

# THE ORANGE COUNTY BETA REGISTER

## Editorial: Stifling discussion isn't free speech

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The campus at UC Irvine has become a hotbed of tension between Muslim and Jewish students, divided along the always-contentious debate surrounding Israel and Palestine.

The latest major incident occurred Feb. 8, when a raucous group of 11 students, mostly from UCI and including the president of the UCI Muslim Student Association, repeatedly interrupted a speech being delivered by Israeli Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Oren. Protesters in the audience stood up and shouted barely understandable tirades, condemning Israeli policies, in general, and the ambassador, in particular, while he was attempting to address 500 attendees at UCI's Pacific Ballroom,

according to news reports and videos (see videos at our blog, [ocregister.com/orangepunch](http://ocregister.com/orangepunch).)

"You are an accomplice to genocide!" among other phrases were shouted from the crowd. The speech was interrupted so many times (10 to be exact) that Mr. Oren was escorted from the stage, and a brief recess was called as university officials tried to quell the disturbance. A short time after the break, an entire section of protesters walked out of the event. Earlier that day the UCI Muslim Student Association issued a condemnation of Mr. Oren appearing on campus.

Eleven students were arrested. School disciplinary action and possible criminal charges were pending.

This is not the first time an increasingly aggressive Muslim student group at UCI has challenged what they see as pro-Israel speakers and events on campus. In 2007, students interrupted an event sponsored by campus Jewish groups featuring Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum and visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. On the other side, in 2009 the Muslim Student Association held a series of events called "Israel: the Politics of Genocide."

What the student protesters did this time hurt their cause. Peaceful protests, sit-ins, and debate are all part of a free society – and should be – but it is also key not to trounce on the right of another person or group to voice an opposing opinion. By rudely and crassly interrupting Mr. Oren, student protesters diminished their cause and killed any discussion, dialogue or debate on the issue.

What the students could have done was to ask pointed questions during that part of the program. But because so many protesters interrupted the speech, the question and answer session was cancelled. Instead of encouraging debate and discussion, ill-advised students attempted to silence Mr. Oren's message outright; essentially asserting that their right to free speech trumps his. All they accomplished was destroying the potential for a civil dialogue.

We talked to Nat Hentoff, a respected civil liberties writer and scholar now with the libertarian Cato Institute, who said of the protests, "Of course, you can heckle and all that sort of stuff, but once you make it impossible for the speaker to proceed, the First Amendment does not apply anymore." Mr. Hentoff went on to say it is OK to "disagree, shout expletives, if you want, but if the attempt to silence the speaker succeeds, and he can't proceed, that is not a First Amendment [defense] issue."

Mr. Hentoff is right. Contrast the fracas at UCI with the September 2007 visit by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to New York's Columbia University in front of a mixed audience, with protesters outside. Iran's president has made outrageous and atrocious statements about Israel, yet the discussion moved forward.

Finally, civility does have a role in American life. Taking the time to fully digest and respond to opposing viewpoints lends itself to progress, but to do that we must actually listen. Restricting dialogue and brashly disallowing an airing for alternative viewpoints hinders free society and speech. It is up to UCI Chancellor Michael Drake to set the rules and boundaries of behavior and enforce them, but from the looks of things it seems like he needs to bring the various opposition groups on campus together for a roundtable discussion on civility.

At the very least, all students at UCI should hear out their ideological opposition rather than try to mute it.

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