



Profile: Students for Justice in Palestine

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INTRODUCTION

Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), a student organization with over 115 chapters at American universities, is the primary organizer of anti-Israel events on U.S. college campuses and the group most responsible for bringing divestment resolutions to votes in front of student governments. SJP chapters throughout the U.S. routinely initiate Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaigns against corporations and individuals that do business with Israel and frequently organize events many of which accuse Israel of war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Since its founding in 2001, SJP has consistently demonized Israel, describing Israeli policies toward the Palestinians as racist and apartheid-like, and comparing Israelis to Nazis or Israel to the Jim Crow-era U.S. SJP chapters around the country plan many types of anti-Israel events throughout the school year such as presentations from guest speakers and student-led teach-ins that address a number of topics such as how to best initiate BDS campaigns against Israel or why Israel is allegedly an “apartheid state.”

In addition to hosting presentations and organizing teach-ins, many SJP chapters also attempt to draw attention to Israel's alleged wrongdoings in a sensationalistic way. Several SJP chapters have gone about doing this by displaying props such as mock “apartheid walls” and Israeli checkpoints around main areas of campus. On certain instances, members of SJP have also made an extra effort to demonize the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) by standing next to their props and acting as cruel Israeli soldiers who look to create travel difficulties for Palestinians in the West Bank.

SJP has become increasingly unified in recent years and its chapters have begun to collaborate more closely, sometimes forming into coalition groups made up by region. Previously, most SJP chapters operated independently of each other, but this changed after SJP became a national organization with a Steering Committee that has organized national conferences for four years in a row on different campuses around the U.S.

These conferences have had different themes, but each year the main goal appears to be to bring active SJP members from around the country together to discuss the successes they may have experienced on their respective campuses and to strategize about future campaigns and ways they can cooperate. The results of these conferences are evident with SJP chapters working together to coordinate actions such as divestment campaigns or “Israeli Apartheid Week” in unison so that multiple campuses are “educating” their student bodies with the same viewpoint and dealing with the same issues at once.

SJP chapters have also continued bringing divestment resolutions to their student governments for votes. In the 2013-14 academic year, student governments on 15 campuses considered endorsing divestment resolutions and so far during the 2014-2015 academic year, several SJP chapters have submitted divestment resolutions to their respective student governments.

In addition, SJP has begun to more frequently employ confrontational tactics such as mock eviction notices, die-ins, and mock checkpoints. The use of these tactics has created a tense atmosphere on some campuses and students have reported feeling intimidated or harassed at certain times. SJP chapters also have continued interrupting pro-Israel events to directly confront speakers and groups sponsoring the events.

THE UNIFICATION OF SJP

SJP's "unification" efforts are partially a result of the influence on college campuses of [American Muslims for Palestine](#) (AMP), the leading organization providing anti-Zionist training to students and Muslim community organizations in the U.S. AMP increased its focus on anti-Israel advocacy on college campuses in 2010 and specifically targeted SJP for this effort.

AMP organized various panels and conferences on the topic of Palestinian advocacy on campus and invited SJP students to lead and participate in these discussions. When the first SJP chapter was formed at the University of California, Berkeley in 2001, the group organized a Palestine Solidarity Movement (PSM) conference to coordinate divestment efforts among anti-Israel groups around the country.

In the years that followed, PSM served as a national umbrella organization for various chapters of SJP and other anti-Israel groups around the country. However, when PSM dissolved in 2006, SJP chapters ceased to collaborate with one another and were no longer officially connected through any national coalition. AMP's efforts to unify SJP chapters seem to have led to an increased amount of cooperation between different chapters, which have helped students to develop the same campaigns and events on different campuses at the same time.

This cooperation has also mobilized a determined base of student anti-Israel activists who often organize and participate in events and demonstrations that condemn Israel, regardless of whether or not classes are in session. During the 2014-15 academic year, for example, AMP's chairman and cofounder Hatem Bazian announced and promoted an "International Day of Action on College Campuses" to protest Israel and demand an end to the Gaza blockade. The announcement, which was posted on AMP's and Bazian's Facebook pages, called for a complete academic and cultural boycott of Israel and urged student activists to stage "teach-ins, rallies, set-ins [sic], civil disobedience, and push for BDS activities." Some SJP chapters cooperated with AMP's call and a little under a dozen campuses participated in "Day of Action" activities.

After becoming more unified, SJP formed regional coalition groups such as SJP West, SJP Chicago, SJP DMV, and SJP Florida, which have made it easier for specific regions to work together on targeted goals and campaigns. SJP West, composed of 23 different SJP chapters on the West Coast, has already started to disseminate open letters, and the group also hosted a conference in January 2013.

SJP chapters belonging to regional coalition groups have also been able to communicate with each other in a more organized manner, making it easier for them to support each other's campaigns and initiatives, such as in Fall 2014 at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), when the SJP chapter submitted their divestment resolution to the student government. Leading up to the day of the vote, members of other SJP chapters around California organized carpools for students to travel together to UCLA's campus so that they could voice their support for UCLA BDS campaign.

In the past few years, SJP has also successfully expanded its reach and visibility through social media. A majority of SJP chapters have created fan pages on Facebook and many also maintain active Twitter profiles. They often create videos on platforms such as YouTube to engage in fundraising and promoting their events. The use of these networks enables SJP to promote events and campaigns more widely and to interact with other like-minded groups on and off campus. Many of the SJP Facebook groups have several hundred members and the SJP national Facebook page has 21,000 Likes. SJP National also has a Twitter handle with 1,100 followers.

SJP'S PARTNERS

SJP partners with other organizations from both on and off campus, sponsoring events, organizing protests, and strategizing for future campaigns. Student groups that frequently partner with SJP include Latino organizations, LGBT organizations, and African-American groups. In recent years, SJP has made a concerted effort to connect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with other relevant social justice issues in order to gain support.

During Summer and Fall 2014, anti-Israel activists tried to link the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza to the situation unfolding in Ferguson, Missouri following the shooting of Michael Brown. The City University of New York's (CUNY) SJP chapter, for example, hosted a panel discussion titled "CUNY Stands for Justice: From Ferguson to Palestine" on September 22, 2014. The event featured "an evening of poetry, speakers, and discussion around repression and resistance from Ferguson, Missouri to Gaza, Palestine," according to a promotional flyer. Several SJP chapters have also organized die-ins where students equated Gaza and Ferguson. One of the die-ins, which took place at John Jay University, featured students holding signs that read "From Ferguson to Palestine INTIFADA INTIFADA" and "Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions."

In Fall 2012, the SJP chapter at San Diego State University (SDSU) co-sponsored an event with Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlan (MEChA), a Mexican student-group that endorsed BDS nationally in March 2012 at their 19th annual conference. The SDSU event compared Israel's security barrier with the West Bank to the U.S.'s border fence with Mexico and brought students on a trip to the U.S.-Mexico border where they lectured about that comparison. Members of MEChA have also attended SJP conferences since they started, and for many years now, members of the group have led sessions such as "Beyond Borders: Palestine and the Latin@ Connection" and "Migrating towards Justice: An intersectional look at im/migration, indigeneity, and labor."

As part of Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) 2013, the SJP chapter at New York University (NYU) co-sponsored an event about the [pinkwashing allegation](#) with NYU's Queer Union and the local chapter of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). The event, which took place at the New York LGBT Center, featured a lecture by Sarah Schulman, the organizer of the CUNY Pinkwashing and Homonationalism conference, about her new novel *Israel, Palestine, and the Queer International*.

National organizations such as AMP also co-sponsor events and have provided assistance to SJP chapters across the country to assist them in initiating campaigns and leading events on campuses across the U.S. SJP and AMP have also collaborated on campus events on several occasions such as an eight-week lecture series titled "The Holy Land, Palestine," which took place at Benedictine University, during Fall 2013. Sessions held during that eight-week series included "Nakba & Naksa," "Intifada I & II," and more.

[Jewish Voice for Peace](#) (JVP) also co-sponsors many events and teach-ins with SJP, and employees of JVP have actually traveled to campuses to assist SJP chapters in leading their campaigns and running events. Sydney Levy, JVP's Director of Advocacy, visited two universities in the Chicago area to co-lead pro-BDS teach-ins in Fall 2012.

In October 2014, JVP co-sponsored "A Teach-in on Anti-Semitism: Learning About and Fighting Anti-Semitism on the Left" at Temple University with Temple's SJP chapter. JVP's Brandeis University chapter also sponsored an event with SJP for "Israeli Occupation Awareness Week" in 2010, which featured presentations by Noam Chomsky, a linguistics professor at MIT who accused Israel of "ethnic cleansing"

and described Israeli policy as “apartheid;” and Dianna Buttu, a former lawyer for the PLO, who also spoke at the event and rejected the possibility of peace between Israelis and Palestinians and called for BDS against Israel. The group also co-sponsored the “Festival of Resistance” at Smith College in September 2014.

DIVESTMENT CAMPAIGNS

SJP is the group usually most responsible for promoting and initiating [Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaigns](#) (BDS) against Israel on campus. SJP receives guidance and suggestions about how to best lead these campaigns from outside organizations such as JVP, the [US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation](#), and AMP.

BDS campaigns initiated by SJP chapters often call for the boycott of companies like SodaStream, Caterpillar, and G4S because of their alleged involvement in profiting from or aiding in Israeli human rights violations. In recent years, SJP chapters have created divestment campaigns and drafted divestment resolutions, which they promote through petitions and guest lectures about why divestment from Israel is supposedly in students’ best interests. Already during the current academic year, SJP chapters have submitted divestment resolutions to their student governments on several campuses, including UC Davis, UCLA, and Northwestern University.

During the previous academic year, BDS was the primary focus of around 150 anti-Israel events that took place on college campuses. Accompanying the events in promotion of BDS, student groups on fifteen campuses submitted divestment resolutions to their student governments, which reflected an increase from the year before when there were only eight campuses that considered such resolutions. Only five of those fifteen resolutions were endorsed by their student governments, and the rest were all rejected or tabled indefinitely, demonstrating that although there was an increase in BDS activity, there was not an increase in success.

Aside from submitting divestment resolutions to their student governments, SJP chapters have also continued to organize and sponsor lectures about BDS campaigns on campus. The Fourth National SJP conference, which took place in October 2014 at Tufts University, focused a great deal of attention on BDS campaigns with sessions like “History and Tactics of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions Movement,” “Transnational BDS - Challenges and Dreams Forward,” and “Bursting the Campus Bubble: Learning From BDS Campaigns Beyond Campus Divestment Resolutions.”

SJP also promotes campaigns that were created by other organizations. For example, JVP started the [We Divest](#) campaign in 2010, which calls on the pension fund TIAA-CREF to divest from companies such as Caterpillar because they allegedly profit from the Israeli occupation. JVP has sent representatives to campuses to lead teach-ins about the initiative on a yearly basis and JVP chapters also gain participation from students in their “Day of Action” During the “Day of Action,” JVP and its coalition partners usually organize protests that SJP members promote and participate in outside of TIAA-CREF offices around the country during the TIAA-CREF Annual Shareholder Meeting.

Many SJP chapters have also begun to participate in SodaStream BDS campaigns, a focal point of the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation’s mission for several years now. This campaign grew in popularity after SJP made claims in public about the company’s relationship with Hollywood actress Scarlett

Johansson. During the current academic year, the SodaStream boycott campaigns proved to be somewhat successful, as Harvard University made the decision to stop using SodaStream products because of complaints that the administration was receiving from student groups such as Harvard's Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) about the company's manufacturing facility in the West Bank.

ISRAELI APARTHEID WEEK AND PALESTINE AWARENESS WEEK

To promote BDS and accusations against Israel, several SJP chapters around the U.S. designate one week of every academic year as "Palestine Awareness Week" or "Israeli Apartheid Week" (IAW). During this time, those chapters typically sponsor a variety of events that take place both on and off campus to attempt to convince students to become supporters of BDS campaigns against Israel. Events include lectures, panel discussions, film screenings, and demonstrations that criticize Israel harshly and characterize its policies toward the Palestinians as "apartheid" or "discriminatory."

IAW, which began in Toronto in 2005, has always featured extreme anti-Israel rhetoric, including accusations of Israeli racism and apartheid, calls for divestment from companies and individuals that do business with Israel, and allegations that Israel is committing war crimes and genocide against the Palestinian people. In recent years, many events have also begun to promote a boycott of all Israeli academic institutions.

It is also typical that during IAW, campuses will set up "mock walls" that are meant to depict Israel's separation barrier with the West Bank. These "mock walls" often have statements posted on them in an attempt to educate passersby on campus about alleged Israeli human rights violations against the Palestinian civilian population. For the first time ever, during IAW 2014, the Tufts University SJP chapter created a "mock settlement" in addition to a "mock apartheid wall." Near the "mock settlement," students re-enacted a "mock annexation" of an area of the campus in order "to call attention to the settler-colonial realities faced by Palestinians."

In recent years, campus SJP chapters have also begun to disseminate "mock eviction notices" inside residence halls on campus and at off-campus housing locations to coincide with IAW. At Northeastern University and the University of North Carolina, for example, the SJP chapters on those campuses distributed hundreds of mock eviction notices in residence halls leading up to IAW 2014 and the same happened leading up to IAW at Ohio State University near off-campus housing.

The mock eviction notices condemned alleged Israeli policy and promoted the upcoming Israeli Apartheid Weeks that the SJP chapters were sponsoring. At Northeastern, the mock eviction notices warned students that their residence hall rooms would be demolished and that "eviction notices are routinely given to Palestinian families living under oppressive Israeli occupation for no reason other than their ethnic background...to cleanse the region of its Arab population, and create space for settlements."

Several of the events from IAW 2014 focused on BDS campaigns against Israel and certain events such as "White Supremacy in Israel?," focused on alleged racism taking place in Israel against African migrants. During IAW 2013, there were many similar events that took place, but there was also an emphasis placed on the theory of Israeli "[pinkwashing](#)" and many campuses sponsored screenings of the film "Roadmap to Apartheid," which attempts to make the case that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Israeli treatment of Palestinians is "worse" than the apartheid regime that existed in South Africa.

ANTI-NORMALIZATION

As SJP has grown, its “anti-normalization campaign” has also picked up steam, and it has been embraced by an increasing number of SJP members and chapters around the country. The anti-normalization campaign is predicated upon the notion that a debate between pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel activists should be opposed because it would grant legitimacy to the pro-Israel position, which they believe has no credence.

Some significant anti-Israel campaigns and strategies have been based around the idea of anti-normalization, including interrupting and silencing pro-Israel speakers and opposing cooperation with Israeli academic institutions. Such tactics have been employed against numerous Israeli diplomats during speeches at universities across the country and opposition against study abroad programs at universities in Israel has also been voiced on numerous occasions.

Also, at SJP’s national conferences, students have been encouraged to refrain from dialogue with pro-Israel groups, and sessions have taken place centered on the anti-normalization campaign. At the second national SJP conference at the University of Michigan, media reports indicated that normalization was frowned upon and that conference organizers discouraged SJP activists from engaging in discussions with pro-Israel groups or individuals.

Some SJP chapters have officially adopted an anti-normalization policy on their campus. For example, at Columbia University and San Diego State University, the policy of anti-normalization was officially adopted and in April 2010, Columbia SJP issued a statement, which was adapted from a position paper by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (the leading pro-boycott organization in the Palestinian territories). The statement included a provision that disallowed dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, claiming that it would only help to “whitewash” Israel’s image.

Even without explicit anti-normalization policies, several SJP chapters have repeatedly refused to engage in dialogue with pro-Israel groups on campus. SJP at the University of California, San Diego, for example, recently issued a press release stating that it considers dialogue with J Street U, a dovish pro-Israel group, “counterproductive to the Palestinian plight for human rights,” and Yale’s SJP chapter has similarly rejected numerous offers from the pro-Israel group on campus to work together.

Anti-normalization is designed to marginalize and suppress the views of the pro-Israel community. While Israelis, Palestinians, and their supporters around the world have long been locked in a difficult and heart-wrenching conflict, fuel is added to the fire when individuals and groups simply refuse to participate in dialogue. If unchallenged, anti-normalization has the potential to further isolate Israel and exacerbate tensions among pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian advocates on campus.

PROTESTS OF PRO-ISRAEL EVENTS

SJP chapters tend to protest pro-Israel events by disseminating anti-Israel fliers to attendees while they enter the event or by walking out in unison during the event. The SJP chapter at American University, for example, organized a protest of “The Bipartisan Discussion on the U.S.-Israel Alliance” in November 2014, and during the event, a large group of students walked out at the same time carrying a Palestinian flag and political signs.

During the previous year, the SJP chapter at Northeastern University staged a walkout protest against two Israeli soldiers who were speaking on campus. While the soldiers were delivering their remarks, a handful of students stood up and walked out at once. All of the students involved had signs taped to their chests that either had the names of deceased Palestinians or pictures depicting alleged attacks on Palestinian neighborhoods by Israel.

While much of SJP's programming takes place on campus, various SJP chapters also regularly co-sponsor off-campus protests with other national anti-Israel groups. This occurred during the past few conflicts between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, as members of SJP spoke at anti-Israel demonstrations to protest Operation Protective Edge and in other cases, SJP co-sponsored the demonstrations alongside other groups like AMP, JVP, and Al-Awda.