



PODCAST | CIVIL SOCIETY, POLITICS

The Student Intifada on US Campuses with Samer Alatout

By: Samer Alatout, Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network · May, 2024

The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Samer Alatout 0:00

Do I trust the institution? No, but what I do trust is the community that was created and the community that was created is really powerful. The students are amazing. The faculty and staff that were involved in the encampment are amazing. This coalition that was built will not disappear. There are a lot of steps that are to be taken during the summer, the fall and the spring that I think will lead to a change in the form of discussion that's happening now.

Yara Hawari 0:34

From Al Shabaka, the Palestinian Policy Network, I am Yara Hawari and this is Rethinking Palestine.

Over a month ago, students at Columbia University in New York set up an encampment on campus grounds in solidarity with the Palestinian people, especially those in Gaza facing the ongoing genocide. Their demands to the university administration are simple, to disclose and divest from those complicit in the oppression of Palestinians.

This encampment shortly led to other student encampments across American university campuses and now even further afield, including the UK and beyond, all



under the banner of disclose and divest from genocide. Whilst perhaps unprecedented in the case of Palestine, these encampments and protests follow a long legacy of student mobilization in the US against imperialism and war.

And just as their predecessors did, these students at these encampments have faced brutal repression from police and security forces. Hundreds of students and faculty members have been injured, arrested, and even suspended from their institutions. They've also faced smear campaigns by the media and agitators who tried to paint the picture of hate-filled violent protests when in fact the opposite has been true.

Palestinian American professor Samer Alatout is the Buttel-Sewell professor in the Department of Community and Environmental Sociology at the University of Wisconsin Madison, as well as a faculty advisor for the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at the university and a member of Al Shabaka.

Professor Alatout was at his local student encampment when he was assaulted and detained by police. And today he joins me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine to discuss the significance of the student uprising from the perspective of a faculty member. Professor Alatout, thank you for joining me on this episode of Rethinking Palestine.

Samer Alatout 2:24

Thank you, Yara.

Yara Hawari 2:26

Professor, before we go into what happened to you, it would be useful to hear a little bit about the background of these protests and encampments as you understand them.

Samer Alatout 2:34



There is a long history in the United States of student activism, and the University campuses have been famously busy with protests during, for example, the civil rights movement in the 1960s, during anti-Vietnam War movement in the 1960s and 70s, then anti-apartheid movement in the 1980's and now, of course against Israeli apartheid, occupation, and genocide in US universities.

So there is a long history of student activism and almost always those student activist movements have been brutalized by police force and police violence and almost always, they affected change.

So while they are ongoing, they are faced with violence. And then within a decade or so, they seem to be succeeding in changing the discourse around, for example, the Vietnam War or civil rights or apartheid South Africa. They seem to have changed the discourses around those, and you end up with a tidal kind of change in general, not only at the university level.

And so usually when people talk about student movements in the US, people are often proud of those movements, of course, in hindsight, right? So for example the university here, the university chancellor in the 1980s apologized for how the university dealt with the students during the civil war, and they issued an official apology for how they brutalized the students in the 1960s and 70s. They recognize that later on, but at the time these movements happened, there was a lot of brutalization.

Yara Hawari 4:43

That's an important historical background to today's student protests, which are anti-war and anti-genocide, but they also have specific demands around disclosure and divestment.

Is it common for American universities to have investments in companies that are complicit with the Israeli regime's oppression of the Palestinian people?



Samer Alatout 5:07

I don't know how many people recognize what, and how that investment happens, but each university has an endowment of some sort. The university has funds that come from gifts or profits from inventions. at the university. So those funds become huge at points. For example, my university has about 4 billion. Harvard, of course, has more than 50 billion. But in total, I think the largest 15 universities have about 320 billion in their endowments.

And so what the universities do is that they invest those endowments in funds, right? In diversified kind of portfolios basically buying stocks in companies. And so usually these are hidden, but we don't know where these stocks are, there is so much investment, for example, in Lockheed Martin or Hillwood, Packard or Motorola solutions and all of these provide aid to Israeli genocide and Israeli occupation.

So for example, Lockheed Martin sells F-16s and those were prominent in what happens in Gaza now and in other places, of course in the last four decades, right? HP, which is Holwood Packard has biometric systems that are used by Israelis to surveil and to follow Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

Motorola provides surveillance to Israeli security systems. Elbit Systems is an Israeli company that builds drones and surveillance systems. And there are so many others. So the universities, because the funds that they have are invested in portfolios, which means a group of stocks, do invest in these companies.

And of course, those endowments, the money that comes, the profits that come out of that investment goes into doing research and salaries and stuff like that for the working of the university. I mean, there is so much investment in Israeli companies. The problem that we are having now is that we don't know what the investment is.



So, for example, at my university, which is very typical of other universities, the university's foundation, which has the money and invests it, is created as a separate entity from the university itself. So there is no control, the university does not control the foundation.

The foundation is not very open about its investment strategies or about its investments. So we don't know anything about what kinds of investments are there or where they have them. The assumption is that they have them in these companies. But we need to know more about where this money is.

Yara Hawari 8:32

And that seems like quite a reasonable demand to ask for disclosure. And it's not unusual for students to ask for divestment, right? It does fit in the context of this long history of student activism against US imperialism and war that you previously mentioned.

Samer Alatout 8:51

Definitely. One thing that, this movement of students at this time asks for, if you can see the slogans are disclosure first, right?

Disclosure means that these funds should tell us transparency in the fund, in the investment, should tell us where the money is invested. That's a very basic democratic principle, especially for public universities, but even private universities, to know where the investment is going.

So disclosure is really important, and this is what we are fighting for now. And then the other thing is divestment and divestment has been practiced often. So, for example, during the anti-apartheid movement, that was precisely what the students were asking for during the late 1970s and 1980s, the students asked that universities divest from businesses that enabled apartheid in South Africa.



And like I said before, all of these companies that I mentioned are enabling Israeli occupation, genocide, displacement of Palestinians, etc, and the assumption that we cannot know if the university is investing in them and whether it's profiting out of death and war is important.

And so the anti-apartheid movement succeeded in the end in forcing the universities to divest, but also it succeeded even in a larger scheme of things, which means that businesses started to divest from South Africa and other private companies started to do that, not only the public.

Yara Hawari 10:35

And divestment has been a demand of Palestinian civil society by consensus for nearly two decades now. The students are very much answering that call that was made by the BDS movement in the early 2000s.

Samer Alatout 10:51

Yeah, absolutely. And I think what happened in the United States, I cannot speak for other countries or other regions, but in the United States, BDS became a somewhat normal discourse.

What I mean by that is that there is so much push against BDS, of course, in the US right on a governmental scale. So the Congress is intervening even here. The assembly, for example, in Wisconsin and the Senate, our local governance institutions have written laws that we cannot actually boycott Israel and we cannot divest from Israel, that any calls for that are illegal, but at the same time, you find that there is a public discourse that is invigorated initially by BDS movement.

But here, because Palestinian voices are becoming much stronger, they are becoming profoundly effective in the US and which was not the case a few years back, right? And I think that has to do with maybe social media, but also with the



fact that probably Palestinian American scholars and activists have reached a point where they do not want to be silenced anymore and in the background, and I think they are taking the risks and willing to take the risks.

So for example, myself or other people, a lot of people in the US are taking so many risks, not from universities, because in the end I'm tenured, for example, which means, that I have certain protections for my job. Also being able to stand firm against Zionist propaganda against organizations that mobilize to attack Palestinian voices and Palestinian activists.

So there is a sense in which we stepped beyond the line that used to scare us from speaking out. And so now when they speak against us, we speak and we defend and we argue. And I think there is something that has shifted and maybe more Palestinians are here in the US too and more organizing happened in the last 20 years, right?

And of course, the BDS successes that happened in the last 20 years also proved to have been effective somehow. The question is how to carry that forward into the future. And I think the student movement is taking all of that experience into account while working for divestment at this point in the United States.

Yara Hawari 14:03

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Columbia University was the first encampment in the US, student encampment, and there's been a lot of media attention on it. I was wondering if you could perhaps tell us a bit about what's been happening at your university, the University of Wisconsin Madison, and perhaps also share with us what happened to you when you visited your student encampment.



Samer Alatout 14:36

So at my university, the students started an encampment on the 29th of April on a Monday, and the encampment was amazingly beautiful.

I mean, that's the thing that people don't understand sometimes, is that the students are able to create a world that we all look forward to living in. Our students built an encampment that included Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and any number of religions, right? Any number of races, any number of countries of origin, such a, a beautiful presence of a community and started to cultivate a communal context that is really unheard of within Madison.

Many people will say, especially people of color and people who are from other places from other countries. So many of them were commenting about how the encampment is the only place where they have felt that they are recognized, seen and appreciated. And so there was a cultivation of a different kind of relation between people.

What happened is that the university refused to talk to the students before they took out the camp. And of course, the students refused to take out the camp because the tents were on the one hand, symbolic, because of what's happening in Gaza, and the students wanted to symbolize that with a real image of tents and by sleeping there.

The other thing is that they felt that the relationship between the administration and them is a relation of power, that is undergirded by the notion that the administration can call the police and can resort to police violence at any moment. So if there was a threat the whole time, if you do not take the encampment down, we will call the police.

If you don't take the encampment down we will not talk with you. In the meantime, we were talking to the administration, asking them to talk to the students and they



refused. So Wednesday morning comes and we hear that the police is coming, and then we go to staff, faculty, and other students who are not in the encampment.

We go there to kind of build a human chain around the encampment to protect them. And this is where, I mean, maybe I should talk about my role as a professor and how I see myself, I think often we forget the elements of being a professor that are more important than just the pedagogical and the educational kind of elements and those are that we are there to nurture the students right to protect them and sometimes we protect them in terms of livelihood sometimes we protect them in emotional terms for whatever reasons, I take that seriously that we are there to love them and to have them.

They are part of us, right, to cultivate this sort of community or kinship relations, rather than a relation of power that is built on law or regulations. So to cultivate that relationship is important for me as a professor. When that happened, I stood between them and the police and I was all the time in contact with the police and the administration urging them not to escalate and to deescalate when they came into the encampment.

They didn't, so they came forward and I mean, I think I was targeted, in part, because I'm a Palestinian, but in general, if you look at it, the police violence led to the detainment of four professors. And guess what? All four professors are professors of color.

And that was a huge embarrassment to the university and even the students. Most of the ones who were attacked violently and arrested were students of color. And that's not because there were no white professors or staff or students. There was a lot, but that begs the question of how the police decide and whether they are trained well enough to protect the civil rights of minorities or people of color.

In any case, so they attacked us, and I tried to stay my ground, and I got hurt, and



I guess maybe you saw the pictures and videos because it became a viral moment, I got injured. But in the end after that, the administration said we would meet with the students. I mean, they took the tents down, but in the end, the students put them up within an hour.

The encampment continued, and that proved to the administration that they were fighting the will of the students and that it would not work that way. And I think there was an embarrassment that kind of spread within the administration about the fact that, for faculty of color, but also the violence, the police violence that was enacted, especially in response to a very peaceful encampment that was all about poetry, music and, and celebration, right, of life. So that's what happened.

Then at some point, I was in the mediating in the negotiation team. Then I withdrew from it because I was really angry with the administration about how they were sending out messages that the reason I was detained is because I was violent. And I thought that they were doing that underhandedly.

And I decided to withdraw from the meetings, but comes Monday, there was a big break in the conversation between the students and the administration, the students withdrew from the discussion from the conversation because rightly so, they felt that the administration was not giving them anything and they are not moving on their requests.

I tried to intervene so that the police is not called again and probably had a hand in getting the chancellor to meet with the students, which was a demand of the students. And so the next day she met with them and we ended up with an agreement that does not fulfill the issue of disclosure and divestment.

It does give some wins. For example, a person will be hired to look into people who come from war-torn countries and displaced people, especially Gaza, and that's in the agreement. The agreement also stipulated that it's an agreement between the administration and SJP Students for Justice in Palestine, which has been



dehumanized for the last year across the US, and that was good.

Then there was an agreement that they would bring three scholars from Palestinian academic institutions, once a year with extensions possible. Also they will review all of the international division programs with an eye on increasing the potential for helping students who come from Gaza or the West Bank.

There were a few things, but I think the recognition is that the chancellor herself cannot dictate to the foundation what to do or not to do with the money.

However, she committed to have meetings with the foundation and stuff like that, but now we have in the Faculty Senate, which is the governance Institution of the faculty we have resolutions that are going to go through hopefully beginning of the fall on divestment and disclosure. So we are working on those already. They are almost ready to be introduced early in the fall.

Yara Hawari 23:28

It's not a surprise that police patterns of brutality are reflected on these campuses, you know, targeting people of color. For centuries, people of color have always been the first ones to be brutalized by police and security forces.

So that at all was not surprising, but I do want to take a moment and reflect on what you said at the beginning of the answer to that last question, that these spaces cultivated what a different kind of society could look like. And I think in and of itself, that is somewhat of a movement gain.

A lot of people are talking about what a win looks like in these situations of these encampments, and I think there are so many gains that have been made, even if some students and some campuses haven't been able to achieve their original demands. That leads me on to my next question about these big conversations around when the encampment ends or when students enter into those conversations with administrations, there are so many different factors to take



into consideration.

Not all campuses are the same, not all student groups are the same, people studying and working in different environments. And so I think that question and that conversation will be ongoing, for months to come. But do you have, hope, or do you trust the administration that they will continue this conversation around disclosure and divestment? Because even though that has been a promise by the Chancellor, as you said, a lot of people might not have faith in the fact that that might actually happen.

Samer Alatout 25:07

That's a great question. In the agreement, there are timelines for all of these things. So the students can always pressure the institution because of the timelines there are deadlines for when each of the demands will be accomplished or each of the wins.

But I'll go back to your question about the new kind of world that the students have been successful in creating. And I think the argument from my perspective to the administration from the beginning has been that they are, by threatening the police force, that what they seem to imply is that the administration is the university.

I said it often that the administration is not the university, that the university is a constellation of groups, students, faculty, staff and the administration. And that governance means that we all have a stake in how the institution presents itself and represents us and that we need to be able to feel that we belong, right?

From the students' perspective, they need to know that they belong, and the way that they know that they belong is by actually participating in governing the institution itself. And what my argument has been all the time is that the threat of violence builds a relation of power that basically pits the university administration



and the students on two opposite sides and does not see them as working for the same institution, right?

And so I argued often that the administration needs to actually try to think of the students as of it, for it, from it, right? They belong to us. The same with faculty and staff and to work in order to cultivate those relations of kinship relations shouldn't be between administration, students, staff and faculty, those relations shouldn't be relations of power and force that are undergirded by the threat of violence, but should be relations of kinship and belonging, then the encampment can be seen as a protest by the students that is trying to tell the administration we need a voice in the governance of the institution. We need a voice in investment, how investment is done, and what the ethics of investments are. How do we decide on what to invest in?

So I think the answer to your question, do I trust the institution to do that? No, I do not trust the institution. But what I do trust is the community that was created and the community that was created is really powerful. So the students are amazing. The faculty and staff that were involved in the encampment or around it are amazing.

This coalition that was built will not disappear, and it's already working on the next steps. So there are a lot of steps that are to be taken during the summer and the fall and the spring that I think will lead to a change in the discussion, in the form of discussion that's happening now.

I think one of the things the administration has been doing is saying that the encampment is illegal, right? And that because it's illegal, we are bringing a police force. And I keep thinking of how they're understanding that the encampment is a state of exception, right?

That it is an exceptional protest, a maneuver by the students, that necessitates police force while they don't reflect. And that's ironic. They don't reflect that the



students are doing that because of the exceptional status of Gaza because there is a genocide. And that's an exception.

If there is an exception of genocide that's happening in Gaza or anywhere in the world, and the students take it upon themselves to stop that genocide or help in the steps that will lead to stopping the genocide and the occupation and the apartheid regime. It is because that is exceptional that they went the exceptional route of building an encampment.

And the administration fails to see how Gaza is exceptional or that it is a genocide. And they need to rethink that.

Yara Hawari 30:09

I think just because some of the encampments have ended, it doesn't mean that the movement has. If anything, this has been and continues to be, such a huge win for the movement. I think we need to be more mindful and reflect on the gains that have been made. And one of the ones that you've highlighted has been the widening of this coalition, of this community, that insists that this genocide won't be committed in their name.

This is my final question, and maybe a bit repetitive, but as a faculty member and as a Palestinian, how do you see your role in this student uprising?

Samer Alatout 30:47

It's a really interesting thing because in a way I wanted to contribute as much as possible of my knowledge and whatever experience right in Palestine and here and through my studies and whatever my academic kind of understandings of the situation, but also I wanted to be able to let the students lead because they are amazing.

I mean, they are really, even the student negotiators were just powerful, so



powerful and very, very proud of them. And so the challenge of understanding your role as an advisor, in my case, or other faculty, also as supporters, but at the same time that it is a student-led movement. And so to kind of frame it in that way, sometimes you will have to back up and just let the students do what the students do my role is as a support. I saw myself as a supporter of the students, I did participate in the negotiations in the mediation with the administration but for the most part, I saw it as support of the students and students' ideas and at times I gave them my opinion if they asked for it.

But in general, I was just there to support them. And I said, even to the Faculty Senate and to the chancellor that, you know, if you bring the police again, I am going to be there. So it's like you're setting the whole community in an upheaval because I will not let the students be brutalized.

Whatever happens to the students should happen to me and to the other faculty and staff. And so I hope they understand that.

Yara Hawari 32:46

Professor, thank you so much for your time and I'm grateful for your safety following your experience at the student encampments. We hope to have you on Rethinking Palestine again soon.

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