

# Does Northwestern student group aim to respect Palestine or demonize Israel?



NU Divest, a student organization, has demanded that Northwestern University drop any investments in Illinois-based Boeing and Caterpillar, as well as four other firms that are said to profit "off of the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands." (Chris Walker/Chicago Tribune)

By **Steven Lubet**

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**D**oes respect for Palestinian human rights require American universities to refrain from owning stock in companies that provide military supplies to Israel? Or is the BDS movement (Boycott, Divest, Sanctions) an impediment to peace, as many supporters of Israel claim?

The latest round in the public relations battle between Israel and the Palestinians has reached the shores of Lake Michigan, where a student organization called **NU Divest** has demanded that Northwestern University drop any investments in Illinois-based Boeing and Caterpillar, as well as four other firms that are said to profit "off of the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands."

It has been a long time since Northwestern was a hotbed of student activism, and a successful drive by NU Divest — on such a traditionally quiet campus — might well presage similar actions at other colleges and

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universities. It is, therefore, important to take a serious look at NU Divest's goals and strategies, which will no doubt have implications far beyond Evanston and Chicago.

To its credit, NU Divest insists that it "aims neither to condemn a country, a people, or a community nor to determine a political solution, but is solely aimed at ending our University's support of companies that profit from human rights violations."

Unfortunately, the moderation stops there. Other statements on the NU Divest website indicate that the group's objectives do indeed extend to condemnation and not merely, as asserted, to "financial neutrality."

For example, an NU Divest video includes this testimonial: "I support NU Divest because the New York and the St. Louis police department were both trained by the Israeli military. If black lives matter, then Palestinian lives must also." The second half of the statement is undeniably true — all people matter, after all, including African-Americans, Palestinians and Israelis — but the first half is dangerously inflammatory and essentially false.

The references to the New York and St. Louis police departments are obviously intended to implicate Israel in the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, as though the Israeli military had somehow prompted American police officers to gun down or strangle African-American men. This is just not true. While some American police officers have attended programs in Israel — as they have in Britain, France and elsewhere — there is simply no connection between Israel and the tragic events in Ferguson and Staten Island. Neither Ferguson Officer Darren Wilson nor NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo had ever received Israeli-based training in firearms or chokeholds.

Why does this matter? Because the Internet is awash in insupportable claims of Israeli responsibility for recent police killings in the United States. These insinuations are uncomfortably reminiscent of the conspiracy theories that blame Israel for all of the world's woes. After 9/11, it was bandied about that thousands of Israelis had received advance warning to stay away from the World Trade Center. More recently, a founder of the Free Gaza Movement declared that the Charlie Hebdo massacre had been a "false flag" operation masterminded by the Mossad. The NU Divest testimonial is not as extreme — implying only that Israeli training was responsible for the Brown and Garner killings — but it demonstrates how easy it has become for pernicious myths about Israel to be spread in the guise of political arguments, even among otherwise reasonable people.

The testimonial cannot be discounted as the credulous contention of one ill-informed student, given that the NU Divest leaders obviously made a conscious decision to post it on their website. And other aspects of the NU Divest website further suggest a settled determination to delegitimize Israel. On its home page (and also on its petition), NU Divest announces that it supports the call for "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel," commonly known as the BDS movement. The Palestinian BDS National Committee, however, supports a wide-ranging academic boycott that would squelch academic freedom and institute nationality-based discrimination against Israeli scholars and schools. In fact, the published BDS guidelines actually oppose all events "that are designed explicitly to bring together Palestinians/Arabs and Israelis so they can present their respective narratives or perspectives" and work toward reconciliation. Joint Israeli/Palestinian programs would be permissible only if they promote "co-resistance" rather than co-existence.

So which is it? Does NU Divest endorse only "financial neutrality," or does it agree with the parent BDS movement in abstaining from normalization and co-existence? Does it seek only to end the occupation, without condemning "a country, a people, or a community," or does it unfairly hold Israel responsible for police brutality in America? Is divestment from the six targeted companies an end in itself, or is it the leading edge in a destructive and divisive boycott campaign?

The answers to these questions are crucial because the outcome of the NU Divest operation will be closely watched at other schools. And its eventual tactics — whether they turn out to be admirably transparent or regrettably disingenuous — will serve as a model for other campuses.

Ending the occupation is a laudable goal but only if it is addressed honestly and without a hidden agenda. The gratuitous demonization of Israel, on the other hand, cannot bring anyone closer to peace.

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