Resisting Israeli apartheid – why the academic and cultural boycott

In this article Omar Barghouti, the independent Palestinian researcher and founding member of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), explains why and how Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) can help resolve the Palestinian/Israeli conflict.

The unbridled racism displayed by an overwhelming majority of Jewish-Israelis – academics, artists and public intellectuals included – in fervently supporting² their army's most recent atrocities in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT) and Lebanon has made me and many Palestinians, particularly in Israel, feel a true existential threat looming over our heads. Even before the war on Gaza and Lebanon most Israelis wished their fellow “non-Jewish” citizens would disappear into thin air.³ After Israel's utter military and political failure in Lebanon some public Israeli figures have rekindled their calls for “punishing” the Palestinian citizens of Israel for their “disloyalty” during the war. Already a mainstream view in the Israeli academy and media well *before* the war, viewing and treating “the Arabs” as a demographic threat became even more pronounced after it.

But while Palestinians in Israel may be facing a potential threat to their existence in their homeland, Palestinians in Gaza, and to a lesser extent in the West Bank,

have been subjected to a relentless campaign of slow ethnic cleansing, aimed at “encouraging” them to leave or to submit unconditionally to Israel's dictates and hegemony.

Throughout, Israeli academic and cultural institutions have not only remained apathetic, but have actively colluded in their state's persistent violations of international law and fundamental human rights. It was precisely this collusion that motivated the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) in 2004 to call for a comprehensive boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions.⁴ Boycotting the Israeli academy is advocated as an end in itself – to counter this academy's own role in perpetrating and perpetuating oppression against the Palestinians – as well as a means to the ultimate end: bringing about a just peace through forcing Israel to fully comply with international law and its recognition of Palestinian human and political rights.

This essay examines the main dimen-

sions of Israel's apartheid regime that have motivated Palestinian civil society's boycott and sanctions movement, with a special focus on academic and cultural boycott as a crucial component of this struggle.

Israeli apartheid

Following its precedent-setting, relative defeat in Lebanon which bashed its deterrence doctrine, the Israeli military-security establishment, fully backed by the Jewish-Israeli public from across the political spectrum, has intensified its already bloody campaign of death and destruction against innocent Palestinian civilians under occupation, particularly in the Gaza Strip, reveling in the shameless support – whether explicit or implicit – Israel has been receiving from Western governments. With rare exceptions, official Europe as a whole seems to have contracted the Tony Blair syndrome, turning into one large, happy herd of George Bush's poodles, thereby ushering a stage of steep decline in Europe's political influence and global ambitions in the Middle East and beyond.

Reacting to what he calls Israel's "killing fields", the prominent Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, argues: "Nothing apart from pressure in the form of sanctions, boycott and divestment will stop the murdering of innocent civilians in the Gaza Strip. There is nothing we here in Israel can do against it. Brave pilots refused to partake in the operations, two journalists – out of 150 – do not cease to write about it, but this is it."

South African government minister, Ronnie Kasrils, a Jewish leader of the ANC, reached a similar conclusion. He wrote:

"Like Jostein Gaarder we must call baby killers 'baby killers,' and declare that those using

methods reminiscent of the Nazis need to be told they are behaving like Nazis. May Israelis wake up and see reason, as happened in South Africa, and negotiate peace. Finally, let us learn from what helped open white South African eyes: the combination of a just struggle reinforced by international solidarity utilizing the weapons of boycott and sanctions."

European complicity in Israel's crimes in Lebanon and Gaza is all the more troubling and hypocritical in light of the fact that most Palestinians and many in the global South recognize Israel's entrenched system of colonialism, racism and denial of basic human rights as a form of apartheid, which was widely opposed by Europe in South Africa. In fact, leading South African intellectuals, politicians and human rights advocates themselves now see the clear parallels between the two apartheid paradigms.

In Israel, too, some politicians and journalists have made unambiguous analogies between Israel and South Africa. Roman Bronfman, a ranking member of the Israeli parliament, criticized what he termed "an apartheid regime in the occupied [Palestinian] territories," adding, "The policy of apartheid has also infiltrated sovereign Israel, and discriminates daily against Israeli Arabs and other minorities. The struggle against such a fascist viewpoint is the job of every humanist."

Former Israeli education minister, Shulamit Aloni, recently noted that Israel commits war crimes, "utilizes terror" and is "no different from racist South Africa." When asked how she viewed Israel's future, Aloni responded: "I can show you Mussolini's books about fascism. If you read them you'll reach the unequivocal conclusion

that ministers in the current Israeli government are walking on the same path.”

Despite the obvious differences between Israeli apartheid and its South African predecessor, enough similarities exist to stir such moral indignation as expressed above. Not only does Israel maintain a choking system of Bantustans for Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem; it also enshrines in basic laws its system-wide racial discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel and continues to deny the rights of Palestinian refugees who were dispossessed and uprooted during the Nakba, a well-planned, and very well documented, Zionist campaign of terror that led to their ethnic cleansing around 1948. This triple Israeli oppression of the three main segments of the people of Palestine still serves to further Israel’s objective of gradually, but steadily, changing the demographics of historic Palestine to ensure incontestable Jewish domination.

Israel’s occupation

Nothing captures the immense injustice of the occupation as much as Israel’s colonial Wall, built mostly on occupied territory, and condemned as illegal by a historic advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice at The Hague in July 2004. Despite the Wall’s grave repercussions on Palestinian livelihood, environment, and political rights, a near total consensus exists amongst Israeli Jews in its support. Former Israeli environment minister, Yehudit Naot, however, protested a different aspect of the Wall, saying:

“The separation fence severs the continuity of open areas and is harmful to the landscape,

the flora and fauna, the ecological corridors and the drainage of the creeks. The protective system will irreversibly affect the land resource and create enclaves of communities that are cut off from their surroundings.”

Even after irises were moved and passages for small animals were created, the spokesperson for the Israel Nature and National Parks Protection Authority complained:

“The animals don’t know that there is now a border. They are used to a certain living space, and what we are concerned about is that their genetic diversity will be affected because different population groups will not be able to mate and reproduce. Isolating the populations on two sides of a fence definitely creates a genetic problem.”

While so attuned to the welfare of wild flowers and foxes, Israel treated Palestinian children as dispensable creatures. Professionally-trained sharpshooters fatally targeted them in minor stone-throwing incidences. For example, medical sources and human rights organizations, including Physicians for Human Rights, have documented in the first stage of the current Palestinian intifada a pattern of targeting the eyes and knees of Palestinian children with “clear intention” to harm. Tel Aviv University professor Tanya Reinhart writes, “A common practice [among sharpshooters] is shooting a rubber-coated metal bullet straight in the eye – a little game of well-trained soldiers, which requires maximum precision.” And when there was no stone-throwing incident to hide behind, Israeli soldiers had to provoke one. The veteran American journalist Chris Hedges exposed

how Israeli troops in Gaza had methodically provoked Palestinian children playing in the dunes of southern Gaza in order to shoot them, concluding: "Children have been shot in other conflicts I have covered [...] but I have never before watched soldiers entice children like mice into a trap and murder them for sport."

Israel and Palestinian refugee rights

Far from admitting its guilt in creating the world's oldest and largest refugee problem, Israel has constantly evaded any responsibility for the Nakba. Most peculiar in the mainstream Israeli discourse about the "birth" of the state is the total denial of any crime. Israelis, with few bright exceptions, regard the Zionists' ruthless destruction of more than 400 Palestinian villages and their expulsion of no less than 750 thousand native Palestinians as Israel's "independence". Even committed Israeli leftists often grieve over the loss of Israel's "moral superiority" after occupying the West Bank

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and Gaza in 1967, as if prior to that Israel was a normal, civil and law-abiding state.

Manipulating the Holocaust, Israel has premised its rejection of Palestinian refugee rights on the theory that Jews are unsafe among Gentiles and must therefore live in a state with a dominant Jewish character that is to be sacredly maintained, regardless of international law and irre-

spective of the human and political rights of the displaced natives of the land on which this state was erected. No other country in the world today claims a similar right to ethno-religious supremacy. When the victims of the "super-victims" are portrayed as relative humans, as possessing inferior comparative worth, such an attitude is largely tolerated.

The fact that refugees form a majority of the Palestinian people coupled with their 58-year old suffering in exile make the recognition of the basic rights of Palestinian refugees, including their right to return to their lands, the litmus test of morality for anyone suggesting a just and enduring solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Moral and legal rights aside, the denial of Palestinian refugee rights guarantees the perpetuation of conflict.

Israel and its Arab-Palestinian Citizens

Israel might not be unique in racially discriminating against its national minority; but it is certainly unique in its remarkable and sustained success – so far – in getting away with it, projecting a false image of enlightenment and democracy and enjoying full membership in the Western club. At the core of Israel's distinct form of apartheid lies a deep-rooted view of the Palestinian citizens of the state not just as undesirable reminders of the "original sin", but also as a demographic threat. Racial discrimination against them in every vital aspect of life has always been the norm, to the extent that an Israeli High Court justice once stated on record that "it is necessary to prevent a Jew or Arab who calls for equality of rights for Arabs from sitting in the Knesset or being elected to it". To this date, significant majorities of Israeli Jews

have consistently opposed full equality with the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Racist walls have been erected in several localities inside Israel where Jews and Palestinians live in close proximity. In Lydda, Ramleh and Caesaria barriers of various forms were built to demographically separate the two communities. Echoing a popular view in Israel, an eminent academic, Major General (reserve) Shlomo Gazit from the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, preaches: "Democracy has to be subordinated to demography."

Even in cancer research, Israeli apartheid is strongly present. In June 2001, the Health Ministry published a map of the geographical distribution of malignant diseases in Israel during the years 1984-1999. The report did not include a single Arab community in Israel, with the exception of Rahat. When asked why, Ministry officials resorted to the ubiquitous excuse of "budg-

to Arab towns. The results of such health apartheid are ominous. In the past three decades the rate of malignant diseases in the Palestinian population in Israel has risen by 97,8 percent among men, and 123 percent among women, as opposed to a rise of 39,8 percent for men and 24,4 percent for women in the Jewish population.

One conscientious Israeli who is revolted by all this language of demographic control is Dr. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin of Ben-Gurion University, who says: "It's frightening when Jews talk about demography."

Ronnie Kasrils and British writer Victoria Brittain addressed this rarely mentioned aspect of Israel's apartheid:

"The desire for an ethnic-religious majority of Israeli Jews has seeped across from the occupied territories to permeate the Israeli 'national' agenda, which increasingly views Palestinian citizens of Israel as a 'demographic threat' [...]. The Palestinian minority in Israel has for decades been denied basic equality in health, education, housing and land possession, solely because it is not Jewish. The fact that this minority is allowed to vote hardly redresses the rampant injustice in all other basic human rights. They are excluded from the very definition of the 'Jewish state', and have virtually no influence on the laws, or political, social and economic policies. Hence their similarity to the black South Africans."

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etary problems". But why is this research particularly important? Because in Israel only when a correlation is shown between the presence of polluting sites and the incidence of malignant disease is it possible to prevent installation of new hazards, or demand tighter environmental standards on existing ones. By intentionally omitting Arab towns in its extensive cancer mapping, the Health Ministry has indirectly given a green light to polluters to relocate

Academic complicity

Israeli academic institutions have not been merely passive observers of these grave violations of human rights and international law; they have also played a direct and crucial role in committing acts of colonial injustice against the Palestinians and in providing the moral and legal justification

for Israel's well-documented crimes. Contrary to its deceptive image as a "bastion of enlightenment" and a vanguard of opposition to the occupation, the Israeli academy is in fact part of "the official Israeli propaganda", according to Ilan Pappé.

The Hebrew University, for instance, has itself illegally appropriated private Palestinian lands in occupied East Jerusalem. Tel Aviv University sits on top of an ethnically cleansed Palestinian village which was bulldozed to prevent its residents from returning to claim their properties. Bar Ilan University supports the College of Judea and Samaria, built in the OPT, thereby violating the Fourth Geneva Convention. Almost all Israeli academics obediently serve in the occupation army, thereby directly participating in committing crimes against Palestinians or at the very least watching in silence as such crimes are committed with impunity. In almost four decades of illegal military occupation, the total number of Israeli academics who have conscientiously objected to army service has remained depressingly negligible. Even publicly opposing the occupation has always been a rare phenomenon among Israeli academics, most of whom voluntarily serve to justify their state's special form of apartheid.

Critics of the academic boycott often claim that it infringes on academic freedom. This argument is quite problematic for two reasons: it is inherently biased as it only regards as valuable only the academic freedom of Israelis; and it privileges academic freedom as a 'super-value' above all other freedoms, in effect negating the foundations of human rights. As Palestinian academic Lisa Taraki and I have argued elsewhere:

"But is academic freedom mutually exclusive with basic human rights? In most cases, no; but, in specific situations of persistent oppression and enduring breach of international law supported – explicitly or implicitly – by academic institutions, the answer is a resounding yes. Towards the end of the apartheid era, when the world boycotted South African academics – as part of the overall regime of sanctions and boycotts endorsed by the United Nations at the time – a degree of violation of academic freedom was indeed entailed. That was accepted by the international community, though, as a reasonable price to pay in return for contributing to the defeat of apartheid and the attainment of more basic freedoms denied black South Africans for generations. From an ethical perspective, freedom from racism and colonial subjugation was correctly perceived as more profound than the 'unwanted side-effects' caused to academic and other freedoms of individual academics opposed to apartheid. The march to freedom had to temporarily restrict a subset of freedom, enjoyed by only a portion of the population."

What's to be done?

The abject failure of the international community, particularly the European leaders, in the last few decades to bring about Israel's compliance with international law has prompted people of conscience the world over to go beyond mere condemnation of Israeli crimes and human rights violations to explicit endorsement and advocacy of effective pressures on Israel, as was done with the apartheid regime in South Africa. This is precisely the conclusion reached by Palestinian civil society. On July 9, marking the first anniversary of the ICJ's advisory opinion against the Wall, more than 170 Palestinian political parties, trade

unions, professional associations and other civil society organizations issued a Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, or BDS, directed against Israel until it fully complies with international law and universal principles of human rights. The BDS campaign is anchored in Palestinian non-violent resistance to Israeli oppression in all its dimensions. Setting an important precedent, this historic document was signed by representatives of the three constituent sectors of the people of Palestine: refugees, Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians in the occupied territory. It is also the first time such a non-violent form of resistance was widely endorsed by virtually all sectors of Palestinian society. A crucial feature in the Call is its direct appeal to conscientious Israelis to support it.

Support for boycotting Israel was strongest in South Africa. In October 2004, a call for a comprehensive boycott of Israel issued by solidarity groups in South Africa was endorsed by major South African organizations and unions, including the Congress Of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), Landless People's Movement, South African NGO Coalition, Anti-War Coalition and Physicians for Human Rights. Only a few weeks ago, a major coalition of South African civil society groups coalesced to form the Sanctions Against Israel Coalition, already actively advocating for effective labour action against trade with Israel.

The BDS Call is modelled after the earlier Call issued by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), which became the centre of attention during the debate leading to and following the boycott initiated by the British Association of University Teachers

(AUT) against selected Israeli universities back in April 2005. That historic decision was overturned in May of the same year, but not before prominently putting the whole issue of boycotting Israel on the table, so to speak. Indeed, in 2006, the largest academic union in the UK, NATFHE, voted for an academic boycott of Israel days before the union merged with the AUT.

Many arguments were made against the Palestinian call for academic and cultural boycott. In the following section I summarize the most significant among them, giving counter arguments, the key to which is the principle of moral consistency.

Boycott: pro and con

First argument: Since Israel is essentially a democratic country with a vibrant civil society, it can be convinced to end its oppression without sanctions. Boycott would result in losing any influence over Israel.

Counter-argument: How can an ethno-religious supremacy that is also a colonial power ever qualify as a democracy? New York University professor Tony Judt, for instance, calls Israel a “dysfunctional anachronism”, categorizing it among the “belligerently intolerant, faith-driven ethno states”.

Furthermore, the famous Jewish-American writer, I.F. Stone, sums up the dilemma of Zionism saying: “Israel is creating a kind of moral schizophrenia in world Jewry. In the outside world, the welfare of Jewry depends on the maintenance of secular, non-racial, pluralistic societies. In Israel, Jewry finds itself defending a society in which mixed marriages cannot be legalized, in which non-Jews have a lesser status than Jews, and in which the ideal is racist and exclusivist.”

As to losing influence, what influence? Europe hardly has any right now. Even in the us, the Israelization of us foreign policy, particularly vs. the Middle East, has reached new depths, effectively tying the hands of any prospective American pressure aimed at curtailing, not to mention changing, Israel's oppressive policies.

Second argument: Boycott will radicalize the Israeli right and pull the rug from under the feet of the left, which is at the forefront of the struggle for peace.

Counter-argument: What left? The Zionist left, particularly when it comes to recognizing Palestinian refugees' rights, easily makes the far-right parties in Europe look liberal in comparison. Israel's war on Lebanon, for instance, was enthusiastically cheered by this "left". On the other hand, the morally consistent, non-Zionist left is a very tiny group whose members may inadvertently end up losing benefits, privileges and funding as a result of boycott. This should compel us to nuance our boycott tactics to decrease the possibility of that happening unnecessarily.

Moreover, the vast majority of Israelis, including almost all those on the left, serve in the army's reserve forces. With the exception of a tiny yet crucial minority, Israeli civil society is largely opposed to full equality of the Palestinians, is supportive of the state's oppression, or is acquiescently silent about it.

Third argument: Boycotting Israel, while ostensibly political, is deep down another manifestation of anti-Semitism, or at the very least encourages that phenomenon, regardless of intentions.

Counter-argument: This charge is patently false and unfounded; it is used solely as a tool of intellectual intimidation. It is

hardly worth reiterating that Palestinian calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions do not target Jews or even Israelis qua Jews. They are strictly directed against Israel as a colonial power that violates Palestinian rights and international law while enjoying unlimited support from the West. The growing support among progressive European and American Jewish intellectuals and professionals for this tactic is another indicator that it cannot be seriously equated with anti-Semitism.

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In addition, as the French philosopher Etienne Balibar says: "Israel should not be allowed to instrumentalize the genocide of European Jews to put [itself] above the law of nations." By turning a blind eye to Israel's oppression, as the us and most of official Europe have done, the West has in fact perpetuated the misery, the human suffering, and the injustices that have ensued since the Holocaust.

Fourth argument: Banning Palestinian-Israeli academic and cultural cooperation harms Palestinians much more than Israelis and hurts the chances for peace.

Counter-argument: Boycott does not preclude joint Palestinian-Israeli cooperation so long as it recognizes the reality of oppression, accepts the basic need for equality, and is directed against Israel's colonial injustice. It is not enough to call for peace, for this word has become per-

haps the most abused word in the English dictionary, particularly when Israeli war criminals like Ariel Sharon, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres are regarded as “men of peace”. Peace without justice is equivalent to institutionalizing injustice.

“Peace” projects which deliberately omit any mention of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians are deceitful and immoral. Those who imagine they can wish away the conflict by suggesting some forums for rapprochement, détente, or “dialogue” – which they hope can lead to authentic processes of reconciliation and eventually peace – are clinically delusional or pathetically dishonest.

Conclusion

While cognizant of Europe’s sense of guilt over the Holocaust, Palestinians cannot forgive Europe for making them, and they alone, pay the price. Creating Israel through ethnic cleansing of the native Palestinians, after all, was Europe’s atrocious and racist way of atoning for its genocide against its own Jews. Since Palestinians were not regarded by Europe as equally human, the systematic destruction of our lives, lands, and society as a whole was considered an acceptable price.

Guilt aside, Israel’s impunity is predominantly a factor of the rarely challenged enormous influence wielded by the pro-Israel lobby over the United States – Congress and White House alike – and, by extension, over key European centres of power. Acutely aware of this reality, Palestinian civil resistance appeals to European and international civil society organizations, hoping that, since they are far less influenced and corrupted by those pressure groups, they are more likely to adopt boy-

cott as a form of effective pressure on Israel to bring about an end to its occupation and apartheid, the only prelude to a just peace based on equality for all, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or other collective identity attributes. That would constitute an atonement of sorts for Europe’s past genocide and colonial crimes.

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