

California university will heed student call to boycott Israel institutions



A woman paints on a barrier during a protest set up at the University of Texas at Dallas on May 1 [LM Otero/AP Photo]

San Francisco, May 16 (RHC)-- Sonoma State University, a public school in northern California, has said that it will not enter partnerships with Israeli universities, heeding a call from pro-Palestine student groups pushing to boycott Israeli companies and institutions amid the war in Gaza.

The decision comes after a recent wave of campus protests spread across the United States, with encampments and demonstrations cropping up at schools like Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

As part of their demands, student activists aimed to sever school ties with academic bodies and companies perceived as complicit in Israel's war and decades-long occupation of the Palestinian territory. In an e-mail to students on Tuesday, Sonoma State's president, Mike Lee, said the school had reached an agreement with the protesters, who set up an on-campus encampment three weeks ago.

Sonoma State would do more to disclose its contracts and seek "divestment strategies", Lee wrote. It would also not pursue partnerships that are "sponsored by, or represent, the Israeli state academic and research institutions."

In exchange for the concessions, student activists agreed to dismantle the cluster of tents on campus by Wednesday evening.

Many universities have responded to the demands of antiwar activists with police crackdowns on encampments. But those efforts have done little to dim calls for divestment, and campus activists have likened their efforts to historic student protests against the Vietnam War and apartheid South Africa.

Several university solidarity encampments have disbanded after negotiations over divestment demands with administrators. In late April, for instance, protesters took down their tents at Brown University in Rhode Island, after the Ivy League school's board of governors agreed to consider divestment in a vote this October.

However, calls for divestment can be controversial in the United States, where Israel enjoys strong political backing.

Israel receives \$3.8 billion in military aid from the U.S. every year, and lawmakers have, with the encouragement of pro-Israel groups, moved to penalise and even criminalize calls to boycott Israel.

In Texas, for instance, Republican Governor Greg Abbott responded to students' divestment demands directly, saying earlier this month, "This will NEVER happen." Under his leadership, the state passed a law that prohibits government entities from contracting with firms that boycott Israel.

Jewish groups and a handful of state politicians have likewise condemned Sonoma State's decision, saying that it represents an attack on Israel and the Jewish community. Some tied the university's decision to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), which seeks to pressure Israel into protecting Palestinian rights through nonviolent means. It also aims to draw attention to companies seen as complicit in rights abuses in the Palestinian territory.

BDS's critics, however, consider the movement anti-Semitic for its targeting of Israeli companies and groups. "Yesterday the President of Sonoma State University aligned the campus with BDS, a movement whose goal is the destruction of Israel, home to 7M Jews," California state Senator Scott Wiener said in a social media post on Wednesday.

In another post, the Jewish Community Relations Council Bay Area said the decision by Sonoma State was in "clear violation" of California's 2016 anti-BDS law. It called on the chancellor of the California State University system — of which Sonoma State is a member — to "rectify" the situation.

However, free speech advocacy groups say that anti-BDS laws suppress criticism of Israel and conflate scrutiny over Israel's alleged human rights abuses with anti-Semitism.

The campus protests like the one at Sonoma State have fuelled debate over the distinction between criticism of Israel and anti-Jewish hate. It also has raised concerns about how to protect free speech rights on campus, while addressing the discomfort some students have expressed towards the protests.

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