Leaked E-mails Show that Israeli Consulate, StandWithUs Tried to Thwart Northwestern Divestment
Alex Kane on February 19, 2015

The Israeli consulate and other pro-Israel groups teamed up to try to thwart a divestment campaign at Northwestern University, according to e-mails obtained by Mondoweiss.

Their efforts ultimately failed, though. Last night, Northwestern University’s student government voted to recommend divestment from corporations linked to the Israeli army. The resolution passed with 24 student senators voting in favor, and 22 against.

The leaked messages are from a listserv for the campus’ Hillel. They provide insight into the inner workings of how pro-Israel groups, many of them from outside campus, are banding together to fight divestment resolutions on campus. The boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement on U.S. college campuses has become a major focus for pro-Israel groups over the past few years.

The campaign, spearheaded by a coalition of pro-Israel groups, was started in response to a push to have the student government at Northwestern adopt a resolution to divest from corporations linked to the Israeli military. The student coalition includes J Street, Wildcats for Israel, Hillel and AEPi, a Jewish fraternity.

The divestment campaign has sparked some intense debate on the Illinois campus. Posters advocating pro- and anti-divestment positions have been ripped and taken down.

The e-mails from late last year and early this year focus on messaging and strategy in response to a mock separation wall and the divestment campaign. Here are the most important items from the cache of e-mails I’ve obtained:

-Outside groups, including the Israeli consulate, are involved. In one e-mail, Michael Simon, the executive director of Northwestern’s Hillel, writes: “I want to express how grateful I am to the fantastic student leaders of the NU Coalition for Peace, to the Hillel staff, and to our wonderful community partners (including Emily Briskman at the Israel Education Center, Assaf Grumberg at Stand With Us, Stacy Rudd and Consul General Roey Gilad at the Israeli Consulate, and many others) for coming together to support our efforts to combat NU Divest’s anti-Israel activity.”

Another e-mail, from the Jewish United Fund, a communal organization in Chicago, contains an attachment to a 25-page document titled “Pro-Israel Messaging for Campus Allies.” It largely directs students to focus on messages of peace and dialogue.

Yet another message is from Lynn Schusterman, a major pro-Israel philanthropist. She thanks Simon for his anti-BDS efforts, and says she will be sending a “Soda Stream starter kit” for his office.

Some of the students involved in the campaign are interns at outside pro-Israel groups.
One student, Tina Umanskiy, interns for the Jewish United Fund’s Israel Education Center. Another student, Jonathan Kamel, interns for the Israel on Campus Coalition.

-Celebrated Israeli author Ari Shavit’s views are informing how the NU Coalition for Peace works. Shavit recently spoke at the university. An e-mail from Rabbi Aaron Potek, who also works from Hillel, reads: “In light of Ari Shavit’s challenge to not just be reactionary but to share our own narrative, have we thought at all about an ‘Israel 101’ session? An hour with an audience would give us the change to share more nuance than a flier.”

-Pro-Israel campus groups want to court Black students. The Jewish United Fund’s Emily Briskman wrote an e-mail about messaging after a mock separation wall went up on campus. She suggests they should respond by, among other things, hosting “a co-sponsored event with the Black Student Union or Northwestern equivalent.”

-The coalition’s strategy is focused on saying that the BDS movement wants to abolish Israel and that it is against a two-state solution. One e-mail on strategy from Maddie Kriger, a student and member of Hillel, instructs students to say things like Israel has a “strong record on human rights (esp war).”

-Members of the coalition debated about whether to include a call to “end the occupation” in their statement of values. Ultimately, they decided against it, though they encouraged individual students to voice that anti-occupation messaging if they choose to.

Update: Below is a statement from Northwestern Divest announcing that the Associated Student Government has passed the divestment resolution:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Northwestern Divest
February 20, 2015

Northwestern University’s Associated Student Government Passes Divestment

For the last month, Northwestern Divest (NUDivest) organizers have campaigned and mobilized the student body in order to pass their resolution through the Associated Student Government (ASG). At nearly 1:30 AM yesterday, one day after Stanford’s student senate passed divestment, Northwestern University’s ASG senators voted in favor of this resolution by 24-22-3. NUDivest’s resolution asks the university to establish transparency, develop a socially responsible investment policy, and divest its holdings from six corporations: Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, Elbit Systems, G4S, and Hewlett-Packard, all of which are actively involved in fueling and profiting from the military occupation of Palestine.

NUDivest is a grassroots, student-led campaign, consisting of a wide range of student organizations and student activists, calling on Northwestern University to divest from corporations that are profiting off of the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. The
resolution passed yesterday was a response to the call for Boycott Divestment
Sanctions from Palestinian civil society and aimed to hold Northwestern University
accountable for its investments in corporations profiting off of the occupation of
Palestinian lands. The student movement for Palestinian human rights has grown in
recent years with national student organizations such as MECha, United Students
Against Sweatshops and Dream Defenders endorsing BDS.

While NUDivest is proud that ASG has taken this step, we also know that the struggle is
not over. It is now incumbent on the entire student body to continue to pressure the
administration to divest from these corporations and end its complicity in the occupation
of Palestine. Though the University never fully divested from apartheid South Africa, it is
completely within our realm to divest from the six aforementioned corporations, and any
corporation found to be complicit in human rights violations of Palestinians in the future.
Northwestern University lags behind other institutions on socially responsible
investment, and although ASG took a step in the right direction, there is still a long way
to go.