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Attacks against anti-occupation activism increase

Stephen Zunes | Jul. 22, 2013
Viewpoint

A growing movement has emerged on college campus calling for divestment from companies that support the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. It is part of broader international campaign initiated by Palestinian civil society for boycott, divestment and sanctions to pressure Israel to end its occupation of territories seized in the 1967 war. The activists hope to emulate the success of a similar movement in the 1970s and '80s to divest institutional stockholdings from corporations doing business in apartheid South Africa.

In California, the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement has been particularly strong on state university campuses -- including Berkeley, San Diego and Irvine, where it has received endorsements from their student governments. In response, the Democrat-controlled state legislature has taken the unprecedented step of injecting itself into these campus political debates.

Last year, for example, the California State Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favor of a non-binding resolution to label boycott, divestment and sanctions activism as an "anti-Semitic activity" that should "not be tolerated in the classroom or on campus," declaring that no public resources should be allowed for such "intolerant agitation." This attempt to stifle free speech led to a strong public backlash. Even the presidents of the University of California and the California State University systems -- who have been outspoken opponents of calls for divestment -- rejected the call for denying classroom space or other resources to student groups on political grounds, though they did not challenge the claim that boycott, divestment and sanctions activism was somehow inherently anti-Semitic.

This year, legislative leaders have put forward a letter to the University of California Board of Regents applauding its opposition to divestment without calling for an outright ban on boycott, divestment and sanctions activism.

The letter falsely claims that the divestment resolutions on the university campuses target the state of Israel. In reality, every resolution brought forward solely targets specific corporations (primarily based in the United States) that profit from specific violations of international law and human rights through the Israeli occupation. This is a crucial distinction. Quite a number of people involved in these divestment efforts would not support the divestment campaign if it targeted Israel itself. Rather than acknowledge that there might be legitimate moral and legal questions regarding a foreign belligerent occupation that includes well-documented violations of international humanitarian law, critics of the divestment campaign are trying to portray it as unfairly targeting the world's only predominantly Jewish state.

The letter condemns the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement as being "divisive." But college and university campuses -- especially those in the University of California system -- have long been the center of divisive political debates: free speech, civil rights, the Vietnam War, Central America, South Africa, Iraq, the nuclear arms race, nuclear power, globalization, women's rights, immigrant rights, and more. On a number of these issues, student government bodies weighed in, often finding themselves in the forefront of issues that were

deemed relatively radical and divisive at the time but eventually became part of mainstream political opinion.

The letter echoes other attacks on anti-occupation activists by paradoxically claiming that divestment somehow makes a lasting peace more difficult. In reality, given the ongoing U.S. role in blocking the United Nations from enforcing its resolutions calling on Israel to abide by its international legal obligations, grassroots activism may be the only way of ending the occupation and making peace possible.

Even more bizarrely, the letter claims that the divestment campaign "creates an antagonistic environment for students who support Israel." However, many students who support boycott, divestment and sanctions also support the state of Israel, but happen to oppose the Israeli occupation, colonization and other violations of international law. Indeed, many supporters of Israel recognized that the right-wing Netanyahu government's policies toward the Palestinians are deleterious to Israel's future.

This effort by the California legislature, which is but one example of a national campaign by right-wing elements to delegitimize the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, is not simply about Israel and Palestine. These attacks against the movement are about suppressing human rights activists who oppose policies of well-connected U.S. corporations profiting from illegal and immoral policies of a foreign government.

Such efforts to stifle human rights activism in support of Palestinians living under occupation establish a dangerous precedent. For example, Students for a Free Tibet has chapters at campuses across the country, including in California, calling for boycotts and related strategies targeting the Chinese government and U.S. companies that support the occupation of Tibet. Conceivably, state legislatures and others could start labeling such activism as "anti-Chinese activities," attacking them for unfairly singling out China, claiming they are being "divisive" and making peace between China and Tibet more difficult, and creating an antagonistic environment for Chinese students.

There is no question that issues regarding Israel bring up particularly strong emotional and ideological issues for some people. And there are a number of legitimate criticisms, even from critics of Israeli policies, directed at the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement. It is also unfortunately true that some individuals involved in this movement take some extreme anti-Israel -- even anti-Semitic -- positions, and such views should be challenged. At the same time, this does not excuse this unprecedented effort by the legislature of the most populous U.S. state to suppress student democracy and unfairly depict the entire movement, consisting primarily of fair-minded and conscientious human rights activists, as its most extreme elements.

Attacks against boycott, divestment and sanctions in California and elsewhere, then, are very dangerous for all those who believe in free speech, student democracy, and human rights.

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