

CUNY's Curious Defense of Linda Sarsour

by A.J. Caschetta



In an era when saying the wrong thing, deemed offensive by someone, can end a career, social justice warriors always seem to get a pass. Few have received more than [Linda Sarsour](#), a Muslim self-styled “feminist” who supports a political system that systematically represses women, celebrates child warriors on social media, and once tweeted of two ideological foes, “I wish I could take away their vaginas – they don’t deserve to be women.”

The more Sarsour offends, the more she is celebrated. Barack Obama honored her as a [Champion of Change](#). Today she will give the keynote address at the City University of New York’s (CUNY) School of Public Health graduation ceremony.

Sarsour’s endorsement of sharia law and leadership in the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement should have made her an unfit candidate to address graduates

of any educational institution even if she weren't a social media provocateur. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, one of the women whose vagina Sarsour wants to confiscate, [calls her](#) a "fake feminist." Brigitte Gabriel, the other woman, [calls Sarsour](#) a "master manipulator" successfully swaying "the gullible women's movement."

[Ariel Behar](#) of *IPT News* wrote that Sarsour specializes in trying "to shut down those who cite her record of celebrating terrorists and advocating radical positions by calling the critics Islamophobes." Sarsour is also a [conspiracy theorist](#), endorsing, for instance, the bizarre view that failed "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was "a CIA agent."

Sarsour's defenders [claim](#) that her views stem from anger and "should come as no surprise for a Palestinian-American;" after all what she really opposes is "right-wing Zionism." Sarsour has [said](#) that Zionists – including the vast majority of Jews – can't be feminists. She didn't say only "right-wing Zionists" can't be feminists.

Why would the CUNY want to showcase someone who, as Daniel Pipes [documents](#), has such a "long record of incompetence, extremism, vulgarity, and eccentricity"? Dov Hikind, a Brooklyn Democrat in the New York Assembly, says "it's just nuts. It makes no sense. It's crazy to have this woman be the person who's going to speak to the students."

In an effort to explain, CUNY Chancellor James B. Millikin released an April 26 [statement](#) saying that while the views Sarsour "reportedly" has on Israel are "anathema to the values of higher education," forgoing a commencement speech by Sarsour "would conflict with the First Amendment and the principles of academic freedom."

Much the same argument was made by five CUNY professors in a [spirited but sophomoric defense](#) of Sarsour's right to speak at

the academic blog *InsideHigherEd*. Two of the five, [Meena Alexander](#) and [Rosalind Patchesky](#), are known for their anti-Israel activism.

But these arguments conflate and grossly misunderstand free speech and academic freedom. Which speakers a university, even a public one, invites to deliver commencement speeches is not a First Amendment issue. This is not a matter of deciding whether to allow this or that student demonstration or campus guest lecture to take place; it's a formal endorsement, not of what the speaker says, but of the speaker's qualifications and ability to inspire an audience. Of course Sarsour has a First Amendment right to her anti-Zionism and even to her anti-Semitism. But CUNY does not have a First Amendment obligation to honor her or provide a platform for her.

Academic freedom is another thing entirely. Sarsour is not a CUNY faculty member, or even an academic. Even if she were, her academic freedom would only be violated if Millikin tried to influence the content of her teaching.

Those who cite Columbia University's hosting of a lecture by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a precedent are missing the point entirely. Having a morbid intellectual curiosity perform live for the benefit of scientific observation is one thing. Inviting one to give parting words of advice to your student body is another thing altogether.

If Millikin really found Sarsour's support for BDS (no need for the qualifier "reportedly") "anathema to the values of higher education," as Chancellor, he could have easily overridden her selection. This is what likely happens all the time in nearly every academic institution when someone suggests a conservative speaker be invited.

The problem, most likely, is that Sarsour received far more faculty support than any conservative who ever made it past the first round of nominations at CUNY.

If university administrators want to wilt under pressure and allow this kind of spectacle to take place, they should at least find the courage not to cite the First Amendment and academic freedom as the reasons.

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