

# Israel: Boycott, Divest, Sanction

By Naomi Klein

This article was published in *The Nation*, January 8th, 2009, and is reprinted with the permission of the author.

**I**t's time. Long past time. The best strategy to end the increasingly bloody occupation is for Israel to become the target of the kind of global movement that put an end to apartheid in South Africa.

In July 2005, a huge coalition of Palestinian groups laid out plans to do just that. They called on "people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era." The campaign Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions—BDS for short—was born.

Every day that Israel pounds Gaza brings more converts to the BDS cause, and talk of ceasefires is doing little to slow the momentum. Support is even emerging among Israeli Jews. In the midst of the assault roughly 500 Israelis, dozens of them well-known artists and scholars, sent a letter to foreign ambassadors stationed in Israel. It calls for "the adoption of immediate restrictive measures and sanctions" and draws a clear parallel with the anti-apartheid struggle. "The boycott on South Africa was effective, but Israel is handled with kid gloves .... This international backing must stop."

Yet even in the face of these clear calls, many of us still can't go there. The reasons are complex, emotional and understandable. And they simply aren't good enough. Economic sanctions are the most effective tools in the nonviolent arsenal. Surrendering them verges on active complicity. Here are the top four objections to the BDS strategy, followed by counterarguments.

**1. Punitive measures will alienate rather than persuade Israelis.** The world has tried what used to be called "constructive engagement." It has failed utterly. Since 2006 Israel has been steadily escalating its criminality: expanding settlements, launching an outrageous war against Lebanon and imposing collective punishment on Gaza through the brutal blockade. Despite this escalation, Israel has not faced punitive measures—quite the opposite. The

NAOMI KLEIN is an award-winning journalist, syndicated columnist and author. Her books include *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies and Fences and Windows: Dispatches from the Front Line*. In 2004 she co-produced *The Take* with director Avi Lewis, a feature documentary about Argentina's occupied factories. She is a former Miliband Fellow at the London School of Economics and holds an honorary Doctor of Civil Law from the University of King's College, Nova Scotia.

weapons and \$3 billion in annual aid that the U.S. sends to Israel is only the beginning. Throughout this key period, Israel has enjoyed a dramatic improvement in its diplomatic, cultural and trade relations with a variety of other allies. For instance, in 2007 Israel became the first non-Latin American country to sign a free-trade deal with Mercosur. In the first nine months of 2008, Israeli exports to Canada went up 45 percent. A new trade deal with the European Union is set to double Israel's exports of processed food. And on December 8, European ministers "upgraded" the EU-Israel Association Agreement, a reward long sought by Jerusalem.\*

It is in this context that Israeli leaders started their latest war: confident they would face no meaningful costs. It is remarkable that over seven days of wartime trading, the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange's flagship index actually went up 10.7 percent. When carrots don't work, sticks are needed.

**2. Israel is not South Africa.** Of course it isn't. The relevance of the South African model is that it proves that BDS tactics can be effective when weaker measures (protests, petitions, backroom lobbying) have failed. And there are indeed deeply distressing echoes of South African apartheid in the occupied territories: the color-coded IDs and travel permits, the bulldozed homes and forced displacement, the settler-only roads. Ronnie Kasrils, a prominent South African politician, said that the architecture of segregation that he saw in the West Bank and Gaza was "infinitely worse than apartheid." That was in 2007, before Israel began its full-scale war against the open-air prison that is Gaza.

**3. Why single out Israel when the United States, Britain and other Western countries do the same things in Iraq and Afghanistan?** Boycott is not a dogma; it is a tactic. The reason the BDS strategy should be tried against Israel is practical: in a country so small and trade-dependent, it could actually work.

**4. Boycotts sever communication; we need more dialogue, not less.** This one I'll answer with a personal story. For eight years, my books have been published in Israel by a commercial house called Babel. But when I published *The Shock Doctrine*, I wanted to respect the boycott. On the advice of BDS activists, including the wonderful writer John Berger, I contacted a small publisher called Andalus. Andalus is an activist press, deeply involved in the anti-occupation movement and the only Israeli publisher devoted exclusively to translating Arabic writing into Hebrew. We drafted a contract that guarantees that all proceeds go to Andalus's work, and none to me. In other words, I am boycotting the Israeli economy but not Israelis.

Coming up with our modest publishing plan

required dozens of phone calls, e-mails and instant messages, stretching from Tel Aviv to Ramallah to Paris to Toronto to Gaza City. My point is this: as soon as you start implementing a boycott strategy, dialogue increases dramatically. And why wouldn't it? Building a movement requires endless communicating, as many in the anti-apartheid struggle well recall. The argument that supporting boycotts will cut us off from one another is particularly specious given the array of cheap information technologies at our fingertips. We are drowning in ways to rant at one another across national boundaries. No boycott can stop us.

Just about now, many a proud Zionist is gearing up for major point-scoring: don't I know that many of those very high-tech toys come from Israeli research parks, world leaders in infotech? True enough, but not all of them. Several days into Israel's Gaza assault, Richard Ramsey, the managing director of a British telecom specializing in voice-over-internet services, sent an e-mail to the Israeli tech firm MobileMax. "As a result of the Israeli government action in the last few days we will no longer be in a position to consider doing business with yourself or any other Israeli company."

Ramsey says that his decision wasn't political; he just didn't want to lose customers. "We can't afford to lose any of our clients," he explains, "so it was purely commercially defensive."

It was this kind of cold business calculation that led many companies to pull out of South Africa two decades ago. And it's precisely the kind of calculation that is our most realistic hope of bringing justice, so long denied, to Palestine. ♦

\*On January 14/09, in response to Israel's aggression in Gaza, the EU called off its plans to upgrade the EU-Israel Association Agreement, a sign of growing understanding that political sanctions can be brought to bear to bring an end to the war. -N.K.

## A Progressive says "No" to Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel

By Stephen Scheinberg

Sometimes I feel like that old man who went to worship at the Kotel, or Western Wall, each day. He was asked by a reporter, who had witnessed his daily visits, what it was he prayed for. "I go there to pray for peace in the Middle East," he responded. "And what does it feel like?" she asked. "To tell the truth, sometimes it feels like I'm talking to a wall." So it sometimes seems for those of us engaged in the search for peace. However, we are not easily discouraged and carry on with the work, very often criticizing those on the right who reject real negotiations towards a two-state solution but in this instance addressing ourselves to those on the left, who endorse not just the tactic of boycott but an international movement aimed at the destruction of Israel.

Boycotting is a legitimate tactic given the right context. I boycotted grapes to support Caesar Chavez and California farm workers, and certainly never knowingly purchased products from apartheid South Africa. By the same token, I have heeded the voices of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who call for boycotting goods produced in the West Bank settlements. Abbas also proclaims, "We are not boycotting Israel because we have relations and we import" their products. I prefer to take their prescription rather than those who claim to be speaking in the name of a rather amorphous Palestinian civil society.

It is disappointing that general, rather than settlement-focused, boycotting of Israel has been subscribed to by some Jewish progressives. They seem to be motivated by several factors. First, there are those who have given up hope in a two-state solution and believe that a boycott will begin the process of the dissolution of Israel. Second, there are some who believe that Israel was conceived in sin, in 1948, and is therefore not worthy of salvation. Third, it is more satisfying to some on the left to identify totally with the victim and adopt a tactic favored by some Palestinian militants. Whatever the combination of these motivating factors, I believe that it is not only a misguided tactic but one that is harmful to both Israelis and Palestinians. ending the occupation.

I want to make four basic points. First, any progressive program must be in accord with universally accepted and applied standards of human rights. The application of such standards only to Israel and not to the Palestinians or other nations of the Middle East, or other nations generally, not only lacks credibility but, to my mind, rightly gives rise to the charge of anti-Semitism. This is certainly not to say that all criticisms of Israel are by definition anti-Semitic, but that criticism which singles out Israel in isolation from other and often more egregious human rights violators will and **should be** perceived as anti-Semitic. Second, I believe that many boycott leaders are not peace advocates but rather hope to turn Israel into the principal international pariah, and hope that the Zionist state will crumble and be succeeded by a single state. Third, if the goal is peace, we should work for the revival of a strong Israeli peace movement to make common cause with Palestinian advocates of two states. But the boycott policy is almost sure to force

*continued on following page*

DR. STEPHEN SCHEINBERG, a Chicago native and dual U.S./Canadian citizen, is Emeritus Professor of History at Montreal's Concordia University. Professor Scheinberg currently serves as Co-chair of Canadian Friends of Peace Now.

Israelis to the right, because it feeds their widely shared perception that the entire world is against the Jews. Fourth, the United States is still the most essential player in the Middle East and now, with the end of eight disastrous years of Cheney and Bush, there is a President who has reengaged his country with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The so-called Israel lobby is a major player in the making of U.S. foreign policy, but it must and can be neutralized. Boycotts will, however, feed the power of the Israel lobby. Those of us who hope that President Obama and Senator Mitchell can move the peace process to fruition, must work against boycotts.

I share the view of the great American journalist I.F. Stone that “History is not melodrama, it is most often tragedy.” In this instance it is the tragedy of two peoples. Israel is a complex country that is both marvelous and infuriating, on the cusp of science and technology and the arts but politically enslaved to fundamentalist rabbis and benighted settlers. It is home to near-fascist figures, such as Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, but is also the home of Amos Oz, Yossi Beilin and other great fighters for peace and justice. I have seen the barrier the Israelis have erected, not only for security, but in some places clearly to grab land. I am all too keenly aware of an occupation that oppresses the Palestinians and undermines the fabric of Israeli democracy. I have read the reports of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and more recently the Goldstone Report on Israel, as well as their reports on the Palestinians and their Arab neighbors and am appalled by the violations of human rights **on all sides**.

Universal standards of human rights must be applied across the board. Those who single out Israel and are silent on Palestinian violations of human rights are not credible and certainly not progressive. Amnesty and HRW point out that both Hamas and Fatah have been killing, maiming and torturing their perceived opponents. Both have closed down opposition media and detain their enemies in violation of any due process.

I want to address the boycotter’s goals as enunciated by Omar Barghouti, one of the principal boycott leaders, and his associates in PACBI (Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel). He is an advocate of a one-state solution, meaning a Palestinian majority nation. His movement calls for action to end the “oppression of the Palestinian people, including their expulsion from their homes ... (1948) and persistent denial of the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and lands.” The assertion of the so-called “right of return” is a non-starter in any peace process, as much as an Israeli rightist call for an indivisible Jerusalem under Jewish rule. Barghouti may separate the act of boycotting from particular solutions. But I think the act flows directly into his preferred outcome. A Canadian who espouses BDS puts it this way: “BDS will be an effective tactic if it is clearly linked to its strategic goal: the overthrow of the Zionist regime and its

replacement by a regime of equality, one that permits the refugees to return”—meaning that the end of Israel, of the only Jewish state in the world, is the goal, and boycott only a tactic. The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel significantly opposes dialogue, Seeds for Peace and other such projects which seek to cultivate understanding. Apparently dialogue as a method of humanizing “the other” is to be eschewed because it is better to regard all Israelis, other than anti-Zionists, as the enemy.

A one-state solution sounds appealing to the North American ear. We are multicultural societies and abhor the mixture of religion and state. But the Middle East is filled with Islamic republics, which I hear few progressives questioning. More important, do my fellow progressives believe that Jewish Israelis will soon give up their state? How many years of boycott will you condemn Israelis and Palestinians to—10, 20, 50 years? All because Israelis, like most people, will defend their state. According to Israel’s most militant peace activist, Uri Avnery, 99.9% of Israeli Jews oppose a boycott. If Gaza resists the terrible boycott that Israel has inflicted not only on Hamas but on its entire population, would it be surprising that Israel would also resist? Such resistance would perpetuate conflict rather than resolving it.

**M**ost Israelis and Palestinians endorse a two-state solution. In one of the more recent polls, 51% of Israelis opt for two states, 28% support the status quo, and among Israel’s Palestinian citizens, two-thirds want a two-state outcome. In the occupied territories, 55% support two states and only 21% support a bi-national outcome. Thus, the support of a boycott, which is strongly linked to the one-state solution, runs contrary to the wishes of majorities among both Israelis and Palestinians.

My third point is that we should give all the support that we can to the Israeli peace movement. Boycott advocates give short shrift to them, and to the many academics, writers, and film-makers who support them. Sholom Achshav (Peace Now) was founded in 1978 by former soldiers, but reached a high point in the wake of the first Lebanon War, when 400,000 Israelis (one-tenth of a nation) protested their nation’s resort to war and especially its complicity in the massacres of Sabra and Shatilla. It, along with other peace groups (Gush Shalom, the Geneva Accord group, etc.) has waxed and waned in the past 30 years, but truly suffered after the plague of Palestinian suicide bombings helped to drive Israelis to the right. But even at this low point, the leader of the Israeli opposition, Tzipi Livni, refused to join a government which did not endorse the two-state principle. Most sitting Labour Party members are in the peace camp, perhaps even their leader, Ehud Barak. The few remaining leftist Meretz members of the Knesset are all dedicated to peace. Israel’s leading literary figures Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua and David Grossman are all devoted to Peace Now.

The super-radical may disparage any and all of them. I honour and support them. The world needs

them and the Palestinians need a strong Israeli peace bloc. I cannot imagine a successful negotiation which does not gain the support of a majority of Israelis. The vision of Israel as a South Africa crumbling from the siege of boycott is not only defective as history (that of South Africa) or sociology but, to my mind, is an illusion. The peace forces in Israel are weak today, yet with pressure from the quartet and especially from the U.S., this can change. Most Israelis believe that their country's relations with the United States are more important to their security, than settlements, land or perhaps even the IDF. Israel, its electorate, its peace movement and its leadership will ultimately be responsive to consistent U.S. pressure to forge a peace settlement and give the Palestinians their own state next to a secure, hopefully democratic Israel.

Finally, the best strategy for advocates of peace is to support President Obama's Mideast initiative and to urge the Harper government to give it more than lip service. If you want to help AIPAC, which is closely allied to the rightist Netanyahu government, then you could hardly do better than to support a boycott. There is nothing better calculated to unite the North American Jewish community against the Obama Administration's peace initiative. To the frustration of the Republican neo-cons, American Jews remain one of the most liberal voting blocs in the United States. 77% of them voted for Obama. But on Israel policy, the more conservative *makhers*, or big shots, purport to speak in the name of most American Jews. They, along with their allies in the Christian right, have been the major voices on Middle East policy for many years, especially during the recent, un lamented, Bush Administration.

But change is in the air, including change within the American Jewish community. AIPAC's monopoly on Jewish campaign financing was challenged by J Street, a liberal rival. Both Debra DeLee of Peace Now and Jeremy Ben Ami of J Street were invited to President Obama's first meeting with Jewish leaders, as was Rabbi Eric Yoffie (President of the Union of Reform Judaism) a long-time peace advocate. J Street is beginning to modestly fund campaigns of congressmen and women who want to be independent of AIPAC.

From the outset, Obama has recognized the need for change in Mideast policy. His first major televised interview was with an Arab network. His Cairo speech was favourably received, for even as he expressed America's continued dedication to Israel's security, he expressed his respect for Islam and his commitment to Israeli-Palestinian peace. Obama's appointment of George Mitchell and his call for a settlement freeze were further signs of change. Such changes did not endear him to right-wing Israel or to those forces in the U.S. which support them. The next months and years will be crucial in fighting for the soul of North American Jewry.

**It is disappointing that general, rather than settlement-focused, boycotting of Israel has been subscribed to by some Jewish progressives.**

## **Coda: Boycotts Updated**

The general boycott movement is having some success. The recent decision by Elvis Costello to cancel planned concerts in Israel is being hailed by the BDS movement. Other stars such as Paul McCartney and Leonard Cohen did not cancel, and it remains to be seen, as of this writing, whether Diana Krall, Bob Dylan, Elton John, Rod Stewart and Joan Armatrading will appear this summer.

Cohen offered to also do concerts in the West Bank and ultimately announced that the proceeds from his Israel tour would go to Israeli and Palestinian peace organizations, with the largest share going to Parents Circle, a group formed by Palestinian and Israeli bereaved parents and relatives.

Authors Margaret Atwood and Amitav Ghosh both came to Tel Aviv to collect literary awards, despite the efforts of boycotters. Ghosh

argued that "institutions of culture and learning must in principle be regarded as autonomous of the state." Atwood supported her colleague, rejecting "the all-inclusive nature of the boycott we were ordered to join. It is specifically cultural boycotts we decline to do."

A restricted boycott of settlement-produced products is being promoted by the leadership of the Palestinian Authority. It is, after all, absurd for Palestinians to give financial support to those who oppress them, steal their land and would use their profits to expand settlements. There is evidence that this focused boycott is already promoting tremors in the Israeli establishment. This boycott is not an attack on the legitimacy of Israel, and is certainly deserving of support.

Finally, during the Spring term, BDS sympathizers on various California campuses tried unsuccessfully to push resolutions through councils or senates to withdraw "financial and moral support from corporations that fund conflict." These campus efforts are extremely divisive and often turn liberal Jewish students into stalwart defenders of Israel. Stanford students seem to have come up with an answer. There the would-be boycotters turned to collaborative efforts with the Stanford Israel Alliance, including joint educational efforts and "on-the-ground relief work in the region." This is a far more productive stance than the confrontations over boycotts and divestment. Supporting efforts toward dialogue and promoting peace are far more difficult for the Jewish establishment to oppose.

The great hope for American and Canadian Jewry is the apparent gap between younger liberal Jews and the older conservative makherocracy. It is that gap which organizations such as J Street and Peace Now are trying to exploit, to form a political base independent of the Israel lobby. Boycott and divestment efforts will, however, prove counter-productive in North America, and will not encourage liberal, young Jews to join the peace camp.

Say "no" to general boycotts of Israel. Say "yes" to peace. ♦