

# **The Academic and Cultural Boycott: The Internal Palestinian Story and the Role of the Academy**

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Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 on the basis of forcibly expelling the overwhelming majority of the indigenous Arab population, Israel established itself to be an apartheid state. Israel is so not just because of its 43 years of repressive military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, but also because Israel has a *legalized* and *institutionalized* system of discrimination against its "non-Jewish" citizens that largely fits the definition of the term apartheid stated in the International Convention for the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid. Israel has always denied millions of Palestinian refugees their internationally recognised right to return to their land. In contrast, any person of Jewish descent from anywhere in the world may become an Israeli citizen under the so-called Law of Return. This law is one example of the structure of Apartheid laws and distinctions whereby Israel, which defines itself as the state of "the Jewish nation," provides rights and privileges to Israeli Jews and denies the basic rights of the indigenous Palestinian population.

Throughout the past 62 years, Palestinian struggle against Israel's ongoing colonisation has taken different forms. Strategies varied to include armed resistance, civil disobedience, informal dialogues involving individuals and civil society organisations, cooperation in joint activities, including among academics, as well as official negotiations leading to the so-called peace process between the PLO and the Israeli government. Given this long history of resistance and dialogue/negotiations pursued by the Palestinians, this paper attempts to address the emergence of the BDS movement as a Palestinian formulated and led rights-based strategy to end Israel's colonial and apartheid regime over the Palestinian people. Specifically, the paper will briefly consider why an overwhelming majority of Palestinians opted for BDS as a resistance strategy at this particular point in time. Discussion will focus on the failure of the peace process, the complicity of the international community in supporting Israel's occupation, the decline of the Israeli peace movement and the futility of the dialogue industry.

The recent Palestinian Israeli political history has been dominated by the peace process, which is now running into its 17<sup>th</sup> year. During these years Israel carried on colonising Palestinian land and encouraging further settlement in the West Bank, increasingly pushing Palestinians into shrinking Bantustans, as described by leaders of the South African anti-apartheid struggle who visited the occupied Palestinian territory. The settlers in the West Bank and Gaza numbered 260,000 in 1992 to nearly double by the end of 2008 (479,500 in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem). [1] To accommodate these settlers, Israel used a complex legal and bureaucratic mechanism to take total control of more than fifty percent of the more fertile land in the West Bank and the main water aquifers. [2]

By 2000, and in an attempt to suppress the second intifada, Israel introduced a meticulous apartheid system aiming to enclave and control the movement of the Palestinians in the West

Bank and Gaza Strip. At the height of these controls, Israel mounted over 700 checkpoints and roadblocks. By March 2010, 505 checkpoints, trenches, roadblocks and barriers remained in the West Bank. [3]

The list of examples of Israel's violations of Palestinian rights, destruction of lives and livelihoods, as well as the ethnic cleansing tactics, is very long. What is of interest to us here is to demonstrate that the Oslo peace process which is based on the false premise that the colonised and coloniser are morally equivalent, equally responsible for the "conflict," and must share the "burdens" of solving it, a formula that will necessarily be biased in favour of the coloniser.

This grave repressive situation has been further compounded by the complicity of the international community. Governments, particularly in the U.S. and Europe, have been supporting the 'peace process' while dealing with Israel's colonisation of the land and its people as a form of a natural disaster. The international community's 'tsunami-like' strategy centres around pumping huge amounts of aid to the Palestinians (amounted to between \$800 and \$1 billion per annum since 2000, which translates into nearly \$258 per Palestinian in the WBGS).[4] Although this aid is necessary to mitigate the impact of Israel's occupation, the provision of assistance to the Palestinians while granting Israel total impunity with regards to its violations of Palestinian rights, has meant, in effect, subsidizing Israel's occupation and violations of international law and allowing Israel a free hand to further colonise and ethnically cleanse the land. This policy on the part of the international community has reduced the Palestinian population, particularly in the Gaza Strip, to hungry dwellers, with their rights discussed within a framework of the number of daily calories necessary to keep them barely alive.

Over the years, it was suggested to the Palestinians that engagement in dialogue with the Israelis, both on the institutional and individual levels, particularly in the academy is a more effective mechanism to address the long lasting injustice inflicted upon the Palestinians by Israel. However, the Palestinians have tried this method, particularly since the early 1980s, only to realise that as long as the terms of the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians are those of occupier and occupied, oppressor and oppressed, the 'dialogue process' only results in normalising the occupation on the ground and whitewashing Israeli atrocities abroad.

Projects based on notions of "dialogue" have flourished after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. The underlying assumption of such projects is that bringing Palestinians and Israelis face to face will necessarily address the injustice and somehow further the possibility of achieving peace. This line of thinking subscribes to the "deserving native" model, which suggests that when the privileged/colonizer is brought to work together with the oppressed/colonized, the colonizer will somehow become more willing to "grant" the oppressed their rights. This model represents a form of racism that demonises the native and only leads to further entrenching the injustice and prolonging the bloodshed, as has been observed on the ground. This model was also tried in the South African case in the early eighties, at which time the anti-apartheid movement's leadership rejected it, opting for diverse forms of resistance instead, which eventually led to the collapse of apartheid in South Africa.

Amjad Barham, the president of the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees (PFUUBE) provides a useful example as to the true nature of the relationship between Palestinian and Israel academics. He notes:

*'Once, as I was crossing one of the many hundreds of checkpoints on my way to my university, I was stopped by an Israeli army soldier who as it turned out was a fellow mathematician at an Israeli university. But our collegiality ended here: from his position of power, he told me that I*

*could cross the checkpoint if I was able to answer a mathematics question correctly! I would only ask you: what kind of engagement can be possible here?’[5]*

The disintegration of the Israeli peace movement since the late 1990s which exposed its highly Zionist discourse, and the rise of the right in Israel has strengthened convictions amongst the Palestinians, particularly the intellectuals, that a different strategy was needed to resist Israel’s brutal colonisation. However, it is interesting to touch upon the reasons behind the decline of the peace movement, which reveals its own highly colonial discourse, as one Israeli analyst notes:

*‘A number of factors contributed to the decline of the Israeli peace movement: First, many peaceniks used to argue that the costs to Israel (financial and otherwise) of maintaining sole control over the occupied territories would be unsustainable over the long or even medium term. But the establishment of the Oslo-derived Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994 significantly changed that calculus. Nearly all of the occupation’s administrative costs and a good portion of security-related costs are now met through European aid donations to the PA..... Second,, the reframing of the peace movement’s own demographic argument. In its simplest form, this argument advocates separate states because “one day soon” Palestinians will outnumber Jews in the area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. The argument implies that it is acceptable to keep a significant number of Palestinians living under the burden of military occupation so long as Jewish Israelis outnumber them....Avigdor Lieberman’s Yisrael Beiteinu and other political forces have put the argument to new uses. Their version is: “If the demographics prevent us doing what we want on the ground, we will change the demographics.” As the British-Israeli political analyst Daniel Levy recently observed: “We have to recognize that Liebermanism is a bastard child of the whole way the Israeli peace movement has used the demographic argument for so long.”[6]*

Given these factors, amongst others, and in response to the concessions made by the Palestinian leadership over basic rights, Palestinian academics shouldered their moral responsibility and in July 2004 issued a call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel. This was followed by the more comprehensive Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS (Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions) against Israel issued in July 2005.[7] These two documents represent the most authoritative statements issued by Palestinian civil society *calling for* international solidarity in the Palestinians struggle against Israeli colonialism and apartheid, in all its forms. The BDS Call was signed by over 170 Palestinian organisations, and both statements have received the support of the overwhelming majority of Palestinian unions, activist organisations, student, women’s organisations and the broad spectrum of civil society.

The BDS call is a rights based approach for all segments of Palestinian society (Palestinians inside Israel, refugees, and those living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza). It thus demands that Israel recognize the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self determination and fully comply with international law by fulfilling three goals: 1) respecting and providing the right of return of all Palestinian refugees; 2) ending the occupation of all Palestinian and Arab lands; and 3) recognizing the fundamental right of the Palestinian citizens of Israel to live in full equality. [8]

The BDS Call outlines the Palestinian strategic vision. It defines the most effective form of solidarity as *direct action*. Just as boycotts and sanctions played a major role in ending the apartheid regime in South Africa, the BDS call asserts that isolating Israel internationally through such measures, is a morally sound and effective strategy available to international civil society to force an end to the colonial and racist apartheid system in Palestine.

The most significant contribution of the Palestinian academics and intellectuals in the current anti colonial struggle against Israel's repression has been to construct and support the academic and cultural boycott. The importance of their 2004 academic and cultural boycott call is multi-faceted:

First, it challenged the Palestinian people, particularly civil society, with the need to go back to the basic questions related to their rights. That is: what are the Palestinians fighting for, is it self rule within the Bantustans, or a dignified liberation from repression and colonisation? This call also dealt with the issue of 'who should we struggle for'? Are the Palestinian refugees in Palestine and the diaspora an issue? Should we pretend that the Palestinians inside Israel do not suffer from apartheid?

Secondly, by avoiding the prescription of any particular political formula (one state, two states or an empire), the BDS Call insists, instead, on the necessity of including the three basic, irreducible rights noted above in any just and legal solution. This has allowed for the unification of the Palestinians everywhere and provided a common vision that brings together all segments of Palestinian society.

Finally, the BDS call challenged the international community, both at the official and unofficial levels to shoulder their moral responsibility in ending Israel's brutal oppression. Through evoking universal human principles the BDS campaign calls for Israel to be treated according to standards that apply to any other state committing similar crimes and violations of international law. The virtually unparalleled state of exceptionalism and impunity that Israel enjoys today allows it to pursue its agenda of apartheid without any regard to international law or concern about possible punitive measures for violating it.

On the unofficial level, the academic and cultural boycott call provided the international academy with the chance to act with moral consistency and support the Palestinian people's struggle, like they did in the South African case. More importantly, it re-initiated a fundamental old debate amongst the world academy regarding whether there exists a link between ethics and the production of knowledge.

In other words, the crucial question that the Palestinian academy puts in front of us today: should we remain neutral in the face of the Israel's ethnic cleansing and slow genocide against the indigenous people of Palestine? Or as some progressive Jewish intellectuals have noted: "Never Again!" must always be understood to mean: never again to anyone.

## **References:**

[1] The 1992 figure is obtained from Farsakh, L (2005) *Palestinian Labour Migration to Israel: Labour, Land, and Occupation*. Taylor & Francis Ltd, United Kingdom. The 2008 figure is from B'tselem: <http://www.btselem.org/english/Settlements/Statistics.asp>

[2] [http://www.btselem.org/English/Settlements/Taking\\_Control.asp](http://www.btselem.org/English/Settlements/Taking_Control.asp)

[3] OCHA (June 2010) West Bank movement and access update. UN: Jerusalem.

[4] Farsakh, L (2006) *The Economics of Israeli Occupation: What is Colonial about it?* [http://web.archive.org/web/20060911184743/http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~mideast/conference/Farsakh\\_outline.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20060911184743/http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~mideast/conference/Farsakh_outline.pdf)

[5] See UCU website at: <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm>.

[6] Cobban, H (2009) Peace Out: the decline of Israel's progressive movement. <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR34.4/cobban.php>

[7] The BDS call also comes out of a long history of Palestinian struggle against oppression and domination. In the last century, the 1936 -1939 revolt which focused around strikes, boycotts and other forms of anti-colonial actions was initially led by urban intellectuals, to develop later into a peasant led armed struggle against the British forces. This rebellion was brutally suppressed by the British army.

[8] <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=869>