THE BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT AND SANCTIONS (BDS) CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISRAEL

Peter Wertheim and Alex Ryvchin
The BDS campaign originated at the infamous NGO Forum of the World Conference on Racism held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001 (the “NGO Forum”). Neutral observers noted that despite its mandate for countering racism, the NGO Forum descended into an openly antisemitic spectacle. A typical reaction was from the UN’s Human Rights Commissioner, Mary Robinson, who told the BBC that “there was horrible antisemitism present. A number of people said they’ve never been so hurt or so harassed or been so blatantly faced with antisemitism.”

South Africa’s Deputy Foreign Minister at the time, Aziz Pahad spoke of the “disgraceful events” at the NGO Forum, which “was hijacked and used by some with an anti-Israeli agenda to turn it into an antisemitic event.”

It is against this backdrop that the NGO Forum delivered its highly polemical Declaration seeking to attack Israel’s legitimacy as a State, and the BDS movement was conceived.

Article 425 of the Declaration demanded that the international community impose a policy of “complete and total isolation of Israel … [through] mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training) between all states and Israel.”

Article 424 stated that the aims of the campaign would be achieved through the implementation of a “global solidarity campaign of international civil society,” including human rights NGOs, churches, trade unions and universities.

**WHAT IS BDS?**

The BDS campaign originated at the infamous NGO Forum of the World Conference on Racism held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001 (the “NGO Forum”). Neutral observers noted that despite its mandate for countering racism, the NGO Forum descended into an openly antisemitic spectacle. A typical reaction was from the UN’s Human Rights Commissioner, Mary Robinson, who told the BBC that “there was horrible antisemitism present. A number of people said they’ve never been so hurt or so harassed or been so blatantly faced with antisemitism.”

South Africa’s Deputy Foreign Minister at the time, Aziz Pahad spoke of the “disgraceful events” at the NGO Forum, which “was hijacked and used by some with an anti-Israeli agenda to turn it into an antisemitic event.”

It is against this backdrop that the NGO Forum delivered its highly polemical Declaration seeking to attack Israel’s legitimacy as a State, and the BDS movement was conceived.

Article 425 of the Declaration demanded that the international community impose a policy of “complete and total isolation of Israel … [through] mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training) between all states and Israel.”

Article 424 stated that the aims of the campaign would be achieved through the implementation of a “global solidarity campaign of international civil society,” including human rights NGOs, churches, trade unions and universities.
Because of its toxic association with the disgraced NGO Forum, and its failure to gain any significant results, the BDS campaign attempted a “remake” in 2005, purportedly at the behest of “Palestinian civil society.” Despite the attempt to market the BDS campaign as “rights based”, its objectives, rhetoric and tactics are identical to those established at the NGO Forum. Even strident critics of Israel, such as Norman Finkelstein, have dismissed the association between the BDS campaign and Palestinian civil society ‘organisations’, which Finkelstein characterises as “one person operations… that represent nothing.”

Since 2005, the BDS campaign has articulated three specific aims:

1. **ENDING THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF ALL ARAB LANDS**

   Nowhere does the campaign stipulate what it considers to be “Arab lands”, nor does it distinguish between sovereign Israel and the territories captured in 1967.

   Significantly, a leading BDS spokesperson, Omar Barghouti, has admitted that BDS’s territorial claims go beyond the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

   Speaking at Carleton University in Ottawa in 2010, ironically at the time that he was completing a PhD at Tel Aviv University, Barghouti declared:

   “If the occupation ends, would that end our call for BDS? No it wouldn’t.”

2. **ACHIEVING EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ARAB CITIZENS OF ISRAEL**

   This aim is equally disingenuous. In fact, Israel’s Arab citizens constitute over 20% of its total population of 8 million. They enjoy full civil and political rights, as enshrined in Israel’s Declaration of Independence:

   “The State of Israel… will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture…”

   Arab representatives have been elected to the Israeli parliament since the establishment of the State. There are currently 12 Arab-Israeli members of the Israeli parliament and Arab judges, including an Arab judge of the Israeli Supreme Court, Israel’s highest appellate court.

   Jews and Arabs use the same public transport, eat in the same restaurants, get treated at the same hospitals, share the same beaches, shop at the same malls, play in the same sports teams, attend the same public schools and universities and work side by side.

   In every country, regrettably, minority groups experience social and economic discrimination. This is true of all states, including Australia and states with far less tumultuous histories than that of Israel. However, the BDS campaign does not seek to engage with Israel to address discrimination. Rather, in order to justify the BDS call for Israel’s complete economic and political isolation, it casts Israel falsely as an inherently discriminatory state.

3. **REALISATION OF THE SO-CALLED “RIGHT OF RETURN” OF “PALESTINIAN REFUGEES”**

   This demand unambiguously reveals the true motives of the BDS campaign. A ‘right of return’ is demanded not just for the limited number of
Palestinians displaced during the 1948 War who are still alive (currently estimated at around 30,000), but for all their descendants, ad infinitum (currently estimated at 6 million people), who were born and have lived in other countries for their entire lives, including those who are citizens of those other countries. Thus, persons born and raised in Lebanon, Syria, the UK or Australia, who have never left or fled from their homes, are considered to be Palestinian ‘refugees’ if they are descended from 1948 refugees.

The notion of refugee status being inherited and passed down in perpetuity is without parallel in international law. It is not applied to, nor is it claimed by any other people.

Most significantly, a ‘right of return’ is sought not only into the future Palestinian state, but also into Israel itself. The clear underlying aim of the demand for a “right of return”, is to transform the demographic balance of the state of Israel by turning the Jewish majority into a highly vulnerable minority, and thereby altering its cultural and religious character.

The goal is to strip the Jewish people of its right to national self-determination. BDS leaders have admitted this on many occasions.

For example, writing on the extremist Electronic Intifada website, Omar Barghouti stated:

“I know that you cannot reconcile the right of return for refugees with a two state solution. That is the big white elephant in the room and people are ignoring it - a return for refugees would end Israel’s existence as a Jewish state.”

In an interview in 2010, Barghouti, in even more unequivocal terms, admitted:

“If the refugees were to return, you would not have a two-state solution. You would have a Palestine next to a Palestine, rather than a Palestine next to Israel.”

Barghouti’s admissions are hardly a revelation. The “right of return” as a mechanism for Israel’s destruction has been openly discussed in the Arab world since 1948.

In 1948, Egypt’s Foreign Minister observed:

“. . . it is well known and understood that the Arabs, in demanding the return of the refugees to Palestine, mean their return as masters of their homeland, and not as slaves. More explicitly: they intend to annihilate the State of Israel.”

By endorsing the so-called ‘right of return’, BDS implicitly rejects the internationally-endorsed principle of “two States for two peoples” and is at odds with the global consensus which has always recognised Israel’s right to exist specifically as the nation-State of the Jewish people legitimately created under international law and a member State of the UN under the UN Charter.

The real aim of BDS is to bring down the state of Israel...That should be stated as an unambiguous goal. There should not be any equivocation on the subject. Justice and freedom for the Palestinians are incompatible with the existence of the state of Israel.”

- As’ad AbuKhalil (Californian academic and BDS activist)
In Australia, those campaigning for BDS, are disparate advocacy groups and individuals predominantly from the far left fringe of the political spectrum, a small number of student activist groups, a handful of academics and clerics, and a small number of people from the Arabic-speaking communities. The BDS campaign has also attracted the support of individuals affiliated with far-right, ultra-nationalist groups, including Fredrick Toben, who has served prison time in both Germany and Australia as a result of his Holocaust denial and antisemitic activities, and Brendan O’Connell, who in 2011 was convicted by a jury of racial vilification and sentenced to imprisonment for three years.

**BDS AND ANTISEMITISM**

BDS activities in Australia have frequently attracted antisemitism, including Holocaust denial and calls for violence against Jews. Anti-Israel activism commonly evokes classic antisemitic motifs, including the blood libel and supposed Zionist/Jewish conspiracies about control of the media, economy and the government.

Whilst denying that it is antisemitic, the BDS campaign has consistently failed to address the antisemitism which its actions attract and encourage, and the antisemitism implicit in seeking to deny the Jewish people their right of national self-determination.

**AUSTRALIA PALESTINE ADVOCACY NETWORK (APAN)**

APAN is now the leading anti-Israel lobbying and advocacy organisation in Australia. Its leadership comprises a small number of professional people of Palestinian-Australian background, two retired Christian clerics, a retired journalist, a retired diplomat, a unionist, an academic, a child psychologist, a social worker and an aid worker.

APAN generally avoids public endorsements of the BDS campaign because this would undermine its credibility in lobbying political leaders and in its advocacy work. However, APAN facilitates speaking engagements for prominent BDS activists from around the world with Australian politicians, senior bureaucrats and journalists. APAN Executive Member, Peter Slezak has written and spoken extensively in support of BDS.

**AUSTRALIAN JEWS AND BDS**

The BDS campaign seeks to recruit individuals identifying as Jews, based largely on the misguided and offensive belief that the endorsement of a small number of Jewish individuals absolves the campaign of the charge of discriminating against the Jewish people collectively. To this end, the few Jewish pro-BDS groups, consisting of no more than a handful of members, have been formed and frequently evoke their Jewish ancestry to argue that BDS cannot be antisemitic despite its origins, aims, methods and rhetoric.

Monash University sociologist Dr Philip Mendes observed that while supporters of BDS including Federal Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon have claimed “many Jewish communities support this work (BDS)”, in fact, “there are no Jewish communities that support BDS.” Mendes further estimated that the number of Jews who hold strong anti-Israel views is “less than one percent.”

**“BDS activities in Australia have frequently attracted antisemitism, including Holocaust denial and calls for violence against Jews”**

---

**Man draped in Hezbollah flag at anti-Israel rally in Sydney**

**Image published on Australians for Palestine website on 10 March 2013**
BDS IN AUSTRALIA

A sociological survey undertaken by Professor Andrew Markus and others at Monash University in 2008 (the Gen08 Survey) demonstrated that Australian Jews overwhelmingly support Israel’s existence as the national home of the Jewish people and abhor the motives and tactics of the BDS campaign.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND BDS

All Australian political parties which have members in the Federal parliament and/or in State or Territory parliaments, including the Greens, have national policy platforms which include, as part of their foreign policy, support for Israel’s right to live in peace and security and for a two-State solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. None of them has endorsed the BDS campaign. An attempt was made in March 2010 at the Greens Federal conference to have that party endorse BDS, but the proposal was rejected. Contrary to their Party’s position on BDS, Federal Greens Senator Lee Rhiannon and NSW Upper House MPs David Shoebridge and John Kaye have openly supported the BDS campaign.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Professor Alan Johnson, The Apartheid Smear, Britain Israel Communications & Research Centre, February 2014 – View online


Professor Irwin Cotler, Durban’s Troubling Legacy One Year Later: Twisting the Cause of International Human Rights Against the Jewish People, JCPA/ICA, Jerusalem Issue Brief, 2/5, August 2002 – View online

Bernard-Henri Levy, Why the call to “Boycott Israel” is crap, Huffington Post, 25 January 2011 – View online

Professor Ruth Lapidoth, Legal Aspects of the Palestinian Refugee Question, JCPA, September 2002 – View online

Professor Efraim Karsh, The Palestinians and the Right of Return", Commentary Magazine, 2001 – View online


Professor Efraim Karsh and David Barnett, Azzam’s Genocidal Threat, Middle East Quarterly, Fall 2011, pp.85-88 – View online

Professor Haim Gvirtzman, The Israeli-Palestinian Water Conflict: An Israeli Perspective, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 94, January 2012, – View online

Professor David M. Phillips, The Illegal-Settlements Myth, Commentary Magazine, 12 January 2009 – View online

PETER WERTHEIM AM
Executive Director
pwertheim@ecaj.org.au
02 8353 8500

ALEX RYVCHIN
Public Affairs Director
aryvchin@ecaj.org.au
02 8353 8505
THE BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT AND SANCTIONS (BDS) CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISRAEL

PETER WERTHEIM AM
Executive Director
pwertheim@ecaj.org.au
02 8353 8500

ALEX RYVCHIN
Public Affairs Director
aryvchin@ecaj.org.au
02 8353 8505

“The Palestinians are a stage on which the BDS activists act out their identity. To make that possible, The Palestinians must be reduced to pure victims of the evil Nazi-Israelis. For only those kind of Palestinians can enable feelings of moral superiority, purity, quest, meaning, even transcendence of sorts. Palestinians being starved by Assad hold no interest. Palestinians being thrown from rooftops by Hamas members hold no interest. When Salam Fayyad is building up the Palestinian Nation the BDS activists just yawn, or denounce him as a collaborator.”

Professor Alan Johnson

“It is very suspicious that those who boycott Israel don’t want to boycott anywhere else in the world. I believe that those who call for boycotts of Israel without calling for boycotts of other neighbouring nations are practicing, whether they know it or not, whether they admit it or not, a modern form of what we call antisemitism.”

US Senator Chuck Schumer

“The peace process with the Palestinians has an agreed beginning and an agreed solution: two states for two nations.”

Israel President, Shimon Peres

I am committed to two states, a Jewish state of Israel and an independent Palestine, in the historic homeland of both peoples.”

Barack Obama

“It is very suspicious that those who boycott Israel don’t want to boycott anywhere else in the world. I believe that those who call for boycotts of Israel without calling for boycotts of other neighbouring nations are practicing, whether they know it or not, whether they admit it or not, a modern form of what we call antisemitism.”

US Senator Chuck Schumer

“Academic boycotts subvert the academic freedoms and values necessary to the free flow of ideas, which is the lifeblood of the worldwide community of scholars.”

Harvard President, Drew Gilpin Faust