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REVERSE BDS

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Since 2002, student activists have tried to pass anti-Israel divestment resolutions at the University of Michigan. This month, they succeeded on a 23-17 vote of the university's Central Student Government. But opponents of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement should not be demoralized by this result.

In spite of favorable circumstances for BDS in the United States, where fervent opposition to Donald Trump has opened a space for even marginal elements on the left, the BDS brand has not been selling at our colleges and universities. Perhaps it is the flirtation with anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Perhaps it is BDS' effective endorsement of violence against Israeli civilians wherever they may reside. Or perhaps it is BDS' romance with unrepentant terrorists. But the University of Michigan's resolution mentions the call of "Palestinian civil society" that supposedly initiated the BDS movement just once. And Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), whose very name obscures its primary purpose, the promotion of BDS, didn't mention "Palestinian civil society" at all in its statement of support for divestment.

For BDS to triumph with students, it has to obscure just what it is students are being asked to vote for. One supporter of the resolution

described its effect this way: “I understand the very deep connection many, many students have with Israel . . . I want to emphasize over and over again that this resolution emphasizes the voices of Palestinian students . . . and to give this community a voice for the first time in CSG history is to not take away from any other community.” That this claim, by no means limited to one student, had any purchase suggests that some proponents were not clued in to the resolution’s intent, however softened for pragmatic reasons. This is a movement dedicated to casting Israel out of the family of nations.

To make sure that representatives would be as clueless as possible, the resolution’s supporters successfully persuaded student government to deny history professor Victor Lieberman the opportunity to speak. Lieberman, who has written about and taught courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict, has apparently been too effective in opposition to BDS in the past. University of Michigan’s Hillel has rightly condemned the student government’s positive aversion to hearing from someone who has devoted years to studying a conflict on which these students have now pronounced their verdict, although most have presumably not studied it at all.

One frustrating feature of the BDS movement on campuses is that organizations like University of Michigan’s Hillel are constantly playing defense. It is hardly surprising that, after 11 years, a student government sufficiently naïve or partisan to pass a divestment resolution was in place. Once a divestment resolution passes on a campus, attempts to reverse it are rare.

But at places like U of M, an attempt at reversal may well be warranted. In the past, I have doubted the use of such efforts because the ugly debate that BDS produces can dirty Zionism. Students that are more or less indifferent to the issues and dislike all the yelling may see the two sides as equally suspect. In that respect, in spite of its remarkable skill

at embarrassing itself, BDS can do some harm even when it loses. At the same time, it hardly seems likely that pro-BDS students, having secured this small victory (the university will not actually divest), will stop campaigning against Israel. In light of that, and the closeness of this year's vote, why should pro-Israel students on campus withdraw from a fight they have won more times than they've lost?

A successful campaign need not imitate the propagandistic tactics of BDS. It can instead begin by discussing the origins and meaning of the movement from which this year's resolution emanates, a movement that even a campus like Vassar College, no hotbed of pro-Israel activism, has rejected. Student government representatives, manipulated by BDS activists, may be able to prevent knowledgeable people from speaking the truth during their debates. They do not have same power in the wider campus debate.

At the University of Michigan, and wherever BDS supporters have barely won after years of failing, the students and faculty that have fought BDS resolutions should not shy from seeking to have them reversed. Let them, for once, set the terms of the debate and put BDS, which cannot sustain close scrutiny, on the defensive.