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The Battle for Divestment from Israeli Securities in Somerville

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From summer 2003, the city of Somerville in the metropolitan Boston area became the battleground for a municipal divestment project against Israel. Previously, anti-Israeli divestment campaigns had mainly focused on universities.

The Somerville Divestment Project took the form of a campaign for divestment of holdings in Israeli government bonds and stocks of companies engaging in military business with Israel. Its target was the Somerville Retirement Board, which manages the pensions of city employees. The mayor of Somerville threatened to veto the proposition if it was passed by the Somerville aldermen.

Sensing danger, the Jewish community quickly

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united against the campaign. In December 2004, the Somerville aldermen voted against the project. Meanwhile, the opponents of Israel have continued their efforts by proposing to place an advisory question on the subject of divestment on the November city ballot.

During the summer of 2003, Ron Francis, a young high school teacher, founded the Somerville Divestment Project.¹ He had previously been politically opposed to Israel. At the end of 2002 he took an active part in a boycott of Wordsworth, one of the last independent bookstores in Cambridge, Massachusetts, because its owner Hillel Stavis had stopped contributing funds to National Public Radio in protest against their anti-Israeli bias.² The activists picketed the store for a week, effectively disrupting the business.

The Problem and the Background

After the failure to bring about anti-Israeli divestment at college campuses, the first attempt to do so with municipalities occurred in Somerville. The anti-Israeli activities there took the form of a campaign to force the Somerville Retirement Board to divest its holdings in Israeli government bonds and stocks of companies engaging in military business with Israel.

The city of Somerville is an integral part of metropolitan Boston, bordering the cities of Boston and Cambridge. Somerville was primarily a working-class area until the subway was extended. When high real estate prices in Cambridge led many of its residents to relocate to Somerville, they brought with them their politically active culture. This new population attempted to reframe the city's political agenda. Whereas Somerville had been primarily concerned with local issues, the new activists forced the community to take a stand on international political issues as well.

The Campaign's Beginning

One summer evening in 2003, Ron Francis launched the divestment campaign at the College Avenue Methodist Church in Somerville. His presentation included a lecture with many visuals that depicted the Palestinian narrative. Francis portrayed the Palestinians as a "peace-loving" population that had been brutalized by the "ruthless Israeli aggressors."

For a year and a half thereafter, Francis and other divestment activists lobbied the Somerville aldermen (city councilors), trying to sway them toward the Palestinian stance. They redefined the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a human rights issue and tried to appeal to the aldermen's sense of justice. These activists used a door-to-door campaign to spread their views and collect signatures.

As noted, the Somerville Divestment Project sought to force the Somerville Retirement Board, which manages the pensions of city employees, to sell any Israeli bonds it had or stocks in American companies doing military business with Israel. The aim was to convince the aldermen to vote in favor of divestment. In October 2004, the activists tried to bring about an unannounced vote by the aldermen on the resolution so as to avoid any possible opposition.

They almost succeeded, because eight of the eleven aldermen initially cosponsored the resolution. However, one alderman, Bill White, called for an open discussion of the motion before the vote, allowing the "other" side a chance to state its views. Thanks to his respect for the democratic process, the whole matter suddenly became a public issue. In autumn 2004, Somerville found itself the scene of a major political contest with international repercussions. Numerous articles and letters to the editor, sent from various places, appeared in the *Somerville Journal*, the city's main weekly publication. The mayor of Somerville, Joe Curtatone, threatened to veto the proposition if it was passed by the board.³

The Jewish Community Responds

The Jewish community mobilized quickly. It assembled an ad hoc antidivestment coalition consisting of the leaders of the Boston chapters of the Jewish Community Relations Council, the

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American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, Jewish representatives from labor unions, the Israeli consul-general for New England, and various concerned citizens from Somerville. The debate was scheduled to be held in the Aldermen's Chamber of the Somerville City Hall on 8 November 2004.⁴

On that day, the chamber was filled beyond capacity. Advocates of each side were given the opportunity to speak for up to two minutes, and the vote hearing for the full board was scheduled for December. One participant in this debate was Shamai Leibowitz, an Israeli lawyer who came to Somerville from Washington where he was a New Israel Fund Fellow at American University's Washington College of Law. Leibowitz had published letters in favor of the divestment resolution in the *Somerville Journal*, the (Boston) *Jewish Advocate*, the *Jordan Times*, and elsewhere.⁵ Another Israeli-born, pro-Palestinian lobbyist was Iftach Shavit, a resident of Somerville, who had written a widely circulated letter in favor of the divestment.⁶

The prodivestment activists presented the Arab-Israeli conflict using the idiom of the radical Left. They portrayed Israel as a racist, imperialist, expansionist, apartheid, colonialist, settler state. The pro-Israeli advocates emphasized that the other side had singled out Israel as a scapegoat for the ills of the Palestinians. Israel supporters tried to show that the Jewish state has a vibrant, pluralistic, multiethnic democracy where people of all faiths and origins partake in equal rights.⁷ They also emphasized the Palestinian terror campaign being waged against Israeli civilians during the recent intifada.

Many prodivestment activists who took part in the meeting came from out of town. Israel supporters were disheartened to learn that about 40 percent of the divestment supporters were Jewish. One was Joachim Carlo Santos Martillo Ajami, a vigorous and vociferous, Boston-based anti-Israeli activist.⁸ At one time he was known to be virulently anti-Arab, but he eventually reversed his views.

Another harshly anti-Israeli Jew at the meeting was Noah Cohen. One of the leaders of the Boston-based New England Committee to Defend Palestine (NECDP), he was also a friend of a militant

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Palestinian activist, Amer Jubran, who was arrested for assault and battery against several Jewish Bostonians and was eventually deported to Jordan for fraud in 2004 by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Marty Federman and Hilda Silverman, two of the better-known Boston-area "peace activists," also attended the meeting on the anti-Israeli side.

Also among the divestment supporters were Lana Habash of the NECDP and Maria Hussain, also known as Karin Friedeman, also known as Umm Yakoub, who is the New Jersey-based editor of the pro-Arab *World View News Service*.⁹ She is also the wife of Martillo Ajami and a convert to Islam.¹⁰

On 7 December 2004, the divestment proposal was voted down in a brief interim hearing of the legislative subcommittee of the Somerville Board of Aldermen. Denise Provost, alderman-at-large, a lawyer and the most active prodivestment member of the board, stormed out of that meeting in anger. The full board hearing was scheduled for two days later.

Both sides inundated the Somerville aldermen with letters. These locally elected representatives, who were not conversant in Middle Eastern affairs, were suddenly plunged into a passionate political debate. To their credit, they quickly learned the basics and were able to make an educated decision in the final vote on 9 December.¹¹

The Vote

On the evening of the final vote, the atmosphere was tense. Both sides filled the Aldermen's Chamber with banners, placards, photos, leaflets, buttons, and flags. The gathering had the feel of a political rally. There were many leftist organizations in attendance, including representatives from Boston to Palestine (B2P), the Boston affiliate of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), as well as a number of Arabs and Muslims. In a particularly disturbing incident before the meeting began, a Jewish Israel supporter asked a man whether a chair next to him was available, to which the divestment supporter replied, "Not for the Jews."

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Ten aldermen voted against the divestment proposal with one abstention by Denise Provost. The results were greeted with cheers as well as hissing and booing. Alderman Provost, who presided, demanded that order be restored, at which point the prodivestment activists began passing out leaflets and singing the anthem of the African National Congress.

Although Provost remonstrated with them, the divestment supporters ignored her and had to be removed by the police as they continued singing. After the public had finally left and the aldermen returned to their business of running the city, Provost tried unsuccessfully to bring the motion to another vote.¹²

The Aftermath

The advocates of Israel's legitimacy won this round. Although a flurry of letters appeared in the *Somerville Journal* and the *Jewish Advocate*, the issue receded as the city returned to its daily business. Despite their reversal, the proponents of divestment claimed their loss as a victory.¹³

Shortly afterward, Mayor Curtatone visited Israel on a trip cosponsored by the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the American Jewish Congress, and returned with favorable impressions.

In January 2005, the anti-Israeli activists tried to revive the divestment effort at the Clarendon Hill Presbyterian Church in Somerville, whose pastor, Karl Gustafson, is known for hostility to Israel. Local Jews, joined by a number of Christians, protested outside the church.¹⁴

The divestment supporters, including ISM/B2P members, continued their anti-Israeli activities in April 2005 by organizing a series of weeklong demonstrations at the entrance to the Massachusetts headquarters of the Caterpillar corporation, which sells construction equipment to Israel.¹⁵ This effort was led by Jeff Halper, a pro-Palestinian activist of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions.

The Somerville Divestment Project is making another try, planning

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to place an advisory question on the subject of divestment on the city's November 2005 election ballot.¹⁶ To this end, they have again begun "raising awareness" by spreading pro-Palestinian propaganda.¹⁷ In spring 2005 they organized a viewing of the anti-Israeli film *Qalqilya*, distributing leaflets describing Israel as a "racist settler regime" and urging supporters to "Reject Racism. Reject Israel."

The Somerville Divestment Project also now has workshops, paid advocates, and information tables near the two subway stops closest to Somerville, and is collecting signatures for its petition, handing out flyers, and canvassing the city once more.

This time, however, the antdivestment activists were prepared and began organizing for the next round by forming a broad coalition and planning their future course. Meanwhile some church leaders, such as M. Thomas Shaw, the Episcopalian Bishop of Massachusetts, began to reconsider their support of divestment from Israel.¹⁸

Lessons Learned: "United We Stand"

Despite the activists' efforts, the Somerville Divestment Project did not achieve its objective of forcing divestment from Israeli securities. When its questionable tactics, such as secretive lobbying and trying to pass resolutions without democratic process were brought to light, the movement began to lose its legitimacy.

When it sensed danger, the Jewish community united quickly, setting aside political differences. It drew on a variety of human resources, including student groups, labor unions, Jewish organizations, and concerned citizens. The success of the effort brought familiar accusations from the other side about Zionist conspiracies.¹⁹

Meanwhile, the Somerville Divestment Project continues its campaign by trying to place its agenda on the November city ballot. Supporters of Israel actively oppose this initiative.²⁰ The Project has already run into trouble with the Somerville election

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commission for "failure to comply with the requirements of the election commission."²¹

The next showdown of the Somerville divestment campaign will most likely take place during the November 2005 elections. The radical leftist and anti-Israeli advocates of divestment have not given up, and the friends of Israel will have to remain mobilized.

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Notes

* Gratitude is extended to Dr. Joel Fishman and Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs as well as to the Center's intern Aviva Horowitz for their kind assistance.

1 See HYPERLINK "www.divestmentproject.org". A thorough account of the events as they occurred, including background and key players, was written and is continuously being updated by Jon Haber, and is available at www.somervilleMEjustice.com. For Somerville-related as well as general divestment information, see also www.DivestmentWatch.com/cities/somerville-main.htm.

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