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University Wire

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**HEADLINE:** Columbia U. petition demands divestiture from Israel

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In the opening rounds of what is likely to be a major campus debate in the weeks ahead, a group of professors announced on Saturday a petition calling on the University to use its influence -- political and economic -- to bring pressure on the Israeli government to cease its military operations against the Palestinian people. Since Saturday, 54 graduate and undergraduate students and 12 community residents have added their names to the 74 initial faculty signatures.

The Columbia/**Barnard** Faculty Committee on Divestment demands in no uncertain terms in its petition that Columbia "divest from all companies that manufacture arms and other military hardware sold to Israel, as well as from companies that sell such arms to Israel, until Israel complies with all relevant U.N. resolutions and Geneva conventions, and ends its military occupation of the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip seized since 1967."

Brinkley Messick, a professor of anthropology and the appointed spokesman of a small group of faculty who circulated the petition among faculty beginning earlier this year describes the origins of the movement as "a group of people who were concerned about what we saw as an unbelievable level of brutality on Palestinian civilians by the government of Israel, mainly the use of military equipment against the civilian population."

The petition follows the precedent set at a series of national meetings to spur divestment. The meetings were initiated in 2000 by a professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago aiming to create an anti-Apartheid-style divestment campaign. The most recent conference at the University of Michigan last April drew national attention to the issue following an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education. So far Harvard has been the only other Ivy League university to have faculty circulate a petition.

Faculty signers have different reasons for adding their names to the petition, but all of them see the issue in a similarly clear moral light. Mahmood Mamdani, a professor of anthropology, described his support for the petition as a "moral statement registering concern over the exercise of power by Israel."

Even scholars whose expertise is not in the politics and culture of the Middle East believe that the situation in the region calls for a strong response by professors. Philip Kitcher of the philosophy department said he believes faculty members have an obligation to speak out about their conscience.

"Faculty have signed petitions for various major causes since the 1960s. It's part of faculty life as professors of my generation understand it," Kitcher said.

Columbia's petition, however, is unique in that it calls only for divestment from firms selling arms to Israel. Other petitions have called for much broader sanctions. The petition at the University of California-Berkeley called for almost \$ 6 billion of the university's endowment to be divested.

Charles Hailey, a Columbia signatory and professor in the physics department, said he was drawn to Columbia's petition specifically because of its more focused aims.

"I did not see another petition out there that I would have put my name to. Our petition is focused on the loss of innocent life," Hailey said.

Reaction on other campuses where petitions have been circulated has most commonly taken the form of charges of anti-Semitism. Most notable was a statement by Harvard President Lawrence Summers, who widely criticized divestment and echoed the sentiment of Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz in calling the petitions "anti-Semitic in effect, if not in intent."

The Columbia petition has been met with charges of anti-Semitism as well. Jewish and Israeli interest groups on campus

met yesterday to "establish an opposition," said Orahm Preiss-Bloom, SEAS '04 and the Israel Action coordinator at Hillel.

"We see this divestment as a blatantly anti-Semitic attack ... professors and alumni have also been rallied by this cause," Preiss-Bloom said.

The group has yet to decide on a name for its own movement but will launch a web site and petition of its own in the next few days. As far as the critics of divestment are concerned, the uniqueness of Columbia's petition does not necessarily separate the movement here from the broader national campaign for divestment. Ari Saks, CC '05 and an activist who has been to several conferences on divestment at other campuses, does not question the motives or the feelings of the signatories of the petition but does believe that the national movement has shown signs of little desire to promote debate. Saks said he sees the Columbia petition's specific wording as nothing more than a token.

"Israel is the only country out of all the nations of the world that supposedly occupy other countries that is singled out for this treatment, and those other countries don't give rights to people like the rights Israel gives to Palestinians," Saks said. Even if the petition is well-intentioned, Saks said he believes "divestment is absolutely the wrong tool."

Responding to these charges, the four signatory professors interviewed stressed that their immediate aims in signing was to spur campus debate on the issue, which they believe has been severely lacking up to this point in time.

"We recognize that there are a diversity of points of view on this campus, and we recognize the legitimacy of their expression," said Mamdani, who said he sees the petition as a critique of the Israeli government and not of the people of Israel. He said he hopes the claims of anti-Semitism will not have the effect of silencing discussion, as he believes it has on other campuses.

Messick said the next step for the Committee on Divestment will be to attend a Nov. 13 meeting of the Committee on **Socially Responsible** Investment, where they will officially present the petition to the administration for the first time.

"At that meeting, groups who have something to state on the matter will be able to speak, and we will make a statement at that time," Messick said.

Columbia's petition identifies four examples of Columbia's investments in areas that the signatories believe are detrimental to the peace process: stock in Boeing and General Electric as the manufacturers of the Apache helicopter, United Technologies as the manufacturer of the Blackhawk Helicopter, and Caterpillar as the manufacturer of bulldozers that are used as "instruments of house demolition" in the West Bank.

Columbia invests over \$ 444 million dollars in the stock market, and it is unclear how much of that will ultimately be called for to be divested after a full investigation is completed.

Divestment from Israel is far from the University's first exposure to politics-via-finance. In 1986, after over 14 years of discussion, the University trustees were the first in the Ivy League to vote for a full divestment from South Africa in response to the Apartheid regime's policies of racial exclusion.

Messick, who understands that any action on the petition is facing a very long time frame, said the signatories are interested in the petition "as a form of political expression and to express ourselves before we take action."

"Once we meet with [the CSRI], we will follow through and seek those divestments that we have mentioned specifically and identify other types of investment that the University might make that involve the Israeli military," Messick said.

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