

# Divestment Diversion

Boycotting Israel will not foster peace.

By Michael C. Desch

FORMER PRESIDENT Jimmy Carter's blockbuster book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* introduced the South Africa analogy into the discussion of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Not surprisingly, the comparison proved controversial. Even the generally balanced *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen angrily asserted, "the Israel of today and the South Africa of yesterday have almost nothing in common."

But both former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and current Defense Minister Ehud Barak have raised the specter of Israel becoming like South Africa if it does not end the occupation of the West Bank. So if the analogy holds, a logical question follows: might the international campaign against white rule in South Africa constitute a viable model for the struggle against Israel's occupation of Palestine?

Many believe that it does. Indeed, the Palestinian Civil Society manifesto that launched the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement takes its inspiration from "the struggle of South Africans against apartheid." The 1949 Arab League boycott of Israel was the forerunner of the modern BDS movement, but given its failure to achieve any of its objectives, BDS proponents are keen to find a different historical anchor. The Third World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in September 2001 is regarded as the turning point for BDS because it linked the two movements.

In the context of the apparent failure of violent struggle in the second Intifada, 170

Palestinian civil-society groups met in July 2005 to call for a global campaign to end the occupation, elevate the second-class status of Arab citizens of Israel, and promote the right of return of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war. A BDS National Committee was established at a conference in Ramallah in November 2007. Founding member Omar Barghouti attributes the movement's "momentous victories of late" to international outrage over Israel's 2006 war in Lebanon and the 2008/9 Gaza wars.

BDS offers a neat solution to the two major obstacles to ending the Israel-Palestine conflict: the continuing use of violence against the Jewish state by some Palestinian factions and the domestic political gridlock in Israel that gives the minority committed to Greater Israel disproportionate influence on policy. Because it is a nonviolent form of resistance, it allows the Palestinians to reclaim the moral high ground.

The flip side, as Middle East peace activist Henry Siegman reminds us, is that since "no country is as obsessed with the issue of its own legitimacy as Israel," BDS particularly stings most Israelis, who consider their country to be part of the "civilized world." Two academic supporters write, "The BDS strategy is designed not only to promote economic consequences for Israel's economy, but also, and often deemed more importantly, to disrupt hegemonic discourse that Israel is a progressive state."

The effort has touched a nerve in some quarters. The Ruet Institute, a Tel Aviv-based policy advisory organization,

warns that BDS represents "a systemic, systematic, and increasingly effective assault on [Israel's] political and economic model." In this view, "the hearts and minds of the elites—individuals with influence, leadership, or authority—represent the battleground between Israel and its foes," and BDS efforts therefore constitute an "existential threat" to the Jewish state.

But not all Israelis regard the movement as a negative development. A few remaining leftists like New Historian and human rights activist Ilan Pappé endorse it. Yet this position remains marginal and precarious, as Ben Gurion University political scientist Neve Gordon discovered last August when he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that a boycott "is the only way that Israel can be saved from itself" and subsequently came under withering criticism from the president of his university, among other high-profile supporters of Israel.

Two other aspects of the BDS movement make it attractive to critics of Israel's policies toward the Palestinians. First, given Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's incessant call for "harsh sanctions" against Iran for its alleged nuclear program, there is a clear symmetry with the BDS effort, which in effect hoists the current Likud government on its own petard.

Second, Israel strikes many as particularly vulnerable to economic sanctions. Sanctions expert Gary Haufbauer points to four characteristics of a state that make it susceptible: small size, democratic political system, vulnerable economy, and

close links to the West. Daniel Drezner adds another reason for optimism: those few cases in which sanctions have succeeded involved otherwise friendly countries. Israel's two largest trading partners are the European Union and the United States. Together, they account for almost 55 percent of the Jewish state's foreign trade. Moreover, because this trade makes up almost 65 percent of Israel's gross domestic product, BDS proponents regard the Jewish state as particularly vulnerable to economic sanctions.

But before we get swept up in the BDS euphoria, we ought to weigh the movement's real prospects for success. Will the boycott and divestment elements of BDS succeed in attracting a critical mass of participants? What is the likelihood that economic sanctions would change Israeli government policy? Finally, would Israel's major trade partners—the United States and the European Union—actually impose these sanctions? On all three counts, the BDS movement's optimism seems unwarranted.

Economist Philippe Delacote observes that boycotts and divestments most often fail because they cannot overcome two common obstacles to collective action: free-riding and coordination problems. Only individuals with strong commitment to the cause are willing to pay the costs of the boycott itself. This reduces the number of participants in the effort, and it also tends to skew the movement's agenda in a more extreme direction.

This explains why the BDS strategy seems ambivalent about a one- or two-state solution. As Barghouti told me, BDS “does not adopt a particular political solution of the colonial conflict.” But the fact that the Palestinian Civil Society document endorses UN Resolution 194's call for unrestricted right of return suggests that at least some parts of the movement lean in the direction of one state.

BDS proponents rightly remind us that the nation that emerged after 1949 was

much larger than UN-designated Israel. Thus their demand that the world recognize the suffering inflicted upon Palestinian refugees during the War of Independence is morally justified. But as a practical matter, anything other than a two-state solution based upon the 1967 borders, shared Jerusalem, and no right of return is a diplomatic non-starter, unlikely to garner support from otherwise moderate Israelis or most other governments.

Proponents of BDS seem to have little faith in changing government policy directly. As the Ma'an Center recounts, “Western governments were entirely supportive of the South African Apartheid regime. . . . Only when civil society groups started to take action did corporations begin to divest from South Africa, paving the way for government boycotts and sanctions.” What they forget is that BDS can only work if it leads governments to impose economic and other sanctions.

Any effort to get the United States government to impose sanctions will have to overcome a very powerful pro-Israel lobby in this country that deploys a wide array of moral (the Holocaust and the Bible) and national-interest (common democracy and allies against terror) arguments bolstered by hardball politics. The problem in Europe, where pro-Israel sentiment is much weaker, is that the EU operates on the unanimity principle. Experts I have spoken with think it unlikely that the EU could ever impose sanctions on the Jewish state.

And even if governments did impose sanctions, it is not a foregone conclusion that they would work. Some Palestinian proponents of BDS hold up the 1936 Arab general strike as a successful boycott campaign, arguing that it led Britain to issue the 1939 White Paper restricting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Given the connection many people draw between these immigration restrictions and the Holocaust, this argument sug-

gests that BDS proponents have a political tin ear. More importantly, this effort ultimately failed to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948.

But we do not have to go back that far to find evidence of how unreliable sanctions are as instruments of statecraft. Even though trade makes up 85 percent of Palestine's GNP, and 90 percent of that is with Israel, the Israelis have not been able to use the economic weapon to dampen Palestinian nationalism. Why would anyone think that economic sanctions would be more effective upon Israel, which is much less economically dependent upon trade? And as the *New York Times* recently reported, the U.S. government is having trouble enforcing its Iran Sanctions Act, a policy that has broad bipartisan support.

Even the most optimistic proponents of economic statecraft like Haufbauer and his Institute International for Economics collaborators Jeffrey Schott and Kimberly Elliot concede that sanctions achieve their objectives in only slightly more than 30 percent of the cases. In a comprehensive assessment of the IIE sanctions database, University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape calculated that the actual success rate was closer to 4 percent. Pape also found that sanctions never work when applied to core issues in a state, especially those involving nationalism. Zionism represents the unifying consensus today in Israel, and while not all Israelis regard the territories beyond the 1967 borders as part of Israel, there is no doubt that Jewish nationalism makes it hard to disentangle from the occupation.

As the constant references to Apartheid make clear, the South African case looms large in the mind of BDS proponents. But as with all historical analogies, there are limits to how much the comparison applies. Many South Africa experts have concluded that international sanctions were not the most important factor

in the downfall of the white minority regime, pointing instead to the greater roles of the internal resistance movements; changes in the global economy that undermined the economic basis of the Apartheid regime; the end of the Cold War, which removed the security rationale for the status quo in the region; and the decision by the United States government to support peaceful transition to majority rule.

Even if one accepts that sanctions played some role in the fall of Apartheid, the differences between the South African and Israeli cases should give BDS proponents pause. One important difference is demographics. While down the road, Jews may become a minority in Greater Israel if the occupation continues, today the balance is roughly equal in Israel and the West Bank, and within the 1967 borders, Jews are a significant majority of the population, a very different balance from Apartheid South Africa where whites were truly in the minority.

Moreover, unlike the African National Congress, the Palestinian resistance is very weak: the West Bank and Gaza are divided between the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas and the secular Palestinian Authority, and with the death of Yasser Arafat there is no Palestinian equivalent to the ANC's charismatic leader, Nelson Mandela.

In addition, while Israel has suffered in many respects in recent years from the ongoing conflict and periodic Intifadas, its economy has nonetheless done quite well in transitioning into the information and service age. While trade makes up a significant part of its economy, of the 196 countries for which the World Bank has data, Israel ranks only 86th in terms of the trade dependency. States with an equal or higher trade exposure, such as Syria (65 percent), Serbia (68 percent), Cote d'Ivoire (74 percent), or Libya (94 percent), have not proven particularly amenable to eco-

nomical sanctions over the years.

One might nonetheless argue that since the BDS movement has so clearly aggravated many Israelis and their supporters in other countries, it must be having some salutary effect. But there is a tendency in Israel to regard every adverse development—from a rudimentary Iranian nuclear program to primitive rockets in Gaza and South Lebanon—as an existential threat. While even hardliners would prefer no sanctions, it does not follow that boycotts or divestment would force them to compromise on deeply held issues. The politically influential faction in power in Israel is willing to sacrifice democracy to maintain the current dimensions of the Jewish state, and is so committed to the Greater Israel project that they are willing to defy the U.S. president. It's hard to imagine that sanctions will affect them.

Nor is the current global security environment propitious for BDS: 9/11 has provided the Israelis with the opportunity to link their struggle with the Palestinians to America's global war on terrorism. This may in part explain why despite early rhetoric about even-handedness in President Obama's June 2009 Cairo speech, the reality of U.S. policy was, at least until recently, better captured in Vice President Biden's assurance to Israelis in March 2010 that there is "no space" between the two countries.

To be sure, the BDS movement has some utility beyond irritating Israelis and their international supporters. It has the educational value of raising consciousness about the occupation and it has the symbolic value of mobilizing opponents of Israeli policies around a concrete program of action. Perhaps these are sufficient reasons to support the movement irrespective of its prospects for success.

But the danger is that in focusing on these things, critics overestimate the prospects for achieving results and underestimate the weaknesses of these

instruments of statecraft. Norman Finkelstein, a consistent proponent of Palestinian rights, concedes that the BDS movement has had some success but cautions against the "tendency now to exaggerate its significance."

This may explain why not all veterans of the struggle for Palestinian rights are unqualified supporters of the BDS movement. MIT linguistics professor and long-time critic of Israel Noam Chomsky opposes sanctions altogether. Peace activist Rabbi Arthur Waskow argues instead that "the major change that needs to happen is a profound change in the actions of the United States government. ... It's the United States government you've got to look to, not private industry or private commerce."

Getting the U.S. government to change will not be easy, as history amply demonstrates. But the argument most likely to sway U.S. policymakers is national security. CENTCOM commander David Petraeus recently testified that the widespread "perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel ... limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships" in the Arab world and thereby undermines our war with al-Qaeda. That logic reportedly led Vice President Joe Biden to tell Netanyahu that continuing Israeli settlement building in occupied East Jerusalem "undermines the security of our troops who are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan" and President Obama to conclude that resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict is "a vital national security interest of the United States." It is hard to imagine the BDS movement's largely moral appeal having a similarly galvanizing effect. ■

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# Arts & Letters

## THEATER

[*The White Guard*, directed by Howard Davies, Royal National Theatre, London]

### Stalin's Favorite Dissident

By Tom Streithorst

BACK IN THE 1930s, after Stalin had finished starving the Ukrainians into submission, was in the midst of slaughtering the kulaks, and was getting ready to murder his own party members, the biggest hit on the Moscow stage was Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Days of the Turbins." It was their "Cats" or, as the head of the Moscow Arts Theatre said at the time, "another 'Seagull' for a new generation." Its appeal to sophisticated Russian theatergoers might have been that it had no tractors, no Stakhanovite workers, no heroic Red Army, none of the tawdry claptrap of typical Soviet propaganda. Instead, its deeply sympathetic heroes were bourgeois intellectuals fighting to restore czarist rule, honest to goodness enemies of the revolution.

Today the play, under its original title, "The White Guard"—a name too politically charged under the Soviet regime—is enjoying a revival at London's Royal National Theatre. I have long wondered how an enemy of the proletariat could have written Stalin's favorite play, so when I heard that it was to be per-

formed for the first time in London since the 1970s, I rushed to get a ticket. I wasn't sure what to expect, but assumed that Bulgakov would have had to suppress his anti-communist convictions in order to get the play produced. I was wrong.

When first performed in 1926, the Communist press denounced the play as counterrevolutionary and suggested that the Soviet government take Bulgakov out and "bash him over the head with a basin." Normally this would have been enough to shut the production down and imprison its author, but "The Days of the Turbins" found an unlikely patron in Joseph Stalin. When he first attended a performance, as the curtain fell, he rose from his box and gave a standing ovation. He would return to see the play some 15 times, insist that it be revived when the authorities closed it, and in a legendary moment in the history of Soviet dissident literature, he telephoned Bulgakov from the Kremlin when the writer was broke and got him a job.

Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), best known for his magic realist novel *The Master and Margarita*, despised the Soviet regime. His 1924 novel, *The Heart of the Dog*, tells the story of a kindly professor who transplants the pituitary gland of a human into a common street dog, transforming the cur into a crass Bolshevik. It is a hysterically funny critique of the Soviet concept of the New Man, telling us that a dog remains a dog, even as he dresses in human clothes and parrots Marxist slogans.

Bulgakov was a snob. For him, the workers and their party were lowlifes. His ideal was the pre-revolutionary intel-

ligentsia—that was the world into which he was born. His father, a professor at Kiev Theological Seminary, raised Mikhail and his six siblings in a profoundly cultured atmosphere.

The play, based on Bulgakov's own family history, opens in the Turbins' large and comfortable apartment in Kiev. Alexei, a colonel in the White Guard, is typing orders, Nicolai is singing, their sister Lena is preparing dinner. It is November 1918. For the moment, their city is still controlled by the White Guard, their German allies, and the Hetman, a German puppet. But Kiev is surrounded by an armed mob. In the Kremlin, the Bolsheviks rule and starving Muscovites are reduced to eating house cats. Outside, you hear gunfire, but inside their flat, the old order remains. Friends stream in from the cold to laugh at each other's jokes, sing songs, flirt, drink vodka, and eat. For all of them, soldiers, scholars, and poets, the Turbins' home is a sanctuary in a world that is falling apart. "These Turbins are. A castle in themselves to protect us from the Horrors," a drunken poet declaims, shortly before he collapses into his soup.

The next day, battle. The second act opens with slapstick comedy set in the Hetman's palace as the self-important toady engineers his escape upon learning that his German allies are abandoning the city. Then a scene with the peasant army, their brutality and venality exposed, contrasting with the nobility (and naivety) of Alexei's White Guard soldiers as they realize they are doomed. The play ends back in the Turbins' apartment as the Bolsheviks are about to enter the city. They recognize their old