

Testimony for Hearing on Ohio HCR 10
March 21, 2018
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To: Senator LaRose

Chairman LaRose, Vice Chair Kunze, Ranking Member Schiavoni and members of the Committee:

I appreciate being able to explain my personal position concerning HCR 10, to Condemn the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement and increasing incidents of anti-Semitism. I share the sponsors' grave concerns regarding the dramatic increase in anti-Semitic events in Ohio and across our country. I strongly oppose all forms bigotry, oppression, discrimination and injustice and condemn verbal and physical violence especially that based on racial, ethnic, or religious bias.

However, I speak in opposition to this resolution because it is not directed at opposing anti-Semitism. It is a very thinly veiled attack on our first amendment rights of free speech and assembly specifically directed at groups working for Palestinian equal rights and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement on college campuses in Ohio. It is totally unjustified to blame the recent increase in anti-Semitism on the activities of campus groups that have been in existence for a much longer time.

There are changes in the political landscape of our country at a much higher level that have encouraged an increase of outright displays of hate and violence. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are 35 hate groups in Ohio. The SPLC list does not include any groups that work for Palestinian human rights at Ohio Universities and Campuses as hate groups. These are the groups that our legislature should condemn.

The U.S. Department of State, in its definition of anti-Semitism states that criticism of Israel like that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic. (1) Additionally, in the instances of worldwide anti-Semitism reported on their website, there are no incidences directly related to activities of the International BDS campaign.

According to one source, there were 88 incidences of anti-Semitic events at universities and colleges in Ohio from 2015-2018. (2) Over 78% of these incidents involved BDS meetings, teach ins, screening of documentaries, lectures, letters to the editor, opinion editorials, workshops on BDS, and debates and votes held at The Ohio State University. All these activities fall under first Amendment protected political speech and the right to assemble. The right to boycott for social change was upheld by the Supreme Court during the Civil Rights Struggle in the U.S. In addition to being protect free speech, these activities are important to vibrant and challenging academic life.

The remaining incidences of anti-Semitism included threats, graffiti, Facebook posts and Tweets. There is no evidence that these were in any way connected to campus BDS or educational activities organized by student groups.

There is concern that these activities make Jewish students uncomfortable. This is an oversimplification considering that there are Jewish students who support equal rights for Palestinians and/or the BDS movement. In addition, a recent study at Stanford University, called "Safe on the Sidelines," surveyed

Jewish students for 10 months on five campuses in California and uncovers a far more complex and diverse picture. The students reported feeling comfortable on their campuses, and, more importantly, comfortable as Jews on their campuses. The study found that student safety is partially predicated on students' refusal to conflate their Jewish identities with unequivocal support for the State of Israel, as students argue that they feel unsafe only when an attack on Israel becomes an attack on the Jewish community. In this study, less than 10 percent of Jewish students who were interviewed articulated the belief that anti-Israel sentiment is, by definition, anti-Semitism. (3)

Over the years, I have attended many events and meetings at OSU held on the issues of Palestinian rights and BDS. I have never seen any of the students of SJP (or the older Committee for Justice in Palestine) or OSU Divest, act in any way disrespectful or uncivil to any other student or any guest speaker, including those who were in opposition to them. I have, however, seen them suffer rude verbal assaults by other students.

The International BDS movement is not anti-Semitic. The call to BDS issued by 170 Palestinian civil society organizations asked the international community to stand for freedom, equality and justice. The goals of the movement are to end the 50-year old, illegal occupation of the Palestinian territory, establish equality under the law between Palestinians and Israelis living in Israel, and to address the rights of Palestinian refugees – all in accordance with International law and internationally accepted standards of human rights. It does not target or blame individuals, but seeks to realize its goals through campaigns to hold companies and institutions complicit in violations of law or human rights abuses accountable for their actions.

I personally support BDS as a member of the United Methodist Church and United Methodists for Kairos Response (UMKR). United Methodist Church West Ohio Conference has made it a priority to actively oppose xenophobic, racist, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and anti-Muslim threats against all persons within our communities, and will support efforts to build relationships among people of diverse ethnicities, religions and cultures. (Please see handout.) I have also attended some meetings at OSU held by Students for Justice in Palestine and OSU Divest and supported some of their actions. I personally know many of the students involved in these groups at OSU.

BDS upholds the simple principle that Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as the rest of humanity. BDS is supported by unions, NGOS, academic associations, churches, progressive Jewish organizations and grassroots movements across the world.

In 2009, all the Christian religious leaders in Israeli/Palestine issued a letter called the Kairos Document, A Moment of Truth, A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering. This letter documented the sheer desperation of the Palestinian people due to the situation on the ground including, among other things, the separation wall, the illegal Israeli settlements, the daily humiliation of military checkpoints, the discrimination against Palestinians living in Israel, and restrictions on religious liberty. The Kairos document called on the international community to support the BDS movement and all nonviolent opposition to the oppression of the Palestinian people with aim to “eventually reach the longed-for resolution to our problems, as indeed happened in South Africa and with many other liberation movements in the world.” (4)

This document inspired United Methodist clergy and laity from around the United States to come together in October 2010 to create a grass roots organization to respond to a plea for help called United Methodists for Kairos Response to support the call for BDS within our denomination.

UMKR is deeply concerned about the wave of local, state and national anti-BDS legislation like HCR 10 that are being introduced in state legislatures. These legislative efforts threaten to limit our first amendment rights of free speech and free exercise of religion. They state that these legislative actions contradict the United Methodist Church's longstanding policies of supporting nonviolent economic advocacy as a means for supporting human rights and dignity of all people. (5)

Anti-BDS legislation has been widely opposed by religious, civil rights, and human rights organizations including American Civil Liberties Union, American Friends Service Committee, Churches for Middle East Peace, Presbyterian Church USA Office of Public Witness, Friends of Sabeel North America, Palestine Legal, Peace Not Walls (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), United Church of Christ, United Methodists for Kairos Response, and US Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

There does not seem to be any other nonviolent way that the government of Israel can be held accountable for the illegal occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights, discrimination against Palestinian citizens inside of Israel, and the expansion of illegal settlements into the Palestinian territories, the virtual siege of Gaza, and the continued denial of the right of return of refugees.

I believe that the movement for nonviolent economic boycott can be catalyst for social change that would benefit both the citizens of Israel, the people of Palestine and the international community by encouraging the state of Israel to adopt policies that would allow all the people of the land to live with dignity, security and peace.

A much better approach to combating anti-Semitism would be to pass a resolution to encourage informed debate, formal educational courses, and civil discussion of issues related to peace, justice and human rights on university campuses and everywhere in our state.

Although this is a non-binding resolution, it could be used to curtail free speech on college campuses and delegitimize student organizations working for peace, justice and human rights.

Please do not vote for this resolution.

I would be happy to take questions.

Thank you.

(1) Defining Anti-Semitism. <https://www.state.gov/s/rga/resources/267538.htm>. Accessed 3-19-2108.

(2) AMCHA Initiative. <https://amchainitiative.org/antisemitism-tracker>. Accessed 3-19-18.

(3) Safe and on the Sidelines. A Report of the Research Group of the Concentration in Education and Jewish Studies @ Stanford University, September 2017.

<https://stanford.app.box.com/v/SafeandonthesidelinesReport>, Accessed 3-19-18.

(4) Kairos Palestine. <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-us/kairos-palestine-document>. Accessed 3-19-2018.

(5) UMKR Opposes Anti-BDS Legislation.

https://www.kairosresponse.org/antibdslegislation_briefingpaper_jan2016.html, Accessed 3-19-18.