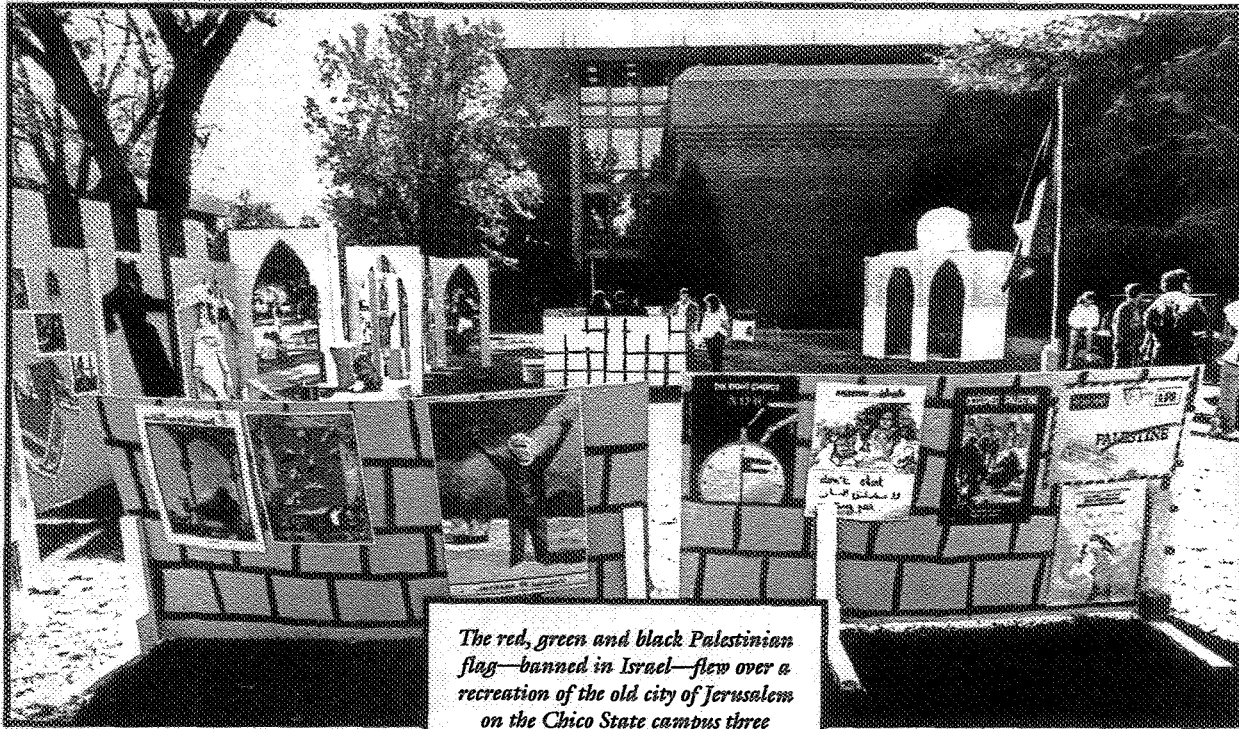


On The Defensive

Mideast Conflict Puts Heat On Jewish Students



The red, green and black Palestinian flag—banned in Israel—flew over a recreation of the old city of Jerusalem on the Chico State campus three weeks ago. Though Jewish students were glad to see cultural artifacts included in the Palestinian students' often angry exhibit, there was concern about potential anti-Jewish sentiment. The Palestinians demurred. "Whatever the Palestinians are doing is not against the Jews," said student Khaled Dudin. "We're not anti-Jew, and we're not anti-people—we're just anti-Israeli policies."

Another Chico State semester—another series of forums, displays and speeches dealing with the continuing crisis in Israel. And again the university's Jewish students are in an awkward, uncomfortable position.

For the Palestinian students, the Middle Eastern issue—that of Israel's occupation of territories they consider home—isn't one happening halfway around the world, to be seen only on television. "We speak for our families," said one. For these first-generation emigrants it's personal.

Not only are American Jews usually not directly involved, they also are on the unpopular side of the issue. "The Jewish students are involved in the political conflict because there's nobody else who will stand up and speak for Israel," said professor Sam Edelman, a strong supporter of Israel. "If there were no advocates for Palestinian concerns, the Jewish students would be overjoyed. They're tired of fighting this battle. It's empty debate, useless and meaningless."

By and large, the Jews here are not politically active. They're third- and fourth-generation students who aren't sure of their connections to the Jewish state of Israel. The 2-year-old Palestinian *intifada*, or uprising, in Gaza and the West Bank, the harsh Israeli response to repress it, and the corresponding rise in local activism has left them reeling. They're on the defensive.

"We can't turn our backs on Israel, but we're frustrated because Israel does things we don't approve of," said senior Melissa Schatz. "How can we support Israel but not support their ways?"

It's a dilemma that is complicated by the fact that many of the members of the campus chapters of the Jewish Student Union (JSU) and the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS)—really the only two Chico State groups at all in opposition—are friends.

Tensions run high and sensitivity is paramount. The Palestinians scrupulously avoid saying "Jews" when they mean "the Israeli government," and this year's week-long Palestinian exhibit at CSUC did not

include the barbed-wire Star of David displayed last year that Edelman has called "a desecration."

In return, the Jewish students are loath to say or do anything that might jeopardize the cautious and tenuous trust that has arisen between several members of the two groups.

Similarly, the Palestinians are ultra-sensitive. The mere act of taking a News & Review photograph at the GUPS display required well over an hour of argument and debate over which students in front of which display would be the most politically correct. In the end nothing was decided.

In an attempt to work out the issue on an intellectual level, a two-part forum—the first part by the Jewish students, the second by the Palestinians—was presented on campus Oct. 25 and 26. Members of both groups attended both forums. The methods of the groups proved as telling as the information provided. "The way that the two groups present their cases is reflective of what's going on in Israel," said JSU President Michelle Winton.

Since the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Israel has occupied the areas known as the West Bank and Gaza. The *intifada* has brought the human-rights violations occurring in the territories to the world's attention. Hundreds of Palestinians have died at the hands of an Israeli army that has had the population under military occupation for two years. With a fairly recent change of attitude, the Palestinian Liberation Organization—which the GUPS students say represents their interests—is advocating a peaceful two-state solution.

For its forum, the JSU brought in John Rothman, a scholar specializing in the Middle East who carefully discussed the poli-

tics of the region from Israel's point of view. "The Palestinian bottom line is that they must have a state and they want it now," Rothman said. "The Israelis' bottom line is that Palestinians have rights, but not at the expense of Israel's right to exist."

In a concluding note, Edelman said that one objective was to "lower the emotional level of the debate."

While the Jews felt Rothman's presentation had been educational and fair, GUPS members were not convinced. "The issues that Rothman carried are not the issues that we carry," said Khaled Dudin, GUPS director of community relations. "Rothman came with a view that does not apply to us at all."

The next evening, GUPS countered with several student speakers as well as videotapes of Israeli brutality in the occupied territories. The speakers—observers of the violence and emigrants from the territories—were emotional and persuasive. They criticized Rothman as one who advocates "bending the truth." Calling his discussion of foreign policy "mumbo-jumbo," they spoke passionately of human rights.

With the room's atmosphere already tense, the GUPS left only a few minutes for questions at the end of the presentation, and attempted exchanges turned hostile. The Jews, shaken, gathered outside.

"This was not an educational forum," said a frustrated Lisa Baron-Haet, of the Bay Area's Jewish Community Federation. "I felt that the format was propagandized. There was no opportunity to exchange. We were just barraged by a lot of things. I really came into it wanting to learn, and it just elevated all the emotion."

Winton would have liked to hear more practical information. "The Palestinians said they had

'viable' solutions but never said what they were," she said. "I never heard a solution besides 'condemn human-rights violations.' I didn't hear give-and-take last night. It did pull my heartstrings, and I did have to think 'why?' I agree that Israel does some things that are wrong. But they're doing everything they can to feel their land is safe under these extreme circumstances."

The forum highlighted a major point of contention between the two camps: For the Palestinians, the question is not one of foreign policy, and it is an emotional question. The Jews, however, must appeal to logic rather than pathos in defending Israel.

Sam Edelman was upset by the GUPS presentation. "Emotionalism is not the way to achieve anything," he said. "Venting makes you feel good, but it doesn't do a whole hell of a lot to solve anything. Both sides have long lists of grievances with each other; the Palestinians, by continually recounting each grievance, only exacerbate the situation. The speakers only spoke their opinions and showed no support for those opinions. They basically ragged on John Rothman. To me that was not educational."

Though another CSUC Associated Students-sponsored forum is in the works for the spring, Edelman is ready to see the dogfighting cease. "Arab-Israeli politics have got to be settled by Arabs and Israelis—not by Americans, not by progressive students, and certainly not by the Associated Students," he said. "It is not going to be resolved by anything that goes on on this campus. If anything, there should be a moratorium on debate. Let the Jews and Palestinians bring culture to the campus."

The fact that many Chico State Jews feel thrust into this uncomfortable position is partly because most JSU members are not political. "They don't want enemies; they want to learn," said JSU member Sharon Alper. "I think that if there were no Palestinian student union on campus, the Jewish students would have a religious social

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By Matthew Budman

Photos By Mark Thalman

club. That's not because the JSU wants to hide the issue, it's just because the Jewish students in the union aren't political."

"It is so hard for the Jewish Student Union to deal with the conflict," Winton said. "Our existence on campus is not just for politics. It's also religious and social. We're American Jews—American coming first."

Yet there certainly are ties between Jewish students and the land of Israel, ties sometimes difficult for non-Jews to understand.

"Jewish culture is in part the relation of a Jewish person's relationship to Israel," Edelman said. "Clearly Americans connect Jews and Israel, though American Jews can't really speak for Israeli policies and we have little control over what they do. The American Jewish community is in a really awkward place."

Though the Palestinians take pains to avoid confusion of attacks of Israeli policies with attacks on Jews, there is concern over public perception.

"What I'm scared of is that a surge in anti-Israel propaganda stirs the fire underneath anti-Semitism in this country because people cannot distinguish between Jews and the Israeli government," said Melissa Schatz.

Despite her conviction of her Palestinian friends' good intentions, Alper concurred that the GUPS display in the CSUC free-speech area was cause for worry. "I agree with the concern regarding possible anti-Semitic associations that could be interpreted from exhibits such as this," she said. "I have faith—perhaps naive faith—that college students can distinguish between criticizing a government and criticizing a people."

In conversations with the Palestinians, the Jews don't associate themselves with the Jewish Student Union too closely. The Palestinians are leery of trusting the JSU as an organization primarily because of the specter of the outspoken Sam Edelman hangs over the group.

The unofficial spokesperson of the local Jewish community and former JSU adviser, Edelman and his hawkish views have dominated local debate of the Middle Eastern issue. While openly renouncing Edelman's influence on their opinions would help the progressive Jewish students in their struggle to gain the Palestinians' trust, they need his authority and clout.

"The Jewish students on campus react by letting Sam Edelman speak for them," Dudin said. "You feel safe when someone outspoken speaks for you, but it doesn't mean he's right, and it doesn't mean he speaks your mind. You



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have to be a really evil person to be in favor of human-rights violations. And the Jews are not—they're very nice people. They're being pushed into a position of conflict with their own representation."

Outside of that conflict, there is little open hostility between the groups. "I feel like on the whole Jews and Palestinians on this campus get along as best they can considering their views," Winton said. "The only time it gets hostile is when politics are being argued. I don't hear the Palestinians on campus talk about peace as much as I'd like to."

Like the Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East, the students are somewhat divided politically, though the outspoken people on each side are moderates and doves. "The split between political Jews on campus isn't apparent yet because nobody's making their voice known," Schatz said.

Much debate in the past has been sparked by the Palestinian students' on-campus displays, which are often angry and heated.

This semester's GUPS exhibit—funded by the Associated Students—recreated the old city of Jerusalem, with the red, green and black Palestinian flag, the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock, as well as presenting a

table of literature and another displaying traditional dress and other artifacts. "The Palestinian lifestyle is a struggle culture," Dudin said. "This represents our cultural lifestyle under occupation."

"We're trying to enlighten the Americans who support Israel to what the situation is from our perspective," said GUPS member Elias Hayek. "I used to be afraid to say I was Palestinian because the world outlook on a Palestinian was that of a terrorist. If we didn't do these displays, how would we get our message across? We may be just students, but we can't close our eyes. The object of this is to show our true identity. I want to show who I am."

Dudin stressed that GUPS has no hard feelings toward the Jews. "Whatever the Palestinians are doing is not against the Jews," he said. "We're not anti-Jew, and we're not anti-people—we're just anti-Israeli policies. We shouldn't take each other personally. We should target the wrongdoing and do something about it."

The progressive Jews were relieved at the calmer demeanor of the presentation.

"I think the display is toned down from last year," Alper said. "It was a deliberate action by the Palestinians to not use religious symbols, and I appreciate that, as I believe do other Jews on this campus. I'm glad to see

more culture; I want to learn more about the Palestinian culture."

As far as moving toward a resolution of the conflict, members of the groups have different goals.

"The position of the pro-Israel lobby is very confusing; we don't really know what they want," Dudin said. "Our politics have one objective—we do not want the occupation. We want the right of self-determination. The thing I hate is to create two sides. But it is a two-sided issue, and there is a problem that exists."

Schatz would like to see more Jewish involvement with the issue. "If Jewish students are true to their consciences as Jews, they're automatically drawn to the issue," she said. "It's very difficult to be a Jewish student and not be confronted with this situation, unless you bury your head in the sand or forget you're a Jew. We have an understanding of why Israel does what it does, and I think that as American Jews lending our support to the state of Israel we have a right and a responsibility to influence the situation."

Winton said the answers are security and compromise. "For peace, each side needs to give up a little of what they want. Israel's not going to give anything up unless they feel secure."

Edelman doesn't believe GUPS genuinely wants a solution. "If the Palestinians were truly interested in

negotiating a peace settlement, they would also be interested in finding ways to foster negotiation," he said. "Their expressions on campus only show an inclination toward extreme oratory and bashing Israel. That is not a way to develop negotiations."

Though the Palestinian students publicly advocate a two-state solution in the Middle East, Edelman is suspicious. "By focusing on human rights, they can avoid the bigger issue—their end goal is the complete and utter destruction of Israel."

For Alper the concerns are more than foreign-policy questions. "It is a moral issue," she said. "I see by the occupation the destruction of morale in Israel. It's the ethics of a Jewish state doing these immoral things. That's scary and in some ways disillusioning."

With negotiations proceeding painfully slowly, the *intifada* losing steam and world focus temporarily off the struggle, the issue may not be resolved for some time yet. But the Jews of Chico State may have benefited from being placed in this awkward situation.

"The activism of the Palestinian students has created anger among Jewish students; that anger has coalesced into activity and a sense of commitment," Edelman said. "To that end, the activity of the Palestinians on campus has been very positive. It's forced Jewish students to confront their own identity." □