

An Interview with University of San Francisco Professor, Dr. Stephen Zunes

The decision by the American Academy of Religion (AAR) to cancel a panel at its November 2017 Annual Meeting spurred a conversation with Dr. Stephen Zunes, Professor of Politics and International Studies and coordinator of the Middle Eastern Studies program at the University of San Francisco. The AAR's Annual Meeting brings together the foremost scholars of religion to engage in a variety of events where ideas are shared and debated. Dr. Zunes had planned to attend as part of a panel discussion that was intended to explore the role of religion and religious actors in movements like the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). Dr. Zunes expertise on the Israel-Palestine conflict and his background in studying political and social movements made him particularly well suited for covering this topic. AAR ultimately decided to cancel this BDS panel, which shows just how sensitive this topic is, even within the academic world.

The following special feature piece stems from a recent interview in which Dr. Zunes discussed his experience as one of the scheduled panelists at the annual AAR meeting. This interview, conducted by the University of North Carolina at Greensboro graduate student Kylie Stephens, also delves into how BDS fits into the larger picture of academic freedom and the overall American discourse regarding the recently reignited debate over Jerusalem and the future of Israel-Palestine.

President Trump's recent decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital has thrown the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians back into the American public's consciousness. Those who study this conflict, or have a personal connection to it, realize that in terms of foreign policy and academia, the relevancy and divisiveness of this issue never waned. In a recent interview, Dr. Stephen Zunes, a prominent scholar on the Middle East and a Professor of Politics and International Studies at the University of San Francisco, discussed his views on the abrupt cancellation of a panel he was scheduled to participate in at the 2017 American Academy of Religion's annual conference. This panel, planned as a roundtable session in which Dr. Zunes and others would discuss BDS, was titled, "Arguing Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) and Religion."

Before delving into the specifics of AAR's decision to cancel the panel, and how this reflects in light of President Trump's recent announcement regarding Jerusalem, it is important to have an understanding of why a nonviolent movement like BDS is so contentious. Much of the controversy surrounding BDS can be traced to how the movement has been framed by both sides. The anti-BDS crowd promotes the narrative that BDS is inherently anti-Israel and that supporters of the movements are calling for the destruction of the Jewish state. Those who are pro-BDS frame the mission as pro-peace and reject claims of anti-Semitism by focusing on the movement's commitment to seeking justice and equality for Palestinians. Supporters of BDS point out that it employs a nonviolent strategy inspired by previous boycotts like those advocated for by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa. The official BDS statement announces that, "Palestinian civil society calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law and universal principles of human rights." Many argue this is a reasonable request, especially since it advocates a nonviolent approach to a conflict that has been characterized by vicious cycles of violence. The topic of BDS, however, becomes complicated by factors like historical

anti-Semitism, existing and proposed American policy in regard to Israel, and concerns over the stifling of ideas and freedom of speech that are often part of academic boycotts. Dr. Zunes touched on each of these topics in his discussion of BDS and the AAR's unprecedented decision to cancel the panel he was scheduled to participate in.

In response to the initial question of why AAR canceled the session, Dr. Zunes was quick to clarify that officially the panel had not been canceled but postponed, presumably until next year's Annual Meeting. He stated that the cancellation for this year's meeting was ultimately due to panelists choosing not to participate, however, the chain of events leading to this decision was, "highly unusual." Two strongly anti-BDS panelists backed out only days before the meeting. This left the panel lacking a balanced sample of viewpoints. Dr. Zunes stated that he interpreted the official reason for the cancellation to be that AAR leadership felt it, "no longer fulfilled the scope of the originally conceived panel as approved by the AAR Executive Committee." While diverse opinions are certainly an important part of ensuring vibrant discussion, Dr. Zunes expressed concern over the ability of people with dissenting opinions to hijack the fate of controversial topics by choosing to abruptly dropout of this event, and others similar to it. Dr. Zunes did point out that, after uproar over the cancellation, an "informal exploratory session" was allowed to proceed. The cancellation of the planned panel had the ironic effect of giving the re-instated exploratory session, "more attention than it would have had it not been canceled."

Dr. Zunes acknowledged, "strictly within their guidelines the AAR Executive Committee had the right to cancel this program" but went on to describe how unusual this was especially in light of the informal nature of the roundtable style panel that had been planned. AAR is, according to its website, "a learned society and professional association of teachers and research scholars." While the focus of AAR's Annual Meeting is religious studies and caters to scholars of religion, it is normal for conferences like these to include academics from related fields. Dr. Zunes noted that roundtable sessions at academic conferences often, "include people from the outside," and even with formal panels it's normal for the scope and composition of the panelists to evolve over the period between the proposal and the actual event. He agreed that while the two missing panelists would have brought a broader spectrum of opinions to the table, other concerns that had been raised were in regard to the professional advocacy work and lack of religious scholarship among the remaining group. Speaking about himself, Dr. Zunes said, "I am not a scholar of religion. I am a political scientist who studies faith-based social movements." To drive home his point in how unprecedented this cancellation was, Dr. Zunes pointed out, "the fact is if you look hard enough, you would probably find any number of other panels which have strayed somewhat from their original focus. On other panels you'd find people who have clear advocacy positions." So while the AAR did act within its rights in choosing to cancel, it acted in a way that was out of character. Dr. Zunes pointed out that this experience highlighted how, "yet again Israel-Palestine is treated differently than other issues."

As a scholarly association dedicated to religious studies, the AAR is composed of a highly diverse membership. Dr. Zunes made note of this diversity saying members ranged from "liberation theologians to Biblical literalists." He went on to recognize that the sequence of events leading up to the Annual Meeting, with two panelists dropping out and the mediator unable to attend, left AAR leadership in a difficult position. Dr. Zunes did express that the decision to cancel the BDS panel was representative of how contentious this topic is and also exemplified how the narrative surrounding this issue has the potential to be more easily stifled due to its sensitive nature. Despite this, he praised the AAR for allowing the exploratory session to proceed. In a follow-up call with AAR leadership, he stressed that the AAR had reached out to let him know that the organization planned to draw up specific

guidelines on how to handle future incidents involving panelists removing themselves at the last minute.

In addition to speaking about the panel cancellation, which itself highlights the sensitivity surrounding BDS, Dr. Zunes shared the paper he prepared for the Annual Meeting. This paper was titled, “Reflections on BDS” and, although it was not published by AAR, it was read in its entirety at the informal exploratory session. In this paper he notes the reasons for the controversy surrounding BDS. He points to the close relationship between the U.S. and Israeli governments, brings up the issue of anti-Arab/anti-Muslim sentiments and notes the power that big corporations often wield in shaping these narratives. Most interestingly, however, is his astute observation that BDS is made especially controversial by the tendency for people on both side of the argument to conflate Israel with the territories it illegally occupies. He reminds us that, “one can be an advocate of certain aspects of BDS without endorsing the whole package,” and points to Christian denominations that have done this by choosing to divest from companies, “which are directly supporting the Israeli occupation and illegal settlements.” When the debate of controversial topics takes center stage in the public discourse, details, like distinguishing Israel from the occupied territories, are often lost.

In the case of BDS, a lack of detail can cause the topic to be portrayed as black or white, instead of in the shades of gray where it really resides. Dr. Zunes highlights the complexity of BDS by noting:

the official BDS call from Palestinian civil society organizations calls not just for the end of the Israeli occupation but for equality for Palestinians within Israel, including the right of return for Palestinian refugees (a right currently limited under Israeli law to Jews only.) This would presumably mean that Israel would no longer have a majority Jewish population. So, while this is not a call for “the destruction of Israel” in a violent sense, it would certainly mean that Israel would no longer be the “Jewish state” as we know it today.

If one takes the time to parse out the realities of what Dr. Zunes has revealed here, the predicament of how BDS is perceived, both in the public and academic realm, become clear. In the U.S. we, supposedly, believe in equality – thus the Palestinian desire to be treated as such within their native land should not be shocking. Similarly, the Palestinian refugees’ desire for the right of return should not be surprising given that it was recognized by U.N. Resolution 194 back in 1948 as an element of the Israel-Palestine conflict that needed to be settled.

Complicating these seemingly basic Palestinian needs is the fact that Israel exists, with acknowledgement from the U.S., as a Jewish state. This is not to say that Israel does not have the right to exist, rather it reveals that within the overall context of Israel-Palestine, there are smaller, more specific issues that occur beneath the surface of the overarching conflict. This harkens to Máire Dugan’s (1996) “Nested Theory of Conflict,” which suggests that conflicts reside at different levels and that specific issues can be nested beneath one another while occurring within the context of a larger conflict. In the case of Israel-Palestine, issues like the Palestinian right of return show how the structure of the Israeli state complicates the question of return for Palestinian refugees. Similarly, BDS challenges the structures of Israeli industry and society. This is all further complicated by anti-Semitism and the fact that historic social structures of the Western world have led many Jewish Israelis to fear they will be perpetually discriminated against.

Historic anti-Semitism is real and has led to legitimate concerns over Israel being unfairly singled out for its transgressions. Dr. Zunes rightfully points out, “history is replete with examples of Jews being scapegoated to deflect criticism from those who really

held power and being unfairly singled out for misdeeds primarily committed by Gentiles.” This brings up the question of how to move the Israel-Palestine conflict, as well as BDS, beyond the cycle of arguing over accusations of anti-Semitism and Israel’s claims of being unfairly singled out by international bodies like the U.N. Dr. Zunes proposes evolving BDS by expanding its call to include all countries who are “legally-recognized captive nations.” Western Sahara, occupied by Moroccan forces, is the only other country that fits this description based on international law. Among the many similarities Dr. Zunes noted between Palestine and Western Sahara, one of the most striking in regard to BDS was how Morocco and Israel have benefitted from exploiting the natural resources in their occupied territories and the role of U.S. companies in this process. Dr. Zunes suggests, “including all occupations in the divestment campaign help protect BDS advocates from spurious charges of ‘anti-Semitism’ and broaden its appeal, it would help bring attention to the little-known but important self-determination struggle of the Sahrawi people.” By evolving BDS to include Western Sahara, the debate in both conflicts can be moved toward a legitimate focus on international law and human rights.

Seemingly intractable conflicts, like Israel-Palestine, require creative thinking and open dialogue for positive change to occur. While lasting progress toward conflict transformation is more likely to happen through decisions self-determined by Palestinians and Israelis, the reality is that international actors, especially the U.S. and the U.N., are deeply involved with both sides of this issue. The U.S. provides Israel with more than \$3 billion in military aid each year and President Trump’s recent decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital breaks with the majority of the world, which has viewed the status of Jerusalem as unresolved for the past 50 years. The U.N., on the other hand, regularly admonishes Israel for human rights abuses and annexation of Palestinian land. A U.N. Resolution condemning the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as the Israeli capital was put to a vote and resulted in 128 countries siding with the U.N., with only 9 countries voting “no” and 35 abstaining. Even from examining these limited examples, it’s clear that international bodies and foreign governments play a prominent role in this conflict and will therefore be involved, at least to some degree, in any type of peace process.

The very nature of BDS involves parties existing outside the conflict zone. By appealing to people, as well as governments and companies, around the world, the BDS movement brings the narrative of nonviolent Palestinian resistance to areas that often only hear about the conflict when another round of violence occurs. Expanding BDS to include Western Sahara is one way to show that the movement is not driven by anti-Semitic underpinnings while also shedding light on a conflict even less well known than the plight of the Palestinians. In the West, our governments and big corporations are often involved in foreign conflicts yet the narratives we hear about these issues are not representative of each region’s population. This is why it’s so important that public and academic discourse not be stifled. Critical exploration of occurrences like the AAR’s cancellation of the BDS panel are important in today’s political climate. By taking a closer look at this incident, we can learn why certain decisions were made and explore whether or not they’re really examples of censorship. In this case, the AAR did not conspire to suppress a specific narrative. Careful examination of this incident, however, reveals that foreign conflicts are often tangled in the on-going domestic tug-of-war over how controversial topics are presented in public and academic forums. In an America where our leadership makes unprecedented foreign policy decisions that break with the solidarity of our allies, while ignoring international law and human rights abuses, it’s all the more important to ensure that lively debate is not being extinguished.

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