

We Will Not be Complicit in Israel's System of Apartheid

SAWSAN BASTAWY of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign explains the importance of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement

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This morning in Hebron, Palestinian children will walk to school, as they do every morning, via a series of checkpoints, watched by heavily armed Israeli soldiers.

In East Jerusalem, several hundred teachers will attempt to do the same, but many will be held at checkpoints for several hours, and some will not make it to school in time to teach.

In the northern West Bank governorate of Nablus, shepherds will herd their livestock under the continual threat of violence from Israeli settlers and soldiers on land that belongs to them, but which they are denied from building on, forcing them to live in caves.

In the Naqab desert, Bedouin residents of Umm al-Hiran will wake up again to the reality of life in one of more than 40 Palestinian villages in the Naqab that the state of Israel refuses to recognise, cut off from all basic services and facing the ongoing threat of demolition to be replaced by a village that will be for Jewish citizens only.

In Gaza, with almost no electricity or clean water supply, many families whose homes were never rebuilt following Israel's 2014 offensive will take shelter from the bitter winter in temporary, makeshift homes.

And in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, Palestinian refugees will wake up to life in a cramped refugee camp with limited facilities, many still holding among their possessions the keys to the homes from which they and their families were expelled in 1948.

In 2005, on behalf of all of these Palestinian communities, a coalition of 170 Palestinian civil society organisations launched a call for the world to show support and solidarity by implementing a campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) until Israel ends its occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza; recognises the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality under the law; and recognises the right to return of Palestinian refugees.

BDS is now a vibrant global movement made up of trade unions, academic associations, churches and grassroots movements across the world.

The call for BDS was launched because of the reality that the international community, including the British government, has consistently failed to take action to meaningfully hold

Israel to account despite passing resolutions and issuing statements condemning Israel's violations of international law.

Instead of holding Israel to account, many governments provide Israel with political, diplomatic, military and financial support. When those in power refuse to act to stop this injustice, what is needed is a global citizens' response.

Israel has identified the growing strength of the BDS movement as a major strategic threat and has launched a global effort to suppress BDS activity.

Alongside the introduction of draconian laws at home, curtailing the activities of human rights activists supporting the campaign, it has worked with allies abroad to see through the introduction of laws suppressing protest.

The British government introduced regulations last November that sought to curtail the right of local government pension funds to divest from companies complicit in the occupation. PSC successfully challenged these regulations, winning a judicial review in June of this year which ruled them unlawful.

Alongside this use of "lawfare" has been the propounding of a narrative that seeks to reframe support for BDS as an act that is divisive, hostile and bigoted. Two key arguments are routinely used to support this narrative.

The first is to deny the legitimacy of any analogy between South African apartheid and Israeli apartheid. Israel, we are told, is a beacon of justice and equality due to the fact that Palestinian citizens can vote, hold seats in the Knesset, and sit in the judiciary.

In reality Adalah, the Israeli legal rights centre, has identified over 65 laws that specifically discriminate against Palestinian citizens of Israel, who make up 20 per cent of the population.

One such law is the Acceptance to Communities Law that legitimises Jewish towns in Israel of a certain size in excluding Palestinians from residing within them. Forty-three percent of Israeli towns have residential admission committees that filter out applicants on the grounds of "incompatibility with the social and cultural fabric."

These committees are, in the words of Human Rights Watch, "used to exclude Arabs from living in rural Jewish communities."

The second line of argument is that BDS targets the Israeli state and that the problem is not the state itself, but Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

Rather than supporting BDS, we are told we should be supporting progressive forces such as the Israeli Labour Party which opposes Israel's illegitimate policies towards the Palestinians.

This line of argument ignores the reality of how the Israeli Labour Party has followed the rightward drift in the Israeli political mainstream in positioning for votes.

It also ignores the reality that the Israeli Labour Party has been more than a willing accomplice in Israel's settlement programme. Former Israeli premier Ehud Barak complained only last month that the state ceremony celebrating 50 years of the occupation of the West Bank did not give enough credit to Labour governments

who “consolidated and led the settlement enterprise for a decade.”

So on this international day of solidarity with the Palestinian people, our message is one of respect for the call made by the Palestinians themselves.

We respect the Palestinian call for BDS because we believe that to do otherwise, to continue to provide cultural, economic and political support for Israel’s system of apartheid is to be complicit.

BDS is not a hostile action towards a people, but is one of non-co-operation with a system which is profoundly unjust and immoral.

The conflict between Palestine and Israel, to which we all seek an end, is one rooted in the unjust domination of one people over another, a domination supported by claims of ethnic, cultural or religious entitlement. This is where the analogy with South African apartheid holds true.

As the South African theologian Desmond Tutu said:

“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

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