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UI VOTE ON DIVESTMENT REFERENDUM CAUSES TENSION

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URBANA — A student advisory referendum on whether the University of Illinois should divest from companies linked to human-rights violations has become embroiled in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A ballot question in this week's campus election asked students whether trustees should withdraw UI investments from companies that "actively normalize, engage in, or fund recognized human-rights violations of marginalized groups worldwide."

The statement accompanying the ballot question specifies human-rights violations of "the Palestinian people and all peoples marginalized on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, class and ability."

It includes a list of 17 companies, including Boeing, Caterpillar, ExxonMobil, General Electric and Hewlett-Packard, chosen by

matching UI investments with reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other groups.

The measure also calls for more accountability in how the UI invests its funds. It builds on a resolution passed by the Academic Senate in April 2016, calling on the UI to divest its holdings in coal and switch to a passively managed, socially responsible investment fund.

Students voted Wednesday and Thursday, and the results will be announced at 5 p.m. today.

The campaign is sponsored by the group UIUC Divest. Supporters say that they don't want the UI to profit from "dirty money" and that pressure from investors can prompt companies to re-examine their practices.

UI senior Muhammad Yousuf of UIUC Divest said the divestment campaign is part of a broad movement meant to cover human rights globally, including such issues as mass incarceration, environmental destruction, child labor and Palestinian human rights.

Opponents say the measure is anti-Israel and linked to the Students for Justice in Palestine movement, which has chapters on numerous campuses.

'Not singling out Israel'

UIUC Divest's Facebook page carries an "I Divest" logo with a white dove on top of the Illini block orange "I" and the "i" in "divest" shaped like the country of Israel. A statement says it calls for divestment "from corporations that are complicit in and which profit from the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people."

"We just want people to be aware, because even students who aren't aware of what's going on have said, 'Hey, this question is worded in a very deceptive way,'" said freshman Elissa Hoffman, part of the "United Illini" group campaigning against the measure Thursday on the UI Quad.

Yousuf, who is also president of the Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at the UI, said the two groups are separate, though they share some members. He said UIUC Divest is concerned about the situation in Palestine, but "we're not singling out Israel."

"Part of the problem is that a lot of the companies that we're invested in ... are involved in the building of Israeli settlements or the operation of Israeli military checkpoints or the blockage of Gaza," he said.

While opponents say other countries should be targeted, too, Yousuf said the UI doesn't have a lot of investments in companies that operate in Saudi Arabia or Iran.

"We're not boycotting Israeli companies. We're only trying to divest in companies that are involved in the internationally recognized illegal activities of the Israeli government and military within Palestinian territories," he said.

More than half the companies were cited for ties to Israeli activities. The group says that Caterpillar makes heavy equipment used to develop more settlements in the West Bank; that Hewlett-Packard provides technology used in border control and prison systems in the U.S. and Israel; and that General Electric supplies the Israeli military with equipment used in attacks on civilians in Gaza.

But Tyson was singled out for its treatment of undocumented workers and for water pollution; Nestle made the list because of allegations of forced child labor and anti-union activities; and Citigroup was cited for its financial support of coal and the Dakota Access pipeline.

Rabbi: Swastikas spotted

The United Illini group focused its "vote no" argument on the impact the measure could have on the UI's relationships with those companies.

Freshman Michael Vilker said the move could jeopardize student scholarships, internships and job opportunities provided by the companies. Caterpillar is a major donor for the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences,

he said, and Boeing, Northrop Grumman and others have close ties to the College of Engineering.

"We are against students losing the opportunity to receive scholarships. We believe these companies should have a place on campus," and the UI should focus on student welfare first, he said.

But supporters emphasized that the resolution doesn't ask the university to sever all ties with the companies, and said the UI invests in them to grow its endowment, not win donations or scholarships.

"Those companies are still going to come here, because we have a great talent pool of students," said freshman Justin Bronzell, who is not affiliated with UIUC Divest but voted yes.

"I was voting on the referendum, not on any ideologies on either side. The referendum clearly stated, did I want to invest money in companies that have civil rights abuses, and I don't," Bronzell said.

Rabbi Dovid Tiechtel of the UI's Chabad House said the campaign has been divisive and adds to the unease over the desecration of Jewish graves and bomb threats at Jewish schools and synagogues nationwide.

This week, two swastikas were found on UI buildings, and several weeks ago, an Israeli flag was defaced with red

handprints, representing blood, at an immigration protest. Tiechtel said divestment campaigns across the country have prompted similar actions.

"People are nervous enough in the United States, and these things don't make it any better," he said.

'Enough divide already'

The UIUC Divest group strongly condemned the swastikas as a "horrendous and despicable display of anti-Semitism, hatred and racism" and said it's committed to fighting a new wave of anti-Semitism brought on by "the rise of fascism in the United States."

"It's not something that's been triggered by our campaign," Yousuf said. "This is something that's part of a larger trend in the United States."

Combating hatred by defending human rights is a big part of the campaign, the group said.

It linked to a letter of support from Jewish Voice for Peace, a national organization that fights anti-Semitism and other forms of injustice, including against Palestinians.

Tiechtel expressed appreciation for UI administrators who have tried to address anti-Semitic acts and others targeting other

minority students. He said the campus should focus on "what are we going to do to make our campus more tolerant?"

"We have to see what we can do to bring people closer," he said. "This is definitely not one of them."

Both Tiechtel and Yousef acknowledged that Jews and Muslims share common fears these days because of the political climate.

"My message is on unity and keeping students safe," Tiechtel said. "There's enough divide already."