COMMENTARY | CIVIL SOCIETY

Israel's Losing Battle: Palestine Advocacy in the University

By: Hatem Bazian · April, 2020

Overview

Palestine Legal recently published a report noting that the majority of suppression of Palestine advocacy in the US targets students and faculty. In particular, 89% of such incidents occurred on college campuses in 2014, and 74% in 2019. While these statistics illuminate the current struggle that university-based advocates for Palestinian rights are facing, it is also critical to trace the development of Palestine advocacy on US college campuses. Tracking this 20- to 30-year history allows a better understanding of not only how we got here, but also of the current and intensifying campaign against students and faculty – and how to fight it.[1]

This commentary first provides an historical examination of the Palestine advocacy movement in the United States and how Palestinian advocacy on college campuses emerged from it, using Students for Justice in Palestine as a particular example. It then analyzes Israel's and its supporters' response to this shift. The piece ultimately offers recommendations for how the university setting, despite attacks against it, can continue to provide and even amplify an environment that fosters critical research and thinking on Palestine, which in turn furthers the struggle for Palestinian rights and self-determination.

Emergence of the US Palestine Advocacy Movement

The movement for Palestinian rights in the US grew at the same time as other global struggles, namely those against the South African apartheid regime, against US intervention in Central America, and against the US attack on Iraq in the First Gulf War. Domestic political campaigns were simultaneously underway in the 1980s, particularly against the Reagan administration's cuts to education, health care, and the environment, as well as its dubious war on drugs, aided by the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, which expanded the prison industrial complex and furthered the mass criminalization of black and brown people. Domestic activism also fought economic restructuring that removed the safety net under the guise of welfare reform and sent millions into poverty.

Progressive movements emerged from these campaigns that positioned Palestine more centrally than it had been before. Palestine activism and Palestinian activists challenged the shifts in national priorities and supported the anti-apartheid struggle, the campaign challenging US expansionism in Central America, and the movement against the Iraq war.

On the other end of the spectrum, pro-Israel organizations positioned themselves on the wrong side of history: They resisted sanctions on South Africa and tried to protect sales of Israeli arms to the apartheid regime. Likewise, they supported Israel as it advised and aided the state-sponsored Central American death squads. And when it came to US intervention in the Middle East, Israel and its supporters likewise backed US war efforts, seeing them as beneficial to Israel's security.

Progressive political mobilizations and domestic struggles have made Palestine a central theme of their organizing. Just 30 years ago the political left in the United States, in its mobilization for peace, justice, and jobs, regularly debated whether or not to allow a Palestinian flag, let alone a speaker, on a stage. Today, one cannot

have a political mobilization on any subject, local or global, without Palestine being a part of it – if not in the main framing, then as one of the themes. Those who would advocate or speak on the side of Israel, in contrast, are hard-pressed to be given space on such a stage because they have cast their lot with the right-wing military industrial complex and its pernicious interventions.

Israel's 2012 attack on the Gaza Strip brought about a decisive shift in thinking about Israel, both at the grassroots level and among policy analysts. Both groups are aware that Israel flouts international law and shows no restraint in its abuse of Palestinian human rights. Moreover, while a pro-Israel agenda initially dominated the mainstream media, with talking heads' constant refrain of how Israel has "the right to defend itself," the less controlled spaces of social media and the internet have allowed a narrative shift that favors a more critical side of the political spectrum – so much so that the mainstream media has actually begun to change.

Palestine Advocacy on College Campuses

Together, and partly as a result of the tireless work of progressive activists, developments outlined above have allowed for the strengthening of Palestine advocacy on college campuses. Indeed, a perspective in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle has become the dominant perspective at universities. One example of this shift is the founding and proliferation of the group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP).

SJP was founded at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1992, following the First Gulf War. Before the war, sizable numbers of Palestinians had come to the US to study, but those numbers diminished as the military confrontation turned into the years of the sanctions regime. As Yasser Arafat had supported Saddam Hussein in the war, Palestinians in Kuwait and the rest of the Gulf were dismissed from their jobs and forced out, with the result that many of those Palestinians who

had been able to afford a US education for their children no longer could. Without Palestinian students in US universities, efforts to organize for Palestinian rights decreased.

This phenomenon likewise occurred just after the Oslo Accords, which decreased Palestinian activism that was linked to the broader Palestinian transnational movement, as through Oslo the PLO agreed to limit its international advocacy against Israel.[2] As a result, Palestinian activists on college campuses no longer had a support base with an historical legacy. In the context of campus activism, the PLO from its inception had a strong university and youth arm that crystalized into the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), with branches across the globe, including in the United States. As a result of the PLO transforming itself into the Palestinian Authority, the role, institutional capacities, and importance of GUPS declined.

An alternative way to advocate was to organize for Palestinians' liberation as a principle, welcoming any student wanting to work for justice in Palestine. This was the genesis of SJP, which now has more than 200 chapters in the United States, Canada, and New Zealand. Many of those students who worked to support liberation and anti-racism struggles in South Africa, Central America, and in the United States joined SJP because they saw the connections among the struggles.

At the same time, the number of Jewish Americans who no longer consider Israel the central part of their identity and who identify as anti-Zionist has been increasing. A significant number are now members of SJP. These youth cannot be committed to opposing the prison industrial complex, militarism, racism, and anti-immigrant discourse without seeing Palestine as a paradigmatic representation of what they instinctively know is wrong: Israeli apartheid.

In large part due to the work of SJP and other groups at universities across the US and the globe, Israel no longer has a case to stand on intellectually and

academically. This 20 to 30-year political evolution must be accounted for as we measure why Israel is currently acting in an undisciplined manner to try to reconstitute support, when the dam of lies and obfuscation has already burst.

Israel's Desperate Response

The loss of Israel's standing in higher education and among the American intelligentsia has spurred the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs (IMSA) and Israel's supporters to frenetically try to reverse this situation. There is thus an overwhelming percentage of attacks on college campuses. Yet the only tool that pro-Israel advocates and the IMSA have to try to recover some level of standing at universities is raw power through defamation. Therefore schemes like Canary Mission and the Lawfare Project target students and faculty through claims that Palestine advocacy and the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement (BDS) are anti-Semitic.

These forces are simultaneously trying to mobilize state legislatures and Congress to pass legislation to protect Israel from the right to free speech when it concerns Palestine. This is a strategic mistake, because the focus on preemptive silencing shifts the debate to one of first amendment and constitutional rights, which so far remains a generally well-protected right in the US context.

The Israeli government's use of raw power demonstrates its anxiety. Indeed, the sign of real power is when one can exercise restraint and refrain from using power because people fear its deployment. In this sense Israel is desperate to try to reconstitute a barrier against its rapidly diminishing standing, including in broader US society.

The Democratic Party's grassroots as well as its rank and file, for example, have abandoned Israel as a central aspect of their platform. One can trace this phenomenon to attacks on President Obama by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu and AIPAC, beginning with Obama's Cairo speech in 2009 and culminating in assaults against his Iran deal, including Netanyahu's March 2015 speech in a joint session of Congress that expressed the Israeli leader's unvarnished opposition to a sitting US president. These attacks led many in the Democratic Party to understand that such targeting of Obama related to the rise of the Tea Party and ultimately to Trump, helping to disrupt the former party line on Israel.

Israel's attempts to use naked power to silence criticism has also not gone over well with many Democrats. It is thus not surprising that Bernie Sanders is beginning to recognize that opposing Israel and skipping AIPAC – even pointing out that AIPAC is a "platform for bigotry" – no longer has the same negative consequences among much of the party's constituency.

Though Trump's December 2019 executive order combating anti-Semitism on college campuses may appear disastrous – the order allows for de-funding institutions based on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-Semitism, which includes criticism of the Israeli state, making Palestine advocacy "anti-Semitic" – it is important to understand that the status quo on Israel has been tumbling since the Oslo Accords. This order is a rash attempt to stem that downward spiral. Further, when Trump puts his name to something, a large base opposes it if only because Trump has done it.

Of course, in the short term there will be negative effects on students and faculty, such as attempts to shut down classes on Palestine, online harassment, and condemnations against departments and student groups. Recent attacks on the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University and SJP and Columbia University Apartheid Divest at Columbia University illustrate these difficulties.

However, though such actions may benefit the Israeli government and Trump in

the near term, in the long run the changes in Israel's standing are irreversible. It is no longer possible to reconstitute Israel in the university setting and broader civil society as a state not considered a violator of human rights and international law. Those in higher education can work to shore up this trend through a number of efforts.

Furthering Palestine in the University

Students, faculty, and those working in academic institutions must demand that Palestine be included and engaged with on its own terms. As such, they must insist on classes that interrogate and contextualize Palestine without questions of whether it is "good for Israel" or of its relationship to Zionism.

As such, approaching Palestine in the context of internationalist emancipatory struggles – making it part of humanity's shared modern history, rather than an exception – is key. A course could, for instance, contrast liberation movements in Sub-Saharan Africa and Palestine. Such a class would not only consider South Africa, but would also examine the Palestinian movement's engagement with African unity campaigns and their collective work on anti-colonial and decolonial movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Another course could examine the relationship between Palestine and Latin America, where robust Palestinian communities exist.

Faculty and students should also insist on developing institutional capacity within various universities and settings. So far, Palestine Studies per se is offered as a program of study only at Brown University and Columbia University. Students can mobilize on campuses to insist on forming programs in the same way as ethnic studies programs were developed institutionally in the 1960s and 1970s. Creating study abroad programs to Palestine is also key.

Academics working on Palestine also need to mobilize financial resources to

support these programs. Palestinians in the United States and elsewhere have not strategically developed their top-end financiers. They must mobilize these donors to invest in initiatives that will have long-term, positive consequences for the Palestinian struggle.

Lastly, legal teams that provide protection in academic settings must be strengthened. Palestine Legal, founded in 2012, already provides much-needed support, but such work must be reinforced and intensified.

In sum, the attacks on academics, SJP, and Palestine activists must be understood within a long historical durée and a deep appreciation for the trajectory toward justice underway on college campuses, nationally and internationally. The moral, ethical, and intellectual arguments successfully opposing well-funded and institutionally connected Israeli efforts at demonization should help continue the struggle for Palestinian liberation and an end to apartheid. In the face of overwhelming odds, Palestine's future is being formed firstly inside historic Palestine, as well as in the solidarity and BDS movements across the globe and on college campuses. Just as apartheid South Africa was put into the dustbin of history, we are approaching a free Palestine.

1. To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.
2. *Personal communication with the late Haidar Abdel-Shafi, the head of the Palestinian negotiations team, during the Oslo period.*

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