

## US universities resist calls to divest from Israel-linked companies

Officials cite barriers to meeting boycott movement's demands despite precedents on other topics



A message in chalk at Brown University in Rhode Island, US, after a protesters' encampment was taken down © David Goldman/AP

**Andrew Jack** in New York YESTERDAY

No US university endowment has divested from companies linked to Israel despite intensifying demands from pro-Palestinian students in campus protests across the country, according to the network that has long championed the move.

Legal and practical obstacles to divestment and the difficulties of building a consensus on the issue have constrained action in response to a campaign launched nearly two decades ago.

Omar Barghouti, an alumnus of Columbia University and co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement for Palestinian rights in 2005, said he was unaware of any higher educational institutions that had sold shares, although a number have held faculty and student votes in favour of doing so and some have introduced academic boycotts.

His assessment confirmed tracking by the American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, which shows despite 50 US [universities](#)' staff or student bodies passing some form of BDS resolution, none were binding and many administrations have explicitly said they would not divest.

BDS's demands have been central to the calls from students on US campuses in recent weeks, as they protest against the destruction and deaths in Gaza caused by [Israel](#)'s retaliation against Hamas over its attacks on October 7.

“Thousands of students are building an unprecedented mass movement on US, European, Australian and other campuses in solidarity with Palestinian liberation,” Barghouti said. He added that his organisation’s aim was “ending Israel’s military occupation, system of racial domination . . . and upholding the UN-sanctioned right of Palestinian refugees to return”.

Over the weekend, Vassar College in New York said it would review “a proposal for divestment from defense-related investments”, but stopped short of pledging to take action.

Meanwhile, protests continued around the country. Pro-Palestinian activists disrupted graduation and commencement ceremonies on several campuses over the weekend, and police arrested dozens more demonstrators, including at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Daniel Diermeier, president of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, which took early action to prosecute students who occupied a building in March calling for divestment, said: “Our investment committee has a clear policy not to divest for political reasons. It is inconsistent with our values to engage in boycotting specific entities or countries. That would violate our institutional neutrality.”

He added that his legal advisers had cautioned doing so could breach federal laws preventing boycotts with countries friendly to the US. He said Tennessee state law was even more strict. “We are not allowed to. If we did, we would lose significant state funding. That would be a serious risk for the university. Our legal analysis is that there is no valid challenge to the law.”

Some question divestment on more practical grounds. Usha Haley, a professor at Wichita State University who studied the anti-apartheid boycotts of South Africa in the 1960s-80s, said: “Boycotts and sanctions had minimal effect on multinationals’ operations and actually lessened the influence of the boycotters.”

Since then, greater use of private equity vehicles and managed investment funds by endowments have increased the opacity of stock holdings along with the difficulty in divesting from them.

Georges Dyer, executive director of the International Endowments Network, which supports investments in a low-carbon economy, said: “The move to external managers and combined funds can make it very challenging, and there are real costs and associated fees. But anything is possible.”

He said while geopolitical divestment calls such as those against Israel might not impose a significant financial penalty on targeted companies, they could have “a signalling impact and be a political driver” for change.

[Minouche Shafik](#), Columbia’s president, said this week that the university had proposed a mechanism for disclosing direct investments and reviewing student demands through its Advisory Committee for Socially Responsible Investing, but also stressed “the university will not divest from Israel”.

Other US universities, including Brown, Northwestern, Rutgers and Minnesota, which have negotiated with protesters in recent days, have agreed similar processes without committing to divestment.

Sheldon Pollock, a retired professor at Columbia who was involved in discussions on divestment from fossil fuels, said: “There is a history of socially responsible divestment at Columbia. It divested from tobacco, guns, private prisons and South Africa.”

But he said faculty had not been involved in recent discussions with protesters and said “the administration has lost all legitimacy and it’s not entirely clear that the students had a good faith negotiating partner”.

Adam Tooze, a professor at Columbia, recently cited a study showing the lack of transparency in the university’s finances, and suggested pressure from donors may be driving the administration’s resistance to discuss divestment.

Barghouti said BDS “strategically focuses on a relatively smaller number of carefully selected complicit companies and products for maximum impact . . . that play a clear and direct role in Israel’s crimes and where there is real potential for winning”. That included arms companies supplying military equipment to Israel.

Its current “targeted list” includes the Israeli arms supplier Elbit Systems and Hikvision, a Chinese manufacturer of CCTV systems, but also multinationals, including Intel, Chevron and HD Hyundai, Volvo, CAT and JCB, which BDS says provide machinery used to clear Palestinian settlements.

The movement also targets Barclays, a focus of the anti-apartheid boycott against South Africa in the 1980s that inspired BDS, which it says has lent more than £3bn and holds more than £1bn in shares of nine military suppliers whose products have been used in Israel’s forces.

Individual student groups, including Columbia University Apartheid Divest, have cited a longer list of companies, including Alphabet, Microsoft, Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, from which they seek divestment.

Volvo and Intel did not reply to requests to comment. Barclays referred to a [briefing document](#) released ahead of its annual general meeting next week, which said the claims were mistaken, because its shareholdings were those of its customers rather than the bank itself.

It said governments should regulate and decide rules around weapon deliveries, and that “the defence sector overall is an important contributor to our security. It provides equipment to a wide range of countries including the UK and other European Nato members, and more recently Ukraine.”