

A progressive Jewish American is Ambivalent About BDS

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I am a Jewish American dedicated to ending the Israeli siege on Gaza and occupation of Palestinian lands. Yet I am ambivalent about boycott, divestment, and sanctions, commonly known as BDS. Not because I want to protect the Israeli people, but because I don't think that BDS will work. That is, I don't believe that BDS, no matter how effective in stopping economic commerce and academic and cultural exchanges, will push the Israeli government to seriously negotiate with the Palestinians to end its occupation and develop a post-occupation political structure.

I am ambivalent and not opposed to BDS because I see two possible ways that BDS can help bring about successful Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. These are education of Israelis to Palestinian rights, and as a tool to help organize opposition to the occupation. But first, why I think BDS will not work.

BDS has not worked anywhere when directed against a government, either as official government sanctions or as organized citizen movements. That does not mean that BDS have no affect on the target country. Rather it means that BDS does not accomplish its stated goal of change in government policy.

The one case of a boycott working is the 1965-1970 grape boycott led by César Chávez and the United Farm Workers against California grape growing corporations. The workers won improved working conditions and a union contract with the growers. Note that the target of this action was a corporation, not a government.

Examples of BDS efforts that did not succeed in changing government policy include efforts against Gaza, Iraq, Iran South Africa, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the Indian salt boycott.

The ongoing Israeli/U.S./Egyptian siege on Gaza has caused great suffering for the 1.5 million people who live in the Gaza Strip. But the siege has not accomplished its stated purpose of pushing the Gazans to turn on their government (Hamas) and overthrow it. In fact, rather than blame their government for their suffering, Gazans blame Israel, Egypt, and the United States.

The U.S. and European sanctions against Iraq during the 1990s caused massive hardship for the people, including killing about 500,000 children. But the sanctions have not accomplished their stated purpose of bringing down the government of Saddam Hussein. However, the sanctions appear to have prevented Saddam Hussein from developing biological, chemical, or nuclear weapons.

The U.S. and other Western nations have had sanctions on Iran for many years. These sanctions have prevented Iran from obtaining replacement parts for several industries, so those industries (petroleum production, refining, aviation, etc.) operate at far less than their potential efficiency, and in some cases constitute a safety hazard. But the sanctions have not brought down the Islamic government of Iran, and have not stopped Iran from developing a program of

uranium enrichment. In fact, the recent movement by Iran to limit its nuclear enrichment program is due to negotiations where Iran was offered something that it considered worthwhile in exchange for limiting its nuclear enrichment program, not the threat of sanctions.

The case BDS proponents most commonly cite as a model for successful BDS campaign is South Africa. They claim sanctions and boycotts were critical in ending apartheid. I disagree. I was in South Africa in 2007 and interviewed 100 middle-class people about their perceptions of why F.W. de Klerk let Nelson Mandela out of prison and lifted the ban on the ANC. That is, I searched for the drivers that ended apartheid. Only one person cited sanctions, and he was deeply involved with the ANC. All other interviewees cited economic unrest due to increasing work stoppages by the black workers, larger and more aggressive black protests, increasing white fear of physical violence due to ANC protests and bombings, and the fact that police repression of blacks was bordering on being out of control. This view of the end of apartheid is exactly that presented in the British film “Endgame” (Daybreak Pictures, 2009), recently shown on Masterpiece Contemporary on PBS. “Endgame” is based on the book “The Fall of Apartheid: The Inside Story from Smuts to Mbeki” by Robert Harvey (Palgrave, 2001).

The 1955 Freedom Charter of the ANC and its partner black organizations was a contributing factor that allowed de Klerk to end apartheid. The Freedom Charted made it clear that the ANC saw a role for whites in a post-apartheid, democratic South Africa. The Charter starts with “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white,” and continually used the phrase “all the people.” The Freedom Charter was a foundation that provided white Afrikaners with enough trust to negotiate with the ANC, and to make concessions without fear of a bloodbath. Unfortunately, there is no trust between Israeli and Palestinians that will encourage Israel, the stronger party, to make concessions necessary for successful negotiations.

The 1955-56 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott by the NAACP appears to have been successful in that segregation on the bus system ended. But the segregation laws did not end by negotiations prompted by the boycott. Rather they ended when the United States Supreme Court decision that declared the Alabama and Montgomery laws requiring segregated buses unconstitutional. Supreme Court upheld a rule against the city. The boycott’s contribution was that it provided the impetus for bringing the racial segregation laws to court.

The 1930-31 Indian salt Satyagraha (boycott) against the salt tax was organized by Mahatama Gandhi and involved perhaps 500,000 Indians, 80,000 of whom were jailed. Even though Gandhi was invited to a Round Table Conference in England, the boycott failed to win major concessions from the British. However, the campaign had a significant effect on changing world and British attitudes toward Indian independence, and caused large numbers of Indians to actively join the fight for the first time.

Four criteria must be in place for sanctions (or divestment and boycott) to achieve political and/or policy changes in a sanctioned country:

1. Significant economic ties must exist between the sanctioning and sanctioned countries. That is, the sanctions have to cause real and evident harm.

2. All important trading partners of the sanctioned country must cooperate to enforce the sanctions. That is, "leakage" must be insufficient to reduce the harm.
3. Cultural and political factors in the sanctioned country must be such that the people do not turn against external groups and rally around their own government.
4. Effective political opposition must exist in the sanctioned country to effect change in the targeted policies or to replace the targeted government.

I suggest that criteria #3 is never met. Whenever a group is attacked, the people never turn against their government. Rather the people always rally round their existing government and in fact the government almost always gets stronger, and the policies and/or government that are targeted commonly gets more entrenched. 9/11 in the United States is an example. In the wake of that event there was a cascade of patriotism, and essentially all criticism of the U.S. foreign policy was silenced.

Beyond criteria #3 never being met, other criteria were also not met in each of the above cases. Sanctions are failing in Gaza because even though condition #1 is met, the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt provide enough leakage that condition #2 is not met. Also condition #4 is not met.

Sanctions failed in Iraq initially because condition #4 was not met – there was no organized opposition group inside Iraq ready to take over. Later condition #2 was not met when the sanction regimen was eased (oil-for-food-program) in response to the realization that the sanctions caused the death of 500,000 children.

Sanctions are failing in Iran because conditions #1 and #2 are not met, mostly because important Iranian trading partners including Russia and China are not willing participants in the sanction regimen.

Sanctions failed in South Africa because conditions #1 and #2 were not met. There was major leakage through Israel and other countries, and South Africa was able to develop internal industry to replace sanctioned items thus negating condition #1.

To understand how BDS may help move Israel to serious negotiations with Palestinians, I return to my South African interviews. Nearly every person I interviewed mentioned the sports boycott, and how they hated it. The sports boycott did not cause apartheid to end, but it surely helped to bring home to white Afrikaners that the world disapproved of the way their government was treating the majority black population of their country. And that surely contributed to the white South African acceptance of de Klerk's unexpected move to release Mandela from jail and lift the ban on the ANC.

Similar situations existed with the Montgomery bus boycott and the Indian salt boycott in that in each cases the boycott did not directly force a change in government policy, but in both cases the boycott contributed to educating and organizing people in support of the cause.

BDS can contribute to the fight against the Israeli occupation in a similar manner. Right now most Israelis think that the way their government treats Palestinians is normal. That depriving young people of education is normal. That limiting Palestinian ability to travel from town-to-town in the West Bank is normal. That starving the people of Gaza is normal. That demolishing Palestinian homes is normal. BDS, especially a cultural and academic boycott may awaken Israelis to the fact that the world disapproves of the way they treat their Palestinian cousins, and that much of the occupation is illegal under international law. A broad BDS program might help Israelis understand that their government must treat Palestinians as fellow human beings, and make concessions to achieve peace.

Another possible benefit is that a BDS program will be an organizing tool to educate the American people about the situation in Israel-Palestine. Many peace activists believe that the unconditional diplomatic, financial, and military support the United States gives to Israel works to perpetuate the status quo. The only way to break the deadlock in negotiations is for the United States to make its support of Israel conditional on real progress towards peace. A BDS program can help change the American view of Israel and Palestine so they urge the United States government to stop promoting the status quo.

But the Israel lobby and the Christian Zionists have a hammerlock on United States policy toward Israel. J Street is already attempting to pull American policy leftward, away from the Likud position of AIPAC and other parts of the Israel lobby, to a more balanced position that recognizes Palestinian rights. A strong BDS campaign will enhance that effort, and may even pull J Street leftward.

Finally, application of BDS does not seem to me the way to change the Israeli government policy towards Palestinians. After all, BDS is a threat (a “stick” in diplomatic terms), and we all know that people change in response to rewards (diplomatic “carrots”) and harden their position in the face of threats. Honorable people and governments get negotiating partners to change by offering inducements, only the mafia and rogue states attempt to get other people to change by coercion.

I am attracted to BDS because it may be an effective tool both to teach Israelis that their mistreatment of Palestinians will not be tolerated by the world community, and to organize Americans to help change United States policy away from unconditional diplomatic, financial, and military support of Israel, a policy that preserves the status quo. On the other hand, I shy away from BDS because it will not fulfill its advertised mission of forcing Israel to change its illegal, violent, and shortsighted persecution of Palestinians. In short, I am ambivalent about BDS.

Jeff Warner is active in LA Jews for Peace, Jews for Peace Between Israelis and Palestinians, Americans for Peace Now, and Cousins Club of Orange County. He organized street demonstrations against the Israeli siege of Gaza starting in late 2007, and against the Israeli bombardment of Gaza during the December-January massacre. In 2006 Warner worked with the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions rebuilding a Palestinian home on the West Bank demolished by Israel. In July Warner was a member of Viva Palestina, a humanitarian mission to Gaza that consisted of 175 Americans.