

Palestinian “Child Prisoners” and the BDS Campaign. Israel’s International Image Continues to Deteriorate

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On Wednesday, a debate was held in the British Parliament on the issue of Palestinian child prisoners detained by Israeli forces in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

The same day, two thousand miles away, Israel’s Knesset hosted a discussion on how to combat the growing, Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. Together, these two parliamentary meetings serve as a useful illustration of why Israel’s international image continues to deteriorate – and why it is not likely to improve any time soon.

First, to Westminster, where Labour MP Sarah Champion sponsored a debate on Palestinian child prisoners. The majority of the [debate](#) was taken up by a detailed account of the situation as it currently stands, including how children are taken from their homes at night, and the injustices and discrimination inherent in Israel’s use of military courts to try and jail Palestinian children.

Instructively, however, the debate did not just focus on the human rights abuses being perpetrated by Israel, but what can be done to stop them.

Champion, describing the transfer of Palestinian detainees out of the OPT as a war crime, urged the government to establish “a watch list” of those responsible, and to “ensure that any individual on the watch list who attempts to enter the UK is detained for questioning and, if sufficient evidence is available, charged and prosecuted, subject to the consent of the Director of Public Prosecutions.”

Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, meanwhile, asked Champion whether she agreed “that it is now time for action”, and suggested that “the UK could call for the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement”, on the basis that it includes “a clause saying that if there are human rights abuses, there is a right to suspend the agreement.” Champion called the recommendation “superb.”

Two members of Labour’s frontbench similarly urged further meaningful steps to be taken: shadow Foreign Office minister Diana Johnson insisted that “the British Government need to do much more to hold the Israeli Government to account”, while shadow minister for human rights Andy Slaughter criticised what he called “the apartheid regime that exists...in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

Interestingly, given how strong the support for Israel has been, and continues to be, within

the Conservative Party, three Tory MPs also voiced criticism of Israeli policies. Tania Mathias, for example, noted the “sad coincidence” that the debate was taking place the same week the UN human rights envoy to the Palestinian territories resigned because Israel denied him access.

Conservative MP Bob Stewart predicted that, unless Israel changes its illegal policies, “people such as me, who actually are big supporters of Israel, will lose the urge to be supporters.” Similarly, Tory MP David Jones, calling himself a friend of Israel, said that “the way that Israel is conducting itself is in a way that should bring shame to any self-respecting democracy.”

Attempts to defend Israel during the debate were feeble and predictable. Labour MP Ian Austin was literally laughed at, after he asserted that the detention of children under-12 simply “does not happen.” Conservative MP John Howell referred to Palestinian “incitement” six times in one minute, and also declared that “we should focus our attention on the Saudi execution of minors.”

Andy Slaughter put it succinctly when he said “government Members—and, indeed, Opposition Members—who seek to defend the occupation are increasingly clutching at straws in doing so.”

In the Knesset, meanwhile, Wednesday saw some 150 politicians and activists [gather](#) for a two-hour [discussion](#) organised by the Caucus to Fight Delegitimization on how to fight the BDS campaign. The caucus has five, cross-party co-chairs: Michael Oren (Kulanu), Anat Berko (Likud), Nachman Shai (Zionist Camp), Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid), and Robert Ilatov (Yisrael Beytenu).

The meeting was chaired by Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan, who [called](#) for “a network to face a network”, echoing the [wording](#) used by think-tank the Reut Institute. Erdan is responsible for coordinating the government’s efforts to sabotage the various global campaigns designed to hold Israel to account, with a NIS 100 million budget for 2016.

Erdan described delegitimization as “a challenge with strategic potential”, and BDS as “part of a broader campaign that covers many areas, including education and culture.” BDS activists’ aim, the minister warned, is “to restrict the IDF’s actions and discriminate in international institutions.”

The Labor party’s Nachman Shai emphasised how the fight against the growing boycott united both coalition and opposition alike. MK Berko [called](#) BDS “jihad dressed up in a suit.” Most [speakers](#) were well-known pro-Israel advocates, including Irwin Cotler, former ambassador Ron Prosor, NGO Monitor head Gerald Steinberg, and Shurat HaDin’s Nitsana Darshan-Leitner.

MK Michael Oren, meanwhile, in remarks made to the press beforehand, [claimed](#) that BDS activists “are well-funded, highly organized and very sophisticated.” According to Oren, Israel is yet to “come up with an answer [to BDS]”, and suggested a role for the Israeli military and intelligence services.

Desperate stuff, and the suggestions made during the meeting were more of what has already been tried: former Israeli soldiers visiting North American campuses, ‘exposing’ BDS activists, and so on.

Meanwhile, in London, British politicians – including many who still describe themselves as ‘friends’ of Israel – despaired of the treatment of Palestinians under a discriminatory occupation, and, crucially, called for the government to go beyond mere words.

Israel’s leaders still don’t understand. BDS is not some well-resourced, evil conspiracy but a grassroots response to Israel’s colonialism, occupation, and apartheid. Without drastic changes on the ground, support for this form of pressure will only grow – including in Westminster.

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