

The Efforts to Disorganize Us:

An Introduction to Counterinsurgency Efforts Targeting Palestine Solidarity Activists



While the Israeli government is leveraging billions to ensure permanent conditions of apartheid across occupied Palestine, pro-Israel organizations here in the US are spending millions to curtail the growing Palestine solidarity movement. The US Israel lobby and its partners within Israeli intelligence are directing enormous resources to suppress growing support for Palestinian liberation, particularly on college campuses. Israel, which relies heavily on continued public support in the United States, fears the potential effects of shifting public opinion shaped by campus advocacy. Their aim, ultimately, is to restrict student activists from participating in freedom work which threatens future public support for the state of Israel.

The US Israel lobby invests enormously in projects to derail and disorganize Students for Justice in Palestine; Jewish Voice for Peace; the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement; and their allies. Their tactics include surveillance, smear campaigns, astroturfing, and legal battles. Their efforts pose real and dangerous consequences to groups and individuals in the liberation movement.

This resource is designed to provide an overview of tactics being used to target Palestine solidarity activism, particularly those on US college campuses. **This resource assumes that organizers are the ultimate experts of their own experiences. The following materials are meant to serve only as additional resources in understanding the ecosystem of organizations and strategies working against our movements, in hope that we may better prepare ourselves to recognize counterinsurgency methodology and return to liberatory work.**

What follows is an introduction to four major counterinsurgency tactics and a list of resources:

Lawfare

What is it?

- Lawfare describes an array of legal and legislative initiatives designed to suppress and, in some cases, criminalize the BDS movement and critique of Israel and its government.
- Most lawfare projects fall under two categories: (1) efforts to define criticism of Israel as a form of antisemitism. This includes implementing the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, or a similar definition, which includes criticism of Israel as a form of antisemitism. (2) efforts to materially disenfranchise supporters of the BDS movement. For example, by denying federal or state funding to universities, businesses, or individuals who support BDS or who allow supporters of BDS to organize within their institution.

What is it trying to do?

- Lawfare attempts to manipulate definitions of antisemitism, hate crime, and anti-discrimination legislation to include criticism of Israeli apartheid and occupation. It attempts to use this legislation to strategically shield Israel from accountability and, subsequently, to discipline activists for standing in solidarity with Palestine. The state weaponizes civil rights laws originally designed to address institutional racism in order to suppress advocacy for Palestinian liberation.
- Lawfare aims to codify criticism of Israel as “antisemitic,” “anti-American,” and “anti-democratic,” giving universities, businesses, and police departments justification and tools to censor and discipline Palestine advocacy.
- Legal action is levied against social justice movements and activists, often with the intention of consuming our time, energy, and resources. This is an additional goal of the lawfare project. The more time we spend combating legal action, the less time we can spend organizing against apartheid, and that’s the point.

How does it affect us?

- In 2019, the Trump administration passed the Antisemitism Executive Order. This order expanded the powers of Betsy DeVos’ Department of Education to investigate and process complaints regarding criticism of Israel as civil



rights violations and a form of antisemitic discrimination. Palestine Legal has reported an uptick in investigations into Palestine advocacy on college campuses by the Department of Education since the passing of this executive order.

- Lawfare strategies incentivize institutions, universities, and businesses to suppress Palestine solidarity activism that could jeopardize their access to federal and state funding.
- Manipulative and politicized redefinitions of antisemitism risk diverting attention away from the real dangers of actual antisemitic violence and ideology.

What can we do?

- Follow ongoing battles over free speech and the right to boycott. Stand up for these rights by joining campaigns against BDS laws in your state.
- Know your rights surrounding free speech, understand how your rights as an activist might be different at a public vs. private university.
- These lawsuits and investigations are often an attempt to consume our organizing energies and divert attention away from the moral indefensibility of Israeli apartheid and occupation. As much as possible, focus your capacity on building your own campaigns and organizing for Palestinian liberation.

Astroturfing

What is it?

- Astroturfing is the opposite of grassroots – it consists of well-funded organizations and lobby groups which produce campaigns that are designed to look like they are coming from local organizers. In reality, these campaigns are helicoptered in by well-funded, outside forces. Astroturfed protests or campaigns are made easier by the internet and social media, which makes tracking the origins of online activity more difficult.
- Example 1: The pro-Israel lobby group Stand-WithUS has developed a series of seemingly innocuous Facebook communities which post content on topics of environmental preservation, women’s rights, etc. These sites post pro-Israel and pro-IDF content alongside internet memes or images of kittens. Stand-WithUs’ own employees have explained that this strategy helps their pro-Israel propaganda campaign blend in with apolitical media.
- Example 2: A 2016 Al Jazeera documentary, “The Lobby USA,” follows an astroturf protest against the national Students for Justice in Palestine student conference at George Mason University. Pro-Israel interns in Washington, DC are shuttled on a chartered bus to demonstrate against student organizers attending the conference. Organizers of the astroturfed

protest alert media contacts who cover the demonstration as an organic opposition to SJP and the BDS movement. In reality, the group has been taking marching orders from paid lobbyists and receiving talking points from lawyers working for StandWithUs.

What is it trying to do?

- Astroturfing is designed to produce the illusion of widespread grassroots support for Israel and opposition to Palestinian liberation movements. Astroturfed campaigns, which often present as genuine public opposition to Palestine solidarity, the BDS movement, and discussion of Israeli apartheid, may actually be orchestrated by a smaller number of people with institutional resources and a narrow political agenda. This can deter people interested in learning about Palestine liberation from engaging with the topic, believing it is too volatile or controversial.

How does it affect us?

- Astroturfing is hard to identify, as it is designed to be undetectable. It can derail genuine grassroots organizing and deter new organizers

What can we do?

- Research the origins and legitimacy of anti-BDS and anti-SJP campaigns on your campus. Is opposition to your work coming from people within your own community or is it being organized anonymously? If so, there's a potential it's being helicoptered in by outside lobby groups with track records of organizing campaigns on campuses. With astroturfed campaigns, this is intentionally hard to discern.
- If you are able to identify outside actors interfering in internal campus politics, consider how that might shape how you want to approach your campaigns and how you want to address the role of lobby groups in your campus political ecosystem.





Surveillance

What is it?

- Surveillance, in the context of counterinsurgency, is the covert observation of individuals, organizations, and movements. Surveillance is used to gather intelligence and information that can be used to target and derail our liberatory work.
- We know pro-Israel media, intelligence, and lobby groups monitor social media profiles of Palestine solidarity activists, attempt to covertly record our gatherings and conferences, and in some cases have the capacity to hack into private communications.

What is it trying to do?

- Surveillance is an intelligence and information gathering tactic. It is used to generate blacklists, doxx activists, develop smear campaigns, initiate legal battles, and intimidate activists. Surveillance operations intend to gather intelligence that can be used to derail and delegitimize our social justice movements.

How does it affect us?

- Paranoia – the knowledge that state and institutional actors may be surveilling the work of Palestine activists can lead to generalized suspicion and paranoia around communications, technology, and infiltration. It's important to make risk assessments and take precautions to preserve your safety.

- Individuals and groups may feel compelled to limit or adjust public statements and online organizing to account for the surveillance ecosystem and its consequences.
- Organizers from Palestine are often at greater risk and can face more drastic consequences of surveillance. Having a profile on activist blacklisting websites like Canary Mission can prevent Palestinians from traveling to their homeland.

What can we do about it?

- Organizers should understand the risks of digital organizing and communications. There are several resources about online security cultures and safety precautions. None of these tactics are foolproof. [Ruckus Society Security Culture Guide](#) is a good place to start.
- Consider your individual and group risk levels, identify boundaries around public-facing work, and make intentional decisions about the use of online communications and social media understanding that different people in a group may experience different levels of risk and consequence.
- Recognize when surveillance and the threat of surveillance is affecting your mental health or collective trust within the group. Reach out and ask for support. Consider when you need to take breaks from online or in-person organizing.

Smear Campaigns

What is it?

- Smear campaigns are the publication of compromising information in order to discredit the work of Palestine activists. Smear campaigns can come from gathered intelligence or false salacious allegations. They often rely on untruths sticking as truths. Smear campaigns against Palestine activists most often include false accusations of antisemitism and connections to terrorism. They often take the form of publicized blacklists and defamatory articles, sometimes published by known authors but often posted anonymously.
- One of the most infamous Palestine blacklisting sites is Canary Mission. The site targets students and academics, and attempts to obstruct their viability in the job market. While the site has long been operated anonymously, an Al Jazeera investigation revealed billionaire Adam Milstein likely funds the website which is reportedly operated by the Israel on Campus Coalition.
- Much of this work is posted anonymously because the individuals and organizations involved in publishing it can't stand behind their work. They know that their allegations are untruths and use anonymity to veil their malicious, ungrounded allegations.

What is it trying to do?

- Much like the other tactics listed here, smear campaigns are most effective as a deterrent. They attempt to intimidate people away from freedom work. Being placed on an internet blacklist is scary and can have serious consequences for our professional careers, personal lives, etc. Smear campaigns work as a counter-insurgency strategy because they force us to divert our attention away from organizing and towards damage control measures.
- Smear campaigns are designed to affect public opinion. When their untruths stick, they can lead to professors being denied tenure, students being hauled into disciplinary hearings and even organizers being visited by the FBI.

How does it affect us?

- The Executive Director of the Israel on Campus Coalition, which reportedly operates Canary Mission explained that their smear campaigns are effective because the time activists spend attending to the smear allegations is time they can't spend "attacking Israel." These campaigns are consuming and threatening, designed to prevent us from running liberation campaigns.
- Smear campaigns have real consequences on our mental health and have the potential of harming our political, professional, and material futures. Many activists have been denied jobs, promotions, or entry into Palestine on the basis of allegations made in smear campaigns.

What can we do about it?

- Be proactive: Talk to those you organize with about how your group could support anyone targeted by smear campaigns. Have a plan in place about how to support members of your group, recognizing that everyone may have different needs.
- Take breaks from or set boundaries around the use of social media. Take some time offline to regroup and take care of yourself.
- Reach out to coalition partners, Palestine Legal or the Center for Constitutional Rights for strategic and legal support.

Conclusion

While the above counterinsurgency strategies threaten individuals and organizations devoted to Palestinian liberation, the enormous resources levied against us are simultaneously a testament to the power of our movement. There will likely always be better financed and more powerful political entities working to derail our work and prevent the realization of liberated futures. These forces will try to push us into less effective organizing strategies or away from organizing altogether.

We can take measures to protect ourselves and strategize around building stronger movements and campaigns. Below are a few resources to support this effort:



Organizing Resources

Pod Map: Map out organizational allies and collaborators. Directions: In the middle circle, write the name of your organization. In bold circles, write the names of groups and individuals you feel confident you can call upon to support you in times of crisis (maybe this is another student group, a professor, etc.) This is your “pod.” In the dotted circles write the names of individuals or groups with whom you are working to build stronger solidarities with the aim of moving them into your core “pod.” The outer circles are for charting resources you can call upon (perhaps Palestine Legal or your campus newspaper, for example.)

Midwest Academy Strategy Sheet: Mapping exercise to layout your campaign strategies, including targets, tactics, opponents, and allies.

Ruckus Society Security Culture for Activists: A thorough guide for developing individual and organizational security practices.

Palestine Legal - Legal and Tactical Guide: A guide for activists navigating legal and disciplinary concerns.

Palestine Legal – Know Your Rights Handbook: A guide to your rights as an activist on or off campus.

Contacts for Supporting Organizations

Palestine Legal

Phone: (312) 212-0448

Legal Support: palestinelegal.org/intake

General Info: info@palestinelegal.org

The Center for Constitutional Rights

Phone: (212) 614-6464

E-mail: info@ccrjustice.org

Students for Justice in Palestine

Phone: (914) 222-3723

E-mail: nationalsjp@gmail.com

Jewish Voice for Peace

Phone: (510) 465-1777

E-mail: info@jvp.org