

Justice Must Not Be Selective

Reflection on the BDS call in the Kairos Palestine document

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Words always matter, and names always have a life of their own. But perhaps Palestine and Israel form a context in which words become *positions* more dramatically than in many others. The authors of the "Moment of Truth" document, which is the Christian Palestinians' word to the world about the occupation of Palestine and a call for support in opposing it – have repeatedly been asked about the use of the word "boycott." What exactly does this mean? How far exactly does it go? And what exactly does it call for?

The document calls for a complete system of sanctions of Israel. Not simply a boycott of products generated by settlements or of products in general, or of institutions and organizations that are unabashedly complicit in the occupation, but a total boycott. Our occupation is not selective, and so our opposition must not be.

The injustices perpetrated by the State of Israel affect our economy, our education, our health, and our mobility; they inhibit our most quotidian and our most far-reaching freedoms; they stigmatize our language and confine our travel; they stifle what we do and buy and make. The occupation is not a random onslaught of power, and it isn't conducted on some remote soil: it is a complete matrix of control, a strategic, consistent, deliberate, historically constructed, externally condoned and internally sustained attempt to separate Palestinian and Israel rights and lives in the very place where we make and have always made our home. Boycotting Israel signifies boycotting this entire range of injustice.

The boycott is also the manifestation of our right as Palestinians to decide the terms of our own struggle and our own freedom. This certainly doesn't mean that we don't value the input of our supporters, both from within Israel and from elsewhere. But we as Palestinians ultimately have the right to choose our own methods of resistance. Resistance itself is a right guaranteed by international law, as expressed by Article 1(4) of Protocol 1 (additional to the Geneva Conventions), for "conflicts in which peoples are fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination."¹ Boycott – which is a powerful yet totally nonviolent tactic – is part of our choice.² Indeed, as is stated in "A Moment of Truth," boycott and disinvestment are "not revenge but rather a serious action to reach a just and definitive peace that will put an end to Israeli

¹ International Humanitarian Law, Additional Protocol 1 1977
² stopthewall.org

occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories and will guarantee security and peace for all.”³

This assertion responds to some of the criticisms we receive from people inside Israel and/or who have pro-Israeli beliefs, including some of the criticisms we receive more generally from peace-seeking people. Many want to see a "balanced" solution: they claim that Israelis don't know what's happening inside the Occupied Palestinian Territories and that they're not directly involved in the occupation; thus, they think that Palestinians should "dialogue" with them, not boycott them, in order to explain our reality. Our answer, though, is that the BDS campaign (boycott, divestment, sanctions) is the only way for them to not hear about but also see, experience, and *know* what their government is doing in Palestine. The occupation is a hierarchy, and Israelis are on top. Every single Israeli is benefiting from its very existence, and so we call, too, for every Israeli to decide where he/she stands. This responsibility is both collective and deeply personal.

Regrettably, the leftist movement within Israel remains very weak. This weakness relates to the fact that strong criticism of Israel is often ignored or dismissed within the international community: many people fear Israel itself, or fear the stigma of being labeled anti-Semitic. This environment of fear and hesitation thus undermines the movement inside Israel and its endeavor to end the occupation. If Israeli activists are perceived as traitors, and so their numbers (as well as the numbers of their international supporters) wane, the Israeli government can continue to claim that no one in the world actually backs their efforts – especially for boycott.

That said, there are indeed Israelis who not only oppose the occupation in theory but who are also avowed public supporters of the boycott campaign. Neve Gordon is one such person. A political science professor at Ben Gurion University (and an American-born Jew who moved to Israel and has raised his family here), Mr. Gordon has reached this conclusion:

"The myth of the united Jerusalem has led to the creation of an apartheid city where Palestinians aren't citizens and lack basic services. The Israeli peace camp has gradually dwindled so that today it is almost nonexistent, and Israeli politics are moving more and more to the extreme right. It is therefore clear to me that the only way to counter the apartheid trend in Israel is through massive international pressure. The words and condemnations from the Obama administration and the European Union have yielded no results, not even a settlement freeze, let alone a decision to withdraw from the occupied territories."³

Boycott us, Mr. Gordon urges – "For the sake of our children, I am convinced that an international boycott is the only way to save Israel from itself."⁵ And we must listen. The Israeli occupation must experience the consequences, and the consequences must be visible, tangible, and countable. They must become apparent to the Israeli state and society on every level – cultural, political, economic, and academic – as the international community concretely demonstrates its unwillingness to tolerate the ongoing occupation.

³ Kairos Group, "A Moment of Truth"

³ Gordon, *Los Angeles Times*

⁵ Ibid.

Some voices, mainly in Europe, have criticized the nature of the BDS campaign. Some say that it could easily be associated with the Nazi-era call to “boycott the Jews” and therefore be misconstrued as anti-Semitic: which is, as we mentioned earlier, another example of the anxiety that inhibits efforts to end the occupation. Others express the kind of hesitancy we also saw before the call to boycotting the Apartheid regime in South Africa – a hesitancy that took the stance of “But we don’t want to hurt the blacks.” If we compare the boycott-related reluctance in the South African context to the similar worries that currently affect the Palestinian context, we must see that there will *always* be justifications to do nothing; people will always harbor concerns, both ideological and practical, that inhibit them from real involvement. And as long as these hesitations are allowed to win out over action, oppressors will continue to oppress. It must not be so.

Other voices criticize the scope of the boycott. They say that it isn't strategic or feasible, that it will backfire, that they can't accept it. As we've been explaining here, we believe otherwise, and we maintain a) that a total boycott is both reasoned and necessary, and b) that moral standards put forth by the international community, informing us of what we should and should not do and what we can and cannot say, are precisely what the autonomy and solidarity of the BDS campaign (that is, our autonomy to choose our own ethical and practical terms, and our supporters' solidarity with that independence) attempts to depart from. That being said, we would still like to pose the following question to people who criticize a complete boycott: would they accept a boycott of settlement products, or some other kind of selective boycott? If so, then we hope they will carry it out. In short, we hope our supporters will do whatever they can. We'll continue with our own goals, principles, and practices, and will be glad to work with those who wish to participate.

Another commentary on an additional source of criticism: some churches worldwide have likewise expressed their skepticism about our call for boycott, and have pushed us to adopt a more “positive” attitude. To them, we wish to say that there is nothing “positive” about the way the occupation is constricting us. Nor is there anything positive about the way the Israeli state responds to our dissent (by repressing it), to UN resolutions about refugee rights or illegal settlements or humanitarian crises (by ignoring them), or to the massive and vocal international support for the Goldstone Report (by rejecting it). The lofty goal of “balanced dialogue” is impossible in a place where there is no balance, a place that continues to silence our voices. To consult another model, advocating for “positive engagement” with the South African apartheid regime in order to “convince” it to be more humane in dealing with the oppressed proved to be condescending and ineffective.

Clearly, we receive quite a bit of criticism about the BDS movement, but we rarely receive any suggestions for alternatives – and, indeed, the gravity of the situation in Palestine doesn’t leave room for many of them. If the call for a complete boycott was not “justified” some years back, how can they possibly respond to the overwhelming atrocities committed by Israel in Lebanon in 2006, or in Gaza in 2008/2009? Exactly how epic a catastrophe is necessary in order to “justify” our own measures of resistance? While we discuss the effectiveness of the BDS movement, Israel continues – in concrete and increasingly extreme ways – to keep Gaza in a chokehold, demolish houses and evict families in East Jerusalem, to build illegal settlements and evade any commitment to a freeze. Israel is tilting more and more dangerously to the right, and

turning more and more irrefutably into an apartheid state. To delay opposition, to delay a boycott, is dangerous too.

Even more than the word "boycott," of course, the word "apartheid" garners wrath from Israel's supporters. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter knows this well, as the author of a new book, "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid," which has been widely slammed by prominent pro-Israeli figures in his own country. But Carter stands firm on his use of the term "apartheid": "When Israel does occupy this territory deep within the West Bank, and connects the 200-or-so settlements with each other, with a road, and then prohibits the Palestinians from using that road, or in many cases even crossing the road, this perpetrates even worse instances of apartness, or apartheid, than we witnessed even in South Africa."⁴ Carter is calling a spade a spade, and his words once again call us to boycott as the only way to prevent such apartness from becoming even more profoundly and destructively entrenched. Moreover, the threat – the reality – of this apartness must compel us to carry out a complete boycott, not a selective one. The blockade of Gaza is enacted by the State of Israel; the State *is* the occupation. They are not separate, and they cannot be separated. We must boycott both.

We, too, must call a spade a spade. We must be courageous enough to be honest, both in describing the situation we're subjected to and in calling for its end. In our document "A Moment of Truth," we strove for this kind of candor and clarity, and we continue to do so. Without a complete boycott– economic, academic, cultural, political, athletic, artistic, and so on – Israel's unjust and illegal policies will continue, and so will passivity within both the Israeli and the international community. The bloodshed will continue, too. Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabah once said:

“We love everyone, Israel, those who love Israel as we love ourselves and our freedom. We want freedom for ourselves and for Israel from the evil or sin of occupation. That is the aim of our call for BDS as well as for love, justice and security. It is a question of we being serious or not, we and the Churches. If any one wants to abandon us, we will keep firm in our very clear and right and loving of the other position: if men and Churches abandon us, God will liberate us when He wants. Occupation must come to an end. Enough talks and more serious action. Enough process and more true peace.”

As churches, we must not simply be "strategic": we must be prophetic. We must raise our voices, and the boycott will strengthen our words with deeds.

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