceful campus discourse and plunge us into an environment of extremism again. And we must take concerted action to ensure it does not.

In a repugnant act, the director of Hillel - an organization I have affiliated with since arriving on campus - labeled nationally known and incredibly controversial Palestinian activist Fadi Kiblawi a terrorist in an e-mail over its listserv. In an effort to stave off criticism, the director later issued a second e-mail indicating the views expressed in the first message were his and not representative of the Hillel community. It is important to note that most Jewish student leaders I have spoken with condemned this action.

The following evening, at an event organized by Kiblawi, Students for Justice in Palestine called on the University to divest its funds from companies doing business with Israel and unfairly linked the Jewish state to apartheid South Africa. At the event Kiblawi himself rejected a two-state compromise in favor of a one-state solution, a thinly veiled rejection of Israel's right to exist that has little support among Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

Instead of focusing on frivolous debate and rhetoric, campus groups should seek to engage students to relate to the conflict in a civilized manner. As a Jew, I understand how difficult it is to hear people advocate against Israel's right to exist. No matter the depth of my disagreement with Israeli government policy, I simply cannot accept a world in which Israel does not exist as a state for the Jewish people.

No hostile sentiments toward Israel, however, justify labeling critics as terrorists, anti-Semites or Nazis. While some people who criticize Israel no doubt fall into these categories, the charge must not be hurled without incontrovertible evidence. In my dealings with Kiblawi we have found much on which we disagree, but he has been nothing but respectful of my heritage and my ideas. The director of Hillel should be ashamed of his initial e-mail and must be held accountable in a significant way for his actions.

Students for Justice in Palestine, with whose members I have enjoyed good relations over the years, must reassess their chosen course in the struggle for Palestinian rights. Spuriously equating Israel with Apartheid South Africa and calling for divestment from Israel signifies their embracing of an

unfortunate ideology pursued through a defeated tactic. It is also a rejection of the moderate course it has staked out at GW and is not conducive to the creation of any mutual cooperation or civil discussion about the issues on this campus.

Divestment - despite minor achievements in convincing the Anglican and Presbyterian churches to adopt resolutions supporting the act - has been defeated virtually everywhere it was proposed. Even during the height of the Intifada when suffering was at its worst, Kiblawi could not persuade the University of Michigan, his alma mater and a bastion of pro-Palestinian activism, to divest from Israel.

The open-minded campus environment of which I once boasted is teetering on the verge of collapse. Campus activists must cease their retreat to entrenched emotional clichés. Tolerance of this spiral toward extremism will only breed more hatred on campus. It is a vicious cycle. What we need is a committed group of moderates from both communities who disavow defamatory titles. We need people who embrace the legitimate national rights of both communities. We need people committed to finding a real solution by making painful and real concessions, not those who feel at home debating historical minutiae while people are needlessly dying. Let's buck this trend and reestablish GW as the bastion of tolerance and moderation on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict it had been for so long.

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