

Editorial

This issue of *Jadal* is a preliminary assessment and critical reflection on the question of boycotting Israel. So far, discussions on this subject have ranged between either an outright dismissal and knee-jerk rejection by pro-Israel groups, or an enthusiastic endorsement by pro-Palestine groups. This issue of *Jadal* aims to provide a thoughtful and reflective engagement of the question of boycott by authors who are generally sympathetic to the boycott movement and support its broad goals.

The question of boycott arises against the backdrop of the debate over the ways in which Israel can be forced to comply with the demands of international law and the international community. The perceived ineffectiveness of previously deployed methods (UN resolutions, International Court of Justice's advisory opinion, Oslo process negotiations, Israeli legal system, and the second intifada) leads many to see boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) as a more promising path. The hope is that civil society groups can provide the pressure and deliver the outcomes that official channels of decision-making and diplomacy have failed to provide. This hope seems to be vindicated by the recent uprisings in the Arab world wherein official and long established political mediums — as in existing political parties — have been bypassed and rendered irrelevant through direct action of social movements and ordinary citizens. BDS is not, in this sense, a despair of politics but a different form of politics. Many are also attracted to BDS since it utilizes the language of universal human rights, draws a strong analogy to South Africa, and is a non-violent strategy to end the occupation and discrimination. BDS seems also to be supported and championed by proponents of the one-state solution. Israel has replied strongly against BDS, viewing it as a delegitimation strategy and has recently enacted a law to provide civil sanctions against calls for boycott inside Israel (including the settlements) by Israelis.

But what is boycott? What are its goals? How can they be achieved? Is it important that boycotts be effective because boycott is an instrumental tool for achieving political ends? Or is boycott a strategy that should be pursued for moral reasons regardless of the efficacy question? Is the analogy to South Africa appropriate? In this issue of *Jadal*, several scholars and practitioners grapple with the questions that the idea and the practice of boycott give rise to.

In his opening essay **Nimer Sultany** warns against three potential pitfalls that the boycott movement should avoid: non-violence should not become a new dogma; the discourse of the movement should not be highly legalistic; and the occasional excess of rhetoric should be avoided. Sultany argues that Palestinian political discourse should not be reduced to the question of boycott, and boycott should not be reduced to a moral discourse lacking political efficacy.

How can this efficacy be achieved? **Esmail Nashif** argues that the difficulty with the boycott campaign is that it is a partial reaction to a larger colonial project as opposed to an action within a larger resistance project. Indeed, boycott is primarily a reaction to the reality of the West Bank. Thus it is bound to produce limited results especially if it does not take a critical distance from its instrumental character. He argues that boycott, rather than being a substitute to a project, should be considered a tool to advance a project.

Diana Buttu elaborates on the lack of a larger political strategy. For Buttu, BDS is not likely to be effective if such a strategy remains lacking. She compares the case of Palestine to the boycott movement in South Africa. The existence of a larger political strategy pursued by a credible leadership in South Africa, in which BDS was only one tool out of many, paved the way to success. Without a similar development in Palestine, boycott will remain selective and ineffective. Thus, it will be no more than a moral discourse of shaming.

Turning to one specific area of boycott, **George Bisharat** makes the case for boycotting Israeli academic institutions. He points out that these institutions are involved in various ways in maintaining oppression and discrimination against Palestinians. Academic

boycott, Bisharat maintains, may encourage internal critical Israeli reflection on the policies that led to Israel's isolation.

The questions raised by boycott are not hypothetical questions for academics to ponder on. Building upon his own experience, **Yaman Salahi** discusses the lessons learned from boycott activism on US campuses by student groups. There, students have faced the question of transforming the slogan "boycott Israel" into a concrete political agenda. He argues that it is insufficient to make the moral case against Israeli oppression. Rather, it is highly important to critique the institutional arguments against boycotting corporations involved in the Israeli occupation.