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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

SESSION III

Campaigning for peace and justice for the Palestinian people

Paper presented by

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you all today at this prestigious and important conference. I have spent nearly ten years as an undergraduate and graduate student at UCLA and Columbia University working as part of Students for Justice in Palestine, a campus group that educates and advocates in support of Palestinian rights. In this time, I have had the chance to watch trends and patterns unfold on campus and in our organizing community, and I will try to overview these trends today in an objective and journalistic manner, before ending with my own observations about the challenges student activists face in their struggle to educate and organize in support of Palestinian rights. I also want to note that while the other comments in this conference have rightly focused on the economic impact of BDS organizing and the ability for this strategy to highlight US corporate complicity in human rights violations, my comments will focus on BDS as a tool to change public opinion on campus.

To begin, I want to draw your attention to three major trends I see in American society at large. These trends, which are the shifting public opinion among young people, people of color, and what we in the US call “liberals”, the growth of Palestine solidarity organizations and their increasing ties to other justice movements, and the rapidly growing support for Palestinian rights from inside the Jewish community are all important factors for us to understand what is happening on campuses and what might be possible in the near future.

The first trend is the increasing change in public opinion at large regarding Israel and the Palestinians. Although public opinion polling is never precise enough in its wording and frequency of polling to produce snapshots of public opinion that I would consider completely reliable, the trends that have nevertheless emerged over time indeed show a striking willingness to consider the Palestinian narrative and to weigh issues more critically than previous generations of Americans have. **In specific, young people, people of color, and American liberals (or what you might think of as the center-left), all hold views towards Israel-Palestine that are increasingly favorable to Palestinians.** These trends may reflect the improving media coverage of this issue and the failure of traditional narratives of stereotyping and fear-mongering that paint the Palestinians as the primary bearers of responsibility for the suffering of both peoples.

Why does this matter? As Ha’aretz columnist Peter Beinart noted, these demographics make up the “Obama coalition” of voters who helped to elect and re-elect the president. They are a constituency that will have great weight in the public discourse in the coming years, and their increasingly willingness to consider the Palestinian side of the story may lead to a greater willingness to re-think American policies that have thus far failed to uphold and protect Palestinian rights.

Second, we see that the movement to support Palestinian freedom has both grown larger on its own, and has expanded in many new and exciting ways, building links of solidarity to other communities struggling for justice inside the United States. National Palestine solidarity organizations have reported their memberships and budgets growing steadily since 2009, there has been a proliferation of local activist groups working in American cities, and student organizing has grown rapidly since 2005 and particularly since 2009. But in addition to this growth of the movement, we also see Palestine solidarity maturing and becoming more complex and invested in domestic struggles as

well. Activists are routinely seeing beyond their cause and lending their support and resources to help other causes in the US, whether this comes in the form of picking campaigns that draw on intersections between multiple struggles, such as G4S and Veolia, or joining in the organizing in support for victims of police violence such as Mike Brown in Ferguson and so many others across American cities in the past few years. This growing solidarity reflects the increasing consciousness of Palestine activists that working for justice in the Palestinian context goes hand in hand with working for justice in the domestic context.

What it portends for the future is an increasingly broad base of support for Palestinian rights as larger and larger segments of the American progressive and activist community come out in support of the Palestinian cause. What this signals is a Palestine solidarity movement connected to movements for immigration justice, movements for racial justice, and other movements for social equality.

Third, we also see growing heterogeneity in Jewish attitudes towards Israel and its government's policies. Movements inside the Jewish community are changing the way people within and outside the Jewish community understand and relate to the question of Palestine. Organizations ranging from J-Street to "If Not Now" to Open Hillel to Jewish Voice for Peace have dramatically changed the landscape of Jewish relations to Israel since roughly 2008.

Why does all of this matter? While the American Jewish community has traditionally been pro-Israel by default, taking positions that support the ongoing denial of Palestinian human rights is now something that actually has a political cost to it – and that cost is originating from within the Jewish community. Growing Jewish support for Palestinian rights also contributes to growing coalitions of Palestinian solidarity work and helps to produce a more mature and vibrant movement.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe all three of these trends are extremely important for the Palestine solidarity movement in the United States. It cannot be lost on us that in order to affect changes in public policies, we must first achieve large-scale changes in public opinion, and activists are now presented with an opportunity that has scarcely existed in the past several decades. Large segments of the American public are already beginning to hold more progressive positions regarding Palestine, or are open and available to be reached. Combined with the role of social media and an improved journalistic approach to Palestine, much can be done.

I want to emphasize that each of these trends is accelerated on college campuses, where the student body is young, diverse, and generally liberal. Colleges are, in some ways, laboratories for the future of the public discourse on Palestine, so the political trends expressed on campuses are sure to become political trends expressed in the broader society in the coming decades, and thus activists must consider the campus a major opportunity and site of social change. If activists can change the attitude towards Palestine on US campuses then they can make a significant contribution to changing the future. This, then, brings me to Students for Justice in Palestine.

Although campus movements for Palestine have a longer history, the first SJP started in 2001 at UC Berkeley. Since 2005, the chapters have rapidly grown in numbers, but a major spike has been

noticeable since 2009 and Operation Cast Lead, which was a major turning point in American organizing work on this issue.

Each SJP is its own autonomous entity, which makes its own decisions, has its own governing rules, and so on. While there is no top-down leadership dictating decisions to individual SJPs, in the past few years we have seen the growth of regional and national networks of support that help SJPs exchange ideas and best practices and smooth out the ups and downs of campus organizing.

What do SJPs do? SJPs work to educate their own members about Palestine, to support Palestinian-American communities, to educate the broader student body about Palestine, and to work in solidarity through boycott and divestment campaigning on their campuses. While BDS is extremely important as a way for students to respond to Palestinian requests for solidarity and to locate their own complicity in violations of Palestinian rights, I want to also highlight another way that BDS is extremely useful for campus activists in support of Palestinian rights. I believe divestment is a crucial tool in the effort to educate and change campus opinion about Palestine, and I will use the example of my own university, UCLA, to show you how this works.

Divestment, for those who don't know, is the process of getting an institution or in our case a university, to withdraw out funds and investments from companies that are complicit in human rights violations against Palestinians. There are a number of American corporations that are major targets of these efforts – Caterpillar, Raytheon, Hewlett Packard, G4S, and so on, and they are the targets of much of the activism going on today.

Let me first highlight to you the main problem of any campus activist. SJP can hold an event on campus or a protest or demonstration and the average student can simply choose to ignore it by not coming to the event, walking by the protest, not taking a flyer, and so on. **Student activists' efforts are therefore limited by the problem that those who don't already know something about Palestine are often the most hesitant or reluctant to find out or the most unwilling to learn.** Divestment is an effective way of getting around this problem because it operates through the mainstream institutions of the university, namely the student government. A campus that might have been able to conveniently ignore the question of Palestine now must confront these issues head on in order to continue the day-to-day business of the student government.

And because divestment asks a very narrow and simple question – whether we should or should not invest in companies violating Palestinian human rights – it creates a situation where students who are confronted with this question must determine whether they are for or against the measure. Having to come up with your position on the issue forces students to learn the issues and parse the arguments, choosing the side they believe makes the most compelling case. In this way, SJPs can use divestment as a way to create the friction necessary to force a much broader level of engagement on the question of Palestine amongst the community. Divestment also creates a period of time in which the focus of the campus must be on the question of Palestine, as the campus government must resolve the divestment question before being able to proceed with the rest of its business. These are advantages that activists rarely have when using the traditional tools available to us. In this manner we are able to reach students who we have never previously been able to engage with.

Let me go to UCLA as an example. We first proposed a divestment resolution in February 2014. Organizing in the lead-up to this vote took 5 months, and the last two months were particularly intensive. Over 500 people attended the hearing itself, the largest display of civic political involvement seen on our campus that year, and perhaps the largest since the protests against tuition hikes in 2010. 19 student groups, together representing the largest communities on campus, endorsed the resolution, however it ultimately failed by a 5-7 margin. Nevertheless, this period of friction and organizing caused a significant number of people, including future candidates for student government, to think through the issue and come to a position in favor of divestment. It significantly broadened the base of support for divestment on campus and laid the foundation for activists to return to the student government last month with a new resolution.

This time, students organized even harder. They reached over 110 student organizations, they received the sponsorship and endorsements of 32 groups, made presentations almost daily for a period of one month, published articles in the campus paper, held forums, and created their own teaching resources and materials to give to students. I list these activities to show that student activists were able to use divestment as leverage to reach the mainstream segments of campus that until now had been so difficult to reach. Based on my estimates of the size of the groups SJP reached, and the readership of the campus paper and other online outlets we used, I estimate that SJP altogether reached somewhere between 7 and 10,000 students on campus, or one in every three undergraduate students.

This time, the vote passed by a landslide, 8 votes in favor, 2 opposed, and 2 abstentions. The atmosphere was remarkable – communities from across campus came to lend their support and express their solidarity in their own terms – the union, indigenous students, queer students, black students, immigrant groups, feminists, the list goes on and on. This tidal wave of support helped to put political pressure on the elected student government to support divestment not just because they accepted the idea but because they saw that the democratic will of the student body was firmly in support as well. Every trend I described earlier was present in an accelerated form at UCLA. The “Obama Coalition” of progressive leaning populations was not just supportive; they were unanimous in their enthusiastic endorsement and even helped to campaign for the resolution. The 32 groups that endorsed the bill represented the entire social justice caucus of the school. Jewish students came out to support through the campus chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace. As far as the campus is concerned, supporting divestment is now a mainstream political issue that even independent and relatively conservative student government members ended up voting for. Opposing divestment is now a marginal political position. One can only imagine the degree of political change that the United States would experience if our national political discourse reflected the political atmosphere of UCLA.

UCLA is just one of 23 campuses to have launched a divestment campaign in the past two years. The process of mass education and outreach I have described at UCLA is being multiplied over and over again on every campus that is taking up divestment as a tool. Each victory represents another change in the status quo – as supporting divestment becomes the default campus political position, and wanting to invest in the companies that violate Palestinian rights becomes a deviation from this normal political state. The effect of this shifting status quo on the future political understandings of students is hard to measure today, but certainly bears great potential.

To try to wrap up my comments, it is clear that the ground is fertile for reaching and educating large segments of students on US campuses, and I think the question facing student

activists now is how to capitalize on that potential and effect mass change among the student body. But to reach them takes serious work. Student activists must continue to learn how to educate and persuade people with lower levels of political knowledge and engagement than we are used to. And we must also learn how to use tools such as divestment to reach larger and larger segments of campus.

UCLA is famous for being one of the campuses that helped spearhead the anti-apartheid movement against the South African government, and a few years ago I had the opportunity to meet one of the people who helped found the movement there, Tim Ngubeni. After giving SJP his endorsement of our work, he recounted to us the great level of work that occurred in order to push the entire statewide university system to divest. Activists would show documentaries to all segments of campus, playing films and holding teach-ins every day of the week for months on end. He reminded us that to achieve the same change as South Africa activists did, we too would need to reach the same levels of activity and engagement. When asked to compare the level of work being done by SJP to the level of work done by his generation, the difference was clear.

However, just a few years later, what I saw as a student working on our divestment campaign was the closest approximation to the mass engagement and organizing that is the benchmark for successful campus divestment activism. It took ten years to divest UCLA and the UC system from Apartheid South Africa. I expect it will take just as long if not longer to divest from the American companies that are engaged in today's violations of Palestinian rights, but on campuses, we are in just the very beginning stages, and the payoff in changes in public opinion are already clear. Thank you.
