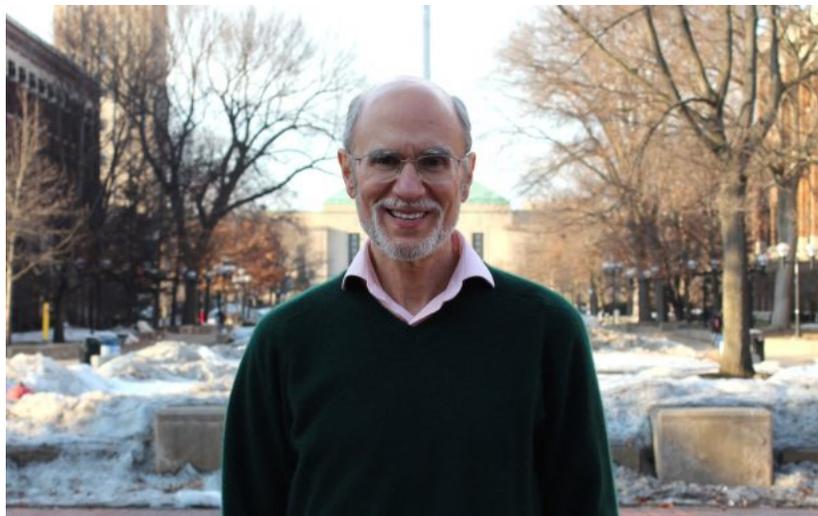


U-M Professor Not Allowed to Speak at BDS Meeting Speaks Out Now

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Newsroom



Victor Lieberman, Raoul Wallenberg Distinguished University Professor of History and Professor of Asian and Comparative History

An Open Letter to the University of Michigan Central Student Government from Victor Lieberman, Raoul Wallenberg Distinguished University Professor of History and Professor of Asian and Comparative History

On Nov. 14, the Central Student Government voted to prevent me from delivering a carefully prepared talk on divestment from Israel. The argument against my speaking was that “a structural power imbalance” within the university militates against the views of UMDivest and be rectified by removing me from the discussion.

This argument cannot withstand scrutiny for three reasons. First, it was claimed that junior faculty who speak against Israel risk being fired. No junior faculty has ever been fired for expressing political views, and such views have no bearing whatever on tenure or promotion.

Second, UMDivest could have engaged senior faculty to speak on their behalf. In my department alone, there are six senior professors particularly critical of Israel, four of whom signed an American Historical Association petition against Israel. Nineteen other faculty in various departments, mostly tenured and some very senior, signed the statement of support for UMDivest. If none of these professors spoke on Nov. 14, it’s because they weren’t interested or UMDivest didn’t ask them. Neither condition reflects a “structural power imbalance” within the university.

Third, UMDivest also could have enlisted outside academics or regional experts, as they have in past years. The ready availability of such experts for both sides argues further against the view that institutional factors prevented a level playing field.

In short, one side made better use of opportunities equally accessible to both. Imagine that the Michigan football team showed up to play OSU hadn’t bothered to practice. OSU therefore claimed that the game would be “unfair” unless the referee barred Michigan’s starting running backs from playing — and the referee agreed. An equitable solution?

Obviously, the real motive for preventing me from speaking was UMDivest’s fear that it lacked effective counter-arguments and that I might lose the vote. Free discussion therefore had to be prevented. Thus, we were treated to a surreal spectacle where a community activist from Dearborn who knows nothing about Middle East history or politics and who has no connection to U of M was allowed to speak for at least half an hour — while a U of M professor who teaches the subject was not allowed to speak for 10 minutes.

Censorship is the instinctive preference of people who “know” in advance that there is only one truth and entertaining alternate viewpoints is a waste of time. “Objective discourse” means a discourse that excludes views they don’t like. This is a position unworthy of a university whose duty is to promote the unfettered flow of ideas. It also runs counter to a lifetime of my own research and teaching, which has always embraced the open-ended interplay between divergent historical interpretations. Uncertainty is what makes intellectual life exciting. Unfortunately, intolerance on display Nov. 14 is part of a growing climate of intolerance that has led to the shutting down of speakers on college campuses across the country. Irony of ironies: While student representatives spoke in favor of silencing me, UMDivest supporters in the audience waved signs that read “Do Not Silence Me.”

The fact that the CSG debate was conducted under censorship can hardly have weakened U of M’s decision to ignore the CSG resolution.

Victor Lieberman

Victor Lieberman, a U-M history professor, was prevented from speaking at the Central Student Government meeting Tuesday, Nov. 14, when the body was calling for a vote on a resolution calling for university divestment from Israel.

Here are the words Lieberman would have delivered to the CSG:

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE BDS RESOLUTION”

Ways NOT to Judge This Resolution

I’d like to thank the CSG... I’m Vic Lieberman, Raoul Wallenberg Distinguished University Professor. I teach courses on world history, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, and I’ve written a textbook on that conflict.

Let me start by suggesting ways NOT to evaluate this resolution.

In my view, you can’t judge it on the basis of anecdotes.

You have heard, or will hear, stories of Palestinian suffering.

These are genuinely moving, but no more deserving of sympathy than stories about Israeli victims of terrorism, such as:

* The teenage Israeli girl whose feet were blown off by a bomb

* The little Israeli boy who this July saw his father and grandparents stabbed to death.

Likewise, I think it’s wrong — as I’ve heard some students say — that the CSG should support Palestinians because they are “brown” people struggling against “white” oppression.

Not only are Israeli Jews, most of whom come from Arab and African lands, physically indistinguishable from Arabs, but to judge issues of physical appearance is not a useful mode of analysis.

Who Is Responsible for the Ongoing Conflict?

The only way to judge this resolution is to analyze its central claims.

Is it true, as the Resolution claims, that Israel is historically responsible for Palestinian suffering?

Is it true that Israeli treatment of Palestinians violates international norms?

Now I agree that current Israeli policies are one obstacle to peace. But the question is: Why have these policies come to dominate?

Jews have offered to recognize Arab sovereignty in Palestine on at least five occasions.

Everything the Palestinian Authority claims it wants — Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, an independent state, a capital in East Jerusalem, an end to settlements, a partial return of refugees —

Israel has offered.

But every offer has been rejected.

What's more, every rejection has been accompanied by attacks with the declared goal of destroying the Jewish state.

This happened in 1948, 1967, 2000, 2006 2008, 2012, 2014.

Why this recurrent resort to violence?

* Because Palestinian leaders reject the 1947 decision of the United Nations that both peoples have historic rights in Palestine.

* This was the view of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Father of Palestinian nationalism, who worked during WWII with Adolf Hitler.

* It was the policy of the PLO, whose charter promised to destroy Israel and expel 95 percent of the Jewish population.

* It is the position today of Hamas whose leaders have declared,

"Palestine is ours from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea... We will never surrender one inch of land. There is no [hope] for Israel rid this land of the Jews... By God, we will not leave one Jew in Palestine."

One can easily sympathize — and I do — with the Palestinian sense of injustice, the feeling that they were displaced by alien intruders. But practical terms, maximum demands and violence have been extremely counterproductive. Palestinians have been the chief victims.

a) Every time Israel is attacked, it takes steps to prevent fresh attacks.

b) The Palestinian position therefore deteriorates, which creates more bitterness, which engenders more attacks, which inspires new Israeli measures. Thus the cycle goes on and on.

* If Palestinians had accepted the UN decision to divide Palestine between Jews and Arabs, Palestinians would have had their own state 70 years ago. Instead they joined Arab armies in an effort to destroy the Jewish State.

* If they hadn't urged Jordan to attack Israel again in 1967, Israel would never have occupied the West Bank

* If they hadn't used the West Bank to start the second intifada — bombing hotels, restaurants, buses all across Israel — Israel would not have built the separation wall, installed biometric IDs and other security controls, and expanded strategic settlements.

* If Hamas hadn't used Gaza to start three wars against Israel from 2008 to 2014, there would be no blockade of Gaza.

Israel doesn't use Apache and Blackhawk helicopters to target innocent civilians. They're used to defend against attacks by Hamas, Hezbollah and other terrorist militaries.

Israel has the same right as any other country to defend its people.

Fear that Hamas will repeat its Gaza behavior is the chief reason Israelis are now reluctant to leave the West Bank.

a) If Israel left the West Bank, Hamas — the most popular Palestinian movement — almost certainly would take over. It could then amass thousands of rockets 5 miles from Israel's main cities. And to help invade Israel, Hamas could invite in Iranian troops, who write on their flags "Israel must be destroyed."

b) In repeated polls, 70-75 percent of Jewish Israelis say they'd gladly get rid of the West Bank if militants would only agree to stop attacking Israel.

c) But Palestinians don't reciprocate: in poll after poll, some two-thirds say that their ultimate goal is Israel's disappearance.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia, a lifelong supporter of the Palestinians, summed up the problem when he begged Palestinian leaders to accept Israeli peace proposals in 2000:

"Since 1948, every time we've had something on the table, we say no. Then we say yes. But it's not on the table any more. Isn't it about time we finally said yes?...I hope you remember what I'm telling you: If we lose this opportunity, it's not going to be a tragedy, it's going to be a crisis."

But Palestinian leaders refused — and launched a suicide bombing campaign.

III. Does Israel Violate International Norms?

In this light, consider the claim that Israel's actions have been unusually harsh and bloody. In the last 10 years, in wars started by Palestir forces, while themselves suffering significant casualties, have killed 3500 Palestinians, about half civilians, according to the UN. Other countries have faced security threats far less serious than those facing Israel.

How does their behavior compare to Israel's — as documented by the UN, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch?

* To suppress a local revolt, Russia in Chechnya killed 200,000 Chechens, 90 percent civilians. Murdered and tortured w/ total impunity.

* To keep control over Muslim Kashmir, India killed 45,000 people... and passed laws to shield its soldiers from charges of rape, torture, murder.* To prevent Kurdish independence, Turkey has killed 50,000 Kurds and ethnically cleansed vast areas.

* Saudi Arabia has now killed 20,000 Yemeni civilians, and subjected 70 percent of Yemen to famine and cholera.

* But the world's most unspeakable atrocity is Syria, where Iran, Hezbollah and Russia have killed almost half a million and made 11 million homeless.

They use chemical weapons, bomb hospitals and operate vast torture centers, where prisoners are starved to death, metal spikes are driven into their anuses to their spines, lips and noses are sliced off, and 10s of 1000s are executed.

By contrast, Israel has no capital punishment even for terrorists. Israel's security services are subject to constant judicial review.

The commander of British forces in Afghanistan wrote, "[The Israeli army has] done more to safeguard the rights of civilians ... than any country in the history of [modern] warfare."

If I had time, I COULD GIVE YOU 50 OTHER EXAMPLES OF STATE VIOLENCE — in defiance of repeated UN resolutions — FAR more hideous than ANYTHING ISRAEL'S ENEMIES HAVE EVEN accused it of doing..

Why then are we focusing only on Israel? Why not India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, which also receive U.S. arms? Why not Hezbollah-dominated Syria, Russia, and Iran, which direct the slaughter in Syria?

And why not China, America's chief trading partner, which is practicing systematic genocide against Chinese Muslims and Tibetans?

The same double standards are used to criticize Israeli democracy.

a) The apartheid analogy is mere rhetoric. Like other international boundaries, the separation wall divides people on the basis not of race but of citizenship. South Africa — but citizenship.

On one side of the wall you have Israeli citizens — Arabs and Jews. On the other side, you have non-citizens.

b) Within Israel itself, Arab citizens enjoy the same legal rights as Jews. They sit in the parliament, the cabinet, the supreme court, they have access to universities and all public institutions.

Israel has the same freedom of speech as the U.S. So-called "political prisoners" are in jail not because they said something, but because they spoke or tried to kill other people.

c) The most authoritative survey of democracy, the *Economist Index of Democracy*, ranked 167 countries for democratic practices and treatment of minorities. #1 is the best.

Israel ranked #34. The U.S. ranked #20. No other Mideastern country ranked better than #57 and most ranked above #110.

The Need for Impartiality

So again I ask, why is Israel being singled out?

If you're going to consider gratuitous military violence, Israel is better than 95 percent.

If you're going to weigh internal democracy, Israel is better than 133 countries.

Now some proponents of this resolution say: Well, yes, maybe Israel isn't the worst, but they still do bad things and should be censored. But the CSG is being asked to act in a semi-judicial capacity. Justice requires uniform standards. What would you think of a judge who sentenced a man to 10 years in jail for double parking — but ignored charges against others accused of rape and murder?

Some supporters of this Resolution also say this is only a preliminary step. We'll set up an Advisory Committee to settle the issue. But for the only country subject to such an inquiry is itself deeply insulting — and completely unjustified.

This Resolution is merely a tactic in a long-standing political campaign to demonize and delegitimize Israel. It uses the same strategy, the rhetoric, to pursue the same goals as all other movements to boycott, divest and sanction Israel.

A national BDS leader Asad Abu-khalil has made clear the movement's goal, "The real aim of BDS is to bring down the State of Israel."

Omar Barghouti, a co-founder of BDS, concurs: "We oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine."

Proponents of this Resolution know that whatever an Advisory Committee decides, UM regents will not divest because the Resolution ignores basic legal conditions for divestment.

But they seek something much larger than withdrawal of money. Their real goal is to undermine Israel, to isolate it and ultimately to destroy

Israel has done nothing to deserve being singled out.

Its only offense is that it has refused to commit suicide.

Its "crime" has been to defend itself against constant attacks.

And in defending itself, Israel has acted more humanely than the vast majority of countries facing less existential challenges.

The CSG should have no part of this campaign.

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