

31 October 2017

To: Representative Louis Blessing III

Chairman Blessing, Vice Chair Reinke, Ranking Member Clyde, and fellow members of the Government Accountability and Oversight committee, I submit the following as opponent testimony against House Concurrent Resolution 10.

As a Jewish supporter of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and resident of Columbus, I am, frankly, appalled at this legislative attempt to identify Jewishness with the repressive state of Israel and thereby delegitimize the Palestinian struggle for justice as antisemitic.

It is true, as the text of the bill states, that Jewish religious sites, especially Jewish cemeteries, have been desecrated recently in the United States. What this has to do with critiques of the Israeli government is not so clear. The bill tries to implicate BDS campaigns in a variety of such antisemitic incidents and increased harassment of Jewish students, but a recent study by researchers at Stanford University found that Jewish students at a number of “hotspot” campuses in California feel safe and do not feel that their campuses are antisemitic. Moreover, as noted in their report,

The majority of our interviewees parsed differences between being Jewish and supporting Israeli policy, and they objected to the expectation that their identity as Jews meant they held one kind of politics[...]Many feel an affinity for Israel, which they carry from their childhoods, but they also readily acknowledge that Israel’s politics and policies generally often contradict their own political values.¹

At the same time, overt displays of fascism have been sweeping the country, including the murder of Heather Heyer at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA by a fascist from the state of Ohio. Openly white supremacist and fascist groups, including Identity Europa and Fascist Solutions, have put up flyers at Ohio State and Cleveland State. The white nationalist “alt-right” leader, Richard Spencer², is coming to speak at the University of Cincinnati and attempting to reserve space at OSU to give another speech. In addition, the AMCHA report, along with documenting BDS activity on campuses in Ohio, lists a number of truly reprehensible antisemitic incidents—drawings of swastikas, glorification of the holocaust and genocide, promotion of antisemitic conspiracy theories, etc. These, however, are omitted from the text of the bill. Given that the authors of the bill claim to be interested in creating a safer, more welcoming environment for students on our college campuses, this is a peculiar choice. While I feel no threat of antisemitism whatsoever from the Palestinian, Jewish, and other anti-Zionist students at OSU with

¹ Ari Y. Kelman et al., “Safe and on the Sidelines: Jewish Students and the Israel-Palestine Conflict on Campus” (Research Group of the Concentration in Education and Jewish Studies @ Stanford University, September 2017), <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/SafeandonthesidelinesReport>.

² Richard Spencer has called himself a proponent of a “sort of white Zionism” to establish a “white ethno-state” (see, e.g., his SPLC profile). He is also a virulent antisemite, showing again that antisemitism—oppression of Jews based largely in “scientific racism” and conspiratorial claims of manipulative Jewish influence—is distinct from critiques of the political ideology of Zionism and actions of the state of Israel.

whom I campaign for divestment from the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the complete silence in the face of neo-Nazis and their sympathizers is devastating.

Much of the bill blatantly misrepresents the goals and actions of the BDS movement. Contrary to the text, the BDS movement does not seek to “eliminate Israel as the home of the Jewish people” (which, considering the majority of Jews live *outside* of Israel, is a questionable description of Israel as is), but rather aims to grant *all* citizens, irrespective of faith, equal recognition and protection under law—a basic tenet of democratic society—and to end the theft of Palestinian land and resources being carried out in the name of Jewish self-determination at the expense of Palestinian self-determination.

The bill also quotes a completely fabricated slogan “Palestine forever, Israel Never Ever” that represents a bizarre inversion of the widespread Zionist claim that Palestine and the Palestinian people never existed—a claim that is used to justify the expansion of Israeli settlements and the continual shrinking of Palestinian territory.

Perhaps the chief irony of the bill, however, is its supposed support for free speech. The Center for Constitutional Rights and Palestine Legal have thoroughly documented the so-called “Palestine exception” to free speech³, which this bill threatens to extend. Likewise, the ACLU has filed a suit on behalf of a Kansas math teacher who has supported the call for BDS and was, as a result, banned from working as a contractor in a Kansas Department of Education training program⁴. The Supreme Court ruled that boycotts are legally protected in a 1982 case recognizing the constitutionality of the NAACP boycott of white-owned businesses in protest of racial segregation in Mississippi. This bill does not support free speech; it restricts it.

I welcome any genuine attempts to combat antisemitism—I know that I’ve experienced enough already in my life. Continuing to conflate my Jewishness with the criminal Israeli state and silence dissent, on the other hand, is entirely unwelcome.

Sincerely,

Ethan Ackelsberg

³ “The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in the US” (The Center for Constitutional Rights & Palestine Legal, September 2015), <https://cctjustice.org/the-palestine-exception>.

⁴ Brian Hauss, “The Right to Boycott Is Under Threat,” *ACLU: Speak Freely* (blog), n.d., <https://www.aclu.org/blog/free-speech/right-boycott-under-threat>.