

AGAINST the DAY

**Israeli Jews Address
the Palestinian Boycott Call**

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The Challenge of the BDS

The BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) is a large Palestinian civil society movement that calls upon “people of conscience worldwide” to boycott Israeli institutions and products, divest from economic firms that do business in and with Israel, and exercise sanctions against Israeli institutions and companies. In a recent statement the movement has called “to intensify BDS campaigns to isolate Israel’s regime of settler colonialism and apartheid in the academic, cultural, economic and military fields, in order to bring about Israel’s full compliance with its obligations under international law. This must include pressuring companies to end complicit business activity and institutions to divest. Pressure must also be increased on governments to finally adopt effective measures, starting with a comprehensive military embargo, as well as the suspension of free-trade and cooperation agreements with Israel” (Palestinian BDS National Committee 2014).

Israel’s obligations under international law, according to BDS’s initiating document, must include ending the occupation “of all Arab lands,” dismantling the Separation Wall, recognizing the full equality of Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, and “respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194” from 1949 (Palestinian BDS National Committee 2005).

These are not minor demands, and they are not limited to the forty-eight years of martial rule and Jewish colonization in the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Since its initiating statement, the BDS’s demands have repeatedly referred to all three segments of the Palestinian disseminated nation: the second-class Palestinian citizens of Israel (about 1.7 million); stateless noncitizens in the occupied West Bank

(about 2.7 million) and the besieged Gaza Strip (about 1.7); and refugees and their descendants in the diaspora (about 5 million).¹ Accepting these demands means nothing less than changing the basic structure of the Zionist regime in Israel. By their very existence and status, the three groups attest to three unsolved problems with the Zionist² cause itself: Jews can preserve their monopoly over the state apparatus and claim the state as their own only by keeping their fellow Palestinian citizens as second-class citizens and reproducing their structural discrimination; Israel can call itself a democracy only by excluding as noncitizens 4.4 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, whose lives it governs and sometimes takes; Israel could have become a Jewish state only on the basis of its persistent refusal to grant the right of return to the Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

Without necessarily accepting each one of the BDS's demands, all five contributors to this section, including the present author, share the BDS's critique of Israel's current political regime, in part or as a whole, and are addressing the BDS's call from this perspective. In what follows, I offer some reflections on the position from which we speak about the BDS.

Calls to end the occupation and grant equal rights to Palestinian citizens gain support among many Israeli Jews, but the BDS's statement goes much further than that. What Israel has to do in order to be exempted from boycott, divestment, and sanction is not merely to change a series of recent military and governmental policies, not even "to end the occupation," but to give up on what most Israeli Jews understand today as the very future of Israel as a Jewish state and what most Palestinians understand as the unacceptable principles of Jewish supremacy in historic Palestine. For the organizers and activists of the boycott movement, the Israeli regime is an apartheid form of settler colonialism, its policies are criminal, and its rhetoric and some of its laws are racist. This regime should be brought down. For most Israeli Jews who cannot see the difference between country, state, and regime (all three could easily melt down in common political discourse to one word, *hamedina* [the state]), this demand, especially the call to allow Palestinian refugees the right of return, means a call for "the elimination of Israel." For most Israeli Jews, Israel means a Jewish state, and a Jewish state means Jewish supremacy in part (Zionist Left³) or in the whole (Zionist Right) of Palestine. More and more Jews are willing to admit that their state cannot or should not be fully democratic.⁴ During the last days of his campaign, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made several statements to this effect, admitting that a Palestinian state is out of the question and portraying the very participation of Palestinian citizens in the Israeli election as a threat. Apparently, these

statements helped him win the popular vote. A clear majority in the new Israeli parliament actively supports or is willing to tolerate Netanyahu's position regarding both the 4.4 million noncitizens in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the 1.7 million second-class citizens in "Israel proper." Long before the election, explicit racist ideology had become a legitimate voice in Parliament and the mainstream media, not to mention in social media, and it has been supported by a wave of ultranationalist policies and legislation. In this climate, which Dov Michaeli describes and explains in some detail in his essay in this section, the state apparatus and the majority of Israeli Jews do not recognize the right of Israeli citizens to question the basic tenets of the Zionist regime and use civil forms of struggle to transform and democratize their political regime; rather, they understand such struggle as an act of treason.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the rejection of the BDS as a legitimate form of struggle is overwhelming among Israeli Jews as well as among Zionist Jews worldwide. It is not surprising that those few who dare to support the BDS in public are considered traitors, even if they support only the strategy, not the cause as a whole. Calls for boycott, divestment, and sanctions seem to create more anxiety than any other form of Palestinian resistance. In a way, such calls are more alarming than terrorist attacks, for the latter can easily be used to mobilize support at home and abroad and justify precisely that form of rule which the BDS movement challenges. Hence, any sign of openness toward BDS's tactics, strategy, and ideas is censored vehemently, often quite hysterically, and almost no serious discussion of the movement, its demands, and its strategy is taking place, not even on the margins of the already marginal left. In 2011, public support of the boycott became a civil offence.⁵ Today, anyone who takes a public position in support of the BDS is exposed to some risks—and this is true for Israel and the United States alike, though the risks are different. University professors might lose their jobs, doctoral students might not be hired, Jewish activists and intellectuals might be isolated in their communities and break ties with close family members (boycott is a contagious practice), and Palestinian citizens in Israel might be detained by the police and harassed by the Security Service.⁶

Why has a campaign calling for boycotting a regime that appears utterly unacceptable to its critics become so risky for its advocates in Israel and the United States, two countries that allegedly respect the freedom of speech as a basic civil right? Three main arguments have been raised against the BDS campaign: it singles out Israel as a target for boycott; it violates the

freedom of speech and research of Israeli academics; and it delegitimizes Israel as a Jewish state. Each of these accusations has been pointed to as proof of the anti-Semitism of the campaign and of the people who take part in it.⁷ Anti-Semitism is a serious charge, indeed, and it is probably accurate to ascribe it to some supporters of the BDS.⁸ But its ascription to the BDS campaign as a whole, and to numerous critics of Israel that take part in it, is always too easy and dubious. To label the campaign anti-Semitic dismisses straightforward accusations directed at the Israeli state apparatus, not at the Jewish people, reading them only for the motives they allegedly hide. Too often, anti-Semitism appears to be an excuse for closing the debate on the BDS; it cannot explain the vehement reaction to the BDS campaign but should rather be read as a symptom of the ideological conditions in which the campaign is taking place. The only possible reason why public support of the BDS has become risky and has provoked such an aggressive reaction is that by targeting the Zionist regime, the BDS appears to delegitimize Israel as a Jewish state.

In Israel, the BDS movement is conceived as a “strategic threat,” an issue of national security. The effort to counter BDS success is conducted through the Israeli consulates across the United States and Europe, in close cooperation with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and other mainstream Jewish organizations.⁹ New programs for “engaging” American students “with Israel” have popped up recently in many campuses; Israeli students who study abroad and veteran soldiers are recruited for the task, and most Hillel houses in American campuses are virtually closed to critics from the Left. The few activists and university professors who have expressed their support of the BDS have been often harassed and always marginalized.¹⁰ One of the contributors to this section, Michaeli, uses a pseudonym in the hope of avoiding similar or worse sanctions.

The threat seems to be growing. In the last few years, especially since the war in Gaza in 2009 (“Operation Cast Lead”), and even more so since the recent war in the summer of 2014 (“Operation Protective Edge”), the BDS has become a popular platform for international solidarity with the Palestinian oppression and with the Palestinian struggle against Israel. This has happened at a time when Palestinian oppression has reached a new height, and most Jews seem to support the oppressive policies of their government. The Palestinian people are under Israeli attack on three fronts, according to the actual partition of Palestine/Israel: in the Gaza Strip, besieged and impoverished Palestinians are constantly placed on the verge

of a humanitarian catastrophe and suffer periodic eruptions of military “operations” that bring massive death and destruction;¹¹ in the West Bank, aggressive expansion of Jewish settlements goes hand in hand with dispossession and the disintegration of a contiguous Palestinian territory; and in Israel, Palestinian citizens are at risk of losing even the deficient protection that their impaired civil rights have granted them.

The international support of the BDS should be understood as a response to these developments. Not all those who have been mobilized by the BDS’s call support all its demands. The BDS National Committee (BDN) has established and makes frequent efforts to enforce clear regulations regarding who and what should be boycotted. However, the most recent wave of BDS-related activities in northwestern countries does not always follow these regulations. As Galit Eilat’s essay shows, many activists and organizations prefer to “work with the BDS,” shaming Israel for its crimes and exposing its regime as intolerable without necessarily complying with the guidelines and rules of the central committee.¹² It is precisely for this latitude and openness to various practical interpretations that BDS has become an effective platform of civic action. The BDS is a civic movement and not a state organ, a mobilizing cause no less than a plethora of grassroots organizations, a sentiment no less than a policy. At the heart of this sentiment lies the feeling and understanding that the current Israeli regime has become unacceptable. With the failure of armed resistance, the bankruptcy of the Palestinian Authority, its dependency on Israel and the United States, and its failure to advance the Palestinian cause at the UN General Assembly and the Security Council, this sentiment has made the BDS the only effective strategy in the Palestinian struggle at this moment. It is also the only form of popular resistance in which no violence is being used. The BDS does not kill or destroy. It has an empowering effect on Palestinians, but so far, its impact on Israeli citizens, including the Israeli academic community, has been very limited. It is as peaceful as resistance to oppression, colonization, and dispossession could be. Its demands are expressed in the language of international law, and its practices are entirely civil. And yet, among Jews both in Israel and worldwide who are critical of the Zionist regime and are extremely worried about the course Israel has taken, there is no open discussion, let alone support, of the boycott. When a radical critique of the current Zionist regime is being considered, it is discussed without addressing the question of the BDS. When the BDS is discussed, it is mostly the strategy, not the cause that is rejected off hand, without any argument, as a nonoption.

Thus, the BDS, the only effective form of Palestinian resistance, finds almost no partners in Israel, not even among the more radical, non-Zionist leftists who have been struggling for decades against the occupation and for Palestinian rights. Some do not partner with the BDS because they want to preserve their meager speaking position on the margin of what is considered a legitimate debate among Jews around the world. Others feel excluded or alienated by the BDS's tactics and rhetoric. Still others, as Itamar Mann explains in his essay in this section, are reluctant to publicly support the BDS so as not to lose a sense of belongingness to family, friends, and a larger Jewish community. For all these reasons, Israeli intellectuals and activists on the left are paying a heavy price: they remain silent with respect to the most pressing question concerning the Palestinian struggle: the BDS. In the international arena, the BDS has been a powerful and mobilizing force, but in Israel/Palestine, it has played a divisive role. It has significantly weakened an already weak, disintegrated, and confused Jewish Left. Failing to stop or even slow down the pace of Israel's submersion into new depths of nationalism and racism, on the one hand, and failing to join the Palestinian civil resistance and challenge the Zionist regime from within, on the other hand, the Jewish Left has become virtually insignificant.

But Palestinians, too, are paying a price here. The BDS has placed the Palestinian citizens living in Israel in an impossible position. Their precarious citizenship is surely one of the reasons why they are also mostly silent about the BDS campaign. If they do support the BDS, they are mostly careful enough not to do so in public. Palestinians in Israel are not only afraid of the political and personal consequences of their so-called disloyalty but are often reluctant to take action against the academic or cultural institutions in which they have struggled so hard to find acceptance, looking in vain for a middle road between "cooptation" with the Zionist regime and "disloyalty" to Israel. This becomes especially apparent in the few shared spaces in which Jews and Palestinians are engaged as equals—in political, academic, and cultural activities—but instead of taking a leading role in the boycott campaign, they do their best to avoid it.

Moreover, by using tactics of indiscriminate boycott, which resulted in cutting almost all contact with Israeli Jews, the organizers of the BDS campaign have divorced themselves from their potential partners in the Israeli Jewish Left (potential partners in civil disobedience as well as in the critique of the Zionist regime). Instead of working to blur the nationalist lines of separation, as often happens in the few sites of joint demonstrations in the West

Bank, the BDS organizers have reduced the Palestinian struggle to its basic irreconcilable nationalist form. Finally, by insisting on “respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties” as a precondition for ending the boycott rather than as a major issue for serious negotiations, they have made it clear that they target Israel not only as a regime of occupation and colonization but also as a Jewish State (implicitly denying Israeli Jews the right of self-determination for the sake of respecting the same right of Palestinians).



And yet, one should distinguish clearly between criticism of the BDS movement’s strategy and the legitimacy of its call. Let me address this call from the perspective of the fears it has sown among Jews. These fears are different than those instilled by terrorist attacks or seasonal wars in that they are not related to the imminent presence and horror of violence but, rather, to the realization that there might be something substantially problematic with one’s world and way of life. For this reason, these fears cannot be easily mobilized by the hegemonic discourse to play a role in the ideological reproduction of the conditions of Jewish supremacy. The BDS appeal demands a political and existential answer, not another counterterrorist policy. It demands an answer to the question of how a regime based on Jewish supremacy and the oppression of non-Jewish citizens and noncitizens can be justified. The fears BDS raises signal the feeling that this regime cannot be justified. Hence, the quick resort to questions of freedom of speech and anti-Semitism, which are often nothing but strategies to divert attention from the real question and from the hiatus this question opens in the midst of Jewish political discourse.

It is in this light that one may interpret Netanyahu’s recent manipulation of fears in his electoral campaign. Israel’s growing isolation in the international community, which the BDS movement epitomizes, was very much in the air in the last weeks of the campaign. Netanyahu’s stoking of fears was more than a campaign strategy; it was a blatant attempt to redirect fears back to the sphere in which they can be manipulated to serve ideological ends. He did not respond to the BDS directly, but he did respond to two of its basic claims, which make Israel “boycottable”: Israel is a regime of permanent occupation and apartheid. Netanyahu explicitly admitted the interminability of occupation and implied the necessity of apartheid. Without occupation and apartheid, he told the public, the very existence of the Jews would be at

stake. Fears were mobilized again, except that now the source of danger was not terrorism but respect for Palestinians' rights and democracy. The lesson for Israel's critics should be clear. The BDS movement can be a very effective tool in breaking the cycle of fear and violence because it forces those who respond to it to expose and admit the nature of the regime they are defending.

The BDS is a legitimate and potentially powerful form of struggle. The Zionist regime in Israel has become utterly unacceptable and should not be immune from sanctions of the kind advocated by the BDS campaign. But, as Ariella Azoulay argues in her essay in this section, the suffering, plight, and future of the Palestinian people are not the only issues at stake. Many decades of corrupting colonial and military rule have had a devastating effect on the culture, religion, morality, and psyche of both Israeli Jews and Jews worldwide. It is for the future of the Jewish people, too, that many Jews—in Israel and abroad—are engaged in the struggle against the Zionist regime. And no partition or any form of decolonization would separate the fate of the two people. Even if all of the BDS's demands are met, Palestinians will still live alongside millions of Jews, as neighbors or fellow citizens. If the Palestinians' right to self-determination is respected, the same should go for the right of the Jews. If there is to be a binational or federal state, rather than partition and new waves of transfer and ethnic cleansing, Jews and Palestinians should imagine it together. Only in the framework of such joint effort to imagine a different future, with or without partition, can the return of the refugees or the termination of Jewish monopoly over the state apparatus be addressed in earnest. A true Palestinian-Jewish partnership (in which both sides are equal but their different positions in the colonial power structure is always taken into account), is necessary in order to imagine this future and bring it closer to the present through various forms of civic resistance, including the BDS campaign. The first step in this direction, however, must be made by Israeli Jews. They should force themselves to become addressees of the BDS's call—and then, hopefully, they will seek to join the addressors.

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Notes

- 1 These are rough numbers based on official Israeli and Palestinian sources. The fierce dispute over the demographic data is irrelevant in the present context.
- 2 The term *Zionist* is understood here according to its current, mainstream use: an individual or an organization that politically supports establishing and developing a

Jewish state that defines itself as the state of and for the Jewish people or the doctrine that takes this to be the ultimate goal of national politics.

- 3 Here and throughout, the term *Left* is used only in its Israeli connotation, that is, to signify a liberal with respect to questions of citizenship, rights, and “the solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian “conflict.”
- 4 Most of the Jews who responded to a 2013 survey by the Israel Democracy Institute (Hermann et al. 2013) felt that “critical national decisions should be determined by a Jewish majority, both on matters of peace and security (66.7%) and on social economic issues (56.9%).” About one-third of the Jewish respondents thought that the “Jewish component of Israel’s definition as a Jewish and democratic state is more important” than the democratic component, and only 37 percent, a figure that has been steadily declining, believed that both components are equally important.
- 5 According to the Law for Prevention of Damage to State of Israel through Boycott, individuals or organizations who call for “an economic, cultural or academic boycott against a person or entity merely because of its affiliation to the State of Israel or to Israeli institutions and/or specific regions under Israeli control” are committing a civil offense and may be sued in court by individuals and organizations claiming that they might be damaged by such a boycott. The court is authorized to fine persons and organizations found guilty. Organizations may be denied government support in the form of budget allocations, tax exemption, government contracts, and so on (Chronicles of the Book of Laws 2304, 7/11/2011; for an unofficial translation of the law published by the Association of Civil Rights in Israel, see ACRI 2011). So far no one has been charged for violation of this law.
- 6 Paradoxically enough, Palestinians in the occupied territories, not to mention those living outside Palestine, risk nothing for their support of the BDS’s campaign and have recently preferred it to more costly, but also more direct, forms of nonviolent confrontations with Israel.
- 7 These arguments have been recently collected in Nelson and Brahm 2015. There are many nuances, of course, but they are not important for my argument.
- 8 Those who argue against singling out Israel should ask themselves why they single out some dubious expressions of anti-Semitism in the BDS campaign among the many forms of racism tolerated in Israel or the United States.
- 9 According to an official document published by the Knesset’s research and information center in 2013 (see “Boycott Initiatives against Israeli Academic Institutions” 2013), the Foreign Ministry established a forum that coordinates governmental actions against boycott and delegitimization of Israel a few years ago. The forum includes representatives from the foreign and defense ministry, the prime minister’s office, the Israel Defense Forces, intelligence agencies, and other governmental agencies.
- 10 Two examples should suffice: Neve Gordon’s 2009 op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* resulted in four years of governmental scrutiny and threats to the continued existence of the Department of Politics and Government of Ben-Gurion University, where he was a professor and chairperson (see, e.g., Myers 2012); Professor Rachel Giora and Dr. Anat Matar, of Tel Aviv University, whose public support of the BDS has long been part of their radical political activism, have been targets of numerous vicious attacks in the social and mainstream media, and the university is under constant pressure to fire them.

- 11 The opening phrase in a recent statement published by B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, read: "2014 was a terrible year—one of the cruelest, and deadliest, in the history of the occupation" (El-Ad 2014).
- 12 The BDS's activists and supporters often lament this lack of obedience and reproach it as a form of "cooptation" (see, e.g., Massad 2014).

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