

Dick Platkin on BDS, June 16, 2010

Dick's position: "anyone can participate in BDS if they so want . . . but the organization should generally remain neutral for all the reasons I present below."

### **Further thoughts on BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) for ICUJP**

In essence:

1. All assessments of how Jewish members of the ICUJP feel about BDS need to be matched with an objective analysis of what BDS actually is. Without this knowledge, it is premature to poll Jewish members for their feelings, and it is also premature for the ICUJP to make decisions.
2. Within LA Jews for Peace we have had several discussions about BDS, including with Norman Finkelstein (see Discussion, below). Based on those discussions, and following Norman's lead, we have not formally embraced or rejected BDS.
3. My own gut-level sense is that BDS is based on the outlook of the "rejectionist" wing of Palestinian nationalism. It is the Middle East equivalent of the white skin privilege theory of U.S. racism so common in the 1960s. In this scheme all whites benefit from racism, and all blacks are hurt by it. Just as this approach is a deficient approach to racism in this country, it is deficient in understanding and dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
4. Other than this theoretical criticism, we also have practical questions about the effectiveness of BDS. In the case of South Africa there is mounting evidence that it was not BDS but corporate fears of a destructive rebellion or a socialist government which would nationalize the mines that tipped the scales against apartheid.

**Discussion:** On his recent visit to Los Angeles, Norman Finkelstein presented his several reservations about BDS, which I will share:

First, BDS is vague on what it actually wants, and Norman's efforts to get clarity never got far. He personally stated he could support a BDS movement which called for an end to the occupation of lands Israel conquered in 1967, but he was not aware of such a BDS movement.

Second, Norman felt that BDS had a cultish quality to it, using initials that no one except insiders understood.

Third, BDS's emergence parallels and probably reflects changes he has observed in his many years of campus presentations. Several years ago he got his largest turnouts through the efforts of Students for Justice in Palestine chapters on many campuses. It then presented itself as a multi-ethnic organization focused on justice for all those living in Palestine, which meant Palestinians and Israeli Jews. He also noted that many SJP chapters had a large number of Jewish student members. But, several years Norman noticed support for the SJP chapters shrank when their focus turned away from its earlier, multi-ethnic format to sponsoring annual Israeli apartheid weeks. When this happened, he noted that on campus after campus, SJP numbers and turnouts had declined, especially among their Jewish members.

This appears to be similar to the experiences of Jeff Halper, well known within the ICUJP because of his leadership of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD). Jeff told me that in the winter, when the Free Gaza movement had aid trucks approaching Gaza from its Egyptian and Israeli sides, he was only permitted to join the Israeli contingent as an individual. His organization could not participate because it was an Israeli organization. His personal anti-racist reputation and ICAHD's reputation as a

multi-ethnic organization engaged in civil disobedience, legal cases, and rebuilding demolished homes was apparently not a factor in their decision.

I personally have had two similar experiences. In 2007-8 and 2008-9 I gave presentations to the SJP chapter at USC, with a great reception. In the past academic year I contacted them repeatedly by email and in person to return for another presentation, and never got a response, much less an invitation. I also had a similar experience with the SJP chapter at UC Davis. They invited me to speak several years ago, and said they wanted me to return. I approached them last years to set up a date, and I never heard back.

While these could be isolated experiences, something similar happened at the recent rallies against Israel's attack on the Gaza Flotilla. Palestinian organization sponsored two intense rallies at the Israeli consulate with the theme of "Palestine will be Free", and at which members of our organization participated as individuals. But, when we called for two rallies at the Federal Building with the theme of ending U.S. government support for Israel, including military aid and diplomatic cover, few of the groups which assembled at the Israeli consulate showed up.

### So, what is going on?

My own take is that there is a subtle but actually profound difference between the focus of most Jewish critics of Israel, such as Norman Finkelstein or Noam Chomsky, and the Free Palestine/ Justice for Palestine movement of which BDS is a part. In LA Jews for Peace, for example, we differ over two states, one state, and regional solutions, but we all agree that any political solution must be based on creating a multi-ethnic state, states, or region. This new political entity would follow the South African model of being multi-ethnic and not become an expression of one group's nationality. In other words, we do not want to see a Palestinian reflection of Israel in which an exclusive nationalism is the defining ideology of any political solution.

Nevertheless, this is what we see happening. For example, after some questioning, last Friday's speakers finally outlined the goals of the BDS movement, and presumably what would need to happen for the BDS movement to declare a victory. Under theme of Justice for Palestine, three steps would be necessary:

- End of the Israeli occupation of land conquered in 1967.
- End of discriminatory and restrictive laws in Israel.
- The right of return for all refugees and their descendents expelled from Israel in 1948-9.

While this is the clearest explanation that we have yet heard about the goals of the BDS movement, it is also problematic for us for the following reasons:

1. **Two Different Ways to Frame the Problem and Solution:** Even though the BDS movement explicitly draws detailed parallels between South Africa and Israel, their South African model seems to be Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement, not the multi-racial, multi-ethnic African National Congress. BDS frames the question and the solutions in terms of Justice for Palestinians, which would correspond "Justice for Africans" of "Africa will be Free", quite different from the multi-racial analysis and program of its political rivals in the ANC.
2. **Conflict with Global Consensus:** Noam Chomsky and Norman Finkelstein repeatedly point on there is a global consensus to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, UN resolutions 242 and 338, usually called "Land for Peace" and the basis for the Arab Peace Initiative, which has been on the table for nearly a decade. Developed by Saudi Arabia

based on suggestions from the [NY Times'](#) Tom Friedman, it offers Israel a full, comprehensive, negotiated Middle East peace based on these two resolutions. This offer has been endorsed by all 21 members of the Arab League and press reports also indicate it is supported by Iran and Hamas. It has even been amended to indicate the return of refugees would be negotiated with Israel to prevent that requirement from becoming the deal breaker. While Israel and the United States have never responded to the Arab Peace Initiative, it has been worked out in substantial details through Israeli and Palestinian NGOs' and called the Geneva Initiative, a 400 page document with several hundred thousand Israeli and Palestinian signators.

If this initiative or some other form of the Arab Peace Initiative were agreed to, the BDS movement would be in a pickle. Only one of their three goals would have been achieved, the end of the occupation, while two goals would still be unmet: the return of the refugees and the end of Israeli discriminatory laws and practices. Would they then call off BDS or would they soldier on despite a comprehensive peace treaty? We have no idea.

3. **Imperialism:** But, there are further problems for the BDS movement related to outside domination and intervention in the Middle East. Even if the two-state solution, or even a bi-national state or other one state solution appeared, the question of outside meddling powers, especially the U.S., would still be on the table, in particular because of the enormous role played by the U.S. in training and supporting the Palestinian Authority, the local governing authority for the West Bank. This is, in fact, why LA Jews for Peace calls for rallies and vigils at the Westwood Federal Building – to emphasize the negative role of the United States in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other Middle East conflicts. While the end of U.S. (and also EU, Russian, and Chinese) intervention in the Middle East is clearly part of the LA Jews for Peace vision for a multi-ethnic Israel-Palestine, this criteria runs totally oblique to BDS. Their objective is to change Israel, with few comments on U.S. policy or calling for any Boycott, Sanctions, or Divestment against this country, other than the practices of the LADWP and LAX.

While there are calls for sanctions against Caterpillar because it supplies Israel with the D-9 bulldozers used to demolish houses, this movement preceded the BDS movement by many years.

4. **Economic Inequality:** A fourth problem with BDS relates to economic/class equity. Even if all of the goals of the BDS movement were met, at least as they were presented last Friday, the movement makes no mention of economic equity. It never came up in their Friday presentation or in the questions and answers. Yet, how free would Palestinians, or for that matter Israelis, be if the extraordinary inequality which now exists in Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank was not reversed? To simply maintain the current, highly unequal relationships of income, wealth, and power in both societies, even if the occupation ended, Israel's internal laws changed, and the refugees returned, is not a satisfying conclusion to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Conclusions:** If these problems with the BDS perspective are merged, it appears that the movement could meet its three objectives and then live with a state or states still within the U.S. orbit, dominated by its Jewish and Palestinian economic elites, with large amounts of poverty among its lower classes, and perhaps an Israeli/Jewish minority placed into some yet-to-be defined and likely subordinate status.

This is why LA Jews for Peace has continued to kick the can down the road. So far the vagueness or even the newer clarity of the BDS movement is not enough for us to change course, which means protesting U.S. policy, building bridges among Israelis and Palestinians, and supporting Israeli and Palestinian organizations which have some type of independent, equitable, democratic, and multi-ethnic vision to finally resolving this conflict.