

FULL COMMENT

Avi Benlolo: The new face of BDS



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Students against Israeli apartheid hold a rally in support of their divestment campaign against Israel, in Ottawa in 2011. Bruno Schlumberger/Ottawa Citizen

The world is finally waking up to the cancer called BDS - the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanction campaign. I can recall countless meetings with Israeli officials who originally dismissed this insidious, anti-Semitic movement. Now they want to set up conferences and send emissaries to counter the scourge.

Yet the BDS campaign is no longer just the BDS campaign. Like all anti-Semitic libels and propaganda initiatives dating back over 2,000 years, it metastasized while the Jewish world was slowly catching on. It is now going through a re-brand on university campuses because of: 1) the negative and anti-Semitic connotation of the term "boycott," with its undertones of the Final Solution; 2) political condemnation

and counter-legislation targeting BDS in Canada, the United States and Europe; and 3) the need for a wider, socially acceptable umbrella to be used as a cover to promote an anti-Semitic narrative through the denunciation of Israel.

The new brand name for BDS is "Divestment." This latest incarnation is billed at Toronto's York University as #YUDivest. It is a strategy that aims to bring together student groups and faculty alike under a singular declaration against the financing of arms manufacturers.

On the surface, almost everyone would agree that a university should not be investing in military equipment. And yet, the organization behind the #YUDivest campaign at York is called "Students against Israeli Apartheid" (SAIA). It's a group that promotes harmful propaganda against Israel. Indeed, the only democracy in the Middle East that safeguards minority rights, gay rights, women's rights, Palestinian rights and freedom for all, is the only country maligned by SAIA and slandered as an "apartheid state."

While most student groups and faculty had difficulty aligning with the BDS movement, they now find vindication under the #YUDivest umbrella, which masquerades as an anti-military coalition. Its true raison d'être, however, is the condemnation of Israel under the SAIA mandate - a mission that finds a receptive audience in the toxic, anti-Semitic environment on the York campus.

The campaign struck gold when it received the endorsement of the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) executive and Stewards Council. YUFA, however, adamantly denies the endorsement of #YUDivest has anything to do with BDS. That's a disingenuous sentiment, considering SAIA acknowledges it is the group that initiated the #YUDivest campaign in the first place.

The change from BDS to Divestment is spreading widely. Over 125 University of Toronto faculty members have announced their support for the Graduate Student Union's Divestment campaign, while students at the University of Illinois in Chicago, who have an active Divestment campaign, are less shy about admitting this is all about Israel. In fact, the map of Israel features prominently in their logo - as their target country.

The Divestment movement, couched in the language of human rights, is in reality a malicious campaign that targets and singles out the Jewish community as a collective, demonizes Israel and Israelis, applies unfair double standards to Israel at the exclusion of other nations in the Middle East and rejects the legitimacy of Israel as the only Jewish state in the world, thereby inciting an abhorrent resurgence of anti-Semitism.

It is deeply troubling to see this phenomenon of hate coming from an ideologically inspired group of students. It is contemptible to learn it is supported by university professors. History has shown us that not even campuses, and faculty, are immune from the forces of hatred and discrimination.

All of this speaks to the critical question: is there a cure for anti-Semitism in academia?

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Avi Benlolo is the president & CEO of Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies.