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Testimony before the Illinois House Committee on International Relations
Michael A. Bilandic Building, 160 N. LaSalle Street, Chicago
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Chair Vella, Vice Chair Scherer, Minority Spokesperson Sosnowski, and Members of the Committee — thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning in support of HB 2723 introduced by Representative Abdelnasser Rashid.

My name is Richard Goldwasser. I grew up in Skokie, Illinois, and now live in Highland Park. I have practiced law in Chicago for 35 years. One of my first jobs was clerking for Appellate Court Judge Dom Rizzi here in this building.

My legal career began in 1990. Shortly after I took the bar exam that July, Iraq invaded Kuwait which was the start of what became known as the Gulf War. Within a week, I was in Israel where I clerked for the President of the Israeli Supreme Court. Each day, I carried a gas mask to and from the courthouse.

After a year in Israel, I returned to Chicago intending to pay off my student loans and move to Israel. Life, however, had other plans. I met my wife Debra, we started a family, and I stayed. I did manage to pay off my student loans—something that, at the time, a young person could reasonably expect to do in short order, though that is a story for another hearing.

Over the past two decades, my wife and I have raised our two daughters, Ilana and Ari, in Highland Park and have been members of a Conservative synagogue.

During this time, I served six years on the national board of J Street, a pro-Israel, pro-peace organization, and until last fall I chaired its Chicago chapter for a decade.

I share this background because there is a persistent misperception that Jews are of one mind on Israel, and that criticism of the Israeli government is inherently antisemitic. That is simply not the case.

In fact, a poll conducted after the 2024 elections, showed that 90% of Jewish Americans believe that someone can criticize Israeli government policies and still be pro-Israel.

And we are not talking about milquetoast criticism. According to a Washington Post poll from last September, 61% of Jewish Americans believe Israel has committed war crimes against Palestinians in Gaza and 39% believe Israel's actions constituted genocide.

These criticisms are not fringe – they are located well within the mainstream of American Jewish opinion.

Having laid out my pro-Israel bona fides—something I confess I find somewhat distasteful, but necessary in a climate where some voices are privileged over others—I turn to the substance of my testimony.

In 1967, Israel launched a preemptive war against Egypt, commonly known as the Six-Day War. By its conclusion, Israel had defeated Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, and had occupied the Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza.

From the outset, some observers recognized the profound dangers inherent in a prolonged military occupation: not only for the occupied, but for the occupier. Simply put, occupation corrupts.

We see that corruption today in the daily violence carried out by Israeli settlers against Palestinians—burning homes, displacing families, and, in some cases, taking lives. And this says nothing of Israel's actions in Gaza, which raises grave concerns and deserves a hearing in different tribunal.

For present purposes, I want to highlight a warning issued in 1967 by Yeshayahu Leibowitz, an Israeli Orthodox Jewish public intellectual.

He said:

“A state ruling a hostile population of 1.5 to 2 million foreigners would necessarily become a secret-police state, with all that this implies for education, free speech, and democratic institutions.”

Leibowitz understood that sustaining an occupation would require suppressing dissent—that people of conscience would inevitably organize and speak out—and that democratic institutions, including the judiciary, would come under strain. For those watching the events in Israel, his warning resonates powerfully today.

Now consider a parallel closer to home. In 1966, Black citizens in Claiborne County, Mississippi, presented local officials with a petition demanding racial justice: desegregation, fair employment, and equal access to public accommodations. When those demands were ignored, community members voted to boycott white-owned businesses.

The boycott was effective. In response, business owners sued the NAACP and others, winning a substantial judgment. But the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately reversed that decision in *NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware Co.*, holding that politically motivated boycotts are protected under the First Amendment rights of free speech, assembly, and petition.

The Court emphasized that “the practice of persons sharing common views banding together to achieve a common end is deeply embedded in the American political process.”

Indeed, boycotts have been central to American history—from the Boston Tea Party to the Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Dr. King. They are a foundational tool of democratic change.

So how did I come to testify today?

For many years, I believed that Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian people was wrong—not only because of its impact on Palestinians, but because it threatened Israeli democracy. I hoped that ending the occupation would preserve that democracy.

Over time, as the occupation deepened—now encompassing over six million Palestinians living under military rule for nearly six decades—I came to see another consequence: its corrosive effects reaching the United States.

Leibowitz's warning now applies here. Today, more than 35 states punish Americans for engaging in political boycotts. Illinois, regrettably, is one of them.

This is deeply troubling.

First and foremost, this law makes Illinois complicit in the occupation. It directs our pension system to punish any company whose conscience leads it to withhold commerce from Israel or "the territories it controls" — the legislative euphemism for occupied Palestinian territory, where millions live under military rule without political rights.

The corporate decision to withhold one's commerce as a matter of collective conscience is precisely the kind of action the Supreme Court vindicated in *Claiborne Hardware*. Illinois has put itself on the wrong side of that principle and on the side of the occupier.

And the harm radiates outward. The statute that forced Illinois to dump Unilever stock because Ben & Jerry's would not sell ice cream in West Bank settlements is the model on which more than thirty-five other states have built their own anti-boycott regimes. Illinois went first. Illinois licensed the rest. This is the corrosive effect of the occupation washing up on American shores — and our state's name is on the door.

Punishing politically motivated boycotts — the tool the Supreme Court protected in *Claiborne* — is of a piece with the growing fascism in our country. Using the State of Illinois's investment power to shield Israel from the cost of denying Palestinians their political rights, while punishing those engaged in the very boycotts the First Amendment was meant to protect, is a double foul.

I support HB 2723 because it seeks to correct this wrong. It reaffirms the fundamental American right to political expression and restores a vital tool of democratic participation.

Thank you.