

Lessons From South Africa

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In recent months, YouTube has seen a flurry of videos featuring American “flash mobs” dancing to the beats of Michael Jackson and the Village People promoting boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel and its institutions. While the tactics are new, the call for such measures is not but rather dates back to the first *intifada* when Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip first began separating themselves from Israeli institutions and products. The tactics have evolved since that time as has their effectiveness.

With the growth of BDS, many questions arise regarding its efficacy and scope. So too, many analogies are made to South Africa as a means of promoting the success of BDS. But, while there are many analogies to South African apartheid, it does not necessarily follow that Palestinians should follow the identical path set by South African anti-apartheid activists.

In the case of South African apartheid, BDS was both grounded in political ends — a complete end to the apartheid regime — and based as well on moral positioning; that apartheid is illegal and immoral. As a tactic, BDS was tied to a broader political strategy aimed at isolating apartheid. This strategy was led, in part, by the seemingly uncompromised political leadership of the ANC, with BDS as merely one tactic among many.

Such is not the case for Palestine. With a scattered population, diverse groups each facing their own unique challenges, the nature of the Palestinian Authority’s financial dependence, and the lack of effective democratic representation, no group today can legitimately define Palestinian political goals, strategies, or tactics. For the PLO, the proclaimed “sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people,” its goal appears to have devolved into an effort to remain in power, endlessly negotiating “agreements” while gingerly embracing Israel, Israeli business interests, and Israeli officials.

Given this political context, it is therefore unsurprising that the calls for BDS have been

scattered and varied. At one end of the spectrum, some call for a complete boycott of all Israeli institutions and products while, at the other end, the PLO hesitatingly supports BDS but limits its scope exclusively to consumer goods from Israeli settlements. This latter view implies that Israel's illegal activity is confined only to the territory it occupied in 1967. But of course, Israel's illegal actions long predate 1967 and are not confined to any mythical "Green Line."

Accordingly, if it is to be an effective and persuasive political tool, BDS must not selectively target only certain illegal actions to the exclusion of Israel's crimes against Palestinian refugees and against its so-called "citizens." So too, BDS should not confine itself only to some Israeli institutions. As political tools require political representation and given the demonstrated paucity of effective Palestinian political leadership, at present BDS can only effectively be deployed as a tool of moral persuasion and/or shaming. Therefore, local groups should exercise wide latitude to develop effective BDS targets and tactics based on their perceived "moral" obligations.

Take, for example, the United States. Without US backing, Israel would lose the current level of impunity it enjoys. Tactically speaking, US-based solidarity activists who feel "morally" obligated to support Palestinian rights are uniquely positioned to target US-based institutions — the primary enablers of Israel's racist and militant policies. Given these unique opportunities, some US-based activists may justifiably choose to devote their resources towards targeting US institutions, while Swedish activists, based on their "moral" considerations, will target Israeli organizations in their boycott campaigns given the lack of Swedish institutions that support and enable Israel.

That said, while "moral" actions should persist, it is questionable whether BDS will have any positive political impact for Palestinians, absent effective political leadership. As research now shows (e.g., "How Sanctions Work: Lessons from South Africa," edited by Neta C. Crawford and Audie Klotz), consumer boycotts had little financial impact on corporations operating in apartheid South Africa. Rather, it was the stigma of being associated with apartheid that led some multinationals to cut ties with the regime. So too may be the case with Israel because consumers and corporations are rarely guided by moral considerations. This is not to say that BDS should not be pursued or that consumer

boycotts should not continue. However, these tactics alone will not sufficiently stigmatize Israel and affect its behavior.

In the case of South Africa, BDS was part of a larger strategy — and not the sole strategy — aimed at grinding apartheid to a halt. The strategy took many forms: BDS, international litigation, and action by organized labor — a particularly effective tool — to name a few. Today, while labor unrest no longer remains an option for Palestinians (since Israel has completely weaned itself from Palestinian labor) other options remain open, particularly civil unrest and international litigation. Both can and should be pursued. While cognizant that Americans are differently situated than those suffering directly from Israel’s actions (and hence have a greater obligation than the latter in dealing with Israel), Palestinians can, and must, do more to challenge Israel’s policies and to isolate Israel.

The Oslo agreements undermined boycott demands by initiating “joint cooperation” projects where Palestinian and Israeli “leaders” alike reaped economic rewards for their cooperation (including coveted VIP travel passes). Rather than devising a strategy to wean itself from Israel, the PA spawned complete dependence on Israel and outside donor assistance, with political conditions attached. Even symbolic and essentially meaningless measures, such as Palestine’s effort to seek admission to the UN as a “state” or the formation of a “national unity” government have lead to threatened economic sanctions by Israel and the international community. More Palestinians today depend on international assistance than did a decade ago, belying claims of a “booming” economy. This compromised state of affairs demands critical assessment and corrective action. Just as South Africans paid a hefty price for their freedom, Palestinians will face a similarly hefty price for theirs.

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