

Thursday, May 16, 2013

Campus divestment campaign is a political war on Israel
by Gerald Steinberg

At university campuses, particularly in California, anti-Israel divestment debates in student government have become a spring ritual.

From San Diego to Berkeley and Davis, student senators introduce resolutions backing divestment, debate is scheduled immediately, propaganda is spread, supporters pack the halls, pro-Israel speakers are harassed (or worse), and student senators with almost no knowledge cast deciding votes. Whether the resolution (which has no practical impact) is adopted or defeated, Israel's demonization is propagated.

While presented under the façade of local student initiatives, this process is a central part of a much wider and well-financed campaign of political warfare against Israel. The delegitimization of Israel began with its founding, and has not stopped. In the early decades (before the pretext of occupation after the 1967 war), the Arab League boycott office, located in Damascus, persuaded many firms, including Pepsi and American Express, not to do business with Israel. And travelers with Israeli visas in their passports were barred from Arab countries.

At the U.N.'s 2001 NGO (non-governmental organization) "anti-racism" conference in Durban, South Africa, the political war was expanded to include false claims of "war crimes," "apartheid," "ethnic cleansing" and even "genocide." Boycott efforts were expanded to universities, churches and the media. They received a massive infusion of funds and "feet on the ground" in the form of highly politicized NGOs. The goal of this Durban strategy was clear: the complete international isolation of Israel.

On this foundation, the first campaigns for academic boycotts and divestments were launched a few months later by pro-Palestinian student groups and union officials, using the false allegations of an Israeli "massacre" in Jenin. Monthly and sometimes weekly events featured speakers under the banner of human rights who repeated the mantra of Israeli demonization. Although often focusing on post-1967 occupation and settlements, and stripped of the historic and military context, the message remained that sovereignty for the Jewish people, regardless of borders, was unacceptable. This is the core message of campus divestment campaigns, including those in California.

The engine propelling this political war is composed of groups like Electronic Intifada, (led by Ali Abunimeh), the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott (Omar Barghouti) and other full-time dedicated Palestinian activists in scores of NGOs. Their funding sources are often hidden, but they clearly have major resources to send speakers, organize training sessions for activists, hold pseudo-academic conferences, and support the Students for Justice in Palestine network on many campuses. Perpetual students, like Emiliano Huet-Vaughn, who is part of the International Solidarity Movement and SJP, have spent years going from campus to campus (St. Louis, London, Berkeley, etc.). All of this takes money, coordinated organizations, schedulers, speakers, graphic artists and spin doctors.

To support the pretense that these campaigns are not inherently anti-Semitic in singling out Israel, the organizers quote Israeli and Jewish political NGOs that are part of the Durban strategy. For example, the 2013 UC Berkeley divestment resolution cites B'tselem, Adalah and Physicians for Human Rights-

Israel as sources for allegations of “human rights violations systematically committed by the Israeli government.” Although these Israeli groups and their funders are officially opposed to BDS, they have failed to speak out against this demonization.

In addition, the Jewish Voice for Peace — founded in the Bay Area — plays a central role on campus. At Berkeley, JVP took out a banner ad in the student newspaper supporting divestment. This summer, JVP is partnering with the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) in a Summer BDS Institute for Student Leaders, a “five-day intensive program for campus BDS organizers.” JVP’s reported 2011 revenues were \$876,529, a nearly 24% increase over 2010 (financial records for 2012 are not yet available). JVP does not report the identity of its donors.

While local student groups opposing this form of campus-based political warfare against Israel have done a good job and have won some votes, they are inherently out-gunned by this powerful political machine. As a result, the pro-Israel students are largely on the defensive against divestment resolutions.

In order to bring an end to this spring offensive, an aggressive proactive approach and far more resources are required. To defeat divestment, the immorality of this racist propaganda must be exposed before the public campaigns begin. This will require the extension of the anti-divestment cooperation between the pro-Israel and genuine pro-human rights groups across the ideological spectrum.

While the debate on how best to handle the complex issues of borders, security, and occupation will continue, the rejection of the demonization of Israel as a Jewish state transcends these differences.

Gerald Steinberg teaches international diplomacy at Bar Ilan University in Israel and is the president of NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research institute.