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Running Out of Options

The Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement

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In 2000 Bill Clinton, Ehud Barak, and Yasser Arafat assembled to once again attempt to find a solution to the question: what is Palestine? The leaders came up with a plan that was unacceptable to the Palestinian side, and the break-down of negotiations led to a renewed wave of violence culminating in the Second Intifada. This conflict was bloodier than the First Intifada because of the access to black market guns and explosives (Peterson), so many Palestinians looked for another way to protest the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. This led to the formation of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement in 2005. While boycotting was not a new concept for Palestinians, many had boycotted Israeli goods during the First Intifada, it now called on the international community to assist in the Palestinian struggle for rights. Ten years after its inception, BDS has not accomplished its goals nor has it had an overt economic effect on Israel. Even so, BDS allows citizens in other countries to begin a dialogue with corporations, governments, and other citizens on the Palestinian-Israeli question and bring awareness to the violation of international laws in Palestine. This will eventually pressure the international community into addressing the human rights and land violations that Israel is perpetrating against the Palestinians but will not lead to BDS realizing its main goals.

The BDS movement began in July of 2005 and calls for the end of the occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and all other Arab lands that have been seized by Israel. It also calls for the end of discrimination against Palestinians and full equality in Israel and the occupied territories. Finally, it calls for Palestinian refugees to be allowed to return to their homes according to U.N. Resolution 194 (Barghouti 49). The movement does not consist of one cohesive group but rather any company, state, or person who wants to participate. In 2008, the Palestinian BDS National Committee was formed and became the guiding force for the movement internationally, but it is still commonplace to enact a boycott or divest independently (Barghouti 61). BDS has been endorsed by many Palestinians and was issued by the three distinct Palestinian groups: refugees, Palestinians in Israel, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (Barghouti 56). Even so, some Palestinian groups do not support BDS because they are worried of appearing anti-Semitic or believe the best way to accomplish their goals is through violence (Barghouti 60). Essentially, it is a campaign that calls for Israel to be accountable to international law which states that Israel’s separation barrier and settlements built on Palestinian land are both illegal (Barghouti 55). These international rulings by the International Court of Justice are the basis of the legitimacy of the movement. It is neither exclusively political nor moral, but rather a response to the violations of international laws (Sourani 61-62). It is not exclusively political because the movement does not take a position on the one-state or two-state argument. Because it is a rights-based movement, not a solutions-based movement, it does not take stances on what land should comprise Palestine (Hallward 25).

Sanctions are often used as a mean of ensuring respect for international law and to ensure accountability (Sourani 63), and the BDS movement calls for economic sanctions to remain in place until the occupation ends. The sanctions are directed at the occupation and not the state because the sanctions would be lifted as soon as the occupation ceased (Halper 288-289). There are also two groups within the BDS movement. The first is more concerned about targeting Zionism and Israel itself, but few international entities subscribe to this form of BDS. The more common focus is on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, so the form of BDS one prefers determines which companies are targeted. Those interested in targeting Israel itself support a boycott on every Israeli good, but those who protest the occupation believe in a selective boycott of companies that profit from the settlements (Hallward 25). Generally, the selection of which entities to boycott or divest from need to be companies in which there is an easily accessibly alternative for consumers to buy at the same price. Furthermore, because the campaign wants immediate sociopolitical change, it usually targets corporations instead of governments. Attempting to get governments to boycott or put sanctions on another government takes more time and resources than it does to boycott or divest from a corporation. Divestment can be a powerful tool because if it is instituted on a large scale it can paralyze companies or lead to bankruptcy (Hever 113). Finally, any boycott must be collectively organized for it to be effective because voluntary consumer boycotts result in the free-rider problem meaning some people will still buy and invest in companies and let others protest (Hallward 11).

Along with two different ideological ways to boycott Israel, there are two different types of boycott. There is a boycott against companies and corporations that profit from the occupied territories as well as a cultural and academic boycott. The cultural and academic boycott is one of the most controversial parts of the BDS movement because some think it is a form of censorship, prevents academic freedom, and is anti-Semitic (Hallward 28). The United States Based Campaign for Academic and Cultural Boycott (USACBI) was formed in 2009 to boycott educational institutions that profited from or supported the occupation of Palestinian areas. Over 13,000 academics from U.S. colleges and universities endorsed the USACBI. Organizations in Europe have also supported a cultural and academic boycott of Israel, and, in a petition in 2002 before the official BDS movement began, a suspension of European Union funding for research with Israeli scientists was proposed. This petition gained 130 signatures, and even though it resulted in a significant backlash from interest groups, it began a dialogue on Palestinian rights within educational institutions. The British Committee for Universities of Palestine was created after this petition was published, and it took great strides in getting academic institutions to adopt the logic of an academic boycott (Barghouti 19). The greatest success of the academic and cultural boycott is that it started a dialogue on campuses about whether or not colleges should be supporting other educational institutions that either profit from the occupation or support the settler movement.

Multiple universities have discussed selective divestment from Israeli institutions that profit from or are located in settlements (Hever 113). Princeton, Harvard, MIT, Yale, Tufts, Hampshire College, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, and the public universities of California, Illinois, and North Carolina all have divestment campaigns, but Hampshire College has been the only successful college so far in divesting from companies that profit from occupying Palestine. It was the first United States higher learning institution to divest from Israel because it is a small, private school that prides itself on investing in humane companies. Hampshire College divested from Caterpillar, General Electric, Motorola, United Technologies, ITT Corporation, and Terex all of whom sell products used to antagonize Palestinians (Beinin 67). While the economic consequences of the divestment are unknown, Caterpillar, which sells bulldozers to Israel used in destroying Palestinian homes, has had to move its headquarters from Chicago to Little Rock in order to avoid protests (Hever 119). Other colleges can look to Hampshire College as an example of what an organized group of students can accomplish. One university divesting from select Israeli companies will not have an effect on the overall conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis, but it does allow for other U.S. colleges to consider investing in socially conscious companies to further the dialogue on the conflict.

Other BDS movements are involved in boycotting physical goods. There is a boycott in Europe and the United States on Ahava cosmetics because the company is based in the West Bank (Halper 290). Its factories are north of the Green Line in the settlement Mitzpe Shalem (Hallward 61). The American boycott was led by Stolen Beauty, and, even though their main goal was to educate people on the effects of the settler movement, they were able to pressure the charity organization Oxfam to cancel actress Kristen Davis as their Goodwill Ambassador while she was contracted by Ahava (66). Oxfam’s removal of Davis as their Goodwill Ambassador did not go unnoticed. Newspapers printed articles about Ahava and how it profited from the settlements, and the company received bad press from the incident. Stolen Beauty has affected Ahava’s profits, but because the company’s financial information is not available to the public, it is difficult to quantify the effect of the boycott (Hallward 70). Even so, this event allowed common people to realize companies are breaking the law, and they have the power as consumers to affect companies. The fact that an actress was involved in the Ahava boycott was especially poignant to the movement because many Americans are in tune with popular culture more so than social rights movements, so this was an effective way to bring the Palestinian-Israeli question to the public’s notice.

Also, many celebrities have refused to visit Israel or have openly criticized Israel for allowing settlements to be built in Palestinian territory. Musicians who refuse to play in Israel include Snoop Dogg, Gil Scott Heron, The Pixies, Cat Power, Carlos Santana, and Cassandra Wilson among others. Authors who refuse to visit and support the BDS movement include Judith Butler, Angela Davis, Sarah Schulman, and Alice Walker. Furthermore, former basketball player Kareen Abdul-Jabbar cancelled his visit to Israel to show his solidarity with the Palestinian people (Ruebner 247). Celebrities bring the international law violations to the attention of the common people which is important for the BDS campaign because states and the U.N. have refused to implement sanctions or boycotts on Israel. People who listen to these musicians, read these authors, and follow this basketball player often times want to emulate these celebrities like so often happens in today’s culture which could bolster BDS’s popularity. At the very least, these celebrities continue to open mainstream discourse to the possibility of supporting Palestine.

Most notably, Norway and Denmark divested from Israeli military companies altogether (Barghouthi 8). Their divestment is the most important divestment to date because they are states expressing their displeasure with another state’s policy. The other actors that divested were colleges or companies who do not hold nearly as much power or influence as a state. Israel relies on foreign aid and investment, so states condemning Israel in any way is potentially dangerous for them. Single companies, colleges, and supermarkets deciding to divest or boycott Israel has very little effect because economically Israel will not suffer, and, politically, these isolated movements can be explained as anti-Semitic or misguided. When an entire country decides to divest from the Israeli military, a new legitimacy is given to the BDS campaign. Israel has ignored these moves from Norway and Denmark, but if other democratic nations follow their lead, it could lead to serious political consequences such as reduced foreign aid or international isolation.

BDS was created because the frustrations Palestinians expressed in the Intifadas were not addressed, and other countries had success with boycott movements effecting policy. Palestinians living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are being pushed off their land through the settler movement where Israelis built communities on Palestinian land. House demolitions continued after the Oslo Accords and more than 24,000 homes were destroyed since 1967. Furthermore, it is unlikely that negotiations will result in anything concrete especially with the recent uptick in violence (Halper 274-275). Some even consider how the Palestinians are treated akin to how blacks were treated in Apartheid South Africa. Palestinians face discrimination, military orders controlling everyday life, and few political rights. Also, Israeli Jews are privileged over Palestinians (Ruebner 243). Unlike in Palestine, the boycott and sanctions movement succeeded in making South Africa from “an accepted member of the international community into a pariah” (Ruebner 242). This transformation is key for the BDS movement to succeed in Palestine-Israel. Eventually states must view Israel’s policies to allow settlements to be built on Palestinian land and demolishing Palestinian homes as unacceptable (Ruebner 242). Halper, among others, believes if BDS can grow and become better coordinated, it is the best way to attain Palestinian independence. However, the BDS movement targeting Israel faces more difficulties than the South African movement did. The U.N. supported a boycott of South Africa, but there is not nearly enough support for a U.N. resolution to pass on Israel considering only a few states have boycotted Israel’s military. This shows a lack of support for any official move against Israel by the international community. In the United States, the number of South Africans supporting the Apartheid regime was less than the number of Jews who support Israel today, and the United States needs Israel as a strategic ally but did not need South Africa. Both of these situations prevents the U.S. from supporting BDS. Israel is an important security partner to the United States because it is the strongest democracy in the region, the U.S. has given it over $115 billion since 1949, and, because Israel has nuclear capabilities, it stands as a deterrent to extremists in the region (Eisenstadt and Pollock 1). State and U.N. support of the BDS movement is key for the effects that South Africa faced during Apartheid to be the same on Israel today. If the BDS had U.N. support, it would increase the effect of the movement. Based upon of the South Africa model, U.N. support would lead to the end of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza and a new respect for Palestinian rights.

The BDS movement has also seen more significant steps taken in Europe to support the BDS campaign because of how “the popular narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as portrayed in the mainstream media differs, which leads to different discursive space for engagement in the issues” (Hallward 20). The United States is pro-Israel because of the economic and political ties between the two countries which often times prevents citizens or politicians from criticizing Israel. Europe allows for more conversation on the topic which is why entire countries, Denmark and Norway, have divested from the Israeli military and entire labor unions representing millions of people have condemned the treatment of Palestinians. Before BDS can take hold in the United States, a change in the “discursive space for engagement” in regards to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict needs to take place (Hallward 20). This is why organizations such as the Stolen Beauty campaign against Ahava products were mainly concerned with raising awareness of the settlements and treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli government. An effective boycott is impossible if people do not understand why the boycott is necessary and not, as some argue, anti-Semitic. This is another reason why BDS will work better as an educational tool for other countries than as a way to regain land and stop the settler movement.

The United States and European countries have been the most active in the BDS movement because other countries in Asia, Africa, and South America have not formed effective BDS movements. By adopting BDS, countries such as China, India, Malaysia, Brazil, and Russia could challenge the West’s stance on the Palestinian-Israeli question which is currently noncommittal (Barghouti 61). For example, India has received arms from Israel valued at over $8 billion since 1999 (Purkayastha and Kidwai 41-42). The BDS movement has not taken hold in India because the two countries have close business relations, and few Indian people see how they can help play a role in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. An Indian boycott of Israeli goods would make a huge impact on the Israeli economy and make Israel reconsider its settlement policy. There are some Indian organizations that support BDS such as the Communist and Marxist Parties and the All India Peace and Solidary Organization, but this is a far cry from the country as a whole supporting the movement (43). Similarly, groups in South Africa have encouraged their government to divest and boycott Israel because they see how the Palestinians are treated is similar to Apartheid but to no avail (Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign 180). Getting countries in Africa and Asia involved in the BDS movement is the next logical step because Western countries refuse to condone the movement. Israel is a very global society, so Eastern countries could have a huge impact on Israel’s economy. Palestinians should target other countries even if they have less international power than Western nations in order to advance their agenda.

The Israeli response to BDS has been one of fear of the economic and political consequences. Israel cares about its reputation as a democracy because it is a globalized country, and it relies on a massive amount of international investment and aid (Hallward 15). Proponents of BDS believe this is one of the reason that BDS can be so effective in Israel because diplomacy and persuasion have failed so far (19). It is evident that BDS scares Israel because in July of 2011 the “Bill for Preventing of Damage to the state of Israel Through Boycott 2011” passed which subjects supports of BDS to civil penalties including lawsuits, denial of tax exemptions, and exclusion from government contracts among others (Hever 110-111). This bill is a telling document about the frame of mind in Israel. Israeli policymakers have given BDS validity and legitimacy by implementing consequences if someone is complicit in the movement. Their actions prove BDS works better as an educational tool because Israel will not change its policies independently, so international awareness is essential for BDS to succeed.

Another concern some have is that the BDS movement is anti-Semitic because there are other countries with worse human rights and international law violations, but BDS focuses on Israel. Also, many say it is a way to delegitimize Israel (Falk 91-92). These arguments are not valid because the BDS movement targets the occupation of Palestinian territories which was ruled illegal by the ICJ and, just because other countries are also violating human rights laws, does not make Israel’s violation of these laws any less important. BDS does not advocate a one-state or two-state solution, nor does it say that Israel is not a legitimate state. Fatah, a political party in Palestine’s government the Palestinian Authority (PA), has adopted the BDS movement, and the PA has recognized Israel (Barghouti 56). Therefore, saying BDS is anti-Semitic is unfounded because the movement is advocating for international law to be instituted, not that Israel needs to be demolished. One way that Israelis worry the BDS movement is attempting to delegitimize their state is through the right of return advocated for Palestinian refugees in the BDS movement as well as through ending the occupation of all Arab lands. With the millions of refugees, if they decide to come back to reclaim their territory, it would mark the end of Israel. Also, the end of the occupation of Arab lands could refer to 1948 when the majority of Israel was in Palestinian hands instead of 1967 which would also essentially result in the destruction of Israel (Hallward 12-13). These are valid concerns because the basis of Israel is that it is a state where all Jewish people can live in, so part of their culture is one of living with others who practice Judaism. The influx of Palestinians would vastly increase the Muslim culture present in the country. Realistically, Israel would never concede to allow Palestinian refugees back to their homes because it would completely change the demographics of Israel, so, even though it is one of the main points BDS is fighting for, it most likely will never happen. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to allow every Palestinian refugee back to their homes because then Israeli families would be left homeless.

Palestinians set out with three specific goals in mind when they called for an international BDS movement in 2005: the land seized by Israel to be returned, equality in Israel and the occupied territories, and the right of refugees to return to their homes. One of the main successes of BDS has been the divestment from the Israeli military by Denmark and Norway. It is evident that Palestinians need the international community to support their cause if they want to meet any of their goals, so the support of two countries is a huge boost to their movement. Recently the EU decided to label goods made in the settlements which can be seen as supporting BDS, but France also ruled a boycott of Israel as hate speech (Piser 2). International recognition is obviously a long way off. The BDS movement has been in effect for ten years, but it has not accomplished any of its goals because it has unrealistic demands. Israel and the international community will not support allowing all Palestinians back to the land they were pushed off of because it would essentially destroy Israel and its identity. BDS is a positive way to facilitate governments, companies, and colleges to discuss the international law violations perpetuated by Israel, but it will never result in Palestinians reclaiming their land. This is not to say there is no hope for the movement. In South Africa it took over 30 years for the boycott movement to have an effect on government policy, so it is possible BDS could affect Israeli policy. Hopefully the BDS campaign helps resolve the Palestinian issues of land disputes and human rights violations, but realistically BDS will not have a quantifiable effect on policy for many years.

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