

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions: Israeli Pressures on the Canadian Government

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The movement to isolate Israel through boycott, divestment and sanctions resonates from Canada to the Indo-Pakistani border, notes Eric Walberg

Last month Canada's controversial Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper continued his campaign to support Israel through thick and thin at an international conference hosted by the Canadian Parliamentary Coalition to Combat Anti-Semitism (CPCCA), where he solemnly warned participants, "History shows us, and the ideology of the anti-Israel mob tells us all too well, that those who threaten the existence of the Jewish people are in the longer term a threat to all of us."

His goal was to produce a protocol, to be adopted by all Canadian political parties, expanding the definition of anti-Semitism to include criticism of Israel. But Harper's vocal support for Israel right-or-wrong over the past three years has backfired. The Bloc Quebecois withdrew from the CPCCA in March, citing "the refusal of the Steering Committee to hear groups with opposing viewpoints". The New Democratic Party has been under intense pressure to do the same.

I'm not sure about a "threat" to the Jewish people in Canada, but "the anti-Israel mob" is very much a threat to Harper's neocon programme, not only in its warlike foreign policy, but its elitist domestic one. In any case, the proposed declaration never appeared, as it became clear that it would not be possible to submit such a declaration to parliament, and it would only add further fuel to the Canadian grassroots activists who are appalled at Canadian complicity with Israel's behaviour.

As Canadians turn their thoughts to Noel feasts, boycott divestment sanction (BDS) activists are finding that what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Harper's over-the-top obsession with Israel has been a boon to educating Canadians about Israeli apartheid. George Galloway made several speaking tours speaking to packed audiences this year criticising the bias of the Canadian government, after he was barred from entry last year as a security risk.

Omar Barghouti, a founder of the Palestinian BDS campaign, toured Canada last month after attending the Montreal BDS conference at the end of October. He is "very optimistic" about the effect the growing global BDS is having, which a Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) delegate at the Montreal conference called "an unstoppable movement".

Barghouti dubbed Montreal "the capital of the BDS campaign in the Francophone world". "The Old Order is going. BDS is skyrocketing, well-anchored in international law and in the universal principles of freedom, justice and equal rights. We are absolutely anti-racist and

we reject anti-Semitism. We believe in ourselves, in our heritage, in our roots. The once 'invincible' US-Israeli axis is now shaking. You'd think Netanyahu and Lieberman were working for the BDS movement!" He was too polite to add "and Harper", but his listeners got the message. "Besiege your siege," exhorted Barghouti, echoing the cry of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

Despite the presence of trade unionists representing COSATU, Quebec unions, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canadian unions still have long-established links with the Israeli labour federation Histadrut, and resistance among union leadership to BDS continues. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) world congress in June 2010 in Vancouver rejected calls to support BDS, and even elected Histadrut head Ofer Eini one of its vice presidents.

"COSATU lost a few friends in Canada when it raised the BDS issue at the ITUC conference. Its international officer was even threatened with the withdrawal of his Canadian visa. But the attack has only strengthened world solidarity behind the BDS campaign," said the COSATU representative in Montreal.

Barghouti said the world order was changing rapidly, seconding Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiongo's argument that "decolonising the minds" is even "more important than decolonising the lands". "Canada kept it quiet, but it did refuse, with many other countries, to attend the OECD Tourism conference held in Jerusalem," Barghouti said. "At the 2009 AIPAC conference, it was stressed that the BDS campaign was becoming mainstream, and Israel's Hasbara (Propaganda) campaign was failing. The Knesset is now looking to criminalise Jewish support for BDS inside Israel."

Barghouti's colleague Areej Jaafari, a young woman activist from the Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem, told the conference "Boycott of Zionism is nothing new for us. It goes back 100 years. We have Gandhi, the US civil rights movement and South Africa on our side."

There was a strong presence of Canadian First Nations at the Montreal conference, including the Mohawk Nation, once dwellers on the land that is now Montreal. Canadian apartheid was condemned alongside Israeli apartheid. Judy Dassylva of the Grassy Narrows First Nation in northwestern Ontario compared Israeli actions to the contamination of First Nation lands through clear-cutting and mercury poisoning. "To us, apartheid is one and the same whether in South Africa, Israel or Canada. Our kids were brainwashed in residence schools. Our women raped. It's a miracle I am alive and sitting here in front of you. But we are not as powerful as you, we need our own BDS campaign," she beseeched Barghouti and Jaafari.

One of the BDS groups that Harper has inadvertently helped most is Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), which recently inaugurated an impressive Boycott Centre at cjpme.org, providing activists around the world with resources and tools to promote the campaign to bring Israel to its senses. It features Talking Points, a "Why boycott Israel?" Factsheet, a Consumer Boycott Network and City Activist Network.

Each month CJPME features an active consumer boycott campaign of a company supporting Israel through economic ties. Last month it was the turn of Aroma Espresso Bars, part of an Israeli-owned chain which operates in Maaleh Adumim, an Israeli settlement built on the site of several Palestinian and Bedouin villages, strategically located near Jerusalem, part of a

clear plan by Israel to expand and annex East Jerusalem.

CJPME is setting its sites next on Mountain Equipment Co-op, which uses Israeli military contractors as suppliers. Western Union, Ahava, H&M, Office Depot and Pizza Hut are on their list for the new year. The BDS movement in Canada targets more than 120 brands and labels linked to Israel, including Coca Cola, Estee Lauder and Indigo-Chapters bookstores.

Another CJPME focus is artists, asking those who contemplate performing in Israel or have been there recently to rethink their actions. They can point to such stars as Meg Ryan and Dustin Hoffman, who refused to attend the Jerusalem film festival in July to protest the Israel raid against the Freedom Flotilla, and director Mike Leigh, who last month cancelled his plan to teach at the Sam Spiegel Film & Television School in Jerusalem, citing the new loyalty oath.

Far from wintry Canada, a poignant meeting took place on 5 December on the Pakistan-Indian frontier, when 28 Indians and one Japanese peace activist crossed the Wagah border to hand over a Palestinian flag to Pakistani participants in the Asian Gaza Solidarity Caravan.

India-Pakistan is a sad testament to another failed two-state solution imposed by colonial Britain following WWII, and the Indian activists were forced to return to New Delhi to take a flight to Tehran where they will join their Pakistani comrades to continue their journey of solidarity and peace to beleaguered Gazans.

Muthu Krishnan, a Hindu journalist from Tamil Nadu, said the caravan had touched the hearts of millions of Indians of all faiths. "Palestine and Yasser Arafat are household names in India," despite the fact that current Indian leaders toe a US-Israeli line. The caravan is scheduled to reach the West Bank on 27 December after passing through Iran, Jordan, Turkey and Syria.

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a

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