

Why Israel?

by Jason Kunin;
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In January 2007, a group of us who are active in District 12 of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF) tried to pass a motion supporting the international campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. Since I was the mover of the motion, many people afterwards became angry with me. Others were merely confused. Everyone, however, wanted to know the same thing: Why Israel? After all, they would correctly point out, there are so many terrible countries, so many other human rights abuses in the world – some of them here in Canada. Why does Israel alone deserve sanctions and not the myriad of other countries committing gross human rights violations? Why not Sudan, for example? Or Saudi Arabia? Or China? For that matter, if colonialism is the issue, why not shed a light on the Canadian government's on-going abuse of our own aboriginal peoples? There's certainly plenty of work to do here.

The premise that lies behind such questions is that Israel is, if no better than other countries, at the very least no worse. And indeed, there is a certain truth to the fact that all states contain varying degrees of inequity, state enforced imbalances of power and privilege (always gendered and frequently racialized), and a predatory ruling class who view the state as a tool for expanding their own power and wealth to the detriment of other nations.

Acknowledging all this, however, has no bearing on the argument for boycotting Israel. Indeed, to object to a campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel on the basis that all states do bad things is to miss the point. As the British BDS activist Roland Rance recently told a small group of Toronto activists, no one believes that boycotting Israel is going to bring the Israeli economy to its knees – not unless BDS activists are somehow able to reach the hearts and minds of international arms dealers and diamond traders. (Highly unlikely.) The boycott campaign, rather, is primarily an educational tool aimed at provoking awareness and action at the grassroots level. Given the way political leaders, even in the Arab world, have retreated from supporting the Palestinian cause, a grassroots campaign that can put pressure on political leaders is one of the few recourses left to Palestinians and their supporters.

Nonetheless, it is important for activists to be able to address the question of why an international BDS movement is currently focusing on Israel, and those who want to do education work had better be prepared to answer this question when it arises, as it inevitably will. What follows is my own attempt to do so, which I hope will serve as a resource for those doing education work around BDS.

Why Israel?

A routine strategy of Israel's defenders is to continually redirect attention to the human rights failings of countries hostile to Israel, or to catastrophes like Darfur that are used to argue the ongoing need for the sort of "humanitarian interventions" that provide cover for the advancement of U.S. interests. Yet the question of why Israel is being targeted and not some other country assumes, erroneously, that other countries are not being targeted. The reverse, in fact, is usually the case. Often, countries deemed acceptable for criticism by supporters of Israel are already subject to political and diplomatic sanctions by the U.S. and its tool, the UN Security Council – sometimes for acting in ways identical to Israel. So, for example, Syria, like Israel, engages in targeted assassinations (in Lebanon), and Iran, like Israel, possesses an openly discriminatory state structure that has institutionalized the supremacy of a single religious group. Yet while Syria came under sanctions in 2003 (when the U.S. passed the "Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act") and Iran has been subject to U.S. trade and investment sanctions since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Israel has faced no political repercussions for the same actions. Where there is already action at the political level, there is no need for the building of a grassroots movement to instigate political change, so as atrocious as the human rights records of countries like Iran and Syria may be, targeting them for a campaign of boycott would be redundant.

Israel, of course, is not the only country in the world that has faced little concentrated political opposition to its occupation. China, too, has faced few serious political repercussions for its own occupation and colonization of Tibet¹, which has been going on almost as long as the Zionist colonization of Palestine and which has been similarly brutal. So why aren't activists boycotting China? Well, in fact, many are²; the only difference is that most supporters of Israel don't seem to notice or care. Regardless, the question of whether China should be boycotted – or whether any other country should be boycotted – has no bearing on the question of whether Israel should be. In a world where so many countries commit gross violations of basic human rights, the question should never be which country deserve boycott instead of Israel, but which country deserves it in addition to Israel.

Israel does not deserve boycott because it is necessarily worse than other states; in some respects it is and in other respects it isn't. Rather, Israel deserves boycott, firstly, because it has power, which gives the bad things it does a wider impact than the bad things done by other states; and secondly, because the particular bad things that Israel does are things that a boycott campaign can peacefully and effectively take action against.

¹ No country in the world, for example, currently recognizes the Tibet government in exile as the legitimate government of Tibet; they all accept Chinese sovereignty.

² See, for example, <http://www.boycottmadeinchina.org> and <http://www.buyhard.fsnet.co.uk>.

Israel's power over Palestinians

Let's begin with the first statement, that Israel deserves boycott because of its power. For this, we need to look at what role Israel plays in global politics, how it interacts with other nations, and the relative power it has in relation to them. Nowhere is Israel's power more apparent, of course, than in its conflict with the Palestinians. This would seem to be so obvious a truth it hardly needs stating, yet the most common objection to any boycott of Israel is that it is "unbalanced" unless it also boycotts the Palestinians. The objection is nonsense, of course, since it neglects to consider the current U.S. and Israel-led boycott of the Palestinian elected government that has been in place since last year, or the cruel blockade that has been imposed on the impoverished Gaza strip since 2005, or the myriad ways in which Israel prevents on a daily basis the routine functioning of Palestinian civil society and has been since the middle of the last century. Indeed, those who demand "balance" should be the first to applaud a boycott campaign against Israel.

Let's begin with the most obvious fact – that Israel is occupying the Palestinians, the Palestinians are not occupying Israel. Israel controls every aspect of Palestinians life in a way that is simply not reciprocal. The imbalance of power between the two sides could not be starker. Palestinians living under Israeli occupation face the daily threat of arbitrary arrest and torture, house demolition, starvation, poverty, and any manner of death resulting from lack of access to medical care or clean water. This is to say nothing of those who are bulldozed in their homes, humiliated at checkpoints by adolescent soldiers, or killed as bystanders during one of Israel's many military incursions or "targeted assassinations." On the other side of the balance sheet are the suicide attacks against Israeli civilians, which have been recently renounced by Hamas.³ Terrible as these attacks have been, and I don't want to minimize them, they have not prevented most Israelis from living normal lives – a luxury that Palestinians do not have. Indeed, statistically, in their sheer ability to kill large numbers of civilians, suicide bombers have proven no match for Israeli drivers. In terms of impact, there is simply no equivalence between individual acts of resistance and the full institutional force of a major military power.

Israel is, of course, a nuclear power with one of the largest, best-equipped armies in the world and a ranking on the standard of living index higher than many European countries. Palestinians, by contrast, are largely impoverished, politically isolated, geographically encircled, and badly divided. Roughly four million live as refugees in countries where they face differing degrees of oppression; three and a half million live under the boot of a military occupation that continues to destroy their homes, steal their land, restrict their movements, and deny them access to water; while another one million live as second-class citizens in a state where the deputy prime minister openly talks about stripping them of citizenship. Worse, the different immediate threats faced by each group

³ See <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/world/story/0,,1750028,00.html>.

don't just divide them, but set their interests against one another. So Arab-Israeli citizens face pressure to stay uninvolved in the affairs of Palestinians in the occupied territories, while Palestinian leaders under Israeli occupation face pressure to surrender the refugees' right of return in exchange for an end to their occupation. Further internal divisions are exacerbated by Israel's prevention of movement between Gaza and the West Bank and its carving up of the West Bank into isolated cantons divided by settlements and restricted roads. Israel further creates divisions by its arming and funding of groups that undermine unifying popular movements. When the PLO was ascendant, Israel funded Hamas, and when Hamas won an overwhelming victory in an internationally monitored democratic election, it began arming and funding Fatah militias.

Israel's regional power

Israel, however, does not confine itself to exerting its power over the Palestinians alone – in the way that, say, the violence of the Sri Lankan government does not extend beyond the repression visited upon its own Tamil population. Israel is, for starters, a regional menace. For decades, it has invaded, occupied, and bombed neighbouring countries with diplomatic immunity provided by the United States Security Council veto. It almost destroyed Lebanon – twice – and has long coveted the water of the Litani river, which Ben Gurion once openly envisioned as the natural northern border of the Jewish state⁴. It continues to steal water from Syria's Golan Heights, which it has occupied for forty years, and it makes Palestinians go thirsty while it diverts water from the West Bank for its own exclusive use. It has worked to suppress popular movements in Jordan and Egypt by helping to prop up their undemocratic regimes. But most importantly, through Israel's role as the Middle East "watchdog," to use Henry Kissinger's phrase, and its willingness to be a U.S. offshore base, maintaining its regional supremacy – which entails, naturally, keeping its neighbours perpetually weaker and poorer – is one of the cornerstones of U.S. mid-east policy.

Israel's global reach

To a certain extent, it has become a bit of a charade to speak of Israel as a separate entity from the United States since the two countries can be seen as integrated parts of a single economy. It is well known that U.S. financial aid to Israel outstrips its aid to any other country. Israel currently receives, on average, \$2.4 billion a year, though a new package just released promises to raise that by 25%.⁵ Yet this money functions for the U.S. as a kind of corporate subsidy to its own defense industry since it comes with guarantees that Israel will use the

⁴ In 1918 Ben-Gurion outlined what he hoped would be the borders of the future Jewish state: "to the north, the Litani river [in southern Lebanon], to the northeast, the Wadi 'Owja, twenty miles south of Damascus; the southern border will be mobile and pushed into Sinai at least up to Wadi al-'Arish; and to the east, the Syrian Desert, including the furthest edge of Transjordan." See also <http://web.macam.ac.il/~arnon/Int-ME/water/THE%20LITANI%20RIVER.htm>

⁵ See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6920988.stm.

money to purchase U.S.-made military equipment. Some of this equipment is modified enough to be designated "Israeli" then sold to countries to which U.S. law prohibits the sale of arms. Particularly since the eighties, when the Reagan government began using Israel as a means of getting around congressional restraints placed on the selling of arms (remember the Iran-Contra scandal?), Israel is now one of the world's major arms dealers.⁶ Since there is barely a single congressional district in the U.S. in which thousands of jobs are not directly or indirectly related to the defence industry – which is effectively the engine of the U.S. economy – elected leaders have no incentive to end this symbiotic U.S.-Israel relationship.

So what is Israel's role in global politics outside of the Middle East? First and foremost, it is the chief weapons supplier of the world's right-wing death squads. Its record in Latin America in particular makes for depressing reading.⁷ Israel has provided military assistance and counterinsurgency training to paramilitary drug traffickers in Colombia (the AUC), the ANSESAL death squads in El Salvador, the right-wing Somosa dictatorship in Nicaragua, and the brutal Guatemalan government of Carlos Arana, who vowed to turn his country into a "cemetery" in order to pacify it. It has sold arms and provided training to right-wing regimes in Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela, and the anti-Semitic military government that ruled Argentina in the late 70s and early 80s. Its history of suppressing popular workers' movements makes Israel a prime target for unions and labour organizations throughout the world. Indeed, the call for the current international campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions was initiated in 2005 by the Palestinian Federation of Trade Unions as a response to the impoverishment of Palestinian workers by Israeli occupation and settlement, their replacement in the Israeli labour market with imported guest workers from Thailand and Eastern Europe, and their exploitation by World Bank supported "industrial zones" that take advantage of the desperation of Palestinian labourers.

More recently, as Naomi Klein has written, Israel has successfully marketed its status as an armed fortress in a state of continuous war to export its expertise in security, counter-terrorism, and surveillance, while field-testing its weapons and instruments of state control on Palestinians.⁸ Internationally, Israel sells itself as a model for other countries, thus helping to normalize perpetual war and promote the repressive security state within the larger global order. It thus differs from the myriad petty dictatorships of the world that defenders of Israel

⁶ See Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2004) for its discussion of Israel's role in U.S. proxy wars. See also Jeff Halper's discussion in http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6920988.stm.

⁷ See, for example, http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Israel/Israel_LAmer_TrailTerror.html and http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Middle_East/Israel_Honduras_Costa.html.

⁸ See <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070702/klein>.

would prefer focusing attention on because it does not just visit repression upon those under its direct rule, but it is a high profile exporter of state terror.

Apartheid and occupation: Israel sets itself apart

The truth is that Israel does far more terrible things than the boycott movement cares about. The BDS campaign focus is modest and is concerned only on justice for Palestinians. It seeks to do away with the farce of a two-state solution – now a practical impossibility, given that the mid-sized cities Israel has built upon destroyed farms and olive orchards make undoing the occupation impossible – and demands simple compliance with international law. This entails ending the military occupation (UN Resolution 242), allowing for a return of the refugees (UN Resolution 194), dismantling a discriminatory state structure that privileges Jews over other citizens (Declaration of Human Rights, Articles 2 & 7), tearing down the so-called “security wall” (International Court of Justice ruling), ending land seizures and house demolition and providing compensation to those who have lost homes or land (Declaration of Human Rights, Article 17), and ending the condition of Palestinian statelessness (Declaration of Human Rights, Article 15). In short, the BDS movement does not ask that Israel be better than other nations, only the same.

Earlier, I wrote that Israel is in some respects no worse than other nations, and that is true; however, other things it does set it apart from the routine bad things done by other countries, and these revolve around Israel’s displacement, exile, and occupation of the indigenous people of Palestine. True, one could point to Australia, New Zealand, and the entire continent of America as colonial projects in which indigenous societies were destroyed in genocidal campaigns and supplanted by white settler societies. Yet in the modern era of international law that has seen the colonial societies of these lands forced to make concessions to its indigenous people, Israel remains one the last places on earth where a full-blown nineteenth century colonial project is still in high gear. This is what makes it stand out among even bad states.

A comparison to put things in perspective: Canada’s treatment of its aboriginal peoples has been nothing short of criminal – even genocidal, if you consider the disastrous residential school system. (“Forcibly transferring children of a group to another group” is considered genocidal under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide). Today, First Nations peoples in Canada continue to be governed by a racist, colonial-era piece of legislation called the Indian Act, while their communities endure repeated treaty violations, land theft, contaminated water, systematic underfunding, police harassment, high rate of suicide and illness – it goes on and on. Canada is certainly not the kind and gentle nation it likes to portray itself as being. But to put Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians in perspective, imagine that Canada’s reserves were also encircled by walls and towers, that dozens of random checkpoints were set up at arbitrary locations and times to inhibit movement

within the reserves, that people living in the reserves were forbidden to build houses or expand on existing ones, that homes were routinely demolished in the middle of the night without warning, that missiles were fired periodically where people gathered, and that what little remained of Native land was seized by crazed settlers who taunted the people they stole from and took all the reserve's water for their exclusive use.

In addition to the brutality of its occupation, Israel is also responsible for the longest-running refugee crisis in the world. (It was also the largest refugee crisis in the world until being recently dwarfed by Iraq.) One could point to Darfur, to be sure, which is a desperate place. Large numbers of people there have been killed in a very short period of time. Yet drag out those deaths over a period of sixty years – the length of the Palestinian refugee crisis – and try to decide if that would be better or worse than the present situation. If the question itself seems perverse, then it is easy to understand how equally perverse it is to ask that attention be focused on one refugee crisis alone. And unlike many Zionist Darfur campaigners, I have yet to meet a supporter of Israel BDS who has objected to raising awareness about Darfur or who has tried to silence discussion about its refugee crisis.

BDS is not anti-Semitic

Add together the size, scope, and brutality of the impact that the Zionist project has had on the Palestinian people and it becomes apparent that Israel is not a nation like any other nation that is being unfairly singled out. Rather, it is through occupation and apartheid that it sets itself apart. Forget the nonsense about Zionism being “the liberation movement of the Jewish people.” Zionism is a movement that took its cue from the anti-Semitic belief that Jews had no place among the peoples of Europe, and most Jews of the time rightly found its premise offensive. Moreover, as many have noted, Israel is now the most likely place in the world where a Jew can be killed just for being a Jew. For centuries, in fact, the rabbis had warned that concentrating Jews in one place made the Jewish people more, not less vulnerable, and that it was a recipe for annihilation.⁹ Leon Trotsky famously concurred, calling Zionism “a trap.” In short, Zionism is no liberation movement.

There is nothing remotely anti-Semitic about pointing out what Israel does in the world, as critical analysts of Israel are frequently accused of being, and everything I have noted here is part of the public record. Nor is there anything anti-Semitic about the BDS campaign focusing on Israel. Anti-Semitism is about targeting Jews just because they are Jews. The BDS campaign is only concerned with Israel's power and its abuse of power, not its Jewishness. No one is proposing to boycott synagogues or Jewish businesses – unless, like Chapters/Indigo, their owners donate millions of dollars annually to fund Israeli

⁹ See Yacov Rabkin, *A Threat From Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2006): 98.

military occupation. (Heather Reisman and Gerry Schwartz are the founders of Heseg, which provides scholarships to individuals if they serve in the Israeli army.) The focus of BDS is on Israeli institutions, not on Jewish people, and anyone who argues that there can be no such separation because Israel is “the expression of the will of the Jewish people,” or some such baloney, is confusing the narrow interests of a small Jewish elite with those of the Jewish people as a whole. Israel has certainly not been an expression of the will of the Ethiopian, and Russian Jews, who face racism and discrimination in Israel; or of the Jews from Yemen, who had their children kidnapped and sent to state residential schools and orphanages¹⁰; or of the once prosperous Jews of Arab lands, who upon arrival in Israel were sprayed with DDT, settled in border communities on the front-line of Palestinian resistance attacks, mocked for their religious ways, and relegated to second-class status as a marginalized proletariat; or of the hundreds of thousands of Holocaust refugees who faced social stigmatization and who today live disproportionately in poverty, receiving little help from the state¹¹. No one should confuse the Israeli state with being an expression of the will of the Jewish people.

What BDS is and what it hopes to achieve

Israelis have always longed to be regarded as just another nation among nations. The BDS movement shares that goal, and it is directed towards educating Israelis about what they must do to achieve it. This might sound bewildering at first given that boycotting Israel would seem to invite the opposite response – to drive Israelis deeper into the embracing arms of the state. This, in fact, was the argument against boycott made by the late Baruch Kimmerling¹², a distinguished writer and academic on the Israeli left. Yet what is frequently misunderstood about the boycott movement – including, sometimes, in the movement itself – is that, as I noted earlier, it is directed at Israeli institutions, not at Israeli individuals. No one is being told to stop speaking to their Israeli family or friends, though they would be recommended not to buy Israel bonds from them if asked. Israeli academics under boycott can still be invited to speak – provided, of course, they are coming as individuals, not as representatives of Israeli universities, which are organs of the state. By all means, shop at the Israeli grocer’s and ask him about his kids, but don’t buy products from him that are made or grown in Israel.

Obviously, individuals will be affected by boycott – institutions are, after all, made up of individuals – but the goal of boycott is not to drive hundreds of thousands of Israelis into poverty (an unrealistic goal at any rate, though one that is being accomplished quite effectively by the neo-liberal policies of their own governments). The goal, rather, is to provoke in Israelis a change of consciousness by stripping away the veneer of normality that disguises from

¹⁰ See <http://www.ahavat-israel.com/protest/missing.php>.

¹¹ See <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,291697,00.html?sPage=fnc.world/mideast>.

¹² See <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=7741>.

them the true nature of the Israeli state and enables them to believe they can continue to have an occupation and be a normal country. Hopefully, this will be done through education, though failing that it will have to be done through shame and isolation from the international community.

To be sure, there are many terrible things going on in the world, and much suffering being inflicted upon people by despotic governments. Yet what makes Israel a target for boycott is that boycott has the potential to be an effective, peaceful tool by which ordinary people can bring about change, and many Jewish people – including me – support it for precisely the reasons I have listed above. As George Bisharat wrote just as I was completing this article, “‘the worst first’ has never been the rule for whom to boycott. Had it been, the Pol Pot regime, not apartheid South Africa, would have been targeted in the past. It was not - Cambodia's ties to the West were insufficient to make any embargo effective. Boycotting North Korea today would be similarly futile.”¹³ Israelis have deep ties to the West and generally like to see themselves within its liberal traditions. Like people anywhere, they are no less prone to wanting to be liked and thinking well of themselves. They are no more lacking in personal decency than people anywhere else. And like people in many places – most places, perhaps – they have been ruled by bad leaders and indoctrinated since birth into accepting an unjust status quo. As in apartheid South Africa, a boycott campaign has the potential to reach ordinary Israelis – to appeal to their sense of decency and invite them into the family of “ordinary” nations they so long to join. All they have to do is end their apartheid now.

Jason Kunin is a Toronto teacher and writer. He is on the Administrative Council of the Alliance of Concerned Jewish Canadians (ACJC) and also belongs to Yosher Jewish Network for Social Justice, Educators for Peace and Justice (EPJ), and Not in Our Name (NION).

¹³ See <http://www.counterpunch.org/bisharat08162007.html>