The Pros and Cons of BDS

In 2005, over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations put out a joint call for a boycott, divestment, and sanction of Israeli institutions that support or benefit from the occupation of Palestinian land. Fed up with the lack of progress in finding a political solution and seriously dismayed at the negative impact of the Oslo Peace Process, BDS was born out of frustration.

The BDS campaign has three goals:
- Ending the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantle the Wall,”
- Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
- Respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.”

The BDS campaign aims to boycott, divest and sanction the state of Israel and its institutions that support the status quo occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza siege. They point to BDS as a successful mobilizing tool, as they hold forums at universities and churches to educate new audiences about Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes, of how the security wall cuts off Palestinians from their jobs and family members, and the daily humiliation of checkpoints. The BDS campaign asks universities, labor unions, and churches to pass resolutions and to divest in companies benefitting from businesses operating in Israeli settlements.

BDS argues for a complete boycott of Israel, including academic, cultural, economic and political individuals and institutions that represent in some way the state of Israel. BDS organizers insist that outsiders defer to local Palestinians to set the terms for the BDS movement. While BDS states that others can choose for themselves to only commit to a partial boycott of Israeli settlements rather than all of Israel, outsiders should not criticize Palestinian representatives calling for a full boycott.

Reasons to Support BDS

There are many legitimate reasons to support BDS.

1. Supporters sign on to the campaign because it legitimately has support from grassroots Palestinians, who ask international groups to stand in solidarity with them. A call like this must be answered.
2. Supporters sign on because the situation on the ground is truly dire and immediate action is needed. New Israeli settlements are built on land set aside for a Palestinian state every day. The possibility of a Palestinian state is disappearing, and Palestinian families are losing their land and homes every day.
3. Supporters sign on because BDS is a nonviolent movement that does not use violence to achieve change. Boycotts are far better than the type of violent resistance of suicide bombers or Qassam rockets.
4. Supporters sign on because there is rampant Islamaphobia in the West, and more Westerners need to stand behind Muslim-led nonviolent movements.
5. Supporters sign on because there is no other game in town; there is no alternative movement that can harness public concern about Israeli policies toward Palestinians.

BDS is the only possible method for change for some Palestinians. They don’t believe in nonviolent vigils or protests. They don’t believe in dialogue. They only believe in getting the international community to boycott and divest from Israel.

**Jewish Perspectives on BDS**

A Jewish Israeli organization known as Gush Shalom called for the first boycott against Israeli settlements in 1998, well before the BDS movement. We met many Israelis who practice a boycott of products made in the settlements because most Israelis support a two-state solution, and the settlements are a threat to a viable Palestinian state.

Members of Gush Shalom did not join the BDS movement because they did not agree with the need to end the occupation. Members of Gush Shalom and other groups believe a complete boycott of Israel is anti-semitic, seeking the destruction of the Jewish state and in effect attempting to force the 6.5 million Jews who now live in Israel and the West Bank to leave. They think the BDS movement uses language that is offensive to most Jews, even those who agree on the need to end the occupation. As one member of Gush Shalom notes, “BDS must decide whether it is for peace with Israel, or peace without Israel.”

Boycotts are a form of power. They work by creating pressure for change and aren’t always used to support justice. Israelis point out that Nazis told Germans to boycott Jews. From a Jewish perspective, boycotts against Jews are not something new.

A boycott is a “trauma trigger;” a perceived attack on the survival of Jewish people. People have a right to voice their support or opposition to a wide range of ideas and businesses by buying or not buying. But many if not most Jews view BDS as an attempt to destroy and delegitimize the state of Israel.

Israelis want Palestinians to recognize that Jews have a right to exist in a state called Israel, whatever its borders. From the very beginning, Arab leaders rejected all efforts to establish a Jewish state, regardless of its size. Jews see Palestinian refusal to acknowledge a Jewish state as an existential threat. For Jews that recognize the right of Palestinians to have their own state, there is anger that Palestinian activists won’t do the same for Israelis.

There are thousands of Jewish Israelis that want peace and recognize the need for Palestinian rights. Jewish peace groups like J Street openly oppose occupation and support Palestinian statehood. Influential and large scale Jewish groups like J Street oppose BDS because it does not “recognize the right of the Jewish people to a state or distinguish between opposition to the existence of Israel itself and opposition to the occupation of the territory beyond the Green Line.” J Street also notes the BDS “Movement’s supporters and leaders have trafficked in unacceptable anti-Semitic rhetoric.” The Jewish peace group If Not Now main goal is ending Israeli occupation. But If Not Now does not take a stance at all on BDS because its members cannot agree on it. Americans for Peace Now does not support BDS, but they do oppose the anti-BDS legislation aimed at punishing BDS supporters.
Jewish Voice for Peace is one of the only Jewish peace groups that openly supports BDS. This alone should prompt reflection.

Nonviolent action requires building large coalitions for change. If the largest and most powerful Jewish peace groups opposing Israeli occupation of Palestine oppose BDS, this movement is in serious trouble.

For many if not most Jews, BDS wishes to push out all Jews living in the region. The BDS movement website does not acknowledge any Jewish rights. It avoids talking about a future where Palestinians live with Israelis. By avoiding the topic, BDS looks as if it opposes the state of Israel and all of its 6.5 million Jewish citizens. There is no attempt to assure Jews that Palestinians want to live with Israelis or quell fears of removing Jews. As such, most Israeli citizens we met and Jewish allies in the diaspora see BDS as an effort to undermine the Jewish people and the state of Israel.

So in turn, most Jews oppose BDS as they have other existential threats: with every measure of resistance. Many Palestinians interpret the opposition to BDS as an opposition to Palestinian rights. So confusion on the meaning and goals of BDS is a significant obstacle to the growth of the movement for change.

BDS insists that claims of anti-semitism are completely false propaganda. Without any dialogue to address this serious confusion of goals, it becomes impossible for any coherent change process or inclusive social movement.

The inability for Palestinian and Israeli civil society leaders to develop a strategic nonviolent campaign that harnesses the energy of all of these changemakers – Jewish, Palestinian and international – is a primary reason there is little progress.

If BDS is truly about equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, ending the occupation, taking down the wall, and finding a solution for refugees, then all those things can happen without undermining the state of Israel, or threatening Jews. BDS leaders do not seem to see that a more inclusive movement is possible, one that assures Jewish Israelis of the desire to end occupation in order to achieve peaceful coexistence in either a one binational state or two-state solution.

Palestinians insist more pressure is needed, and BDS will eventually work. As someone who studies nonviolent strategy and boycotts, in particular, I have almost no hope that BDS will work because of the lack of attention to building a movement that also has wide Jewish support.

Most internationals that support BDS are not strongly anti-semitic and haven’t spent time reading Jewish opposition to the movement. Many people don’t read the BDS fine print which holds statements that appear anti-semitic to most Jews. (Unconscious bias against Jews does exist, for antisemitism has deep roots in Christianity and Islam, and many have not done the deliberate work needed to root out antisemitic frameworks from their theology. See my last article on anti-semitism and Israel).
Without taking the time to listen to all sides, they see the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as a simple case of white Europeans taking Indigenous land without actually studying the issue and different narratives.

**Problems with BDS**

There are many problems with BDS. BDS organizers seem unable to acknowledge that antisemitism is still a real issue in many parts of the world. And BDS organizers do not take into account that real anti-semites may be enthusiastic to punish Jews.

- BDS dismisses charges of anti-semitism without sifting through the valid or invalid points. It dismisses past persecution of Jews – particularly through boycotts – as irrelevant. It is ahistorical, assuming that Jewish trauma in the past should have no relevance on how Palestinians seek to address their own past trauma of the Nakba or current trauma of the siege on Gaza or occupation of the West Bank. BDS does not look at legitimate concerns about BDS by progressive, anti-occupation Jewish people. It seems not to care that it is a tactic that is easy to dismiss as anti-semitic because of this history, or that the BDS movement language and the tactic of seeking to punish and undermine the state of Israel seems to be contributing to a rightward shift in the Israeli public as Jews across the political spectrum unite against what they see as an existential threat.

- There is no logical path for how BDS translates to different Israeli policies within an elected government. BDS appears to believe that the Israeli public and government will somehow change their mind about current policies because of international support for BDS. But there is no theory of change that relates to who is elected in Israel, and the debates within Israel on its policies in the West Bank and Gaza. BDS organizers do not appear to understand that nonviolent movements need to build a wide coalition, including a much larger segment of the Israeli population who oppose the occupation. They don’t seem willing to address progressive Jewish and Israeli groups on language and demands related to the boycott.

- BDS focuses on punishment and uses highly inflammatory language that makes it difficult for many people and groups to join. Terms like “settler colonialism” communicate that BDS advocates see no legitimate history or connection between Jews and the land. **Supporters of BDS often refer to the whole of Israel as “a colonial project carried out by a racist and violent settler society at the expense of an indigenous population.”** By comparing Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Europe, Arab countries and the larger world to the white colonization of North America, which was largely driven by economic desires, BDS erases history and invalidates key aspects of Judaism that have advocated a return to “Zion” for thousands of years. **BDS does not distinguish between potential progressive Israeli allies and right-wing groups spewing racism.** The BDS website makes wide generalizations about Israelis that undermine the ability for more people to sign onto the movement.

- BDS ignores any Palestinian responsibility. The BDS organizers appear to believe that only Israeli policies are an obstacle to justice for Palestinians. No mention is made of the corruption and bad decisions or politics within Gaza or the West Bank.
• BDS cuts off any other routes for social change by punishing anyone who engages in dialogue. *(see my article on Anti-Normalization)*

• BDS ignores the legitimate causes of other justice movements. At an LGBTQ conference, for example, Israeli gay and lesbian women were asked to leave. BDS advocates think Israeli LGBTQ advocates are simply covering up Israeli policies with a face of gender justice. In the same way, BDS advocates accuse Israeli environmentalists of simply being a “greenwashing” even though many Israeli environmentalists speak out on behalf of Palestinian rights. BDS accuses Palestinian women’s movements that engage with Israelis as traitors, ignoring the sexist and patriarchal dynamics at play within male-led Palestinian movements. To label every other type of justice movement as invalid is a serious attack against intersectionality; the interconnectedness between different types of struggle.

• BDS is based on a theory of change that punishment and isolation are effective. BDS and counterterrorism share the same theory of change. Counterterrorism strategies in the war on terror seek to isolate and punish various non-state groups that use terror around the world. Counterterrorism laws (like the anti-normalization movement) make it illegal for peacebuilders to have contact with those listed as terrorist groups. So, for example, in Gaza, US laws prohibit any contact with Hamas. Counterterrorism also engages in collective punishment. The peacebuilding field renounces these theories of change. Change happens through engagement and relationships, not isolation. BDS demands that preach isolation and punishment of all Israelis are likely to be just as ineffective and backward as counterterrorism. What has been the result of counterterrorism? There are more terrorist groups today thanks to counterterrorism strategies of bombs and drones serving as a recruitment tool. Counterterrorism has serious strategic flaws. The opposite of counterterrorism is engagement, not isolation.

Conclusion
As a nonviolent activist, I believe strongly in the use of nonviolent tactics and strategies. I also believe extensive analysis should be done to choose which tactic will be used in each specific situation. There is a significant difference between using nonviolent tactics because they are justified and using nonviolent tactics as part of a larger strategy that aims to end the occupation. Tactics may be just, but that does not mean they will be effective. There are compelling reasons why BDS is just. Because of the strong support for BDS in Palestinian civil society, the movement must be taken seriously, and outsiders should respond. But outsiders support for Palestinian rights does not require an automatic “yes” without a discussion of the points above.

BDS will only be effective as part of a larger strategy to end the occupation that includes dialogue, joint projects and problem-solving, and other creative efforts for a just peace. Building a successful nonviolent movement requires careful listening and coalition building to build an inclusive and diverse movement capable of bringing successful change.

Building stronger relationships with Israelis and American Jews is necessary for that strategy. It is necessary so that BDS does not simply contribute to the rightward drift of the Israeli public. BDS requires monitoring and evaluation. Is it capable of building substantial Jewish support from those who support Palestinian rights but not at the cost of Jewish rights? Is BDS pressure
having any impact on changing Israeli policies? Is it actually creating momentum toward specific agreements or toward collapsing the Netanyahu and far-right coalitions?