“Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction” Lecture Summary

On Tuesday October 29, 2013, the Center for Gulf Studies at the American University of Kuwait hosted a joint lecture by Omar Barghouti and Abdullah Al Naibari entitled, “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.” This lecture was part of the Kuwait-Palestine series, a CGS initiative encouraging an open-ended discussion of the various facets of the history between Kuwait and Palestine and the importance of this relationship for both. Al Naibari kicked off the two-part lecture by discussing the history of the Arab League’s boycott of Israel. He explained the systematic economic isolation of Israel by Arab states, and the various degrees to which both Arab and non-Arab nations have implemented it. Following Al Naibari’s segment of the lecture, Barghouti took the opportunity to discuss the history of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement and how crucial it remains today. He outlined what role Kuwait has played in the success of the movement, and then concluded by affirming the need for solidarity over charity.

Abdullah Al Naibari approached his segment of the two-part lecture through a historical analysis of the Arab League’s boycott of Israel and how this influenced current manifestations of the BDS movement. He began by discussing the origins of the word ‘boycott’, emphasizing that although the word itself may only be around 130 years old, the act of boycotting far predates it. Similarly, boycotting the Zionist occupation of Palestine predates recognition of Israeli independence, going back as early as the 1920s. With the formation of the Arab League in 1945, however, the boycott of Israel became official, with a tertiary mandate covering three areas: boycotting products and services originating in Israel, non-Arab countries that engage in business with Israel, and businesses that offer services or goods to Israel. Al Naibari explained that this boycott forced non-Arab countries to pick sides, with those choosing Israel becoming permanently blacklisted from Arab markets. U.S. opposition hindered boycott efforts, however, with Congress passing a law in 1977 that prevented U.S. businesses from cooperating with the boycott at the risk of heavy fines. The first country to abandon the boycott was Egypt in 1980, and many soon followed, Al Naibari explained. With the passage of the Oslo Accords in 1993, GCC states formally announced their withdrawal from the Arab League boycott. Al Naibari affirmed that Kuwait has remained steadfast nonetheless in its support of the boycott. He concluded his discussion by highlighting that the boycott is not only of Israeli goods and services, but also the boycott of Israeli academics and culture as well, providing a smooth transition for Barghouti to begin his segment of the lecture.

Omar Barghouti began by providing a brief historical introduction to Palestine. He explained that of the 11.6 million Palestinians globally, 69% were refugees or internally displaced persons in 2012. For this reason, the BDS movement calls for basic refugee rights to be granted to the Palestinian people, especially the right to return. Barghouti then introduced the idea of BDS as a global movement, uniting millions of people around the world in the struggle to free Palestine from Israeli oppression. He likened Israel’s contemporary acts of apartheid against the Palestinians to South Africa, calling them in some ways as bad if not worse than the South African apartheid. Barghouti explained that there are over 50 laws in Israel that allow for institutionalized and legalized discrimination and racism against Palestinian Arabs, resulting in the restriction of land ownership, the destruction of books, and the denial of education to Palestinians. Barghouti explained that although leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi,
and Nelson Mandela inspire the movement, BDS is very much a Palestinian movement, and remains so today. He then emphasized recent successes of the global BDS campaign: companies which have engaged in business with Israel losing contracts in Arab nations, the divestment of countless bodies, including the state of Norway and the Mennonite Church, from Israeli companies, and gaining the support of individuals and organizations around the world. The BDS movement is no longer a fringe movement, Barghouti explained, having drawn widespread media attention and support from people globally. He then transitioned into discussing Kuwait’s continued solidarity with the BDS movement, a relative anomaly amongst wealthy Arab nations. He highlighted that even with this existing support, Kuwait has room to improve its influence in BDS immensely. Barghouti concluded his discussion by emphasizing that pessimistic outlooks on the BDS movement utilize “snapshot vision” in their scope of analysis, and that the potential of individuals and small groups uniting under a common cause cannot be overstated, as they have been at the root of all revolutions since the dawn of civilization.

Following the lecture portion of the discussion, a lively question and answer period took place, allowing both speakers to expand upon their previous thoughts and introduce new points as well. Some audience members chose to ask the speakers to explain or expand upon particular points, including what the actual economic effects of the Arab League boycott were on Israel and why sanctions remain a crucial part of the BDS equation. Others asked about what is currently being done to prevent complicit companies from signing large contracts with the Kuwait government, and what audience members can do to become involved. Al Naibari took the chance to explain which Arab countries remain engaged in the boycott today and how they remain important, while Barghouti explained BDS’ general deference and context-sensitivity to local forms of BDS action, calling upon area experts to use their knowledge to engage in BDS specific to existing circumstances. Both speakers urged members of the audience to partake in the struggle to end Palestinian oppression, and stressed the importance of action over agreement and the need for persistence at all levels of BDS.