

BDS movement draws dueling events at UMass Amherst

By **Laurie Loisel** Globe Correspondent, Updated November 12, 2019, 11:19 p.m.



Israeli flags hang near the minaret of a mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem in September. AHMAD GHARABLI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

AMHERST — When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, common ground is hard to find.

At the University of Massachusetts on Tuesday night, two competing events illustrated that gulf, offering differing perspectives in neighboring venues on the controversial boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement on Israel, which is known as BDS.

A panel of prominent intellectuals who support the movement addressed a full house at the Fine Arts Center for a panel called “Criminalizing Dissent: The Attack on BDS & American Democracy.”

Meanwhile, a group of about 100 students and community members turned out for a counter march and forum called “End Polarization Promote Peace” at the nearby Newman Center.

The BDS panel included Harvard professor and leading voice on race, religion, and philosophy Cornel West; Shaun King, a journalist and voice of the Black Lives Matter movement; Dima Khalidi, founder of Palestine Legal which advocates for pro-Palestinian activists; and, via Skype from Palestine, Omar Barghouti, co-founder of the BDS movement.

Founded in 2005, BDS is described by its advocates as a non-violent campaign urging boycotts and sanctions towards the Israeli government until Israel withdraws from occupied territories and Palestinian refugees are allowed to return to their homeland.

Critics of BDS say it is anti-Israel and anti-Semitic.

Prior to Tuesday’s panel, UMass Chancellor Kumble Subbaswamy released a letter to the university community stating “the BDS position in general fails to acknowledge the humanity on the Israeli side of the conflict and is considered by many as anti-Semitic.”

“It is troubling that such a one-dimensional, polarizing event should take place on our

campus,” the chancellor wrote. “A panel discussion where only one perspective is shared does little to increase the understanding of such a complex topic like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

During the panel, author and anti-racism activist Tim Wise took umbrage with Subbaswamy’s letter.

“My great-grandfather was run out of Russia by actual anti-Semitism,” he said, recounting a number of other incidents he and his family experienced at the hands of “actual anti-Semites.”

“Not one of them was Muslim, not one of them Palestinian, not one of them supporters of BDS,” he said. “So I do not need your chancellor or anyone else to tell me what anti-Semitism is.”

Tuesday’s panel was a follow-up to a similar BDS-related event at UMass last spring.

Communications professor Sut Jhally said he and other organizers decided to focus this one on the topic of free speech because of attempts to thwart discussion about BDS, actions he termed “unrelenting attacks on free speech coming from everywhere.”

“The autonomy and independence of the campus is under real threat,” he said. But, he said, faculty on university campuses must remain steadfast in their work to “teach the truth even when it may cut against the grain of powerful and repressive forces.”

Meanwhile, at the nearby Newman Center, “End Polarization, Promote Peace,” was held to encourage dialogue, according to organizer Stephanie Margolis, a UMass senior.

Margolis said she attended the previous BDS event, where she did not feel her belief that Israel has a right to exist was respected or accepted. She wanted to offer an opportunity for something different this time.

“You can have nuanced discussions even if you don’t agree at the start and you don’t have to agree coming out of the dialogue either,” said Margolis.

Margolis led a group of about 100 people on a walk from Kendrick Park in downtown Amherst, to the Fine Arts Center and then onto the Newman Center. Ahead of the march, organizers handed out buttons with peace signs on them reading “End Polarization Promote Peace” and gave marchers neon-colored glo-sticks, Israeli flags, and signs with slogans like “Let’s talk” and “I’m Jewish and I care for Palestinian Rights” to carry on the half-mile walk to campus.

But not all of the marchers were on board with their pro-peace message.

Leon Kadis, a UMass alum from the class of 1978 who lives in Newton came to campus to protest the BDS movement, which he believes is anti-Israel.

Holding an Israeli flag, he said the BDS movement is anti-Semitic.

“This demonization and slanderous lies against Israel, it’s not stopping and it can poison people’s minds,” he said. “It seems like Jews are fair game now.”

When march organizers talked about promoting peace, he objected to that focus.

“This is not just about peace, it’s about defending Israel against their enemies,” he said.

And when he was offered a sign reading “Let’s talk” to carry, he declined.

“I’m not that touchy-feely, said Kadis. “I’m here to support Israel. Period.”

Meanwhile, as the group prepared to march, student organizers speaking on bullhorns reminded them that the march was a peaceful one, and asked them to “stay on message,” and not argue or be aggressive to others they may not agree with.

Rabbi Aaron Fine, one of several speakers at the Newman Center, said it is challenging to create a response to the BDS panel that doesn’t play into the polarization, though that was what the students were trying to do with the alternative event.

“In relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the extremes are winning. A sane middle ground seems to barely exist,” he said, according to a copy of his remarks provided to the Globe. “A ground on which the inherent worth of every human being is valued — to affirm the humanity of both Palestinian and Israeli.”

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