When Vincent Evans arrived as a bright-eyed first-year at Florida A&M, the country’s largest historically black university, he knew he wanted to get involved in politics. So when an older student leader approached him one afternoon after a student government meeting to ask if he wanted an all expenses paid trip to D.C., Evans jumped at the opportunity.

The trip, it turned out, was sponsored by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, the country’s most powerful pro-Israel lobbying outfit. Israel is under growing attack from Palestinian and international activists who call the country a racist apartheid state. In response, its staunchest U.S. lobby is recruiting black students as moral shields to make the case for Israeli impunity. At historically black colleges and universities (known as HBCU’s) around the country, AIPAC is finding and developing a cadre of black allies to declare there’s no way Israel can be racist.

In his four years in college, Evans traveled to D.C. at least 10 times on AIPAC’s dime. He and a small group of other student leaders from his school joined hundreds of others from around the country, including other HBCU students, for AIPAC’s semi-annual Saban Leadership Seminar.

“Within the program,” says Evans, “they make a concerted effort to reach out to HBCU and majority Hispanic schools.”

Before he went to D.C., Evans knew nothing about Israel and had no opinions on Middle East politics. “The program starts at a layman’s level and takes you through what the current Middle East peace talks are about,” he recalls.

AIPAC trained Evans and other students in lobbying and campaign work and provided a crash course in its staunchly Zionist version of Middle East history and politics. Participants are introduced to American and Israeli political leaders and spend afternoons walking Capitol Hill to lobby for Israel.

It seemed to Evans an opportunity of a lifetime.

“You’re talking about a lot of students who grew up in a socio-economic place that does not give them these opportunities,” said Evans. “We met amazing people. I met Netanyahu. In 2007 or 2008 I met all the Democratic candidates for president. My dad cried when I met Obama. [AIPAC] opens your eyes to things you’ve never seen.”

In many ways, training HBCU students simply broadens the base of supporters of Israel. The
students are sent back to their campuses where they’re expected to continue their pro-Israel advocacy. But targeting black students appears to have a particular utility for AIPAC.

Last year, AIPAC featured several HBCU students as speakers at its 5,000-person national policy conference in D.C. On stage, one student explained that she and a group of other AIPAC-trained HBCU students launched an attack on the Palestinian rights movement.

Specifically, they targeted Students For Justice in Palestine, a national student coalition with branches on a growing number of campuses. SJP frames its work as a struggle against Israeli apartheid. The group is fashioned on the model of the movement against South African apartheid that swept American universities in the 1980s. Like its predecessor, the growing international movement against Israeli apartheid calls for institutional and individual divestment from, boycott of and sanction against the Israeli government.

It’s a movement that prominent South African leaders, including Bishop Desmond Tutu, have put their weight behind. And American racial justice activists are increasingly joining the movement against Israeli occupation of Palestine.

Edna Bonhomme, a graduate student at Princeton University who is active in Palestine solidarity activism and was previously a member of SJP at Columbia University, explains the thinking:

“If you look at South Africa, there were differential sets of laws for people of different races in education, jobs, housing, for example. Having a differentiated and unequal legal system where racial origin differentiates people is apartheid. In Israel and the Occupied Territories the legal structure is that Arab residents have different rights than Jewish residents. It’s an apartheid structure.”

For AIPAC and other pro-Israel groups, the claims of Israeli state racism threaten any moral claim Israel tries to maintain. AIPAC has cultivated young black voices from black universities who are now taking the front line in repelling accusations of apartheid.

On stage at last year’s AIPAC conference, an HBCU student waxed indignant.

“How dare they use a word that has historic meaning for me,” said the speaker, to the loud cheers of the audience. “A word that conjures up some of the worst injustices an individual can suffer.” As she spoke, positioning herself as an arbiter of what gets to be called racist, a slide of an apartheid-era South African sign reading “White Area” appeared behind her.

Another speaker followed explaining that in early 2011, a group of students from Atlanta HBCU campuses who identified themselves as the Vanguard Leadership Group had drafted and published a letter in newspapers on campuses where SJP groups had recently scheduled anti-apartheid actions.
The Vanguard Leadership Group, which identifies itself on its website as a “leadership development academy and honor society for top students at the nation’s historically black colleges and universities” did not respond to Colorlines.com’s questions. AIPAC would not speak on the record. But Vincent Evans, who signed the letter, says that the Vanguard Leadership Group members “had all been through the Saban training. AIPAC uses Vanguard as their student cadre for the Atlanta schools.”

Rattling off a view of Israel mirroring AIPAC’s talking points, the Vanguard Leadership Group student explained to the conference that the letter “call[ed] out Students for Justice in Palestine… for mischaracterizing the one state in the Middle East that treats its citizens and its adversaries with care and concern. Whose army works under strict code of conduct… A country whose laws of democratic government ensure the rights of every man woman and child.”

The speaker claimed the letter appeared in a dozen student papers around the country.

According to Tanya Keilani, a Students for Justice in Palestine member at Columbia University, the letter was a sign of the anti-apartheid movement’s impact.

“It’s clear the word apartheid unsettles AIPAC and they’re trying to delegitimize our movement,” Keilani said. “Connecting Palestinians with any group and struggle that has any legitimacy in the US—like the black civil rights movement and the anti-apartheid movement—has a particular resonance and impact.”

Evans insists he “never felt with AIPAC that I was being used.” And the multiple trips he took to D.C. and the extensive political training he received paid off. After graduating from college in May 2011, Evans got a job working for the Democratic Party in Tallahassee.

His only regret about the involvement with AIPAC in college is that he could never fit into his schedule an AIPAC-organized trip to Israel, on which he could have met Israeli military leaders and members of the Knesset.

In late May of this year, according to AIPAC’s website, the organization will sponsor a trip to Israel for “allies,” including student leaders from historically black colleges and universities.