



What Does It Mean To Be Pro-Israel?

Program Guide For Facilitators

What do you think of when you hear the term “Pro-Israel”? Across North America, there is debate about what it means to be pro-Israel. The purpose of this program is to explore and discuss what it means to be pro-Israel today — on a personal level, a national level, and a campus level.

Suggested Audience

5-25 participants who are involved in Israel-related issues on campus, specifically from groups that are supportive of Israel’s future in diverse ways, for the purposes of this program.

Suggested Format

The program should be led by a facilitator or ideally co-facilitators representing more than one group. Participants can sit around tables small enough for conversation, or sit in chairs in a circle that can be grouped into small clusters.

Time

1.5 hour program. If you only have an hour, you may choose to shorten or skip the Personal Level or National Level discussions.

Materials

- Laptop/internet/screen to show video clips
- Copies of participant’s handout
- Flip chart or whiteboard and markers

Before the Program

Ask participants to read the article from *The Forward*, “On Campus, a Divide Over ‘Pro-Israel’” (encouraged): <http://forward.com/articles/118315/>. Also, invite participants to watch the entire session video of “What it Means to Be Pro-Israel” online beforehand (optional): <http://vimeo.com/7300781>. Clips will be shown at the program.

Introduction (10 Minutes)

Who's in the Room

Facilitators welcome everyone and start off the introductions. Everyone goes around the room and introduces themselves, how they heard about the program, what group they are part of (if any), and a fun fact about themselves (optional – or use your favorite icebreaker). Facilitators thank everyone for being here and emphasize how much they appreciate the groups that are coming together for this discussion.

Why We're Here

Facilitator explains: We are gathered to discuss an important issue that is very hot right now, on both a national and campus level – what it means to be pro-Israel. Over the next hour and a half, we'll have a conversation about this question, and everyone will have a chance to express their views and listen to other people's views. First, we'll look into the personal level of connecting with Israel. Next we'll zoom out to the national debate over what it means to be pro-Israel. Then we'll focus on how the pro-Israel question plays out on campuses. Finally, we'll talk about what we can take away from this conversation and put into action on our campus.

Group Agreements

Facilitator emphasizes that this will be a space for honest and respectful discussion. There may be real disagreement in the group, and that's okay. To help the conversation be as honest and respectful as possible, there are some suggested group agreements on the participant's handout. Facilitator invites participants to go around the room and read the suggested group agreements out loud (at your discretion). Then facilitator asks if these agreements work for everyone, or if they have anything they would like to add.

Suggested Group Agreements

- Speak honestly from your personal opinions and experiences
- Listen fully and “hang in there” when you hear something challenging
- Share airtime and don't interrupt others
- Avoid personal attacks – focus on critiquing ideas
- Try not to make assumptions about other peoples' beliefs or motives – instead, talk with them and test your assumption
- If someone speaks in a small group or one-on-one, assume the comment is confidential unless they give you permission to share it
- Make the most of this chance to learn from each other

Part I: Personal Level (20 Minutes)

First Impressions

A facilitator asks the large group what comes to mind when they hear the term “pro-Israel.” This doesn't have to represent their personal opinion, but just their first impressions when hearing those words. The facilitator writes the responses up on the flipchart or white board. After getting a variety of responses, the facilitator says: There are clearly a wide variety of ways to look at what it means to be pro-Israel. We're going to sort through this in the next hour or so and come back to this list later.

Personal Connections

At tables or in small groups of 3-5, participants each get a turn to answer the following question. This is not a time to debate, but to listen fully to each person's response. Each person should have about 2 minutes to speak.

Say a few words about your personal connection to Israel. Why do you care about Israel and what happens there, and why do you choose to devote energy to these issues? What from your personal experience has led you in this direction?

After everyone has gotten a chance to speak, come back together in the large group. Facilitator asks for highlights from the groups, reminding them to check with each other before retelling a personal experience or opinion of another group member.

Part II: National Level (20 Minutes)

Chait-Yglesias Debate at the J Street Conference

Facilitator explains that now we're going to zoom out to the national level of debate on this issue. At the recent J Street Conference, Jonathan Chait of *The New Republic* and Matt Yglesias of *ThinkProgress.com* debated what it means to be pro-Israel, moderated by J. J. Goldberg.

Show clips from the video at <http://vimeo.com/7300781>.

- Chait lays out his position (Minute 4:52-6:02)
- Yglesias lays out his position (Minute 10:10-11:48) (*Pardon the camera problem!*)

Discuss questions in large group:

Chait and Yglesias articulate very different definitions of what it means to be pro-Israel. Do you agree with Chait's claim that being pro-Israel means believing that Israel is the more sympathetic party in the Middle East situation? Do you favor Yglesias' broader definition that anyone who supports Israel's continued existence should be able to claim the term pro-Israel? Or do you take a different approach from either of them?

What do Chait and Yglesias agree on? What voices are not represented in the two-person debate? (optional question)

In your opinion, what approach to being "pro-Israel" is most constructive toward a peaceful, secure future for Israel and the Middle East, and why?

Optional: Watch another clip of the debate on how these views of "Pro-Israel" may or may not be helpful to achieving a negotiated two-state settlement (Minute 17:30-23:15).

Part III: Campus Level (30 Minutes)

Forward Article

The article, "On Campus, a Divide over 'Pro-Israel,'" by Josh Nathan-Kazis in *The Forward* from November 4, 2009, describes the complex situation of this term on campus. Quotes from various students who are active on these issues show the diversity of views on using the "pro-Israel" label at universities.

Participants take turns reading out loud the four student quotes:

Ari

"If 'pro-Israel' means agreeing that Israel has a right to exist and wanting to do good things with the state, then we're pro-Israel," said Ari Fine, president of JSC [at Carleton College]. But "people had different connotations about what the word actually meant."

Jonathan

When asked whether the fact that his organization calls itself pro-Israel turns off some Jewish students, Jonathan Sachs, president of the University of Maryland's Terrapin Students for Israel, laughed. "No, absolutely not," he said. Sachs, who calls his group a "moderate pro-Israel voice," thinks that students misunderstand the term pro-Israel. "Being pro-Israel, in my opinion, means that you understand the importance of Israel to the United States, to the Jewish people and to the world in general, and the contributions that Israel is making as a world citizen," he said. "The way that [pro-Israel] has been stigmatized is unfair."

Roey

"It's an empty word. It's lost all meaning," said Roey Kruvi, an Israel-born junior at University of California, Berkeley, and leader of Keshet Enoshi, a campus group that works on social justice issues in Israel. "Those terms usually raise more questions than they answer."

Aimee

"Any time you make a statement to a student, you essentially have 10 seconds before they stop listening," Mayer said. Mayer says that when she is speaking publicly about the group, she decides based on the audience when to mention the phrase. "The pro-Israel term is usually in there, but it's usually around second 11 or 12," she said.

Then discuss the following questions in the large group, making sure everyone has an opportunity to join in the conversation:

What strikes you here? Do any of these quotes surprise you or make you think about something differently?

Which statement(s) resonate(s) with you most and why? Which reflect the way members of your group on campus relate to the term "pro-Israel"?

Why do you think there are such differences surrounding the term?

Do you think "pro-Israel" should encompass all the things we listed at the start? What could you do without, and what would you like to hold on to?

Next Steps on Our Campus

Discuss where to take this conversation further and how the groups can work together concretely in the future.

What can we do on our campus to demonstrate that there are multiple ways of being pro-Israel, and that a broad debate is beneficial?

Some Possibilities

- Writing a joint op-ed to the school newspaper about how a broad definition and debate about what it means to be “pro-Israel” is important.
- Planning another joint event, or co-sponsoring each other’s events when appropriate.
- Coming up with guidelines for respectful debate on issues surrounding Israel on campus—a joint effort between all the relevant groups.

Closing (5 Minutes or less)

Facilitators thank everyone for coming and joining in the lively discussion. Specific people are assigned to take the lead on next steps. Be sure the organizers have everyone’s contact information.

After the event, follow up and thank participants and co-organizers. Continue the momentum on next steps!