

BDS: Yes, No, Maybe, but what is it? (Long version)

Larry Stillman, member, AJDS Executive

The Jewish Community Council's condemnation of the AJDS for alleged sins and crimes brings forth a big question—so just what is BDS? What the bulls, bullies and others in the conservative Jewish Lobby present is in fact something far different from the reality. It is sometimes hard to know what is fact, impression, or interpretation and this is what makes it difficult for the AJDS to have an either/or view on all aspects of what supporters of the BDS do. This essay could probably become 10,000 words rather than the 4,200 it already is, such is the difficulty of the issue at hand, but I am not in a position to spend the time to write what is truly required.

In addition, any analysis of the BDS movement inevitably brings to account beliefs (or prejudice) on a whole host of issues, such as Zionism, Israel as the State of the Jews, the Right of Return and so on. I've had to therefore interpolate my views in my analysis of what I think is going on in the BDS movement below. I will probably be criticised by proponents of BDS for "making up stuff", but I've seen enough websites and videos and news reports, articles, and online chatter to have a fair impression of what the major trends.

BDS is not so much movement or clear platform as it is a loose and leaderless coalition resulting in many different tendencies. It is scattershot, at times resulting in a frivolousness that makes its legitimate political arguments seem like an afterthought to cultural and student politics in the age of non-stop media presence.

It is also fallacious for BDS to adopt a crude anti-colonialist viewpoint, which draws upon a narrow reading of liberation theory stemming from Fanon and others that refuses to engage with the 'other' (Israel Zionists, and despised "liberal Zionists" abroad) because this serves to further disempower the powerless (i.e. Palestinians). This viewpoint is part of a global anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist agenda to privilege those without voices. It goes well beyond the problem of Israel and can be applied all too simplistically with totalist politics that engage in purely black and white characterizations. This activity and removed from any relevance to international law as understood by almost all countries and the forums in which international pressures could be brought to bear. The international community is not going to abolish the state of Israel, though it should support and insist that the Occupation ends. Thus, the movement, for any number of reasons as described, has over-played its hand by turning on Israel as a whole, as distinct from focussing on the achievable—ending the Occupation and obtaining strong Palestinian rights and independence in future arrangements as they are negotiated under (I hope) international supervision.

BDS gives almost no credit to the particularly difficult circumstances under which the Israeli left has functioned for decades. It does not take into account the reasons why in a "total" society such as Jewish Israel, dissent on core issues of national identity comes at a real price. Not everyone is a hero, but I also give no excuse to the millions who have been diverted by the "Tel Aviv bubble" and pretend it will all go away. It won't.

Thus, because of ideological rigidity, by not recognising that a spectrum of opinion in Israel and Jews overseas are actually potential allies, BDS actually has isolated itself from having an effect on the Israeli government. A target of getting Israeli out of the Occupied Territories and engaging in advocating restorative justice with Jewish allies would strike a massive and humiliating blow to the nationalist fantasies that have grown up in the Zionist movement over the past 60 years or so. Israel would probably not fall apart (much as some would wish it to do so), but it would have to behave differently and equitably towards Palestinians and internationally.

But to say that the BDS movement is inherently anti-Semitic is way off the mark. There certainly are fruitcakes that have aligned themselves with BDS, but when discovered, they get denounced. In fact many of the issues that BDS highlights have certainly been part of the left conversation in Israel for decades, and are now reflected in the political landscape: the Occupation; the creeping culture and institutionalisation of a local form of Apartheid, whether in the territories or Israel proper, combined with an intolerant nationalist-religious ideology; Israel as a so-called Jewish state or a state of all its people; the collapse of rule of law and other matters such as Israel's support of the international arms trade when it has nothing to with self-defence.

So if the Jewish Right disagrees with some aspects of the BDS movement agenda, then it also objects to the "insider" Left viewpoint. We subsequently see this disharmony coming out in the local condemnation of the AJDS by the JCCV and internationality, the hostility to anything but a very circumscribed criticism of Israeli politics by organised Jewish communities. The objection to BDS therefore has to be seen as part of the general assault on any criticism of Israel outside of a narrow party line as unpatriotic/treasonable/threatening to Israeli security/delegitimizing the state and homeland of the Jewish people/anti-Semitic and on and on, including the relevance of Zionism (for those who believe in it) in the future. Yet we forget that until the 1940s and even thereafter, the idea of Israel as the eternal, representative and necessary homeland of all Jews as the State of the Jews was continually under debate and in new ways, this debate continues until today.

Thus to say that the global BDS movement and the insider Jewish left are the same thing because they have some views in common is simply untrue. There are in my opinion, some significant differences, which make it difficult for people like myself to sign up to the BDS agenda lock stock and barrel.

I'd like to take up a couple of points in detail. At times the argument repeats itself, but that is because each point below rests on particular interpretations and actions.

Extremism and exaggeration

I know that there are many individuals and organisations that support BDS that do not take any of the positions I criticise below. Instead, they take a moral, human rights approach. They focus on action, which is meant to make a clear statement about the Occupation, without confusing it with other, often more controversial and ambiguous agendas that have become attached with the BDS movement.

For example, consider the position taken by activist and writer Naomi Klein who had the Hebrew version of her book *No Logo* published by a radical non-mainstream publisher in Jaffa as her form of protest against the Israeli mainstream. Or consider the moral position taken by Stephen Hawking to not attend a politicized summit in Israel. Hawking has had no issue with Israel in the past, but now he is taking a clear stand against the Occupation. There are human rights-groups, which have been engaged in moves to disinvest from organisations, such as pension funds that invest in the West Bank. All have these as far as I can see, have focussed on a key issue—the Occupation, without becoming confused with controversial agendas such as the right of Israel to exist, the Right of Return and so on.

Contrast these activities to the Max Brenner protest tactic, which has been adopted by various groups who are high on rhetoric, political causation theory (Max Brenner = blood), and confrontation, but low on logic. One can also look at various Islamist websites and be completely horrified at their intolerance and racism. Also consider the laudable aims of increasing humanitarian aid for the people of Gaza (the flotilla), getting convoluted with far less tolerant people, including known anti-Semites and Islamists. Thus it is over simplistic to claim that movements such as the Gaza flotilla increased anti-Semitism, when it was the Gaza blockade that was the problem in the first place. Hatred of Israel/Jews in places such as Turkey (where I saw nasty slogans when I was last there) is well, pretty understandable though revolting to see. I even had a Turkish academic engaging in conspiracy theories with me.

These problems appear to arise for a number of reasons. First, there are internal tensions within Palestinian activist organisations themselves on the right of Israel to exist or not as a Jewish state or something else, the Right of Return and normalization. This means that certain issues remain controversial and unresolved, given the chronically anarchic state of Palestinian internal politics. Many foreign activists are also reluctant to criticize Palestinian positions as lacking a basis in reality out of a sense of solidarity. There is also the difficulty of 'group speak' and internal silencing in certain leftist groups, which allows infiltration by extremists. There are also politically related issues in the Muslim world that permit the circulation of anti-Semitic materials that are no longer acceptable in the West. Furthermore, the experience of Muslim countries as victims of imperial policy (France, UK, USA), makes them far more susceptible to simplistic conspiracy theories involving Israel.

The result of this is a hydra-like movement with any number of trends, tendencies and variant activities, with the noisiest voices dominating. It is clear that the current dominant stream (at least expressed by foreign activists), wants to use BDS as a crude, punitive, and negative instrument, rather than as a tool for positive political conflict resolution.

Israeli Jews, the State of Israel, and foreign Jews are seen as such sinners that they have lost any rights to have a legitimate voice in the solution. There is a fetish about not privileging what is seen as the voice of the oppressor (that is Israelis), because admitting that Israel even exists as a state entity is a concession. Independent action by Palestinians to redeem their stolen rights is viewed as the sole foundation on which to solve the problem. In the particular circumstances of the Israel-Palestine conflict - Israel is a reality - this is pure fantasy.

This leads to another observation. Just because a particular strategy is called for (e.g. a blanket ban on Israel) does not mean that it is correct. Sometimes, strategies can be wrong and can change, but reality checks to not appear to have been achieved.

Ambiguous views about Israel (that is, Israel inside the Green Line)

I think it is important to look at key words in the BDS call to action. There are at least two versions on the BDS “Movement” website.

“Non-violent punitive measures should be maintained until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.”

Another version has a significant difference under point 1: “Ending its [Israel’s] occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall”

This discrepancy shows me the political tension between political realists and those that take on the one state solution (in various forms) and I see this tension in the online debates. Some of the originators of the BDS call can come to terms with Israel, others cannot. Thus Norman Finkelstein, one of the strongest critics of Israeli militarism, has been denounced as a compromiser and legitimizer for his view that the two-state solution is the only realistic option, for all its faults.

However, I am pointing out this problem with additional qualifications. Finkelstein may also be wrong. The solution may not be two states. It may actually be very different form of state arrangement (such as a federation). We can also see this argument now being raised in Israel itself because of an awareness of just how far down the track the Occupation has gone. In this respect, proponents of the “human rights” approach in the BDS movement, rather than naïve one-statism are correct.

The focus should be upon the establishment of equal citizenship in whatever arrangement that may occur, rather than being fixated on particular state formations. Of course, this viewpoint entirely challenges the idea of Israel as the Jewish homeland, the (exclusive) State of the Jews and so on which brings one into conflict with widely held beliefs about the absolute necessity of Zionism or privileged Jewish rights as the only means to guarantee Jewish survival in what is called 'Eretz Yisrael'. In response to the shock and anger that occurs at questioning the status quo, I can only quote from recent article in Haaretz by Roy Isacowitz "Portraying each potential danger as a Holocaust-in-waiting does not qualify as courage. It's nothing more than cheap and cynical manipulation. Likewise, massive retaliation to every provocation aggravates the public's fears, rather than allaying them. Playing on the public's fears is a time-honored tactic in Israel (it distracts attention from such mundane things as tax increases,) but it's unlikely to lead us any closer to peace" [Haaretz, June 11 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/lvhgg8j>].

But the elements of the BDS movement that have gone wrong as far as I am concerned is a mealy-mouthed approach to the rights of Israeli Jews whom they consider interlopers, and constant "proofs" of the illegitimacy of the Jewish/Zionist presence in what is regarded as pure historic Palestine. This is wrong. For whatever reason, as occurs in history, a population has moved and grown up in another place. The vast majority of Israeli Jews now have their permanent homes in Israel. They were born there or migrated there in one way or other. They are the product of a colonial project (it is strange that Zionists now deny that Zionism was colonial when organisations had names like the Jewish Colonization Society), which became tied in with the simple need to rescue Jews in a terrible hour of need during the 30s and 40s. Of course the problem is that the Palestinian inhabitants suffered a terrible loss as a result and their rights were ignored and their heritage obliterated and replaced by JNF forests.

But despite this trauma on the part of Palestinians, and particularly because the ingrained fear of terror by Israelis, there needs to be a far more open approach to producing a peace that gives Israeli Jews a key thing that is part of the Jewish psychological DNA - a sense of security. This equally applies to Jews outside of Israel. I've seen this scoffed at too many times as an undeserved demand because of what has happened to Palestinians, but it is a real sticking point. It is as important and symbolic for Jews as the acknowledgement of the Palestinian Right of Return. Graciousness to your enemy is sometimes necessary for the sake of peace. The constant belittling of Zionism and obsessive belittling of Israel's achievements only serves to further a gap. At a certain point, you need to stop complaining, sit down with imperfect partners and get the job done. Unfortunately, the dominant stream in the BDS movement does not seem to be composed of people who are either interested in sitting down with or supporting people who would do what is normal: negotiate with vision.

Thus, the same article in Haaretz goes on to say about Mandela: "Above all, Nelson Mandela is a man of empathy. He is able to look at his opponents and see human beings; people with their own histories and myths; their own hurts and their own desire for dignity. Negotiations succeed when concessions are freely made and all parties believe that they have won more than they have lost. Dictates and ultimatums are good for starting wars but not for reaching peace".

I fear that some involved in the BDS movement cannot come to this viewpoint, in the same way as the Israeli right cannot. Yet for the sake of lasting peace, Israel needs to give back territory and property, apologize and negotiate a realistic and meaningful right of return. Israel needs to legislate for a State that privileges no group, complex as inter-communal relations are (see below).

Israel was able to absorb one million Russians immigrants. Allowing even 500,000 Palestinians to return for the sake of peace (assuming they even want to come back) will not break the bank if the Occupation is no longer a millstone around Israel's neck and the international community would I am sure throw money at all concerned. Those Palestinians will also want Israeli Palestinians to be hospitable to them as well—and that will prove to be a hornet's nest. Thus, I doubt that millions of Palestinians will want to go back to a small, crowded, and expensive country, but they should have the right to visit and claim compensation for their losses and destruction or if possible, reclaim property that was seized if it comes onto the market (various justice mechanisms have been outlined for this that do not displace Jews). And much as many Palestinians would not want to, an apology needs to be offered to Israelis for decades of retributive terror.

The problem of “normalization”

The tendency to not want to legitimate any contact with Israelis or foreign Zionists except those who have virtually signed a sort of negative loyalty oath appears to be a disastrous tactic. According to this way of thinking, all Israelis and Diaspora Zionists are responsible for oppression, unless they personally denounce it. This viewpoint is generally unsympathetic to the Jewish historical experience over the past 150 years or so, preferring to take the view that Zionism is a totally manufactured ideology that can be easily separated from an authentic Judaism (hence the trotting out of Neturei Karta). There is very little understanding, if any, of the development of a transnational identity as a modern ethno-cultural phenomenon akin to that of the overseas Chinese to the Motherland. All forms of Zionism are associated with all matter of evil (e.g. the politics of the Haavarah agreement to transfer German Jewish capital to Israel, or Israel's despicable role as an arms trader in central America). This is used as a means of giving what are legitimate Jewish Israeli aspirations no credence. To my mind the denial of the reality of contemporary Jewish presence and connection with Israel is as unreal as saying that diaspora Palestinian identity is inauthentic and a modern invention and that Palestinian nationalism is contemptible because of its association with Nazism (the Grand Mufti during WWII and so on).

I say this as someone who considers himself as post-Zionist, but who believes that the solution requires actually engaging with Israeli Jews and diaspora Jewish supporters of Israel Zionists or not to take responsibility for the crimes committed against Palestinians and change direction, in order that the future of Jews in geographic Israel, in whatever form of state is secure. I can't see any other way out of the problem.

One-statism, two-statism, no statism

Today there is a strong ideological trend towards the “secular democratic” state arrangement, though very little detailed thought, other than denunciations of Zionism appears to have been given to the actual practical side of one-state arrangements. The excuse appears to be that the future is not their responsibility. I actually see such behaviour as completely irresponsible and devoid of any relationship to reality. It has proved hard enough for over 50 years to deal with the relationship between Orthodox Jews of all sorts and secular Israelis. Throw the communal and cultural characteristics of different Arabic-speaking communities into the fold (religion, family, clan, region, wealth), and the difficulties are real and huge. The region has a history of Ottoman communal independence—the millet system—and I suspect that traditional forces will fight tooth and nail for preservation of the status quo, whatever the future arrangements are. This also proves problematic for “rights based” approaches which look not to one or two states, but as I have said the establishment of human rights as an underlying principle is a key to the future.

One would think that from somewhere in the BDS movement there would be the development of a plan for transition that could be used to convince people that there are well-considered options for the future. Other than the “democratic secular state” argument, there does not appear to be much. There is even opposition to the Arab Peace Plan and particularly, some of the positive achievements of the PA, despite its enormous problems and client status. This is essentialism at play, not reality. Contrast this attitude with the wealth of wisdom of the Geneva Accords (2003) that was the result of years of work by NGO representatives from Israel and Palestine, which contain detailed proposals across a whole range of matters. It is not perfect, and contains some proposals that would not pass muster today, but on many details, it makes complete sense. There are also any number of academic articles written by Israelis and Palestinian academics on all aspects of practical peace-making and state-building on the ground. Don’t hold your breath. They really aren’t taken up in BDS agnosticism, which as I have said, is irresponsible.

Abuse of the South African experience

I constantly see reference to the South African experience. But the point of view that is presented is also highly selective: change was as much about bringing along whites (particularly Afrikaners) as engaging in particular strategies for the oppressed population of South Africa (who are seen as similar to Palestinians). Ultimately, the ANC understood that it had to work with white liberals and white capitalists (Afrikaner and English-speaking). It made no sense to exclude them. But mantras about Bishop Tutu and others regarding their opposition to what goes on in Israel are repeated, without much knowledge of the negotiated result they were engaged in.

Yet elements of the BDS movement keep harping on with separatist rhetoric and dreams of self-empowerment that wishes away the “other”. I see this as a fruitless exercise.

BDS as ugly or clever?

BDS protests are meant to bring the issue to the fore, but the problem is that tactics can be naïve. This is where the Max Brenner campaign was way off the mark. It chose a tactic—boycotting shops based on a convoluted political argument—which hit a Jewish nerve. If its promoters had even the slightest sense, they would have sought for a tactic that stayed right clear of the possibility of being interpreted as anti-Semitic. But no, students know best.

Similarly, why choose situations where the right to protest, rather than the actual protest becomes the issue? Likewise, why engage in tactics that involve confrontation with police (I am sure I have seen posts saying that police are local defenders of Zionist interests). This is idiotic and reductionist politics that is not part of statecraft.

The same problem also occurs with the inevitably crude implementation of calls for blanket academic boycotts (Jake Lynch, Stuart Rees and the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at Sydney University as a case in point). The personalities involved have not demonstrated the most sophisticated approach to analysing Israeli politics or for that matter, how Zionist lobbying is carried out in Australia, nor do they see the difficult situation under which Israeli institutions operate (notwithstanding their complicity, like all institutions in the control regime that has been established).

Alternatively, the Jewish left internationally and Palestinian supporters could join forces on a bi-national campaign that has a great moral impact. But this requires compromise (e.g. accepting that resolution 242 is the best starting point rather than talking about tearing up borders as illegitimate because of the Balfour declaration), and hard thinking about campaigns and targets - unambiguous ones as the Occupation that stick to the point, have a high moral and behavioural threshold on the part of proponents and have a high impact. Inevitably, this is going to also be in the realm of international diplomacy and getting foreign ministers and others onside in many countries, as well as getting more and more Jewish leaders with credibility to speak out in support of what well may be particular forms of sanctions. This is very different to what I see as destructive sloganeering at the lowest common denominator.

The right to non-violent protest

This is where I think the BDS movement is not at fault and spin in the Zionist community deliberately confuses the situation. I think that all of us in the AJDS Executive fully support the right to non-violent protest, even by those who we don't agree with. At times of course, we may think that particular tactics are stupid (thus I think that Max Brenner protests or protests during a classical music concert are dumb), but as a general principle, non-violent protest is important. In Israel and the Occupied Territories in particular, non-violent protest by Palestinians is virtually the only way that the conditions under which they live can be opposed, and their protests should be supported, as should the right to protest in Israel. As for settler 'rights' in the occupation, given that they are an extension of the occupation, their rights to impede are certainly of a lesser quality than the victims of the occupation.



This has been a lot of work. So take note of the conditions below!

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/).

You are free:

1. **to Share** — to copy, distribute and transmit this
2. **to Remix** — to adapt the work

Under the following conditions:

1. **Attribution** — You must attribute the work by its URL (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
2. **Noncommercial** — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.