

Influential Jewish Group Pushes New York Bill: Cut Funds to Academic Institutions Supporting Israel Boycott

By [Alex Kane](#)

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Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver speaking at the Jewish Community Relations Council's 2009 rally in support of Israel during Operation Cast Lead. (Photo: Vosizneias.com)

The [Jewish Community Relations Council \(JCRC\)](#) takes legislators on free trips to Israel and [spearheaded the campaign](#) against boycotting the country at Brooklyn's Park Slope Food Coop. Now, the JCRC has opened up a new front in the battle against the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement: helping to draft legislation aimed at academic organizations that support BDS.

[On Friday, the Jewish Daily Forward's Hody Nemes](#) reported that [the JCRC](#) was working closely with the New York legislators who are behind a bill prohibiting state funds from flowing to academic groups that boycott Israel—a reaction to the [American Studies Association's \(ASA\) endorsement of BDS last December](#). The JCRC helped draft New York Senate legislation against the boycott that passed two weeks ago, and is working with New York Assembly leaders on their own bill.

The JCRC is a key umbrella organization that acts as a central coordination body for the organized Jewish community in New York. Other Jewish organizations that are members of the JCRC—like the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee—say they don't support the New York bills.

“Speaker Silver and Senator Klein are taking a stand against this extremist movement and in support of academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas,” the JCRC's [Hindy Poupkoff told the Forward's Nemes](#), referring to the legislators who drafted the anti-boycott bills.

The original Assembly legislation prohibits state cash from going to pro-BDS academic groups. It would have cut off state aid for a year to any school in New York that used taxpayer dollars to fund travel or departmental membership in groups like the ASA.

[After an outcry last week](#) from Palestine solidarity groups, the New York teacher's union and civil liberties organizations that called it an attack on free speech and academic freedom, it was withdrawn. The backlash worried some Israel advocates, like [former New York Assemblyman Ryan Karben, who, in a blogpost, called](#) the withdrawal of the bill a “political earthquake” because it showed that “Democrats and the interest groups that fire the party's base and fill its coffers are moving away from global pro-Israel talking points.”

[But now, the bill is back](#), with Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver amending the punishment for schools in violation of the bill. Instead of withdrawing all state aid for a year, the exact amount spent would be withdrawn from state aid to the school. In other words, if \$100 of taxpayer money is used by a teacher to travel to the ASA convention, the state would deduct \$100 from the school the teacher works for. While it's less punitive than the original bill, the constitutional concerns—that the state is punishing speech based on its content—remain.

The New York Senate legislation has not been amended. As the Senate measure stands, any school in violation of the law would lose all state aid for a year. Jeff Klein, the Democratic author of the Senate bill, praised the JCRC's work on the legislation to the *Forward*.

Klein "worked very closely with the JCRC," which helped him draft the legislation. "I was on a conference call with their board [on February 4] and they were very, very excited and supportive of the bill passing the Senate and they wanted to figure out a strategy for the bill passing the Assembly as well," [he said in an interview with Nemes](#).

The JCRC's involvement in drafting the bill is the latest demonstration of its clout in state government. It is the go-to address for legislators looking to display their pro-Israel bonafides, and has forged close relationships with powerful officials such as Assembly Speaker Silver. [In October 2011](#), the JCRC worked with Silver to pass a bill banning companies that invest in Iran's energy industry from being able to obtain state contracts. [And as Phan Nguyen noted on this site](#), Silver toured Israel and the occupied West Bank in December 2008 on the JCRC's dime. He was pictured next to Shaul Goldstein, then-mayor of the Gush Etzion Regional Council, which administers illegal settlements.

The JCRC is not the only Jewish organization to get behind the anti-boycott bills. [The Forward's Nemes also reported](#) that the Baltimore Jewish Council in Maryland helped draft that state's bill, which is similar to the New York one. Another bill aimed at state funds for universities is set to be introduced in Illinois, according to the *Forward*. Less punitive resolutions condemning the ASA are pending in Pennsylvania and Florida.

And some Jewish and pro-Israel groups are [backing the Congressional bill](#) introduced last week that would cut off federal funds to academic institutions in support of BDS. The conservative [Washington Free Beacon's Adam Kredo reported last week](#) that The Israel Project and the Simon Wiesenthal Center supported the legislation.

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Articles by: [Alex Kane](#)

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