



BDS activist couple:

US Campus protests disabled old levers of power

Iranians were anti-Israel before Revolution

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INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

There's only so much one can discover about the cause, methods, and characteristics of a group of protesters across the world from pictures, videos, and news stories. The problem would be exacerbated if the regime the protesters are fighting against has a media hegemony committed to whitewashing its crimes and misrepresenting or even slandering its opponents. What arguably better breaks this access barrier is someone with close knowledge of both sides who has followed the struggle for years. Iran Daily has conducted an extensive exclusive with not just one but two such individuals, who are introduced in turn below.

Blaine Coleman is an American resident of Ann Arbor and an activist fighting for the human rights of Palestinians. He is a frequent commenter at public meetings, including those of the Ann Arbor City Council and the Central Student Government at the University of Michigan. His profession in the past 22 years has avowedly been protesting "against military aid for Israel" in the Ann Arbor city council "in the capacity of human beings and a regular citizen of Ann Arbor". He helped U of M students in organizing the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign and gathering a sizable audience during controversial deliberations.

Dr. Mozghan Savabieasfahani, a native of Iran and wife to Coleman, is an award-winning environmental toxicologist and an advocate for justice for Palestine. She has published extensively on the harmful effects of war-created pollution in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq post-2003, where birth defects, cancer, and other diseases have become epidemic. After many years of speaking out before the Ann Arbor City Council, Mozghan Savabieasfahani is eyeing a seat at the table to, among other things, pass a resolution against military aid to apartheid Israel.

IRAN DAILY: This recent wave of pro-Palestinian protests and campus encampments that swept across the United States was the latest in a series of political activism by students that American universities pushed back against. With years of political activism under your belts, you two rushed to join several such protests on the campus of the University of Michigan before coming to Iran to spread the message of the students. What did you glean from your first-hand observation?

BLAINE COLEMAN: This October of 2023 was the very first time that we have seen massive, unrelenting demonstrations by the students for divestment from Israel, for cutting off the military aid to Israel. This is a new thing. You'll notice that it's a very openly anti-imperialist movement. This also is something you have never seen on such a big scale in the United States. Now, I know you're thinking, "Well, there was the anti-Vietnam War movement." Yes, that was extremely important and big, but it was not mostly anti-imperialist. It was mostly a nationalist kind of thing.

I think this movement is unmatched because it's so big, so determined, so loud, so unrelenting, and so publicly anti-imperialist. The anti-Vietnam War movement was not led by Vietnamese students. In those days, there were very few Vietnamese students. This big anti-imperialist movement against Israel is led by Palestinian-American students. Of course, it has a very large participation of many Muslim students, many Jewish students, many Christian students, and other students.

Even ultra-orthodox Jewish students?

MOZHGAN SAVABIEASFAHANI: On the campus of the University of Michigan, we haven't seen any, but they are everywhere else. There are other students who don't believe in God or they have no religious bone in them. Most of them are not religious, but there are all kinds of students. There are Hindus. There are Buddhists. There are all kinds of students.

For 20 years, Blaine and I have been pushing these students to get out there and make a demand. In 2001, there were a lot of students who were talking about boycotting Israel, but it was very mild. They were not this serious about calling for divestment, for stopping investment in companies that benefit Israel, and for totally cutting Israel



American activist Blaine Coleman (L) points to a slogan on his hoodie that reads "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," as he and his wife Mozghan Savabieasfahani talk to Iran Daily about pro-Palestinian student protests sweeping US universities, in Tehran, Iran, on May 12, 2024.
● ALI HASSANPOUR/IRAN DAILY

off. This continued up until the past six or seven months. The students were never this determined and convinced that it must be done. I never thought they would actually come out forcefully and not quit.

Coleman: Now, to give you some background, the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel movement started on the US campuses in 2001 in Berkeley. The first big victory of this BDS movement was at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, on April 17, 2003. It was a resolution for total divestment against Israel.

Upon hearing the students' calls for divestment, many people assume that it must be impractical for universities to cut longstanding ties with Israel. Is it, though?

Coleman: When Russia attacked Ukraine in 2022, many institutions and universities including the University of Michigan instantly cut the Russians off completely. They just issued statements saying they're divesting from Russia. That was it.

Divestment is complicated, but it's also a political move that is not really a financial move. It's not really a complex financial transaction. It's really a political statement. When they said, "We're divesting from Russia", they were expressing outrage and demanding concrete action against Russia. Now, today, if they say they want to divest from

Israel, it would be the same thing. Who cares about the dollars and cents? In my opinion, it's a political statement.

Personally, I don't care about the method. It can be divestment, boycotting, or cutting off military aid. The important thing to me is that you express outrage against Israel because it's massacring people. So, if you feel comfortable with divestment, like the students feel, I'd say, "Go for it." If you feel comfortable with a boycott because the word boycott is well-understood, I say go for a boycott. We've done that.

Savabieasfahani: But why is it unrealistic to reject a monster that is trained to murder humanity and proudly say, "We want to kill all of you"? Anyone who thinks it's okay to continue to feed these kinds of monsters should stop and think about who they are. Israel is not just about killing Palestinians. Israel is about killing humanity, freedom, and dialogue. It's about oppressing every human being in the Arab world so they cannot speak one word.

Why do you think Arab governments are so reluctant to do anything about Israel? It's because they get support from Israel to oppress their own people and continue to milk their own people. So, Israel and the current governments of Arab nations are hand in glove to torture and kill Arabs. People who say that we cannot stop nurturing them should be ashamed of them-

selves. There is no time for nicety. The time is to expose these kinds of thoughts and tell them who they are. They are helping monsters and justifying terrible crimes.

The news just came out that Cornell University's president will step down from her position next month, making her the third Ivy League leader who announced their resignation. Do you count this as a win?

Savabieasfahani: Is she resigning because the Zionists are forcing her to resign, or is she resigning because she's objecting to the genocide in Palestine? That is the question.

Coleman: She is resigning because she caught heat from supporters of Israel. This is a part of the massive sound and fury around the issue of divesting from Israel that is reflected in this pressure coming from Congress to university presidents. Congress is pressuring university presidents to get rid of students who are demanding divestment and saying, for example, 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.' The university presidents have no way of fighting this. So, they're buckling and quitting.

Right now, they are dealing with it by throwing police at the students. It has a heavy cost for students, but once these students get released from jail a day later, they are out there demonstrating again and rebuilding their tents.