

The Palestinian Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Illegal Israeli Settlements

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Despite the stranglehold Israel lobbies have on Euro-parliaments and politicians, there have been some surprisingly plucky official moves to protest illegal Israeli settlements recently, notes

Israeli mayoral visits to Spain and the Netherlands were nixed in September because the delegation included leaders of illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. The visit of thirty Israeli mayors to the Netherlands was organised by the Israeli branch of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) after the Spanish municipal organisation cancelled a proposed visit in light of the Israeli attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla.

The Dutch conference was to be hosted by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), located in The Hague. The aim of the trip was purportedly to learn more about the Dutch system of local, regional and national authorities, though such official visits are really an Israeli ploy to provide de facto recognition of illegal settlements.

The JDC and the Union of Local Authorities in Israel tried to arrange the tour through the embassy of the Netherlands in Tel Aviv, including mayors of West Bank settlements Beit Aryeh, Har Adar, Kiryat Arba, Oranit, Beit El, Efrat and Elkana, but when informed, VNG refused to host the delegation as long as the occupation mayors were part of it. "When they asked for the list we realised we had run aground," said head of the Council of Efrat Oded Revivi, though the JDC has facilitated similar trips to Denmark, France and China.

The Palestinian Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) National Committee emphasised that there are more than 150 settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, housing 475,000 settlers on more than forty per cent of the West Bank. After VNG's decision to call off the visit, Dutch Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Verhagen came under fire from Dutch right-wing parliamentarians. Geert Wilders, leader of Party for Freedom, demanded that Verhagen force VNG to proceed with the planned visit. Pro-Israeli Verhagen surprised parliament by supporting VNG, admitting that Israeli settlements are in violation of international law.

VNG did the same in the 1990s, urging Dutch cities to support the South African anti-apartheid movement when the national government was reluctant to. Amsterdam declared itself an "anti-apartheid city", boycotting South Africa and hosting the ANC representative for the Netherlands. The VNG's principled position today is once again paving the way for otherwise timid politicians like Verhagen to stand up to Israeli apartheid.

Israel's accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in May was a coup for the country, in face of its 2008 invasion of Gaza and continued

settlement activity. This entry in the European Union via the backdoor was quickly used by Israel to try to try to secure de facto recognition of Jerusalem its new capital by hosting an OECD tourism conference in West Jerusalem in October.

However, this backfired as 11 countries boycotted the High Level Roundtable rather than provide the long-sought recognition, including Norway, Canada, Ireland, the UK, Sweden, Iceland, Turkey and South Africa. Other countries sent only low-level delegations: Greece a Tel-Aviv staffer from the Greek information office and Denmark a statistician. The Czech Republic was the only EU country to send a political representation. The Swedish delegation to the OECD indicated that their boycott of the conference was in conformity to EU policy on the status of Jerusalem.

The tipping point was when Israeli Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov boasted to the press that the meeting — the first OECD meeting hosted by Israel since it became a member — was proof that OECD members recognised Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital. In a strongly worded letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, OECD General Secretary Angel Gurría called the comments “factually incorrect and quite unacceptable”.

Even the drivers at the ill-fated Roundtable, hired to shepherd delegates around the Holy Sites, raised a furor, as they turned out to be from the extremist Mateh Binyamin Regional Council, which has built and has jurisdiction over 42 West Bank settlements.

Critics of Israeli membership in the OECD assert that Israel does not meet the required economic and human rights standards for membership, and that OECD members who allowed Israel to join did so in violation of their own commitments to the Geneva Conventions. Israeli economic data submitted to the OECD brazenly includes information relating to illegal Israeli settlements in Occupied Palestinian Territory, amounting to an implicit OECD endorsement of the Israeli occupation.

The BDS National Committee described the Roundtable boycott as “clear condemnation of Israel's continued ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem”. BDS coordinator Hind Awwad said, “That countries like Canada and the UK, which are traditionally staunch defenders of Israeli apartheid, colonialism and occupation, have refused to attend the conference is a significant development.”

The scandal confirms that it is impossible to deal with Israel without abetting its occupation of Palestinian territories and its daily violations of human rights and international law, forcing even the most pro-Israel countries in the West to join the BDS campaign, despite their official condemnation of it.

It is not just the Israeli government that is guilty, but all Israeli organisations, especially universities, which collaborate with the occupation through research. This prompted 200 academics from 14 South African universities last month to support University of Johannesburg's decision to end collaboration with Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. “As academics we acknowledge that all of our scholarly work takes place within larger social contexts — particularly in institutions committed to social transformation. South African institutions are under an obligation to revisit relationships forged during the apartheid era with other institutions that turned a blind eye to racial oppression in the name of ‘purely scholarly’ or ‘scientific’ work.”

South Africa's Human Sciences Research Council, in a response to an investigation

commissioned by the South African government in 2009, issued a report confirming that the everyday structural racism and oppression imposed by Israel constitutes a regime of apartheid and settler colonialism similar to the one that shaped lives in South Africa.

Despite the strong Friends of Israel lobby in all three British political parties and the fragile UK coalition government, on 3 November, another Hague caught Europe off-guard, this time British Foreign William Hague, who defied official Israel and met with Palestinian and Israeli anti-Wall activists in Bitunia south of Ramallah, overlooking Ofer prison, where many activists are in jail.

“When negotiations seem like an eternally unfulfilled promise due to Israel’s unwillingness to reach a fair solution, popular resistance to the Occupation is the sole remaining possible alternative for the Palestinians to achieve their rights and avoid armed struggle,” Hague encouraged the activists, promising them the support of the British government in their struggle.

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