**Headline:** Student Demands for Divestment Are Not New

**Teaser:** There is a long history of students organizing for divestment from states and institutions complicit in criminal acts, apartheid, and genocide. Today’s campus protests against Israel are building on that movement.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of “[Rising Up With Sonali](https://risingupwithsonali.com/),” a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her most recent book is [Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice](https://citylights.com/city-lights-published/rise-up-the-power-of-narrative-in-pursu/) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/sonali-kolhatkar). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women’s Mission](https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/) and is a co-author of [Bleeding Afghanistan](https://www.sevenstories.com/books/2947-bleeding-afghanistan). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](https://justiceactioncenter.org/), an immigrant rights organization.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** This article was produced by [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

**Tags:** Economy, Media, Politics, North America/United States of America, Opinion, News, Time-Sensitive, War, Middle East/Palestine, Middle East/Israel, Activism

**[Article Body:]**

The student-led movement against the genocide in Gaza that is sweeping college campuses across the United States, has made “[divestment](https://www.npr.org/2024/04/30/1248088063/divest-divestment-university-college-protesters-campus-israel-gaza-invasion)” from Israel central to its demands. It’s what the “D” in BDS stands for—[Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions](https://bdsmovement.net/)—a Palestinian-led international and nonviolent means of holding Israel accountable for decades of colonization, occupation, and war.

Now, just as apartheid South Africa lost global prestige after U.S. university students successfully forced [many universities to financially divest](http://kora.matrix.msu.edu/files/50/304/32-130-E6E-84-AL.SFF.DOCUMENT.acoa000194.pdf) from the then-pariah state, there appears to be some momentum toward a parallel impact on Israel. The administration of the prestigious [Brown University](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/30/us/brown-divestment-deal.html) is the latest to have agreed to explore divestment from Israel in response to student demands.

Divestment can mean different things depending on the nature of the institution’s financial ties. But the idea behind it is simple: It means removing all financial ties, such as withdrawing investments, and therefore ending direct complicity in criminal and unjust actions. American institutions of higher learning are economic powerhouses with massive endowments, and ultimately can be described as “[big businesses](https://www.theguardian.com/money/us-money-blog/2014/oct/07/colleges-ceos-cooper-union-ivory-tower-tuition-student-loan-debt).” Many of them use their funds to directly or indirectly invest in Israel. Harvard University, for example, was found in 2020 to have invested nearly [$200 million of its $40 billion endowment](https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/3/19/harvard-israel-palestine-investments/) in companies with ties to Israel’s occupation of Palestine.

While the latest wave of [student-led encampments](https://www.npr.org/2024/05/01/1198911379/college-protests-for-palestinians-escalate) is new in its scope, motivated especially by the horrors of Israel’s latest wave of mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza, the student demands for divestment are not new. They are built on a decades-long foundation for protest constructed by an international solidarity movement in support of Palestinian liberation.

The [BDS movement](https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds), launched by Palestinian unions and other civil society institutions in [2005](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/1/11/boycott-divestment-sanctions-what-is-bds), explains on its [website](https://bdsmovement.net/BDS-Guide-Strategic-Campaigning) that “Israel is only able to maintain its oppressive regime over the Palestinian people and avoid accountability for its genocide against 2.3 million Palestinians in the besieged and occupied Gaza Strip because of international state, corporate and institutional complicity.”

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), with a long history of organized and coordinated boycott and divestment campaigns, has crafted helpful [guidelines](https://investigate.afsc.org/occupations) on how to divest, and has offered context for such efforts: “[W]e recognize that the Israeli occupation is not the only illegal occupation in the world, although it is the longest and deadliest one.” Moreover, according to AFSC, “It is also the only place in the world from which a call was issued by the occupied people to the international community to use economic activism tools such as boycott and divestment to help end the occupation.”

Columbia University in New York, an epicenter of the current student-led campus actions, has a history of using divestment as a tool of protest that far predates the [encampment](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/some-columbia-students-protest-encampment-is-living-history-lesson-2024-04-27/) launched by students on April 17. Although many media outlets cite Columbia’s 1968 sit-ins against the Vietnam War as a parallel, Omar Barghouti, Tanaquil Jones, and Barbara Ransby wrote in [The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/may/03/columbia-pro-palestinian-protest-south-africa-divestment), that the university’s 1985 anti-apartheid student sit-ins are even more relevant to today’s protest. The Coalition for a Free South Africa successfully pushed Columbia University to divest from apartheid South Africa. Nearly three decades later, a campaign called Columbia Prison Divest also forced the university to pull investments from for-profit prison companies.

And, four years ago, Columbia’s undergraduate school, called Columbia College, passed a [historic student vote](https://morningsidepost.com/articles/2020/10/5/columbia-college-passes-historic-vote-on-divestment-from-israel) calling for divestment from Israel. The list of campus divestment-related victories specific to Israel is [surprisingly long](https://uscpr.org/activist-resource/boycott-divestment-and-sanctions/bdswins/#1499720610811-1ef54a63-054b). Nearly a decade ago, in 2015, the [Associated Press](https://apnews.com/article/8769ec23564a4954b935a3ee9cd5b169) called student-led divestment demands against Israel “increasingly commonplace on many American college campuses.”

What’s different today is that the pace of Israel’s atrocities against Palestinians has significantly ramped up and is a [bona fide genocide-in-progress](https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/international-criminal-court-israeli-officials-worried-109756090), so much so that Israeli officials fear the International Criminal Court could issue [arrest warrants](https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/international-criminal-court-israeli-officials-worried-109756090) against them. The [official figures](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2024/5/3/israels-war-on-gaza-live-unprecedented-levels-of-death-and-destruction) of Israel’s victims in Gaza since last October number more than 34,000, with more than 40 percent of those being children. Israel has decimated so much of Gaza that authorities are [unable to keep track of the dead](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/in-gaza-authorities-lose-count-of-the-dead-779ff694), meaning the death toll is likely even higher.

Young people, including [Jewish students](https://risingupwithsonali.com/report-from-bryn-mawrs-free-gaza-encampment/), are deeply moved by Israel’s savagery and the resulting Palestinian suffering. They are closely monitoring the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza on social media, forming digital ties with Palestinians, and grieving over the deaths of Gaza’s children. It’s only natural that they are pouring their rage toward the institutions they have the most proximity to and power over: The administrations of the schools where they pay exorbitant fees to attend, and that have invested in or partnered with Israel.

Until the tide fully turns against Israel for being an oppressive apartheid state, educational institutions will embrace it as a matter of pride. [Cornell University](https://experience.cornell.edu/opportunities/technion-israel-institute-technology-engineering-exchange), [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-fund-seeks-to-boost-partnerships-between-mit-israeli-universities/), [University of Central Florida](https://www.ucf.edu/news/ucf-partners-israels-tel-aviv-university-fuel-blockchain-research-education/), and [University of Michigan](https://um-israel.org/) are examples of schools that tout their collaborations with Israeli institutions. And there are Israeli efforts specifically aimed at legitimizing the colonial state at U.S. universities through donations of “[Israel bonds](https://www.israelbonds.com/universities).”

Whether or not calls for divestment by the current student-led movement and the long-standing BDS movement succeed or have a concrete result, the symbolic impact of labeling Israel’s actions as immoral can have a ripple effect, potentially discouraging schools from taking on such a controversial affiliation. The fact that students at Brown University, Northwestern University, and the University of Minnesota have [successfully](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/03/business/brown-university-divestment-israel-gaza.html) forced their schools’ administrations to vote on divesting from Israel is a major step toward delegitimizing Israel. Smaller colleges such as the Seattle-based [Evergreen State College](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/evergreen-state-to-explore-israel-divestment-after-deal-with-students/) are also following suit.

Detractors of divestment say the efforts will have [little effect on Israel](https://www.wsj.com/finance/dear-columbia-students-divestment-from-israel-wont-work-48c56f57). Others say they are [antisemitic](https://www.ajc.org/news/bds-is-antisemitic) even though the initiatives are aimed at the Israeli state and institutions complicit in apartheid and genocide, not against Jewish individuals. Indeed, the current student movements in solidarity with Palestinians have the [support](https://www.newsweek.com/jewish-group-applauds-pro-palestinian-campus-protesters-1894965) and participation of many justice-seeking Jewish groups and individuals.

Minnesota’s congressional representative [Ilhan Omar](https://www.newsweek.com/jewish-group-applauds-pro-palestinian-campus-protesters-1894965) put it best in 2019 when the House of Representatives passed a resolution condemning the BDS movement. She said, “We should condemn in the strongest terms violence that perpetuates the occupation, whether it is perpetuated by Israel, Hamas or individuals… But if we are going to condemn violent means of resisting the occupation, we cannot also condemn nonviolent means.”