Jewish National Fund conference in San Diego: Dispossession abroad, repression on the campuses

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A four-day "Global Conference for Israel" concluded Sunday at the Gaylord Pacific Resort and Convention Center in Chula Vista, California, hosted by the Jewish National Fund-USA (JNF). Billed as a celebration of the Jewish people on the 125th anniversary of the JNF's founding, it was in fact a mobilization of wealthy donors behind the Israeli state, its genocide in Gaza and its program of dispossession.

The claim to speak for "the Jewish people" is the basic fraud of the enterprise. "Zionism is about uniting our people," JNF-USA CEO Russell Robinson told the opening session. The JNF describes its vast land holdings as held on behalf of Jews everywhere. However, Jewish workers, in Israel and internationally, have no interest in a program that delivers them war, militarism and austerity in the name of a "national home" serving the Israeli ruling class and its patrons in Washington. Among those demonstrating outside the hotel were members of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP).

The sold-out event drew some 3,000 attendees from around the world, according to the organizers. On the eve of the conference, JNF-USA announced it had raised $192 million in fiscal 2026, up from $174 million the year before and more than $700 million over three years, in tax-deductible money that finances new Jewish communities in the Negev and Galilee. Private security contractors checked IDs at the parking gates, and metal detectors and bag searches stood at every entrance to the convention center.

Sol Lizerbram, board chairman of JNF-USA, sought to present the gathering in the most anodyne terms. The organization, he told KPBS, is apolitical and builds hospitals, schools, reservoirs and parks. The conference's purpose, he claimed, is "for people of similar mindsets getting together looking for ways to promote peace."

Lizerbram himself made clear what this "peace" consists of. The conference, he explained, was "all sessions about how to facilitate more people moving to the north and south of Israel," and the goal is "to move 500,000 people down to that area"—the Negev, "60% of land of Israel and only 10% of population." The figure is the official target of JNF-USA's own "Blueprint Negev" campaign.

The Negev is home to the Arab Bedouin minority, whose villages the Israeli state has been systematically demolishing for decades. Under the fascist National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, demolitions have reached record levels: 5,187 in Bedouin communities in 2024, according to the Negev Coexistence Forum, and 14,280 structures between 2023 and 2025 by the ministry's own count. The village of al-Araqib has been razed more than 240 times so that a JNF forest could be planted on its land. At Umm al-Hiran, razed in November 2024, the state is building the Jewish town of Hiran where the Bedouin village stood.

The Jewish National Fund—Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael—was established in 1901 at the Fifth Zionist Congress for the acquisition of land in Palestine for exclusively Jewish settlement. Its signature activity, tree planting, has served as a cover for land seizure, with forests planted over the sites of Palestinian villages destroyed in 1948. In March 1949 the Israeli cabinet endorsed the "Judaization" of the Galilee, a policy later pursued with equal force in the Negev.

The JNF still owns roughly 13 percent of the land administered by the Israeli state, which for decades it leased only to Jews. After Israel's attorney general ruled in 2005 that Arab citizens could bid on it, the state agreed to compensate the fund with other land whenever a non-Jewish person wins a tender, so that its holdings for "the Jewish people" never shrink.

JNF-USA insists that it is legally separate from KKL. Yet after October 7 the two launched a $50 million joint venture in southern and northern Israel. This year KKL moved to evict the Shaludi family from their home of six decades in Silwan, East Jerusalem, on behalf of the Elad settlers, using the Absentees' Property Law, which in practice is applied only to Palestinians.

Another theme of the conference was the mobilization of Zionist youth on college and high school campuses, through dedicated College and High School Summits.

JNF-USA CEO Russell Robinson told attendees they "can't stay on the sidelines" and must become leaders in the "fight against hate." He was followed by Ilya Bratman, Hillel director at Baruch College in New York, who in 2021 organized against the City University of New York faculty union's pro-Palestinian resolution. Students who chant "Free Palestine" and "from the river to the sea," he declared, have been "entrenched and propagandized." The "new battle is the battle of the mind," and the answer was to "be more Jewish"—and, he added, to "be Israel."

This equation of Jewish identity with loyalty to the Israeli state is the other side of the International Holocaust Remembrance

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Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, now written into university codes, which treats opposition to Israel as hatred of Jews.

Scott Gendell, JNF-USA's vice president for campus engagement, told the students, "You'll never hate yourself enough to satisfy the far left or far right," and denounced Harvard, Penn, Berkeley and Michigan as "cesspools of Jewish hatred." He then told the audience to give themselves a hug, which they did. An IDF officer closed the session with an account of her military career and of October 7.

For all the talk of hate, Gaza did not figure in these speeches. More than 74,000 Palestinians have been killed there since October 2023, over 1,600 of them since the so-called ceasefire of October 2025. The week before the conference opened, the first winter storm flooded some 70,000 tents, while Israel continues to restrict the entry of shelter materials.

JNF-USA's campus program is organized around reporting. Its website offers students an "antisemitism reporting toolkit" to take incidents "straight to your college campus administrator."

That apparatus now works alongside a federal one. The same week as the conference, the Intercept reported that federal prosecutors had subpoenaed the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in August for the membership rolls, payroll and meeting minutes of the University of Michigan graduate workers' local. The case is the federal prosecution of the "Michigan 12," pro-Palestine activists charged with conspiracy to transmit threats over what are mostly allegations of vandalism.

The AFT answered: "We support our local and the motion to quash. We are not commenting on this ongoing case." This is the union whose president, Randi Weingarten, a self-described "progressive Zionist," responded to the Columbia University encampment in April 2024 by denouncing the protesters' chants as "horrific, unacceptable examples of antisemitism."

In March 2025 the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights put 60 universities on notice of antisemitism investigations. Secretary of State Marco Rubio boasted of revoking more than 300 student visas—"Every time I find one of these lunatics I take away their visa"—and students including Mahmoud Khalil and Rümeysa Öztürk were seized for deportation, a campaign a federal judge ruled unconstitutional in August.

In California, a state run by Democrats, UC San Diego called in the police who arrested 64 people at its encampment in May 2024, and it is still pursuing discipline against faculty. Berkeley says it began applying the IHRA definition under the Biden administration's 2024 guidance. The Trump administration is using machinery built under the Democrats.

The crackdown is a response to a historic shift in mass sentiment, which it brands as "antisemitism." In February, for the first time in Gallup polling since 2001, more Americans said they sympathized with the Palestinians than with the Israelis, by 41 percent to 36. Among those aged 18 to 34, the margin was 53 to 23. These are the students on the campuses Gendell called "cesspools."

Internationally, opposition to genocide, war, dictatorship and austerity is driving a growing radicalization of workers and youth to the left, which has erupted in mass working-class action. In September and October 2025, Italy was shut down by two general strikes over Gaza, with Genoa dockworkers blocking the ports. On November 8, hundreds of thousands marched in Amsterdam to demand a halt to arms sales to Israel. Since September, high school students in France have walked out against teacher shortages and overcrowded schools, in a movement of hundreds of thousands that spread to Belgium, Albania, Greece and Italy.

The conference itself drew protests from JVP, the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) and others. Demonstrators gathered on the Interstate 5 overpass on Thursday. JVP announced a Shabbat service outside the hotel on Friday and, on Saturday, a rally and a vigil "for those who have been killed and affected by Israeli violence," while PYM circulated an online petition demanding that the Gaylord Pacific withdraw as host.

The opposition of these groups to the JNF's program of dispossession is entirely justified. The question is the perspective that guides the protest. It is addressed to the conscience of a gathering of wealthy donors, to a corporate hotel operator and, above all, to the Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party is the party that under Biden supplied the bombs that leveled Gaza, and whose San Diego mayor, Todd Gloria, addressed the conference's Saturday-night party alongside Chula Vista's Republican mayor, John McCann. This June, JVP's political arm, JVP Action, made its first-ever Senate endorsement, backing Abdul El-Sayed in Michigan's Democratic primary.

Opposition to the genocide cannot be separated from opposition to Zionism and to the imperialist system that sustains it. The destruction of Gaza is one front of an expanding global war. Israel functions as the spearhead of American imperialism in the Middle East, armed and financed by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. The JNF's settlement drive in the Negev and Galilee is bound up with this war, as is the crackdown on its opponents at home.



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