

# What is Harvard Teaching Students About Israel?

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## Many Harvard students excuse mainstream Palestinian Arab terrorism



In 1974 PLO chief Yasser Arafat (l) developed close diplomatic and personal ties with strong-arm communist ruler Fidel Castro (r) in Cuba. The next year, Cuba was one of the sponsors of UN Resolution 3379 that branded Zionism “a form of racism and racial discrimination.” Both are idolized by terrorist apologists within academia. (Screencap: YouTube)

Much has written about the recent endorsement of BDS by the editors of *The Harvard Crimson*, the Harvard student newspaper. But how do you suppose Harvard students got that way? Could it have anything to do with the professors who are teaching them about Israel?

Let’s consider Derek J. Penslar, who is Harvard’s William Lee Frost Professor of Jewish History. His areas of specialty are the history of Zionism and Israel, as well as related topics in modern Jewish history.

Penslar, who happens to be Jewish, has been very successful in his academic career. He has had a string of prestigious professorships—first at Indiana University, and then at the University of Toronto, before moving up to Harvard. He has published books with prominent academic presses, and articles in well-known scholarly journals. He serves on the editorial boards of several Israel-related academic journals. He is frequently interviewed by the news media and invited to lecture at various Jewish institutions.

All these impressive credentials give us a sense of Prof. Penslar's prominence in his field. But what exactly does he think about Israel? What does he teach his students?

### **What message does he convey when he speaks to the Jewish community?**

— *“Israel is guilty of ethnic cleansing.”*

In an interview with London's ***Jewish Chronicle*** on March 14, 2013, Penslar said: “What happened to the Palestinians [in 1948] wasn't genocide. It was ethnic cleansing.”

He's right, Israel did not commit genocide. But ,”it was ethnic cleansing”? That's a lie.

There was no mass murder of the Arabs. There was no mass expulsion of the Arabs.

There were a few isolated instances—as there are in every war—in which a small number of individuals were compelled to move a few miles down the road. That's not even close to “ethnic cleansing.”

There is no internationally accepted legal definition of ethnic cleansing, so I'll use the one posted on the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: “The forced removal of an ethnic group from a territory... The practice of ethnic cleansing may constitute genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes.”

### **Israel didn't do any of those things. Not in 1948. Not in 1967. Not ever.**

— *“Israel is partly to blame for the Arab-Israeli wars.”*

Penslar wrote last year that “Israel bears its share of responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem in 1948 and for subsequent Arab-Israeli wars.” Nonsense. Israel is not to blame for the refugee problem; the Arab regimes that invaded Israel in 1948 are to blame. Israel is not to blame for the Arab wars against it; the Arabs who launched those wars are to blame. Israel's pre-emptive strikes against Arab regimes that were preparing to invade it were not acts of aggression; they were self-defense.

— *“Israel perpetuates oppression, resistance, and hatred.”*

Penslar also wrote last year: “Israel and the Palestinian territories are a welter of ill-fitting political elements – statehood and occupation, autonomy and settlement enclaves – that perpetuate oppression, resistance, and hatred.”

I know it’s annoying when academics write like this, using convoluted language that has to be deciphered like some code.

Still, it’s obvious that when Penslar is talking here about “oppression,” he’s not saying the Palestinians oppress Israel, he’s saying that Israel oppresses them. When Penslar refers to “resistance,” he’s referring to Palestinian terrorism against Israel; why he labels it “resistance,” which implies that it’s justified, is a question worth asking. (I’ll set aside his reference to “hatred,” since in theory it could be interpreted either way.)

— *“Most PLO terrorism after 1967 was the work of splinter groups.”*

In a book review in *The Forward* on October 8, 1999, Penslar said the author of the book was “on firm factual ground when he argues that post-1967 Palestinian terrorism was waged primarily by splinter groups that were not part of the PLO mainstream...”

Could Penslar really be so ignorant as to believe such a blatantly untrue statement? Does he really not know now many post-1967 terrorist attacks were openly claimed by the “mainstream” PLO, under Yasser Arafat’s leadership?

**Does he really still believe the pathetic fiction that “Black September” was not part of the PLO mainstream, even though its leaders all long ago admitted to it being a PLO front?**



Media networks incorporate PLO apologists like Prof. Derek Penslar into their panels about subjects like “Israel’s Newest Critics: North American Jews” without challenging their narratives. (Screencap: The Agenda)

Ironically, not too long after Penslar’s apologetics for the “PLO mainstream,” the PLO mainstream—that is, its largest component, Fatah—launched a wave of suicide bombings against Israel, including the notorious Passover Seder massacre in Netanya.

I find no evidence that Penslar ever publicly acknowledged his error or apologized.

So why do many Harvard students see Israel as a perpetrator of ethnic cleansing and an aggressor against the Arabs? Why do many Harvard students see Palestinian massacres of Israelis as “resistance” instead of terrorism? Why do many Harvard students excuse mainstream Palestinian Arab terrorism by pretending that the mainstream PLO leadership is not to blame?

I’m not saying that Prof. Penslar is single-handedly responsible for the spread of anti-Israel attitudes on campus, or the mindset that led to the *Harvard Crimson* newspaper endorsing BDS in late April. But it would be absurd to pretend that there is no connection between what

Harvard professors teach and what Harvard students believe.

Academic freedom ensures the right of professors to teach whatever they want, including lies about Israel engaging in “ethnic cleansing.”

**But parents have a right to know what their kids are being taught, so they can decide if that’s the kind of professor who they want teaching their kids about Israel.**



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