

Settlement Boycott Yes; BDS No: Does That Let The Perfect Kill The Good?

by Jeff Warner, an ICUJP Reflection, March 21, 2014
[Some expanded material within brackets in a smaller font.]

I economically boycott illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. But I cannot support the BDS movement.

I believe I am acting on principled and pragmatic grounds. But I worry I am trapped in self-delusion. Am I allowing the perfect to kill the good? I solicit your feedback

I am an opponent of the Israeli occupation/ colonization of Palestinian lands. **So why reject the widespread and growing BDS movement, a locus of civic society's opposition to the occupation?"** Because the opposition is also growing, partly because it is needlessly empowered by the BDS movement.

That is my pragmatic argument, I will return to later.

Boycott, including divestment, is an instrument of the powerless to use against the powerful. It is a way for civic society to press to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. And civic society must act because the U.S. and other Western governments have not.

[Boycotts are called "non-violent" by their proponents. But that cannot be. The essence of a boycott is coercion - to economically "punish" something or someone. The more successful a boycott, the more ordinary people suffer and even die.]

Reasons for an economic boycott of the settlements are well known. The Israeli occupation is a crime against humanity that dispossesses and oppresses Palestinians by colonizing their lands with over 200 illegal settlements. After almost 47 years, the Israelis give no indication that they are about to end the occupation; U.S. leadership cowers in fear of the Israeli lobby and will not hold Israel to account – in fact, the U.S.'s unconditional diplomatic, financial, and military support of Israel actually enables the occupation.

Boycott offers a way for ordinary Americans to distance ourselves from our governments' complicity in Israel's crimes, and demand an end to the occupation. And we must demand an end to the occupation. Israel has singled itself out because it is uniquely the only Western democracy that maintains an occupation; an occupation of land it acquired by force in violation of the U.N. Charter. (And yes, Israel is a democracy, in spite of its apartheid regime in the West Bank and discrimination against Israeli Arabs [- admittedly not a perfect democracy, but as good a democracy as Alabama or Mississippi in 1960]). Boycotting the occupation was initiated in 1990 by the Israeli peace group Gush Shalom.

The most effective boycotts are European, by the E.U. itself, and by semi-governmental and private financial, business, and religious institutions in many countries [including The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Spain], all directly and solely tied to the occupation and illegal settlements.

[Even the SodaStream – Scarlett Johansson incident around the Super Bowl was European because of the Oxfam connection, without which, the incident would have been a non-event, ignored by the main stream media, and known only to activists.]

Amazingly, boycotts are starting to work - they triggered recent warnings from Obama, Kerry, and European leaders that Israel must end the occupation. Similar pressure within Israel comes from political leaders [including Tzipi Livni, Yaper Lapid, Shimon Peres, and Avraham Berg], “A-list” academics, performers, writers, and artists, former intelligence & military officers, and most importantly, [high-tech and agricultural] business leaders.

[Boycott targets are Israeli and international companies and institutions:

- That are located in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT).
- That do a substantial portion of their business in the OPT.
- Whose major owners provide substantial financial contributions to organizations that promote the colonization of the OPT and/or the Israeli army that enforces the occupation.

These criteria are purposely fuzzy to allow for flexibility in their application. For example, Israeli companies should be boycotted at a lower threshold than international companies.]

If a settlement boycott is good, why is the BDS movement bad? The settlement boycott draws a sharp distinction between Israel within the Green Line, its legally recognized border; and occupied Palestinian territories - the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza - and focuses its boycott against the occupation. But the BDS movement has broader goals. It does not distinguish Israel and the occupied territory, noting correctly that the occupation and settlements could not exist without Israel. Given that, the BDS movement targets [all] Israel [companies and institutions], as well as the occupied territories for boycotts that will continue until **three goals are met**:

Goal 1: End the occupation. This is the settlement boycott goal.

Goal 2: Equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel

Goal 3: Pursue the Palestinian right of return

I support Goals 2 and 3, but they are problematic because they go beyond opposition to the occupation.

No one questions that **Palestinian Citizens of Israel deserve equality**. Discrimination against minorities is wrong in Israel, and wrong wherever it occurs, which is everywhere. But to boycott Israel because it discriminates against its minority supports the opposition charge that Israel is being singled-out by anti-Semites. [The opposition has a point; Israel is not unique in its discrimination against Palestinians, it is just like every other country, but it is the only one being singled-out for boycott.]

That charge should not be glibly dismissed - it resonates with Middle Americans who we need to sympathize with, and support, the boycott. A boycott focused on ending the occupation, the most important goal, will attract Americans.

The Palestinian refugee right of return is a central component of the Palestinian refugee issue, which must be solved to end the occupation.

The Palestinian right of return to their original homes, especially combined with equality, is opposed by Israelis and many Diaspora Jews because they see it as meaning the end of Israel as a Jewish state. And maintaining a Jewish state is the most fundamental self-determination objective of Israelis.

Palestinian leaders from Arafat in the 1980s to Abbas today are open to creative solutions to the refugee issue. Just last month, Abbas said the PLO “does not intend to flood Israel with Palestinian refugees.” The Palestinian leadership accepts a symbolic refugee return to Israel, full return to Palestine, and generous compensation. [U.N. General Assembly resolution 194 (1948) that established a Palestinian right of return specifies both actual return and compensation for “lost and damaged property.”] This formula seems acceptable to the Palestinian people in Palestine and the Arab League, as well as the U.S. and Europe, although not to Diaspora Palestinians and BDS activists.

The BDS position is absolute – it calls for a full right of return. This is seen by many as an attempt to destroy Israel as a Jewish-democratic state in favor of a bi-national state. Of course, most BDS proponents, some of who are in this room, don’t want to destroy Israel. But BDS leaders like Omar Barghouti and Ali Abunimah do – just read chapters 2 & 7 in Abunimah’s new book.

[MJ Rosenberg reviews Abunimah’s new book¹, “The Battle for Justice in Palestine.” Rosenberg writes that Abunimah doesn’t call for genocide or for driving Jews into the sea. Rather he calls for dismantling of the State of Israel, its laws and institutions, and replacing them with a Palestinian state in which Jews would have minority rights but no national rights. This is the mirror-image of right-wing Jews claim there is no Palestinian nation, only Israeli Arabs who have no national rights. Both groups are extremists and must be shunned.]

To resolve the tension between the Israeli right of self-determination to a Jewish state, with the Palestinian refugee right of return to their original homes, I turn to Bishop Tutu’s defense of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission². Critics said the Commission was illegitimate because it could not achieve full and complete justice. Tutu responded that full justice is unattainable, and the operational goal is to achieve enough justice so the people can hold their head high and move forward with their lives.

Following that guidance, I support the PLO leadership that is fighting for a Palestinian state alongside Israel, to remove the Israeli boot from the Palestinian neck, and allow Palestinians in the occupied territories, and refugee camps in Syria, Jordan, & Lebanon, and, to move forward with their lives.

BDS, with its absolute right of return goal hurts our cause. It makes ending the occupation almost impossible; thus condemning Palestinians to many more years of suffering. And it turns Americans and Israelis who want to end the occupation and are sympathetic and supportive of settlement boycotts, into BDS opponents.

That is my pragmatic argument. The BDS name has a lot of adverse baggage and should be abandoned. Doing so will not undermine any ongoing boycotts because all targeted companies are involved with the occupation. Identifying a boycott action with BDS enables the opposition to focus their opposition on BDS’s implied goal of destroying Israel, an American ally, as a Jewish-democratic state, and even argue against ending the occupation.

¹ Rosenberg, MJ (2014) “Kerry, Anti-Semites & BDS, AIPAC Decline.” in *Tikkun Daily*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2014/03/14/kerry-anti-semites-bds-aipac-decline/>

² Tutu, Desmond (1999) *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday, 287 p.

This effect seems to have played out 2 weeks ago in the failed attempt to get the UCLA Undergraduate Student Council to pass a divestment resolution. BDS has become a poisoned term that generates opposition to settlement boycotts and ending the occupation.

[The UCLA divestment resolution was sponsored by the UCLA SJP. They seemed to be aware of the adverse baggage of the BDS term, because they attempted to avoid it. But resolution supporters identified with the BDS term, and the opposition used it as the focus of their attacks.]

[Palestinian solidarity activists say that BDS is a Palestinian-led call of conscience that was endorsed by ~175 Palestinian civic organizations in 2005. They say it is an expression of the Palestinian community in the West Bank, and, as Palestinian solidarity activists, we must follow the Palestinian's lead. I reject that argument. The BDS call is so broad that it turns off potential supporters, including me, and builds opposition to ending the occupation.]