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Palestine solidarity

What's behind the rise of BDS?

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In its nine-year existence, the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement has boldly redefined the battle for Palestine in the simple, straightforward terms of human rights. More than any other tactic of the Palestinian liberation movement, the BDS campaign has succeeded in creating a global outpouring of support for Palestinian rights and placed Israel's violations of them under international scrutiny like never before.

In the United States, the issue of Palestinian rights has gone from the margins of the Left and Arab and Muslim communities into mainstream discourse and debate. From the corporate media to academic institutions, the discussion of Israel-Palestine has veered away from obscure territorial claims and competing historical narratives, however important those may be, to focus on the three simple demands of the BDS movement. Israel must do the following:

End its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantle the Wall;
Recognize the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
Respect, protect, and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties, as stipulated in UN resolution 194. [1]

The 2005 BDS call that emerged from 170 Palestinian civil society groups—including all political parties, unions, refugee networks, NGOs, and organizations representing Palestinians living under occupation, in Israel, and in exile—took its inspiration from the successful South African anti-apartheid movement. Initiators were encouraged by the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance that was organized by Unesco in Durban, South Africa, at which a draft statement opposed “movements based on racism and discriminatory ideas, in particular the Zionist movement, which is based on racial superiority.” [2] In 2003, Palestinian academics started by calling for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions and a year later they launched the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel in Ramallah calling upon Palestinian academics and intellectuals to join the growing international boycott movement. [3] Out of this, a national committee was established that brought together Palestinian civil society groups who agreed to the above three demands, and they launched the BDS movement.

The internationalism that undergirds BDS is a departure from the thinking that dominated Palestinian political leadership circles for decades, which perceived the liberation of Palestine as coming through the mobilization of Palestinians alone. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) formed in 1964 and was influenced by the successful anticolonial struggles of that era, especially the guerrilla movement that kicked the French out of Algeria in its war for independence. Though PLO membership was mostly drawn from the impoverished sections of Palestinian society, its leadership was almost entirely comprised of wealthy businessmen and others from the ranks of the Palestinian elite. PLO leaders tried to graft a guerrilla warfare strategy that they'd seen work in Algeria on a population that was much smaller and dispersed throughout the Middle East and beyond. The financing for this armed strategy came from Arab rulers whom wealthy PLO leaders saw as their natural allies, including King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Jordan's King Hussein, and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak.

In exchange for arms and money, the PLO under the leadership of Yasser Arafat agreed to a noninterference policy in the domestic affairs of Arab states. As Philip Marfleet and Tom Hickey explain in the British journal *International Socialism*, “They acted in effect as a bourgeoisie without a state, confining their ‘own’ population to a strictly nationalist agenda. This was congenial to the kings, emirs and presidents of the region, who used formal backing for the PLO as part of a chorus of rhetorical opposition to Israel, the better to maintain their own privilege.” [4]

This approach was politically and economically disastrous. Not only were Palestinians easily defeated militarily within

Israel, but the vast numbers of Palestinians working in Arab states were abandoned by the PLO to the low wages and absence of rights that constituted working conditions in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and elsewhere.

The first intifada in 1987 and the second one starting in 2000 were inspiring uprisings of resistance on the part of Palestinians in response to the rapid growth of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza following Israel's occupation of those territories in 1967. Arab workers in the region initiated work stoppages and other acts of solidarity with the first intifada, but were actively opposed by Arafat and the PLO leadership. When textile workers at Egypt's Mahalla al-Kubra factory launched strikes and other actions that spread to Cairo and Alexandria, they were threatened with violence by Interior Minister Zaki Badr: "I will sever any foot that attempts to march in demonstrations," he warned. [5] Instead of embracing workers' solidarity, Arafat and the PLO leadership discouraged these actions and joined Arab rulers in Algiers at a summit that committed \$330 million to the PLO. [6] The PLO's further collusion with Arab leaders and ultimately the governments of Israel and the United States in the 1993 Oslo Accords has only led to the spread of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, the establishment of the apartheid wall, and even worse conditions of life for Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

A new Palestinian generation raised on the legacy of this failed strategy has taken over the reins. This article examines three of the key developments that have fueled the rise of BDS in the United States. Though by no means an exhaustive list, these three causes have been essential to the ideological and organizational shifts that have taken place in a relatively short time.

The success of BDS in the United States is largely due to:

Unprecedented exposure of Israel's brutal treatment of Palestinians, especially of Operation Cast Lead in the winter of 2008–09 and the 2010 massacre of nine unarmed civilians aboard a humanitarian aid vessel in international waters, the Mavi Marmara.

The leadership of what may be called Generation Palestine [7], mostly young Arab-Americans and Muslims, but also many young Jews and others, who came of age in the atmosphere of heightened Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism in the post-9/11 United States.

The application of methods used in the successful South African anti-apartheid movement that spread to US campuses and reached a crescendo in the 1980s.

Arguably, each of these developments discussed below is a result of and leads to many more, but these appear to be three key catalysts in the rising US BDS movement.

Israel against itself

Leading figures of Israel along with international defenders of Zionism claim the BDS movement is "delegitimizing" Israel, that is threatening Israel's authority and prestige. Global polls warrant their concern: Israel's daily Ha'aretz reported in May 2013 that of the more than 26,000 people surveyed by the BBC in twenty-five countries around the world, only 21 percent of participants had a positive view of Israel, while 52 percent viewed the country unfavorably. [8]

But a more accurate explanation of the dramatic shift in international public opinion against the self-proclaimed "Jewish state" is that Israel's own horrific acts are helping to create a growing movement that shines a light on Israel's inhumane treatment of Palestinians, and more and more people are repelled by what they see. Israel's delegitimization is, in fact, self-inflicted; the BDS movement merely acts to display, amplify, and oppose Israel's crimes.

Let us be clear: Israel's human rights violations are not new. Israel is and always has been a colonial occupier of Palestinian land, and its birth pangs include the ethnic cleansing of more than 750,000 Palestinians in 1948. Karl Marx's picturesque description of capitalism's roots seems to apply equally well of Israel's, which also came into the world "dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt." [9] Many previous articles in this journal have detailed this history and taken up the myths of Zionism and Israel's ongoing crimes against Palestinians. But this history and the ongoing repression of Palestinians living in both the Occupied Territories and inside Israel were publicly denied and ignored until recent years, especially in the United States. Today, the denial by Israel's defenders persists, but the inhumane treatment of Palestinians can no longer be ignored.

A key turning point in consciousness about Israel-Palestine that helped shift BDS into higher gear was Operation Cast Lead. For three weeks in the winter of 2008–09, Israel used one of the most deadly military arsenals in the world on Gaza, leaving 1,400 or more Palestinians dead (thirteen Israelis died, nine of them soldiers), and the surviving population of 1.5 million was left trapped behind walls of concrete and high-tech surveillance equipment. The Gaza massacre, code-named Operation Cast Lead, was followed by the reimposition of Israel's cruel war of immiseration that prevents the free flow of goods, services, and human beings in and out of Gaza—a siege that remains in place to this day.

Launched midday when Gaza's children were leaving school, a police academy graduation ceremony was getting under way, and streets were filled with shoppers, Israel's attack was calculated to do maximum damage to humans and infrastructure. On just the first day, Israel killed more than 200 Palestinians and left 700 injured; after that, Israeli forces destroyed water- and sewage-treatment systems, bombed al Quds hospital, blew up stockpiles of UN food and supplies, and universities, schools, and mosques were wiped off the map in densely packed Gaza City.

Even then, vulgar apologists for Israel were aghast at the potential ideological cost of the massacre. A senior correspondent for Israel's newspaper of record, Ha'aretz, Ari Shavit, complained the scale of the attack was "destroying [Israel's] soul and its image. Destroying it on world television screens, in the living rooms of the international community and most importantly, in Obama's America." Shavit noted that Israel's shelling of a UN facility on the same day the UN secretary was visiting Jerusalem was "beyond lunacy." [10] He had a good point.

Over the years, Israel has launched innumerable military assaults on the Palestinian people. Overwhelming, no-holds-barred violence marks many of these assaults, like the Battle of Jenin in 2002, when 150 Israeli tanks, plus armored personnel carriers and artillery, backed by F-16 fighter jets, laid siege to a refugee camp of less than a square mile that is home to 15,000 people. [11] But with the spread of social media like Facebook and Twitter in the hands of the budding movement, the 2008–09 war on Gaza drew alarm from Americans who'd not previously been particularly sympathetic or even aware of the conditions in Gaza. Across the United States, thousands took to the streets in protest and attended educational events held by small BDS community groups and the growing number of campus chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). [12] Activists posted and tweeted images of the deadly attacks, and people were shocked to see pictures of Israeli settlers relaxing over food and wine in beach chairs on a hilltop overlooking Gaza, cheering the bombings and sniper hits as if enjoying an afternoon at a soccer match or a concert.

In the United States, saturated with pro-Israel messages, it is important to note that in the immediate wake of the siege, only 44 percent of Americans supported the assault, versus 41 percent who opposed it, according to Rasmussen. [13] Ordinary Democrats—unlike their party's leadership—were appalled; only 31 percent could muster any enthusiasm for the assault.

The next major turning point came over the Memorial Day Weekend of 2010. The lead ship of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, the Mavi Marmara, was attempting to break the siege and bring humanitarian aid to Gazans suffering without medicine and sufficient food, but instead was militarily attacked in the middle of the night in international waters.

Kevin Ovenden, one of the flotilla organizers aboard the Mavi Marmara, described Israel's horrifying commando-style attack by air and sea that murdered nine unarmed civilians: "A new phase of struggle is born, but at a terrible, almost unbearable price: Nine of our brothers taken from us, scores more wounded by gunshots, their blood now lapping on the shores of Gaza." [14]

Palestine solidarity activists swung into action and organized protests, speakouts, and educational events with those who'd been aboard the ship describing the horror of suddenly being the target of unprovoked gunfire, exposing Israel's justifications for what they were: lies. Journalist Glenn Greenwald added his voice to the movement and spoke before packed crowds at universities. Within a few months, Frank Gehry, considered the world's most influential architect, joined the boycott of Israeli settlement goods after refusing to design Jerusalem's Museum of Tolerance, planned for construction on top of a Muslim cemetery. Along with pianist and conductor Daniel Barenboim, Gehry added his name to the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) statement of 200 Jewish artists and cultural workers supporting the boycott of Israeli settlement goods. [15]

While US polls continue to show clear majorities in favor of Israel over Palestine—hardly surprising given the inundation of pro-Israel propaganda in the US media despite recent cracks—nobody, from veteran Palestine solidarity activists to Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, denies the growing sympathy with Palestinians and suspicion of Israel's human rights violations. At the 2014 conference of the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), unquestionably the most influential pro-Israel group in the United States, speakers from Secretary of State John Kerry to Netanyahu felt the urgency to deride BDS. In his keynote address to AIPAC, Netanyahu mentioned BDS no fewer than eighteen times. To rousing cheers, Netanyahu called on Zionists to "fight back" against boycott advocates, "to delegitimize the delegitimizers." [16] Many BDS activists rightly took this to be a form of distorted respect from an enemy that previously ignored the movement's existence. Now that Israel is becoming a global pariah, the BDS movement is garnering greater attention from all sides.

Generation Palestine takes the reins

How Does it Feel to be a Problem? asked Brooklyn College professor Moustafa Bayoumi in the title of his 2009 book of interviews with Arab-American youth growing up in post-9/11 Brooklyn. The book explores a central life experience in this country for many Arab and Muslim Americans who've come to know the feelings of being targeted and suspected of terrorism for no other reason than their appearance or ethnic-religious background. For many, the US government's dragnet and society's stigma have had the desired silencing effect. But for a rising minority of Arabs and Muslims who've taken the reins of the BDS movement in the United States, defiance of Israel's human rights violations—and institutions collaborating with them—has become the civil rights struggle of their generation. Call it, if you will, Generation Palestine.

If the liberation of the oppressed is inconceivable without their self-activity, as Marxists have always claimed, this development is a crucial one. The movement itself, of course, was initiated by Palestinians living under occupation and in the diaspora, and the growing participation and leadership of Arab and Muslim Americans in the movement is undeniable to even the casual observer.

Remi Kenazi, the popular and talented Palestinian-American poet, moved to New York City just four months before 9/11. Growing up in mostly white Western Massachusetts had conditioned Remi to certain racist experiences, but he recounts in a Jadaliyya podcast interview that the nasty atmosphere against Arabs and Muslims right after the attacks helped propel him toward his poetry writing and spoken word performance career. [17] As a member of Adalah-NY, the BDS group, and the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI), Remi creatively expresses the outrage, hopes, and political vision of a radicalizing generation. In addition to live shows, he's become a BDS cultural hero in his videos "Normalize This" and his latest sendup of campus Zionists, "This

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Divestment Bill Hurts My Feelings,” a collaborative effort with Suhel Nafar, director, animator, and co-founder of the massively popular Palestinian hip hop group DAM whose music has become the soundtrack of the movement.

In email responses to my question about what inspired some leading Arab and Muslim BDS student activists, certain themes reappear in their accounts of their own politicization. They include early Iraq War images that stoked humiliation at the debased treatment of people in the Arab World, like photos of torture in the Abu Ghraib prison, but also terrifying snapshots of their childhood contemporaries in Palestine suffering at the hands of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). In 2000, the widely broadcast one-minute film footage of twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Durrah shows a cowering young boy crouched against a wall by his father's side as IDF soldiers shoot all around them until the camera captures the murder of small Muhammad and the heart-wrenching grief of his father, unable to shield him from harm. Many university student activists today would have been about Muhammad's age when he was killed. Added to those images from abroad are the daily racist indignities experienced here in the States, yet another source of both shame and defiance.

The embryonic BDS movement created a magnet for some of them, and a means to express their rage and mobilize their peers into action. One young Yemeni Boston student, Sofia Arias, writes, “But it was Operation Cast Lead in 2008–09, and my rejection of the two state solution, that pushed me to organize around BDS at my university, and the urgency of an international movement in solidarity that got activated out of that. And after that, in the US, you could feel things shift, and you could see the cracks in Israel's pristine image begin to show.” [\[18\]](#)

Tareq Radi, a Palestinian-American student at George Mason University, explains his motivation for getting involved in organized political activity this way:

Before I began organizing, I used to be a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu competitor, which required me to travel and frequent other training facilities. In December of 2012, I was invited to a gym that had an Israeli flag overlooking the area where I would be training. I respectfully declined the invitation and explained that 42 members of my family were massacred in the name of that flag. To my surprise the owner of the gym, who was Jewish, offered to take it down. Later that evening I received a complaint from my coach, a person I considered as a brother. He demanded that I keep politics separate from my athletic career. It was at this point that I realized wearing a Palestinian flag on my uniform wasn't enough. I needed to contribute to the liberation of my people to the fullest of my abilities. I want to create a space, not just for Palestinians, for all oppressed populations to thrive without sacrificing their identities. [\[19\]](#)

Similarly, Palestinian-American Wael Elasadly at Portland State began to see the battle for Palestine as much closer to home through the complicity of American institutions. He asked himself: “Why are universities bringing war criminals to give speeches? Why do they continue to normalize a racist apartheid state by setting up study abroad programs in Israel? Why are student tuition dollars invested in companies profiting off human rights violations of the Palestinian people? Why are our university presidents condemning professors who teach the truth about Palestine?” [\[20\]](#)

The 2011 SJP conference held at Columbia University during the height of Occupy Wall Street in October drew several hundred students, a majority of them Arab and Muslim. In addition to strategic discussions about launching campus-based boycott campaigns, students debated the Arab revolutions, the role of US imperialism, and the history of Israel-Palestine. The Sunday morning after hundreds of SJPers had joined nearly 100,000 New Yorkers at an impromptu Occupy gathering in Times Square, classrooms were full with students eager to continue the discussions. As a speaker that morning on the myths of Zionism, I'd expected that most students would either sleep in after a heady night of activism out on the town or head back to their own campuses early. Instead, the room was packed, standing-room-only, and many grilled me on an impressive range of issues well past the end of the session. Dozens left the room with a newly purchased copy of Omar Barghouti's book, *BDS: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*, without a doubt, the primer of the movement.

BDS student activists' political evolution was even more apparent at the Russell Tribunal on Palestine in 2012, an international people's tribunal that came to New York City to place the United Nations and US government on trial for its complicity with Israel's internationally recognized human rights violations. [21] For a frenzied six weeks, dozens of mostly Arab and Muslim students throughout the city volunteered to help organize and promote the event, which featured, among others, Black Power leader Angela Davis, author Alice Walker, and Pink Floyd's Roger Waters as judges. These student activists, who'd been organizing BDS on their campuses, worked tirelessly to build a hugely successful tribunal that drew more than a thousand people each day to watch and listen to the proceedings at Cooper Union's storied Great Hall, the venue where Frederick Douglass read out the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

Also noteworthy is the shift taking place among American Jews, especially those under thirty, some of whom are joining and playing leading roles in the BDS struggle. In a well-publicized New York Review of Books article, [22] Peter Beinart wrote, "For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism's door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead." And there is Time magazine's piece on "Why Fewer Young American Jews Share Their Parents' View of Israel," which cites these stats:

A 2007 poll by Steven Cohen of Hebrew Union College and Ari Kelman of the University of California at Davis found that although the majority of American Jews of all ages continue to identify as "pro-Israel," those under 35 are less likely to identify as "Zionist." Over 40% of American Jews under 35 believe that "Israel occupies land belonging to someone else," and over 30% report sometimes feeling "ashamed" of Israel's actions. [23]

Those who have been speaking on college campuses about Israel-Palestine for years perceive a striking shift. In the nineties and earlier, the announcement of a public forum even mildly critical of Israel garnered death threats from the Jewish Defense League or similar groups, universities often required metal detectors and guards at our talks, and we were frequently disrupted by large numbers of confident Zionist students. In one memorable episode at NYU, the campus Zionists marched in flying an Israeli flag and singing Israel's national anthem, Hatikva, as this author rose to speak. At Harvard during the Gulf War of 1991, students stood and threateningly jeered that I was an "anti-Semite" for criticizing Israel and only backed down when the iconic historian Howard Zinn stood and announced that we were both Jews who refuse to be silenced by a mob. Large groups of swaggering Zionists attempting to intimidate isolated handfuls of Palestine solidarity activists are far less frequent nowadays, though their turn to administrative bullying and legal sanctions is a mark of both their grass-roots weakness and the institutional ties Zionists are strengthening to fight a war on campus BDS, detailed in Ali Abunimah's new book, *The Battle for Justice in Palestine*.

In 2013, the efforts of groups like USACBI brought the question of Palestinian human rights smack into the center of academia. In just a few months, three North American academic organizations voted to boycott Israeli universities: the Association of Asian American Studies was first, passing a resolution last spring, then the American Studies Association, and soon after the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association. SJP chapters swung into action to defend their professors from the predictable wave of attacks. But the controversy, now reaching the halls of state legislatures, brought the BDS movement even deeper into the mainstream media—the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, and the New York Times all carried op-ed pieces in support of the boycott of Israeli universities. It was unprecedented.

The first cracks in the campus bastions of pro-Israel organizing deepened in the winter of 2013–14 as "Open Hillels" formed at Swarthmore and Vassar declaring their intention to work with BDS and other pro-Palestine groups, in open defiance of the Hillels' mission. Today, the role of JVP in promoting and organizing BDS campaigns against pension giant TIAA-CREF, home carbonation device manufacturer SodaStream, and others has been invaluable. Though as a group JVP focuses only on companies operating in the territories occupied since 1967—not the whole of Israel, as the BDS call targets—JVP has opened itself up to debates about the broader boycott and the question of whether a Jewish state can be defended at all. Many of its members are anti-Zionists, others are more equivocal on that

question and just oppose the 1967 occupation. Yet in a movement where charges of “anti-Semitism” are hurled at any criticisms of Israel, having a prominent Jewish organization that connects well over 100,000 Jewish-identified activists is an undeniable advantage in challenging these spurious claims.

Smaller initiatives such as the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) have joined with American Muslims for Palestine to organize events such as a “Never Again for Anyone” speaking tour with Holocaust survivors speaking alongside Palestinian victims of dispossession advocating BDS. IJAN has spawned Facebook groups like Jews for the Palestinian Right of Return that put out statements signed by thousands to help amplify the voices of Jews who reject the logic of an ethnically cleansed Jewish state and instead advocate democratic rights for all Palestinians and Jews in one secular state.

Though BDS activists' early attempts to win university resolutions to divest from companies profiting from Israel's occupation and apartheid policies were often met with setbacks, the movement has grown more sophisticated. The April 2013 University of California–Berkeley divestment debate and vote expressed the profound distance Generation Palestine has come. For an unprecedented ten hours, speaker after speaker, students of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, rose and made eloquent cases for divestment, and the resolution passed. The confidence with which students advocated divestment showed that the BDS movement was transforming campus political culture in many places. BDS activists are beginning to make the question of Palestinian human rights as central to this generation as the issue of the Spanish Civil War was in the thirties or the South African anti-apartheid struggle was in the eighties.

In response to the campus BDS movement's meteoric rise, Zionists have launched a well-funded and multi-pronged attack. The Israel Action Network began in 2010 with a \$6 million budget with tentacles in more than 400 communities to “serve as a rapid response team charged with countering the growing campaign.” [24] Campus groups have looked to the newly formed Palestine Solidarity Legal Support for help in countering institutional attempts to shut down, silence, and even legally prosecute SJP activists for their Palestine advocacy. The counterattacks from Zionists are raising larger questions among activists about the need for more formal decision-making structures in the national movement, centralization, and political questions about how to best challenge these attempts to discredit their actions. National days of action are now on the agenda for many.

As in other movements, BDS activists are influenced by the wider currents in the US Left, though the active collaboration with Israel's government by leading Democrats, including President Obama, creates a robust debate about how and whether to get involved in electoral politics. Most activists are extremely critical of the Democrats, though few have formally concluded that independence from them is key.

“Palestine's South Africa moment”

It is no coincidence that many of the BDS movement's founders and leaders came of age during the victorious final years of the South African anti-apartheid movement. Omar Barghouti, a founding member of BDS and author of *BDS: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*, was an international student at Columbia University in the eighties, the site of one of the most tumultuous campus occupations in the US divestment battle. That generation cut its political teeth in the solidarity movement's final decade, witnessing the victory of Black South African workers against apartheid. Barghouti often refers to the meteoric rise of BDS as “Palestine's South Africa moment.” The analogy with South Africa is not rhetorical; it is a conscious acknowledgement of the historical and political links between the two apartheid systems and a reference to the methods being employed to bring down the world's last apartheid state.

The word “apartheid” is Afrikaans for “apartness” or “separate.” In 1948—the same year Israel was established as a state—the apartheid became the official policy of the white South African government, referring to the laws, policies,

and practices established by that government to maintain the supremacy of the white minority over the non-white majority. In 1973, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid, [25] defining apartheid as a crime against humanity, not specific to South Africa. The crime of apartheid is defined by “inhuman acts” committed with the purpose of imposing racial segregation and discrimination on a targeted group, and establishing domination of one group over another. The Convention specifically prohibits acts “designed to divide the population . . . by the creation of separate reserves and ghettos for the members of a racial group or groups, the prohibition of mixed marriages . . . the expropriation of landed property.” The Convention also prohibits measures that deprive people and organizations of their basic human rights, including the right to work and education, the right to leave and to return to their country, the right to a nationality, the right to freedom of movement and residence.

This describes Israel's political and legal character perfectly. All of these rights are denied Palestinians. Americans know of this kind of formal racial segregation—it was the legal policy of the American South from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s, known as Jim Crow. Though one will never see signs in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem that read: “Jews only” or “Palestinians only,” make no mistake about it: Israel is a Jim Crow state. Israel is an apartheid state, though the workings of the two states' apartheid systems are different in many regards. As Israeli-born socialist Moshé Machover has put it, they are of the same genus but different species. In South Africa, apartheid operated to repress, control, and hyperexploit the indigenous Black population, whereas in Israel apartheid is used to cleanse the nation of its native population.

There is another crucial difference. In South Africa where the overwhelming majority of the population under apartheid was made up of Black workers, their power was capable of landing the deathblow to apartheid. The same cannot be said of Palestine, where the population is not only small but also increasingly disenfranchised. In the case of Palestine, international solidarity from the BDS movement today, and, ultimately, labor actions by workers of the region and beyond, will be decisive in winning Palestinian struggles. Nonetheless, the apartheid analogy applies.

Racial discrimination against the Palestinian people was formalized and institutionalized through the creation by law of a “Jewish nationality,” which is distinct from Israeli citizenship. No “Israeli” nationality exists in Israel, and their Supreme Court has persistently refused to recognize one as it would end the system of Jewish supremacy in Israel. The 1950 Law of Return entitles all Jews—and only Jews—to the rights of nationals, namely the right to enter “Eretz Yisrael” (Israel and the Occupied Territories) and immediately enjoy full legal and political rights. “Jewish nationality” under the Law of Return is extraterritorial in contravention of international public law norms pertaining to nationality. It includes Jewish citizens of other countries, irrespective of whether they wish to be part of the collective of “Jewish nationals,” and excludes “non-Jews” (i.e., Palestinians) from nationality rights in Israel. Under Israeli law the status of Jewish nationality is accompanied with first-class rights and benefits, which are not granted to Palestinian citizens.

The South African anti-apartheid movement was formally launched in Britain in 1959 as a boycott movement. By the early sixties, the United Nations imposed a partial arms ban; in 1964, South Africa was suspended from participating in the Olympics and banned outright in 1970; the divestment and sanctions movement, however, didn't take off internationally for many years. In 1994, the formal apartheid system was thoroughly dismantled and Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress came to power. Throughout South Africa's apartheid years, Israeli leaders from Golda Meir in the 1940s through Yitzhak Rabin in 1994 were willing to look past the anti-Semitism of South Africa's rulers—some with Nazi pasts—to do secretive arms and trade deals as well as police training with the apartheid state. [26]

The BDS movement unabashedly has taken a page from the successful playbook of the South African anti-apartheid movement. Like Israeli Jews today, the vast majority of South Africa's white population opposed a democratic state and clung to their domination over the Black population until the bitter end. But the domestic resistance of Black South Africans combined with the pressure from the international anti-apartheid movement led to a total loss of

legitimacy of the apartheid regime. Like today, some argued that the boycott would harm the very people the movement aimed to help. Yet then as now, the indigenous population was both the initiator and defender of the call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions. Today, some of the same figures who led the South African movement are speaking out against Israel's apartheid and advocating BDS.

"The same issues of inequality and injustice today motivate the divestment movement trying to end Israel's decades-long occupation of Palestinian territory and the unfair and prejudicial treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government ruling over them," . [27] argues South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu. South African anti-apartheid activists Suraya Dado and Muhammed Desai insist a debt of gratitude is owed: "It is our duty as South Africans to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people [28]

The fake shanty towns that college students set up on their campuses to portray the segregation and misery of life in South Africa's Black slums has an echo in the mock checkpoints BDS activists set up to dramatize daily conditions for Palestinians trying to travel from home to work. The days-long teach-ins of the South African anti-apartheid movement have their match in the annual Israeli Apartheid Week, which celebrated its tenth year this winter. The phony apartheid passbooks identifying people by their race that students made in the eighties have their counterpart in the faux eviction notices passed under dormroom doors to educate students about what the IDF does before violently driving Palestinians from their homes. The examples are growing as an older generation shares its experiences with their young peers in the movement, and workshops on lessons from the South African anti-apartheid movement have become de rigueur at BDS conferences.

What is so striking about the BDS movement today is the rapidity with which it has made advances in just nine years. Not only is Israel becoming a pariah state in the eyes of growing numbers of people, but the financial losses are taking a greater toll sooner than activists had dared hope. Israel's Maariv newspaper reports that at least \$30 million have been lost so far due to BDS, mostly in the agricultural sector. . [29] Top officials in Israel today call BDS Israel's "greatest threat [30]

However, no state, and surely not this closest of US allies, would accept these blows without striking back. Abunimah, Blumenthal, and others have detailed the official and clandestine means by which Israel is trying to "delegitimize the delegitimizers." From multimillion-dollar campaigns that "sabotage and attack" activists to propaganda attempts at promoting Israel's limited LGBT rights ("pinkwashing"), Israel's hasbara (propaganda) efforts are sleek, well-financed, and supported by figures throughout the US establishment. Legislators in New York, Florida, Illinois, and Pennsylvania have put forward bills that attempt to squash criticism of Israel on US campuses in the wake of the recent boycott resolutions. President Obama made sure to join the chorus against BDS at this year's AIPAC conference.

Achieving the ultimate goals of the movement—ending the occupation and apartheid policies as well as allowing the right of return—remains far in the future and cannot be won by BDS alone. Though BDS is a magnificent tactic for winning sympathy and drawing activists into solidarity with Palestinians, even landing financial and ideological blows against Israel, it is ultimately a struggle for reforms within capitalism—an exploitative system that is part of an imperial order.

Socialists must support this rising movement, though not all do. At the very heart of socialist ideals lies international solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed, which BDS surely is. Yet some socialists argue that the movement is either not radical enough in its adherence to a human rights framework or must be opposed because it could hurt Palestinian and Israeli Jewish workers.

First and foremost, as a movement launched and led by Palestinians across the political spectrum—extraordinary in and of itself given the historic splits—BDS is an expression of the self-determination of the Palestinians. Its human

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rights-based framework uses international law to expose the hypocrisy of nations like the United States that claim adherence to such high-minded principles, yet defy them in their collusion with apartheid Israel.

Yet the reformist nature of BDS is not a reason for socialists to oppose it any more than other reform movements. Virtually all social and economic justice struggles, including unionization drives, would be shunned by socialists if that were the case. The movement's limitations instead require socialists to raise broader anti-imperialist and internationalist class solidarity politics within the BDS movement, as members of the International Socialist Organization do as active participants in campus and community-based BDS groups. A strength of the current BDS movement is that conferences and educational events have begun to take up questions and debates about what has worked and failed so far in the revolutions of the Arab world these last years. However, it is a weakness of the movement so far that most groups become so immersed in day-to-day logistical planning that deeper political questions are often sidelined in the interests of expediency. It is a tension in every movement, but one that must be addressed if the ultimate aim of liberation is ever to be achieved. The emboldened global movement for BDS must be won to a clearer analysis of imperialism and the centrality of workers' power, unlikely to happen without the active engagement of socialists inside the movement, developing the ties and political credibility to gain a wider hearing for these ideas as struggles in the Arab world place these questions front and center.

The challenge that BDS might hurt Palestinian workers echoes the arguments made against the South African anti-apartheid movement. Palestinian workers' organizations, like Black workers' unions in South Africa who supported anti-apartheid efforts, have signed onto the BDS call. So this argument flies in the face of what those presumably most affected are demanding of us. What's more, the notion that Israeli workers might be hurt by BDS may be accurate, but concerns here are misplaced. Jewish Israeli workers, like those the world over, are exploited and oppressed by their own ruling class. But their overwhelming support for the ongoing displacement, occupation, and repression of Palestinians must be confronted, not accommodated. Overwhelming support for the occupation among Israeli Jews, including a whopping 90 percent support for the brutal siege of Gaza, [\[31\]](#) is further testament to the fact that the vast majority of Jewish workers in Israel have thrown their lot in with the Zionist state against Palestinians.

The handful of Jewish Israelis who defy Israel's policies, most famously Ilan Pappé and Amira Haass, the activists in Boycott From Within, and other small pro-Palestine groups warrant our solidarity, but they are a stark exception to the rule. There is a much-needed update to the 1969 essay on the class character of Israeli society, [\[32\]](#) but the central features of the argument remain intact: the financial subsidization of Jewish Israeli society and the Praetorian Guard role Israel plays for the US Empire in the Middle East distort the "normal" class relations in that country. Until that dynamic is upended, Jewish Israeli workers are not going to break with Zionism en masse.

The focus of the international solidarity movement must therefore remain on those forces inside Palestine and internationally who are willing and able to act. The road to Palestinian liberation continues to run through the major industrial centers of the region where the potential of revolutionary victories led by the working class of the Arab world lies, from Cairo to Amman. But as the world has seen in these last years, this is likely to be a years-long process.

There have yet to be significant policy changes to alleviate the suffering of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Israel. But the ideological tectonic plates beneath Israel's support have shifted, and a new global human rights movement is on the rise. When Israeli officials speak of a "demographic threat" they usually mean the domestic Palestinian population. The BDS movement has shown that the real demographic threat to Israel's stability is the rise of Generation Palestine.

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