#BlackLivesMatter Briefing

What is Black Lives Matter?
Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a non-centralized grassroots social justice movement organized by regional Chapters urging society to value black lives and recognize their marginalization. The movement, born in the U.S. in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of the black teen Trayvon Martin, is now international. As details of the shooting unfolded, two Black LGBTQ social justice leaders, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors, created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in response to Martin’s death. The hashtag quickly spread and birthed a new 21st century millennial-driven civil rights movement. BLM uses their wide network on social media to spread awareness about police brutality and other endemic issues with the use of hashtags, clever tweets, memes and more. Examples of this style of social justice activism include the “Hands up, don’t shoot” slogan widely used following the death of Michael Brown. Decentralized, non-hierarchical and tech-savvy, BLM does not reflect the American civil rights movements of the past. It is often said that this younger, multiracial, intersectional movement “is not your grandfather’s civil rights movement.”

Division within BLM
Today there is much internal conflict about the direction of BLM. And, because BLM is a decentralized movement, it is impossible – and inaccurate – to make sweeping claims such as “Black Lives Matter supports BDS.” Each coast has its own unique Chapters characterized by their micro-regional expressions of activism—some traditional prefer protests, and some less traditional prefer direct action like shutting down public highways. The West Coast chapters are influenced by SF Bay Area local and national BLM leader Alicia Garza, “a Black Jew from Marin County (CA),” who refuses to engage with the Democratic National Committee. Another BLM leader, Patrisse Cullors, has endorsed Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions and has participated in a “Black for Palestine” delegation to the Palestinian Territories. On the other end of the spectrum of the BLM movement is a group, “Campaign Zero.” Unlike the more unpredictable West Coast Chapters and sub-groups, Campaign Zero does support engagement with the political system and one of its leaders, DeRay Mckesson, is a mayoral candidate in Baltimore. This short video clip highlights the divisions among leadership of BLM and is worth reviewing.

Intersectionality of BLM
Generally speaking, BLM embraces intersectionality as a core principle, which holds that one individual can have various, non-competing, non-hierarchical identities – all of which can be subject to oppression. Other identity movements have also embraced BLM as evidenced by the naming of Alicia Garza as the 2016 San Francisco Pride Parade Grand Marshall. Because of this intersectional context in which BLM operates, the BLM and Racial justice (Civil Rights 2.0) movements support the liberation of all oppressed peoples and deliberately focus on LGBTQ civil rights, ending sexism and supporting all demographics of black America. For a more in depth analysis of intersectionality as related to countering BDS, please check out this IAN co-hosted webinar on the topic.

How BLM is intertwined with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
On August 19, 2014, Michael Brown was fatally shot by white police officer Darren Wilson. Protests, both peaceful and violent, ensued in Ferguson, MO, lasting nearly a month. Simultaneously, Israel was in the midst of Operation Protective Edge, a military conflict with the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. As protesters in Ferguson, MO, were being tear-gassed by police, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza started tweeting advice on how protesters could insulate themselves from teargas using the hashtag #Ferguson. This ignited the “From Ferguson to Palestine / When I See Us, I See Them” call to action.
Very quickly, Black and Palestinian activists used social media to express support and solidarity with each other. This confluence of events created the perfect storm for collaboration and increased kinship. Those employing the “Black for Palestine” effort believe Black Americans and Palestinians are similarly victims of repressive, armed, and largely white colonialist governments. Generally speaking, both believe their movements are perceived to be illegitimate by outsiders and share a narrative of dehumanization, oppression, and resilience. There is a genuine sense of kinship and shared experience between both peoples which has coalesced into the intentional coupling and conflating of their narratives: domestic racial justice issues with an international human’s rights movement. This coupling of narratives is often represented in the “Ferguson to Palestine” rallying call.

There are also contemporary issues straining relations between Black Americans and Israel. For example, many Black Americans see Benjamin Netanyahu’s relationship with – and treatment of – President Obama as racist in nature, as well as Netanyahu’s recent comments in the last Israeli election, which they then associate with all the people of Israel. This relationship is sustained through joint-protests, social media and public statements. In 2015 over 1,000 black activists and organizations signed a “Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine” endorsing BDS against Israel. West Bank Palestinians and select Black Lives Matter activists have travelled across the Atlantic to visit one another and strengthen their ties – around the same time Patrisse Cullors opted to endorse BDS.

**Looking at the Jewish and African-American Relationship**

The geographical, cultural, and economic divides between Jews and African-Americans are great. The rate of economic and social advancement of the Jewish community in the last fifty years has significantly distanced our communities. The issues that are disproportionately affecting African-Americans – income inequality, access to formal education, the prison industrial complex, police brutality, and more – are not issues disproportionately impacting the Jewish community, though they are issues of our concern. Put simply, the divides between our communities go far beyond our understandings of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To discuss this issue, we must first recognize the other divides that exist and issues that concern African-Americans.

**Looking Forward: The Jewish and African-American Relationship**

Fifty years ago the African-American and Jewish communities came together in a mutually beneficial alliance that energized the emerging Civil Rights Movement and in some ways dramatically impacted the course of this country’s history. Historically we have had much in common; and now our community relations are quite strained. Jews are responding to anti-Semitism and anti-Israel sentiment, and African Americans are, in many cases, simply trying to ensure safe and equitable access to education, opportunities for advancement, and avoiding sometimes lethal expressions of racism. Together, we can deepen our understanding about the reality of the serious issues each community faces. With that education in hand—we can meaningfully engage the next generation of young activist and thought leaders of the African-American community in an effort to reconnect and strengthen the bonds between our two communities.

**Issues of Concern to the African-American Community:**

The Palestinian Right of Return is seen as a serious and legitimate issue that the African-American community will want to discuss. The question as to why the Jewish people have a right to return and the Palestinians do not is one that will need to be discussed. Much of the shared narrative between African-Americans and Palestinians stems out of a concern for human rights, so alleged Israeli human rights violations will likely be of interest to those with whom you meet. Another major issue that you should be prepared to discuss are settlements and Israel’s administration of the West Bank.
Talking Points – BLM & Black-Jewish Relationship

- I support BLM and the existence of the State of Israel and a state of Palestine. I can fight injustice in both the U.S. and Israel and simultaneously support Jewish and Palestinian statehood.
- Ostracizing pro-Israel progressives from BLM only disrupts the ability of this movement to gain traction, attract allies, and achieve goal of ending institutional racism and all oppression of African-Americans.
- By taking such an absolutist stance you’re by nature ostracizing millions of American Jews who wish to participate in your movement. We need to create an inclusive space for activists that share your agenda on civil rights in America.
- Attacks on the existence of the Jewish State only undermine the Jewish and African-American alliance in our country and our shared efforts for justice that go back many decades.
- The experience of Israelis and Palestinians is markedly different from that of black Americans. Conflating those experiences harms the integrity of both movements, oversimplifies a complicated matter, and dismisses each of their unique struggles

Talking Points – Two States

- The only realistic and moral solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is two states for two peoples living in peace and security. It liberates Palestinians and achieves freedom and statehood for both peoples.
- The Two State Solution is the path to freedom for Palestinians and Israelis. Let’s end the destructive dialogue against Israel’s existence and the destructive dialogue against Palestinians.

Talking Points – BDS

- There isn’t any issue with discussing desired social justice reforms we’d like to address by the Israeli government or the Palestinian authorities. We wholeheartedly support discussing and critiquing their policies – there is certainly room for improvement. But as Palestinian human rights activist Bassam Eid has said, “For our own sake, we need to reconcile with our Israeli neighbors, not reject and revile them.” We need to end the vitriolic and demonizing language of BDS and pursue peace.
- While individual supporters of BDS may feel differently, the leadership of BDS has made it clear they reject the two state solution. As Omar Barghouti, a founding leader of the BDS movement has said, “If the refugees were to return, you would not have a two-state solution, you’d have a Palestine next to a Palestine.”x
- Oversimplifying the root of Palestinian suffering will not alleviate their pain or produce a state of Palestine. It will only detract from the real efforts to achieve Palestinian statehood and liberation.
- Let’s reject violence everywhere we see it. We cannot oversimplify the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a violent side attacking an innocent one. There are shades of gray and nuance. We cannot simply express support for Palestinian activists without also denouncing the violence of Hamas and other terror groups.

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