

## From the Electronic Intifada:

### US launches "civil rights" probe at Columbia University as Zionist censorship, smears intensify

Submitted by Ali Abunimah on Wed, 10/05/2011 - 14:56

A complaint by a professor at [Columbia University](http://www.columbia.edu) who co-founded the anti-Palestinian Zionist group "Scholars for Peace in the Middle East" has resulted in the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) opening an investigation into the university. The civil rights complaint is part of a growing pattern of such actions by Zionist groups across the country to use civil rights laws to suppress campus criticism or even discussion of Israel's human rights crimes, and to intimidate faculty and students and slander those who dare to teach or undertake activities about Palestinian rights as "anti-Semites."

Recently, The Electronic Intifada discovered that Israeli officials had even played a direct role in a planned civil rights complaint against another US institution, [Evergreen State College](http://www.evergreen.edu) in Olympia, Washington, where students had passed a resolution supporting divestment from Israel.

### Columbia rejects attempt to smear Joseph Massad

The complaint also appears to be another attempt to smear Columbia University professor [Joseph Massad](http://www.columbia.edu) even though it in fact has nothing to do with him. For years, Massad was the target of an organized campaign of slander and intimidation by Zionist groups who interfered in the university's processes in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to deny him tenure.

Columbia University President Lee Bollinger has issued a strong statement, according to the [Columbia Spectator](http://www.columbiaspectator.com) :

*"It is important to note that the individual complaint appears to relate to academic advising at Barnard College and in no way involves Professor Joseph Massad," Bollinger said.*

*"Based on these facts, therefore, it is extremely unfair for professor Massad to be cited in a matter in which he played no part whatsoever."*

Barnard College is affiliated with Columbia University. It may only be a coincidence that the complaint has come to light just as the first ever [Students for Justice in Palestine National Conference](#) prepares to convene at Columbia University from October 14 to 16.

## **Individuals pushing complaint are members of anti-Palestinian group**

According to [The Columbia Spectator](#) :

*The complaint was filed by Kenneth Marcus, the director of the Initiative on Anti-Semitism at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research. According to Marcus, in January a Jewish student from Barnard was discouraged from taking a class with Joseph Massad, a professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia.*

*Marcus, who headed the OCR himself between 2003 and 2004, told Spectator that the chair of Barnard's Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures department illegally "steered" the student away from taking the class because Massad, a sharp critic of Israel, has often been accused of anti-Semitism.*

The story also notes:

*The incident was brought to Marcus's attention by Mailman School of Public Health professor Judith Jacobson, who herself heard about it from a third party.*

And that:

*Jacobson, a co-founder of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, said she found the student's story "distressing," and not only because steering is illegal.*

Scholars for Peace in the Middle East is a well-known anti-Palestinian group and it appears that not only Jacobson, but that one Kenneth Marcus is also [a member of its board](#).

## **A national strategy to suppress criticism of Israel by abusing civil rights laws**

It is notable that Marcus, who is a lawyer, is also former US government official. As the Columbia Spectator reported he headed the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights himself. Moreover, the report states:

*Marcus said that Columbia is being investigated for "steering," a term commonly used in housing discrimination cases to describe realtors directing black families away from white neighborhoods, and vice versa.*

***Marcus spent years dealing with steering cases while heading the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. He said the steering that occurred at Barnard was clearly a violation of the law, but that this case may be breaking new ground.***

Could Marcus have a role in the national rash of so-called "civil rights" cases targeting speech that supporters of Israel wish to suppress? It appears that he does.

In March, the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) reported that the OCR had begun an investigation – the first of its kind – into the University of California-Santa Cruz based on complaints about speech critical of Israel and Zionism

*Kenneth L. Marcus, who was the Education Department's assistant secretary for civil rights from 2002 to 2004 and now directs the Institute for Jewish and Community Research's efforts to fight anti-Semitism, said on Tuesday that **the investigation of Santa Cruz "would have been a nonstarter" if the OCR had not adopted the harder line against anti-Semitism urged by his organization and other Jewish groups.***

## **Israeli government and Stand With Us involved in Evergreen State case**

In August, [The Electronic Intifada discovered](#) that Israeli officials and the national anti-Palestinian group Stand With Us were jointly discussing a civil rights complaint against Evergreen State College, the former college of [Rachel Corrie](#), in what appeared to be a growing strategy to use US civil rights protections to censor criticism of Israeli racism, war crimes and apartheid on campuses.

It now appears clear that having lost the argument in the public sphere, Zionist groups are turning to legal bullying as their last line of defense to silence people.

## **Distortion of civil rights laws for censorship**

But the latest strategy to suppress free speech has not found universal favor among pro-Israel groups. Kenneth Stern, the American Jewish Committee's "director on anti-semitism and extremism" [co-signed a statement](#) along with the president of the American Association of University Professors stating that using civil rights legislation to stop speech critical of Israel was a form of "censorship" and a "distortion" of civil rights laws. It remains to be seen whether universities and colleges will recognize the national nature of this effort and fight back to defend the academic freedom of their students and faculty, or will allow extremist anti-Palestinian groups to use bogus charges of "anti-Semitism" to work as those who levy them intend.

