

DIVESTMENT FROM ISRAEL: Presentation at Columbia University

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I want to start by thanking the organizers of this important event for inviting me to speak. I am honored not only to share the podium with such a distinguished group of Columbia professors, but also because it is always an honor to speak on behalf of a cause that is just.

The issue before us – whether Columbia should divest from companies selling arms to Israel – forces us to confront the analogy of present day Israel to apartheid South Africa, an analogy that Columbia President Lee Bollinger recently termed “grotesque and offensive.” Let me read from a dissenting view to his:

Many in the top echelons of the [Israeli] security establishment in the 1970s and 1980s had a warm spot in their hearts for the white apartheid regime in South Africa that was derived not only from utilitarian interests, but also from sympathy for the white minority rulers in that country. One of the elements of the old South African regime that stirred much interest in Israel remains current to this day: To seemingly solve the demographic problem that troubled the white South Africans (that is, to hang on to all of South Africa without granting equal rights, civil rights and the vote to blacks), the South African regime... established small enclaves throughout the country and called them “independent states.” These helpless, unsustainable enclaves were surrounded by South African territory and run by collaborators totally subservient to the authority of the larger “neighbor,” South Africa. All the blacks outside these fictitious “states” were arbitrarily assigned citizenship in those states. In other words, they became foreign residents in their own land.

For those who desire to keep the West Bank and Gaza, to expand the settlements without annexing the Palestinian population, and who understand that transfer [ethnic cleansing] is impractical, the original South African model is particularly tempting... Without anyone taking notice, a process is underway establishing a “Palestinian state” limited to the Palestinian cities, a “state” comprised of a number of separate, sovereign-less enclaves, with no resources for self-sustenance. The territories of the West Bank and Gaza remain in Israeli hands, and its Palestinian residents are being turned into “citizens” of that “foreign country.”

This was written by Avi Primor, Vice President of Tel Aviv University and former Deputy Foreign Minister under the previous Israeli government. Like many Israelis, faced with a ruling elite contemptuous of all dissent and hell-bent on imposing repressive “solutions” that will lay the ground for years of mutually escalating violence, Primor speaks out directly and unapologetically against his government’s unrestrained militarism.

What would happen if I wrote a similarly direct article here in the United States?

First, it would never ever get published in a mainstream paper. This is a very serious problem, and we need to consider what it tells us about the nature of acceptable speech in our democracy, especially concerning Israel and Zionism.

But let us imagine the unimaginable. One day the entire editorial staff at the New York Times is out with the flu, and some junior associate with principles decides to strike a blow for free speech. What would be the likely results?

We all know, without a shadow of a doubt, that I would be widely denounced as anti-Semitic, a self-hating Jew. I might find myself under attack from Daniel Pipes's Campus Watch or Lynn Cheney's quasi-governmental front recently established to encourage spying and censorship in our citadels of free speech. Or I might end up the latest target in Larry Summers self-righteous crusade to root out offensive speech in the university's marketplace of allowable ideas. Certainly Alan Dershowitz would demand that I be tortured, and my Brooklyn neighborhood razed to the ground to deliver a clear message that no community will get away with harboring such an evil-doer.

It is easy to mock our present reality, yet this is no joke. Today in the United States of America, Professor Dershowitz of Harvard Law School, a well-known champion of human rights and civil liberties (no joke), can be seen and heard throughout our media advocating for torture – torture – of suspected – suspected – terrorists. We can all witness how broad is the net that suspicion casts these days, and how dark its shadow. His public call to raze to the ground an entire Palestinian village if it houses a single terrorist – echoing a well-documented Nazi practice that was explicitly condemned at Nuremberg 50 years ago – has been met with silence from official America, our government, our media, our elite shapers of mass opinion.

Contrast this to Professor Sami Al-Arian, very publicly fired from Florida State University for daring to express his personal view that Palestinians, like all of us, deserve basic human rights, rights denied them by a most brutal and unjust Israeli occupation backed by the full force of the world's only superpower.

So this is our present reality: the professor advocating torture remains a well-respected and well-paid talking head while the one upholding human rights is silenced and disappeared from a public university.

How can this be? I thought we passed 1984 by almost two decades ago.

Well, we live in exceptional times, so we are told. The rules have changed after 9/11, we are dealing with ruthless Palestinian terrorists, Muslim terrorists, global terrorists.

And what makes them so different from us? Well, they are evil-doers, they hate our freedom and justice, they even kill our innocent children in the name of a higher cause.

Does any of this sound familiar to anyone?

I hesitate to make another "unacceptable" analogy, but that is the job of a human rights fundamentalist. So let us ask ourselves: is it really true that only "they" commit such evil deeds? How about us, our government, our immensely powerful army the likes of which this planet has never seen, or the Israeli government and its regionally dominant and conquering army, or the rest of the world's repressive governments and armies that, as we gather here tonight, are busily piling up the corpses of all the suspected terrorists who dare to threaten their ruling prerogatives. The clownish manipulation of this so-called war against terror by a motley collection of repressive governments to justify unspeakable acts of violence has reached obscene levels –

witness our friend and ally, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, as he defends his army's brutal rampage through Chechen villages by referring to **[QUOTE IN NY TIMES]**.

Returning to the issue of Israeli apartheid, the willingness of Israeli media and society to discuss openly the South Africa analogy seems to indicate a more robust commitment to democratic speech than is evident right here in the land of the free. As a frequent traveler to Israel, I find much truth to this impression, with one very important qualifier.

Israel is a democracy for Jews only, a situation which does not conform to the textbook political science, not to mention international law, definition of a democratic state as granting full and equal rights to all its citizens regardless of race, religion, or similarly exclusive categories. Here we have another echo of the anti-apartheid movement: the popular struggle for democracy, real democracy, based on equal participation of all members of society, in principled opposition to the status quo of tiered citizenship with differing "privileges" for different groups. And another echo: the belief that state-sponsored denial of equal rights is not just a domestic concern but a fundamental issue of global justice.

The concrete reality of this "democratic" experience for the Palestinian national minority that now comprises 20% of Israel's population is one of systemic legalized discrimination. A few examples will suffice. As a Jew I have the right to return – not to Russia where my family lived for generations before coming to this country – but to the Galilee, for example, to usurp the home of a Palestinian whose family may have lived in that home for generations before being expelled during the birth of the state of Israel. Even today, most Israeli land is reserved for Jewish ownership only. Moreover, Palestinians are excluded from a substantial range of social benefits reserved exclusively for army veterans, meaning Jews (except for selected Druse and Bedouin tribes). According to government socio-economic and demographic surveys, the poorest 30 municipalities in Israel are all Arab towns, and the next poorest are inhabited by Mizrahi Jews formerly from Arab countries.

Remember, this is the Palestinian national minority living within Israel, not the stateless Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank suffering under a ruthless occupation, their families deprived of adequate food, water, and shelter, while clearly visible on the commanding hills overlooking their own underdeveloped towns, are the green watered lawns of Israel's illegal Jewish colonies.

Again let us try to imagine the unimaginable. You are a parent responsible for the lives of your family in Jenin, or Nablus, or one of the many centuries-old communities that have yet to be destroyed and eliminated from memory. The first thing to understand is that you can do nothing, absolutely nothing, to protect yourself and your loved ones. Someone else, armed with all the sophisticated weapons of modernity, controls and patrols your land. Living close amongst you are foreign colonists and occupying army units with the declared will and manifest ability to claim your land, your water, your trees, your home. Perhaps your grandparents were expelled from their home in 1948, and your parents again in 1967. Now here you are, watching their military machine as it deploys for battle, watching their propaganda machine as it transforms you from a free human being into a freedom-hating terrorist, watching the world's only superpower

praise the man of peace in Jerusalem and reward his great vision by pouring more weapons into your land already bristling with every weapon known to man.

Under these circumstances, how would you speak of the future to your 12-year old son? What dreams would you harbor for your infant daughter? And how would you choose to act out your remaining days?

Not so long ago, the U.S. also practiced systemic racism and legalized discrimination. But today we don't consider the period before the success of the civil rights movement as a highwater mark of American democracy. South Africa practiced democracy for whites only. They called it apartheid, or separation, and claimed to be the only democracy in Africa. But no one else called it a democracy, except a handful of ideologues like former Congressman Dick Cheney.

The most recent symbol, and concrete reality, of Israeli apartheid is the new fence being constructed throughout the hills and valleys of the West Bank. Extended families are literally being cut in half; farmers must now conjure up the memories of olive groves nurtured by their families for hundreds of years but now hidden behind a concrete wall of separation. This "grotesque and offensive" project is being paid for your hard-earned tax dollars.

In fact, our money is paying for a variety of war crimes – from the deployment of F-16 fighter jets, Apache helicopters, hellfire missiles, and Caterpillar bulldozers against squalid shantytowns and refugee slums, to the literal construction of settler-apartheid towns, road networks, and concrete walls whose sole strategic purpose (biblical motivation being outside the scope of this presentation) is to establish Israeli control over Palestinian resources and to impose physical, political, economic, and social separation between the conquering Jewish colonists and the immiserated Palestinian natives.

On this issue of separation, this practice of cutting something whole into pieces – whether land, a people, or a single person – it is worth contrasting the ancient wisdom of Solomon with the modern logic of Sharon.

In addition to the abuse of my tax dollars, I find it equally disturbing that the Pentagon has declared publicly, without shame, and without a whisper of critique from our intrepid free press, that it is carefully studying Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz's masterful military assault against the Jenin refugee camp for potential lessons in urban warfare to be applied in Iraq. Never mind that Amnesty International is calling for responsible Israeli commanders like Mofaz to stand trial before international courts on charges of committing grave and systematic war crimes in Jenin – not just indiscriminate killing of civilians, but also deliberately attacking ambulances to prevent them from caring for the wounded and dying. Another lesson the Pentagon has apparently mastered is the "targeted elimination" of suspected terrorists and anyone near them, the strategy of systematic political assassination pioneered and championed by Israel. And more generally, the U.S. and Israeli governments are sharing strategy, tactics, and intelligence as their armies prepare for major military assaults to redraw the national boundaries of the Arab world and requisition the region's natural wealth.

With these realities in mind, perhaps we should revisit that once-asked-but-now-forgotten question: why do they hate us? Is it really true, as our leaders insist, that they, meaning Palestinians, Arabs, Muslims, and perhaps soon most of the world's peoples, want to throw all the Jews of Israel into the sea? Is it really true that they hate American freedom, our way of life, our goodness so much that they wish to sacrifice their own children and plunge the world into endless war?

I have walked through the cities and towns of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine in the immediate aftermath of bloody military assaults by the U.S. or Israel. Everyone I met hated those attacks, and hated also the underlying U.S.-Israeli policies that prop up repressive regimes throughout their region and deny ordinary people the very freedom and democracy that our leaders market to them so relentlessly. Yet at the same time, I, the Jewish-American stranger, was received with greater warmth and hospitality in these conflicted lands than when traveling in my own hometown of New York City.

So, from my perspective as one in 6 billion, the answer to the question is, first of all, that "they" do not exist as a monolithic whole speaking in one voice, and in any case, they certainly do not hate us, let alone our freedom, but yes, they do indeed despise their daily dose of injustice with made-in-the-USA or made-in-Israel labels. Which is to say that they are human beings, and like all people in all places at all times, they hate injustice and desire fair treatment for themselves and especially for their children. And so they rebel when promised justice but dealt oppression. This understanding is so self-evident that it boggles the inquiring mind how our multi-billion dollar media industry has managed to avoid imparting it to the American people.

I have no doubt that if our political and media elites allowed Americans access to information from outside the tightly-circumscribed parameters of acceptable speech, most of us would be fully behind this simple program of freedom and equality for Palestine – as is the entire world outside of Israel and the U.S. Otherwise why bother to limit the information flow in the first place? I also believe that the current US policy of unconditional support to Israel will begin to change the instant that Americans begin to understand that we the people are bankrolling, from our own shrinking pockets, these illegal and abhorrent Israeli policies – at the same time that our government is sacrificing our civil liberties to better isolate and repress disfavored communities, burying our children's future beneath a mountain of national debt, restructuring our tax system to protect the already-affluent while poverty and inequality rise outside their gated communities, and cutting to the bone our shamefully inadequate public services in health, education, housing, and welfare to fuel the explosive growth of a new military-security complex that benefits a relative handful of corporate interests.

We who oppose these crimes, which now masquerade as big brother's firm response to terrorism, are often challenged to provide The Answer to all the world's man-made crises. Failure to deliver a one-sentence totalizing theory is taken as evidence of our hopeless, albeit well-meaning, naiveté.

So here is the simple response: all human rights for all people, all the time. Universal principles of justice applied equally in all situations. The funny part is, this answer also happens to be the paramount commitment of all the world's peoples as expressed in the Charter of the United

Nations, not to mention the solemn legal obligation of all the world's governments, dating back to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and continuing through a plethora of binding international treaties.

We can call this approach human rights fundamentalism, the only fundamentalism that is fundamentally universal, the only one that seeks the collective betterment of all of humanity rather than the elevation of the privileged few at the expense of the superfluous many.

The equal application of universal human rights principles, derived through the ages from the common heart of all religious and ethical traditions, is not just a conceptual abstraction but a practical program for resolving the world's myriad injustices. It would compel us, for example, to stand together in unequivocal condemnation of all forms of terrorism, all attacks against innocents in the name of a higher cause, whether freedom or God, whether committed by the professional armies of the U.S. or Israel or the underground cells of Al Qaeda or Islamic Jihad.

Of course we can complicate even the simplest of issues. When I attended law school, the established teaching method was to invent unrealistically complex hypotheticals with all sorts of slippery slopes. But unless I'm missing something, what we need to resolve the horrendous conflict in the holy land is comparatively straightforward: an immediate and unconditional end – with no more security zones and settlements and checkpoints – to Israel's military occupation, together with the elimination of all forms of discrimination between classes of citizens and the establishment of genuine democratic governance throughout the land. We need to unite behind the basic concepts of freedom and equality, whether in two states, one state, or 20 states.

It sometimes seems that these ideas have no place in our fearful world, wracked by war and rumors of war. But we must never forget that it is our world too. We have no other, so we must not allow our leaders to shape it in their image. We do not have to be silent, to lose our voices and our dignity. We cannot be forced to deny our common humanity, based as it is on the many inheritances we share rather than the few differences that make each of us (thankfully) unique.

It is true that we live in a precarious moment of history, poised at the precipice of endless war, an apocalypse promised by both "our" leaders and "their" leaders. We must understand that these men will do everything within their considerable powers to deliver us into this evil – what else can we call war without end? – unless we join together and stop this lockstep descent into madness.

So my advice, for what it's worth, is that we should not wait for the violence to stop, otherwise it will never stop, and eventually it will consume us all.

We are here tonight because we too have a vision and a plan for Palestine, Israel, the Middle East, the globe, and certainly the universities, campuses, and communities in which we live and work here in the U.S. We believe that the compassionate face of justice is the same everywhere, as is the brutal visage of injustice. The war against Palestine, the war against Iraq, the war against poor people in this country and the world over – it is the same war, fought for the same interests, promoted by those amongst us who value power and gold above peace and justice. But we don't need to follow them any longer.

We should never forget that the future is not pre-ordained, as our overlords would have us believe, not so long as we retain the capacity to think and to act.

We should also remember that successful social justice movements, including the anti-apartheid struggle, have always welcomed students and young people still capable of seeing both the problems of this world and the possibilities of a better world.

We read and hear much these days about the rage and nihilism of today's youths, but what of their hope and courage? The children of Soweto, the children of Deheishe, all the children who have died in struggle and who will continue to die because some inherent force compels them to rebel against the iron law of injustice, something within them glows with a light that cannot be extinguished even in the darkest of times, a light that is always passed to succeeding generations.

Our children are not yet old enough to have learned that life is unfair, that the poor will always be with us, that some of us are born just to die. Shall we teach them such grim lessons, or instead shall we learn from their hope and resistance and join their cause, which after all is the cause of life itself?

So let's not worry too much if we, the human rights fundamentalists, currently number 5% or 50% of the American population – we can't trust these polls anyway! Let's not worry whether our last demonstration drew 10,000 or 100,000. Let each one of us continue to do act exactly as our conscience dictates. In fact, let's each commit one additional act of justice that before tonight we might not have done.

I am convinced that we will win in the end. I am convinced that there is a global consciousness awakening amongst humanity, based on a commonly-shared feeling that justice is greater than vengeance, peace greater than war, truth greater than lies, love greater than hate, life greater than death.

The old saying – that no one among us can save our world, but together we can – is no less true for being a cliché. And if we feel slightly ridiculous speaking these trite little truths, don't forget that it is the purveyors and marketers of injustice who should feel ashamed, not the majority of us who simply want to help make our world a better place.

Mahmood Mamdani has spoken of the mid to late 1980s as the nadir in South Africa's struggle against apartheid, the point of total despair. The white nationalist government was firmly in place, the popular opposition had been routed, killed, humiliated, or jailed, the legal structure of apartheid seemed stronger than ever, the military-security apparatus appeared invincible, and at the global level, ascendant Reaganism stood squarely behind apartheid as an African bulwark against Soviet influence. Not a soul dared to believe that the end of South African apartheid was a matter of the years on one hand. But it was true nonetheless.

Our historical moment may appear to be even bleaker, the forces of militarism even more invincible, but who knows what forces are moving beneath the surface of history? Mass

mobilizations of a size not seen since the 1960s are coming together almost spontaneously, in the space of weeks rather than years. Who can predict the significance of millions of ordinary people throughout Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere, spurred by global communications and a deep sense of outrage, demonstrating their strong opposition to war in Iraq and Palestine even before these attacks are launched in earnest?

Which is precisely why it is so important that all of us are here this evening to call for divestment from Israel until there is justice in Palestine. We are gathered together in the tradition of the international solidarity movement that helped win democracy for all South Africans. Anyone who doubts that we are heirs to that struggle, inheritors of that cause, need only listen to Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and other anti-apartheid heroes support divestment from Israel with the same passion and insight that they brought to their own justice struggle. Speaking recently to an American audience in Boston, Archbishop Tutu declared:

The end of apartheid stands as one of the crowning accomplishments of the past century, but we would not have succeeded without the help of international pressure – in particular the divestment movement of the 1980s... If apartheid ended, so can this [Israeli] occupation, but the moral force and international pressure will have to be just as determined. The current divestment effort is the first, though certainly not the only, necessary move in that direction.