

## **The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement Against Israel: Accomplishments, Tactics and Lessons**

These remarks were made by Yosef Munayyer and Noam Chomsky at a panel on November 8, 2014 at Harvard, part of Harvard Arab Weekend. The panel was intended to follow up the exchange on BDS in *The Nation* in July, 2014.<sup>1</sup> The panel was introduced by the organizer and moderator, Ahmed Alkhateeb of the Harvard School of Public Health. The first three speakers discussed academic, cultural and church-based BDS initiatives. Yosef Munnayer, one of Chomsky's interlocutors in *The Nation* exchange, then spoke, followed by Chomsky.

This was transcribed from an audio recording made by an audience member, posted to YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmM3KIRop-c>. It was transcribed by Harry Clark, to use with his article "Noam Chomsky and BDS: the 'responsibility of intellectuals?'" at <http://questionofpalestine.net/2015/02/12/noam-chomsky-and-bds-the-responsibility-of-intellectuals/> Inaudible passages are marked with ellipses, which mostly cover 5 seconds or less, with one period of 20-30.

### **Ahmed Alkhateeb**

(remarks on panel process)

I would like to give a quick introduction for the BDS movement. The BDS movement officially started on July 9, 2005 with a call by 170 Palestinian organizations representing a wide spectrum of Palestinian civil society to put pressure on Israel to comply with international law. It was deeply inspired by the South African movement to end apartheid. The BDS call had three specific demands: ending the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall; recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel for full equality; and respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

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<sup>1</sup>Noam Chomsky, "On Israel-Palestine and BDS. Those dedicated to the Palestinian cause should think carefully about the tactics they choose.", *The Nation* July 21-28, 2014; <http://www.thenation.com/article/180492/israel-palestine-and-bds> (August 24, 2014)  
"Responses to Noam Chomsky on Israel-Palestine and BDS," Yosef Munayyer, et al. July 10, 2014  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/180590/responses-noam-chomsky-israel-palestine-and-bds> (August 24, 2014)  
"On Israel-Palestine and BDS: Chomsky Replies," July 22, 2014  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/180756/israel-palestine-and-bds-chomsky-replies>

But it's also important before we begin to provide a context for the BDS call. It came several months after the Sharm el-Sheik summit which many believe signaled the end of the second Palestinian uprising. Also, following the death of Yasser Arafat the year before, the Palestinian Authority was being shaped and a new era of security coordination was about to begin. Also Israel was building its Wall and continuing its further construction and dismissing international condemnation. So the BDS came as a last resort.

Today, nine years after the initial call, BDS has proved to be a viable approach to engage the public in the fight for Palestinian rights. Its decentralized structure made it a hard tactic to counter, but at the same time its micro-scale approach made it difficult to assess its true impact on Israeli policy. It's hard to know if BDS places any real pressure on Israel. . . settlements are being built as we speak.

However, earlier this year Israeli prime minister Netanyahu spent half of his keynote address to the AIPAC annual conference attacking the BDS movement. The other half was dedicated to Iran. He described BDS as morally wrong, doomed to fail, and that it should be vigorously opposed. Those remarks are a sign that BDS could potentially be on a trajectory to have an impact on the Israeli economy and public image and eventually its policies.

In the US BDS has not enjoyed the same level of success as in Europe, but it's gaining noticeable momentum. Last year the American Studies Association voted to boycott Israeli universities. Earlier this summer, the Presbyterian Church USA divested from multinational corporations. . . occupation. Actually only last month the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ approved a resolution calling for divestment from companies some of which were targeted by the Presbyterian Church before. So the movement is definitely gaining some momentum. But it is obvious that if any of those actions were viewed separately it would be hard to see how it could pressure Israel into changing its policies in the occupied territories.

But viewing the collective of BDS initiatives paints a different picture. Israeli occupation representatives, supporters and profiteers are held accountable for the crimes of the Israeli occupation against the Palestinian people in every possible venue. This will undoubtedly grow into real pressure. But some say that this eventual impact will come too late, far after Israel has consolidated its grip on the occupied territories. Or

that the tactics are not tailored for their target audience. OR that they might divert attention from the plight of the Palestinians to something else.

This panel will delve deeper into those questions. This panel will have two sections. The first section will hear from activists and advocates who worked on BDS initiatives directly, and the second part will talk about the theoretical framework of BDS with specific focus on tactical approach.

(introduction of first speaker)

**Yousef Munayyer**

(introduction by moderator)

Thank you very much, Ahmed, thank you to all the organizers here for arranging this panel, to my co-panelists for their presentations. I'm honored to be asked to share my perspective with you about this very important topic, the BDS movement. In recent years this movement, which has grown steadily, has been the topic of controversy in the mainstream, and also a subject of debate in progressive circles. It's a topic I've written and spoken widely on in a variety of forums. Earlier this year I participated in a forum hosted by *The Nation* magazine on-line along with Professor Chomsky who is with us here today and others on this very issue, and I recommend it to those who are looking to dive deeper on this question.

What I'd like to do today is answer three questions. First, why is BDS necessary; second, what is the goal of BDS; and third, what form should it take? Let's begin with why BDS is necessary. To ask the question is to assume that BDS is necessary, and I do believe that to be true. I do not however, wish that to be the case. In fact I do not prefer the BDS method. I would much rather see state actors behave responsibly, and use their leverage to change Israeli behavior vis-a-vis the Palestinians. The very fact BDS, a civil society initiative, is necessary, today, is a result of the state and inter-state system to deliver for Palestinians.

That failure is obvious, but for the uninitiated suffice it to say that Palestinian rights, which are protected by international law, yet are denied by the Israeli state, have not been supported by the state and inter-state system. Rather, it is because of that system's failure that the Israeli state is able to continue to act with impunity.

This is clear every time the supposed mediator, the United States, casts its veto in the UN Security

Council to shield Israel from international opprobrium. The Washington-dominated peace process has been a farce, and acted only as a cover for continued Israeli colonization of Palestinian territory. Today there is nearly triple the number of settlers in occupied territory than there was before the famed Madrid conference in 1991. These settlements and settlers act as political, physical and economic disincentives to an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. In short, if the peace process has done anything, it has made the likelihood of a viable, sovereign and contiguous Palestinian state in the West Bank as close to zero as possible.

Washington is very clearly pro-Israel, with little interest in genuinely solving the Palestinian issue. Many ask if this will remain this way for ever, and if it can change. Some will point to signs of progress, in public opinion in the United States and globally as a reason to think the United States might modify its policy. Perhaps that can be the case. But in the meantime Palestinians continue to live with rights denied, and many in abject squalor in refugee camps on top of that.

So what are people of conscience to do? BDS is an opportunity for civil society to act and achieve what state actors have either failed to do, or do not care to do. It allows the average person to maximize their potential to impact the situation, through their own economic choices, and through the actions of institutions they are involved in.

Further, it allows those of us whose tax dollars go to supporting the Israeli system of injustice to address our own complicity in the matter.

Last and perhaps most importantly, responding to the BDS call from Palestinian civil society allows us to act in solidarity with those on the ground calling for our help.

So what then is the goal of BDS? The goal of BDS is two-fold. The first and perhaps most obvious goal is to create pressure on the state of Israel. The idea here is that under growing pressure decision makers in Israel will recalculate the policies that deny Palestinians their basic rights. There is great hope for this endeavor because the Israeli state is only able to continue to behave the way it does precisely because it faces very little costs for that behavior, and in fact reaps many political and economic rewards instead.

There was a time, prior to the Washington-led peace process, where the Israeli state was forced to pay much higher costs for the occupation. Prior to the ceation of the Palestinian Authority, Israel bore the bulk

of administering the Palestinian population's civil affairs, and now, with the development of the Palestinian Authority's security forces, and their renowned security collaboration with the Israelis, the Israeli state has effectively subcontracted a large part of the occupation to them.

Defense consumption in Israel in relation to GDP today has halved over the peace process period. Meaning the economic toll of the occupation on the Israeli state's economy is less of a burden today than it has ever been. At the same time, the economic benefits of the occupation for the usurpation of the land, its water and mineral resources, is very significant.

In short, Israel's posture toward the Palestinians is made possible by this equation. BDS aims to tip the scales in the other direction to the greatest attempt possible. While it would be naive to believe that the BDS movement could do this quickly, or even independently, it would be equally naive, if not more so, to believe that Israeli behavior would change without pressure.

The second goal of BDS, which I believe feeds back into the first goal, is education and raising awareness. These days, because of BDS initiatives, as the Reverend [Tim Yeo, of the Presbyterian Church] mentioned, Americans at Presbyterian Church conventions in Detroit, for example, which is 6,000 miles away from the West Bank, are having heated discussions about home demolitions in the West Bank and Gaza, and are talking about the systems of control that Israel uses to restrict Palestinian movement through checkpoints. These are conversations that simply would not be happening without BDS initiatives, and they're happening across the country.

This is the kind of educational impact at the grass roots level that did not exist ten years ago. And I would argue that it is a factor in the shift in American public opinion on this issue in general in recent years. As the public becomes more aware of Israel's violations of Palestinian rights it's less likely to support military and economic aid from America to Israel.

So then what form should BDS take? This has been a question which has perhaps invited the most debate. Some argue that BDS should only target companies that profit off the occupation. Some argue that BDS should only target companies that operate inside Israeli settlements. I believe these perspectives are problematic and flawed for several reasons.

First, separating the occupation from the state is unrealistic. In fact the occupation is state policy. The settlements, which have become more acceptable to oppose in the mainstream today, do not sprout up on hilltops in the West Bank on their own. They are in fact the product of calculated state policy. They are financed through the central government. They are defended by the state's military, and so on. There's no separating the occupation from the state.

Second, this separation feeds into a dangerous and erroneous narrative promoted by many liberal Zionists. This is a narrative that holds that Israel within the Green Line is a liberal democracy, and just has this minor occupation problem that it has to sort out. This is a narrative that completely ignores the plight of Palestinian refugees, and the fact that the so-called liberal democracy that they champion was built at the expense of a people dispossessed and through their perpetual exclusion.

It is a narrative that ignores the fact that Palestinian citizens of Israel were subject to martial law until 1966. And that the state used this period and a series of discriminatory laws to launder land ownership with the purpose of selling it back to itself, and using it then for the benefit of one group, Israeli Jews. It is in short a narrative that seeks to make the powerful more comfortable with the illegitimate ways they achieve this power instead of challenging them.

In reality, not only is the occupation and the settlement enterprise directed by the state, it is an extension of the state's ethos, one that seeks maximum Palestinian geography with minimum Palestinian demography. And it uses whatever means it can get away with to demographically engineer majoritarianism for one group and one group only, Israeli Jews.

The denial of self-determination to Palestinians in the occupied territories, the inequality of Palestinian citizens of Israel, the denial of refugee rights, all stem from a single system of settler-colonial control. In demanding rectification for these three things, the BDS movement recognizes their inseparability, and recognizes that it is that system, which is and has been the M.O. of the Israeli state from day one that is the problem.

Some will argue, and some on this panel may have, that even if this is true, given the status of public opinion on this issue, BDS efforts would be more successful if they are aimed only at the occupation and

settlements. They will point to the fact that successful BDS initiatives have largely all been focused on the occupation, or the settlements, and not on the refugee issue, or Palestinian citizens of Israel. What we must take from this, though, is not that BDS should abandon two of its three demands, but rather that BDS should redouble its efforts to explain the interconnectedness and inseparability of those three.

There was a time in this country where, because of the status of public opinion on this issue, it was far easier to organize around voting rights for African-Americans, than it was to organize around the right for interracial marriage, for example, or against miscegenation laws. In fact by the time the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, only ten percent of the American public approved of marriage between blacks and whites. Does this mean that such efforts should not have been made? On the contrary, when we're talking about efforts for social justice, whether it be for Palestinians or any other group, what should be done must not be guided by what is popular, but rather by what is right. Today, by the way, 87% of Americans approve of marriage between the races.

While BDS victories focused on the occupation and settlements might not be based on all three demands, they should still be welcomed by the BDS movement in general. At this stage, any effort that could be made, to add pressure to the side of the scale opposite the Israeli state, are efforts in the direction of peace and justice. If this means a particular community is prepared only to boycott Dead Sea products, for example, not necessarily the Israeli state to the fullest extent, then so be it. Every contribution helps.

In closing, it's important to keep in mind that the BDS movement is in many ways a nascent movement, and at the same time it's up against significant odds. It's easy today to question what it has accomplished, and far more difficult to see a clear path forward. What we know for sure, is this.

One, all other efforts at changing Israeli state behavior have largely failed thus far, and two, Palestinians have asked for the solidarity of global civil society in an effort to reclaim their rights. There is lots of work yet to be done, as evidenced by some of the hard-working voices on the panel, there's great enthusiasm to do it.

Self-evaluation within a movement is healthy, and is critical, but it must be guided by its principles, and not short-term tactical objectives. As the movement grows, remaining steadfast to these principles, while

laying the educational groundwork to expand tactical victories, will be central to its success. Thank you.

## **Noam Chomsky**

(introduction by moderator)

It's interesting that I was introduced as someone who wrote something criticizing BDS tactics. That tells you something about the BDS movement. Actually I wrote something advocating BDS tactics, strongly advocating them. But I didn't support every proposal that had been made. This movement is quite different from other solidarity movements I've had to do with over the last 50 years. Either you accept everything or you're a critic. Every other activism I've ever been involved with took for granted that tactics were going to be debated. You were going to ask if they worked. If they didn't work you were going to change them. There was internal discussion, internal criticism. It goes on all the time. If that's not done, it's not going to be a success. That's worth thinking about.

We have a concern, Palestinian rights, what can be done in the short term to alleviate the problems, with an eye for longer term opportunities and goals. We have a choice of action. That depends crucially on analysis of existing circumstances, and also analysis of historical models. So as was pointed out, the BDS movement and other Palestinian activist is inspired to a significant extent by the South Africa experience. So we should pay attention to what it was, not what we wish it was, what it actually was. That's important. Let's take a look at that.

What happened in South Africa? Briefly, the following. By 1958 the nationalist government recognized that they were becoming internationally isolated. The South African foreign minister in 1958 called in the American ambassador, and spoke to him. The records, they have been declassified. He told him, look, we know we're becoming a pariah state, we know everyone's voting against us in the United Nations, we know we're subject to all sorts of pressure, but it doesn't matter, because there's only one voice in the United Nations, that's yours. There's only one major actor in the world scene, that's you, and as long as you support us, we don't really care, we'll circle the wagons, we'll face this and that, but we'll continue doing exactly what we're doing, as long as you support us. That's pretty much what happened.

By the mid-70s, there were already United Nations embargoes against South Africa. By, say, 1980,

opposition to apartheid was almost universal, and pretty soon Congress was passing sanctions against South Africa which Ronald Reagan had to veto, and they had to violate them when they were passed over his veto. By the 1980s BDS-type actions were beginning to take off in the United States, and they were significant. But public opinion, corporations were pulling out, the situation in Israel is quite different. Corporations are moving in, Israel is a target for US investment, it's increasing rapidly.

It's a close ally. Just during the Gaza monstrosity, some of you may have noticed that Israel was actually running low on munitions at one point, because of the ferocity of the attack, and asked the United States to provide more munitions, which it did, but notice where they came from. These were munitions that were pre-positioned in Israel for the use by American forces when they carry out aggressive actions in the region. That's one of many indications of extremely close military and intelligence collaboration. These are parts of the real world. We can't ignore them.

And there's something else, incidentally, about the case of South Africa. By about 1990 the US did change its position, and apartheid collapsed within a couple of years. That wasn't the only reason, there were other factors, in the case of South Africa. One was as I said, the overwhelming opposition to apartheid. The anti-apartheid movement was very narrowly focused. It wasn't focused on economic discrimination against blacks, which was horrible. It was focused on apartheid, and that was a large part of the reason for its success, limited success. So the support activity, the boycotts were against refusal to allow blacks to participate in teams. That's what it was about. And it was successful.

There were other factors that unfortunately don't exist in the Palestinian case. But one crucial factor which we're not allowed to talk about in the United States, was Cuba. Cuba sent forces which drove the South African aggressors out of Angola, forced them to leave Namibia, made it clear to them that they were not going to be able to establish, to sustain themselves in the regional environment. That's why Mandela, when he got out of prison, the first thing he did was to thank the Cubans for their crucial support in the liberation of South Africa. The other, there were other factors, but the change in the US position was a significant one... and I think we should bear all that in mind.

The current circumstances in the region are straightforward. For the last forty years there has been an

overwhelming international consensus in support of a two-state settlement on the international border, with guarantees for the rights of each state to live in peace and security within secure and recognized borders. I'm quoting from the UN Security Council Resolution of January, 1976, forty years ago, brought by Egypt, Jordan and Syria, vetoed by the United States, the first of a long series, I won't run through the record. That essentially remains the international consensus. The United States has been blocking it for forty years and still does.

There is a general debate on this issue, on all sides, Israelis, Palestinians, and international commentators. The argument is that either there will be a two-state settlement, or the alternative will be one state, a binational state, Israel will rule the territory from Jordan to the sea, and many Palestinians welcome this as an opportunity for an anti-apartheid civil rights struggle on the South African model. Israelis are also deeply concerned about it, because of what they call the "demographic problem" of too many Palestinians in a Jewish state.

The problem with this, it's all an illusion. Those are not the two alternatives. The two alternatives are quite different. One of them is the international consensus. The other is that Israel will continue to do exactly what it is doing, and that's quite clear, there's no reason to be deluded about it. Gaza is separated, kept as a mere prison, for survival, separated from the West Bank. In the West Bank Israel is systematically taking over areas that it wants to maintain, that means greater Jerusalem, and the corridors to the east which cut off the surrounding territories, everyone within the separation wall, the Seam [between the wall and the Green Line], the Jordan Valley, which Israel is gradually settling, driving out Palestinians, sinking wells and so on, and that's maybe fifty percent of the West Bank. And of course the Golan Heights. The areas Israel is taking over, none have a heavy Palestinian population concentration, and many of those who live there are being driven out. The end result of these policies is a greater Israel which will have no 'demographic problem'. There will be fewer, a higher percentage of Jews in greater Israel, Palestinians will be left in unviable cantons, the standard neo-colonial pattern. There'll be a place for Palestinian elites to live quite well, in Ramallah and so on.

That's what's being created on the ground, in front of our eyes. As long as the US supports it there is

no reason for Israel to stop. The one-state option I think is a good idea, in the long run, but there is only one way that I can imagine to reach it, and that's in stages, with a two-state settlement as the first stage. If there's another possibility, it's yet to be proposed. It's okay to say 'I'd like it, but that doesn't help.' You have to show how we get there, how we get from here to there. It's kind of like saying let's get rid of nuclear weapons. How? What are the steps we take to get there? That's what activism's about, "how do you get there," not "I like this solution." That's the current situation in Israel/Palestine. What about the United States?

As was pointed out there are changes, significant ones, very significant ones. Fifteen, twenty years ago, literally, you had to have police protection even to talk about this topic on campus, even at my own university, down the street. That's totally changed... talk about Gaza, two or three weeks ago, there were probably seven or eight hundred students there. And its everywhere, all over the country. Palestinian solidarity over the last fifteen or twenty years has become one of the main issues, commitments and engagements on college campuses. That's important. This is pretty normal. .You look over activist movements in the past, young people are typically in the forefront. So in the case of South Africa the first BDS activity was at Hampshire College, similarly with other activists. The tone, is significant, it can have an effect, in the long run it can make a serious change. It's happened in many other cases, including harder ones.

What about tactics? How should we choose? First of all, as far as education and organizational activities are concerned, they're independent of our assessment of the circumstances. We always carry them out, whatever the circumstances. If everybody's opposed, we still carry them out. So that's a separate matter. Activism is to consider the likely consequences of your actions. That's quite different from education and organization. So what kinds of tactics, the tactics that should be chosen are those that will influence what's on the ground, and that will have an effect on US public opinion. . . educational and organizational efforts, and ultimately have an effect on US policy. And BDS can and has served those ends, if it's properly executed. And there are many cases in which it has been properly executed.

Probably the most influential case, significant case, in the long run, is the European Union. The European Union issued a directive, if they implement it we will see, but they issued it, banning any interactions with

Israeli institutions that are involved in any way with the illegal occupation. That's quite significant. That's the kind of thing that can have a major impact, it means a lot to them, it's their biggest trading partner... the Presbyterian church decision that Reverend DeYoe spoke about is a major case here, aimed at the occupation, and crucially, aimed at American corporations. That's very significant, you want to change US policy, the people who are significant in determining US policy, are the corporate sector that's... Caterpillar, Motorola, and others. Actions directed against them are very significant in the long term effort... to change US policy. Also of course this affects US opinion. Sodastream was another case that was mentioned.

The fact of the matter is that the efforts that have in fact had real consequences are those that are directed at the occupation. Overwhelmingly that's true. And there's a good reason for this. The occupation is very strongly opposed... recognized as illegal by almost everyone. The US objection is a partial exception. So it's pretty natural that these policies can be successful, and it has worked.

There are other options. Reverend DeYoe mentioned one of the crucial ones, focusing on getting the US government to follow US law. US law. Forget international law, they don't pay any attention to that... But to follow US law. There is a law... which bans dispatch of arms to any entity which is engaged in consistent human rights violations. Israel's human rights violations, military violations, reach the sky... These are things that can really be pursued seriously. They have exactly the kinds of effects we want, they would affect things on the ground enormously, they would affect US opinion and US policy.

A final comment, one lesson that I won't repeat... second nature for activists. It doesn't matter if we tactics are appropriate. That's interesting, but of no significance. It matters whether others think so, that we convince them they are the right thing to do. If we have time I will give examples of both types... Tactics require honest, accurate assessment, careful assessment of the existing circumstances. That includes what's happening on the ground, it includes the existing state of opinion and the impact that tactics will have on it. This is separate from education and organizational activity, they go on all the time. With regard to tactics you have to ask, what is the impact on the audience you are trying to reach. Will it be positive or will it be negative? It doesn't matter what we think, it matters what they think. With careful thinking about these matters, BDS tactics can be part of a range of actions that could have quite considerable impact... in

bringing about the kind of significant changes that we ought to reach.

### **Question and Answer**

In introducing Q&A the moderator posed a question.

Moderator: Let's talk about US policy. How can BDS affect US policy? So far it has succeeded in raising awareness and engaging the public. But there are as yet no hints that US policy is changing. Or are there? And if you don't think so how can BDS be used to change US policy? This is directed to Dr. Chomsky...

Chomsky: It's very straightforward, it's given by the Presybterian Church decision, which targeted US corporations, Caterpillar and Motorola, those are major US corporations. Targeting them is...they own those profits, they own those business, they don't want to be exposed...they have the power, it shouldn't be this way, it would be nice if it were a democracy, it isn't a democracy, it's a plutocracy, we ought to recognize it, by going after the centers of power. The same is true of the military industry... when the US gives \$3 billion of aid its a huge boon to the military industry, in fact it's a double boon, because Saudi Arabia comes along and says, "we'd like \$60 billion of second-rate equipment which we don't know how to use." All of that is crucial. Furthermore Israel is a valuable client state. There aren't many places for example where you can preposition weapons for when you next want to carry out aggression. And that's only the beginning. So targeting the military industry... and that's alongside what was pointed out, that BDS efforts can be part of educational and organizational programs, aimed at American opinion, which can matter...but of course it has to be carefully thought through. You need to recognize what people believe, what they understand, what they don't understand...