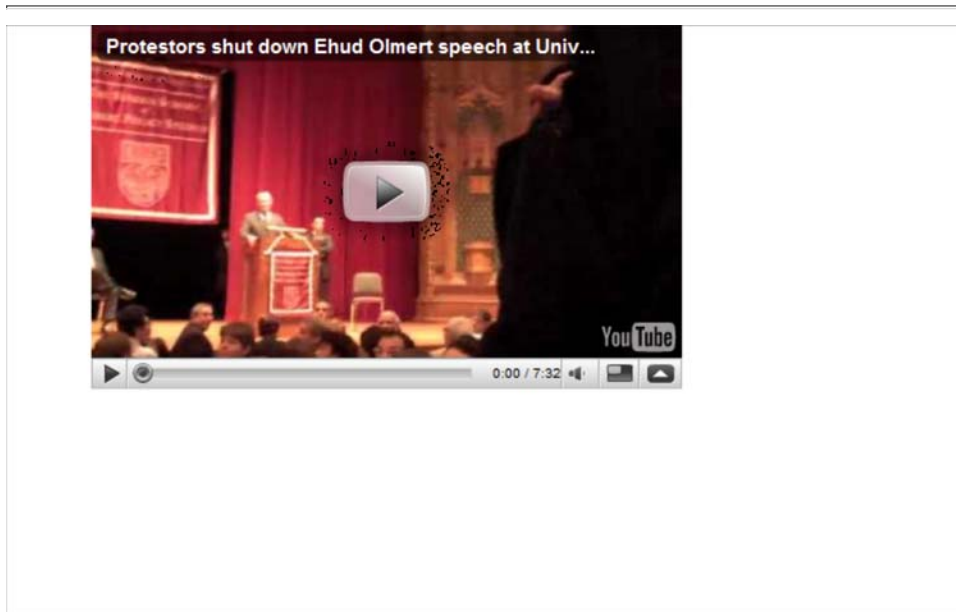


Activism News

EI exclusive video: Protesters shout down Ehud Olmert in Chicago
Maureen Clare Murphy, *The Electronic Intifada*, 16 October 2009



Approximately 30 activists -- mainly students from area universities -- disrupted a lecture given in Chicago by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert yesterday which was hosted by the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy. While Olmert's speech was disrupted inside the lecture hall, approximately 150 activists protested outside the hall in the freezing rain.

Protesters inside the hall read off the names of Palestinian children killed during Israel's assault on Gaza last winter. They shouted that it was unacceptable that the war crimes suspect be invited to speak at a Chicago university when his army destroyed a university in Gaza in January. They reminded the audience of the more than 1,400 Palestinians killed during the Gaza attacks and the more than 1,200 killed during Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006. Both invasions happened during Olmert's premiership.

With interventions coming every few minutes throughout his appearance, Olmert had difficulty giving his speech and often appeared frustrated. At one point he appealed for "just five minutes" to speak without being interrupted.

The demonstration was mobilized last week after organizers learned of the lecture, paid for by a grant provided by Jordan's King Abdullah II. Within hours an appeal was issued, urging those concerned with Palestinian rights to call the university and demand that the lecture be canceled. The call was put out by major community organizations such as the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)-Chicago, American Muslims for Palestine and the United States Palestine Community Network, as well as

solidarity organizations al-Awda, the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network, the International Solidarity Movement, the Palestine Solidarity Group-Chicago and area campus groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine chapters at DePaul University and the University of Illinois at Chicago, as well as the Arab Student Union at Moraine Valley.

The security presence at the lecture was severe with university police, the US Secret Service and Israeli security present -- many of them visibly armed -- with Israeli security checking in those who had registered in advance to attend the lecture. Video and photography was banned inside the hall and media were not allowed to cover the lecture. Despite these restrictions, activists managed to take video inside the hall and drop an eight-foot-long banner from the mezzanine that read "Goldstone" in both English and Hebrew, referring to the recently published UN report investigating violations of international law during the Gaza invasion. One activist was arrested and put in a headlock by a police officer, witnesses said, and released around midnight. Approximately 30 supporters waited for him at the police station while he was detained.

Towards the end of the lecture, Olmert put his hand over his brow and squinted to search out the source of the shout, "There's no discussion with a war criminal -- the only discussion you should be having is in court!" That call was made by Ream Qato, who graduated from the university in 2007, and added, "You belong in the Hague!" Qato told The Electronic Intifada that yesterday's protest "Set the stage for University of Chicago students and students in the Chicago area ... no one should be afraid of speaking out against someone." She added that the demonstration was significant because "The Palestinian community [in Chicago] for the first time went to a university campus to protest."

Second-year medical student Afshan Mohiuddin was removed from the hall after she voiced her disapproval at the Harris School dean's on-stage assertion that Olmert was invited to express his views. "He can do that at the International Court of Justice, not at this university," Mohiuddin shouted, adding, "[Olmert] belongs in a cage, not on a stage!"

Mohiuddin told The Electronic Intifada that "it was ironic that they searched us [instead of him]," considering that Olmert is suspected of war crimes. She added, "As a University of Chicago student I was upset with the lack of commotion on behalf of the student body before the event ... No one has protested the event."

Mohiuddin's frustration was echoed in a commentary published by the University of Chicago's student publication *The Chicago Maroon* earlier this week, in which third-year student Nadia Marie Ismail decried the lack of protest by the university community towards the Olmert speech. She contrasted this silence with the pressure the Center for Middle Eastern Studies faced after a lecture earlier this year by The Electronic Intifada's Ali Abunimah (who was the first to disrupt Olmert's speech yesterday), University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer and Norman

Finkelstein, whose lost bid for tenure at DePaul University is attributed to outside pressure by Israel government apologists. "[T]hat University center was put under unprecedented pressure for weeks before and months after the event, with claims that University centers and schools should not host 'one-sided' speakers," Ismail wrote.

Olmert's lecture in Chicago was one of several scheduled throughout the United States. His speech at the University of Kentucky the previous day was disrupted by activists and met with a protest outside. These demonstrations are part of a wave of notched-up dissent towards Israeli officials implicated in war crimes and racist policy. In 2003, former Israeli minister Natan Sharansky was greeted with a pie in the face by an activist at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Last year at the UK's Oxford University, a speech by Israeli President Shimon Peres was drowned out by protesters outside while students inside the hall disrupted his talk.

One of the organizers of the protest, Hatem Abudayyeh, National Coordinating Committee member of the United States Palestine Community Network, hoped for a larger count of protesters despite the adverse weather. However, he said, "The fact that there's people around the world who know about it, the fact that PACBI [the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel] sent us a letter of support and endorsement of our action, the fact that there was coordination with the outside protest and the inside disruption -- all of these components and aspects of the action made it one of the more successful ones that we've done."

He added, "There is real change happening, whether it's the international response to the Lebanon war or the international response to the Gaza war. The US is the most powerful country in the world, Israel is a powerful military as well, but the Palestinians have the world on their side."

Video shot and produced by The Electronic Intifada.

Maureen Clare Murphy is Managing Editor of The Electronic Intifada and an activist with the Palestine Solidarity Group-Chicago, which co-sponsored the demonstration.

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