

Boycotting Israel More Urgent than in Case of South Africa, Says Anti-Apartheid Veteran

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Global Research, April 07, 2015

[Electronic Intifada](#) 6 April 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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Farid Esack believes that the call to boycott Israel is a progressive one. ([Meraj Chhaya/Flickr](#))

Farid Esack, an Islamic studies professor at the University of Johannesburg, has faced strong objections from the Zionist lobby in France over plans to give a series of lectures about the parallels between Israeli and South African apartheid. The pressure meant that he was [banned](#) from speaking at events in Paris and [Toulouse](#).

A veteran anti-racism campaigner, Esack has also championed the rights of women and of people living with AIDS. He was appointed a gender equality commissioner by the late Nelson Mandela. He is currently chairperson of BDS South Africa, a group supporting the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel.

I spoke to Esack about his speaking tour in France.

Adri Nieuwhof: You went on a speaking tour in France and were banned from speaking on some occasions. Can you tell us what happened?

Farid Esack: There was a huge amount of pressure on all seven universities where I was supposed to speak. Only Paris-Sorbonne University banned me from speaking. The university argued that they were doing so on technical grounds because the forms to fill in the application to give me a venue were wrongly filled in. The students tried to negotiate with the university for one week to correct this error, but the university refused this.

I think that the Sorbonne was giving a pretext by the incorrect filling of the form. The students argued that the students union have been filling in forms like this for years. The university has never drawn their attention to any kind of mistakes in the past. The only plausible explanation we could come to was that pressure from the Union of Jewish Students in France was behind the reason for my banning.

I was also banned from speaking at a public meeting in Toulouse at a local municipal hall by the mayor of Toulouse on the basis of the same claims that were made in the letters to universities. This was basically that I am anti-Semitic, and that I, as the chairperson of BDS South Africa, have been supporting and/or fermenting violent protest actions in South Africa.

AN: What happened after the ban?

FE: It appeared that the Sorbonne reached a tacit agreement with the police that I would be allowed to speak outside the main gate of the university. There were about twenty security

people standing in front of me to block us from going in. I had activists on the left and activists on the right. But it was very interesting that the vice-principal of the university came to welcome me and regretted that the university had to ban my public lecture. He stayed for the entire duration of my lecture and thanked me afterwards.

In Toulouse, we also resisted the ban. I spoke outside the venue.

AN: Pro-Israel and Zionist groups regularly attack the BDS movement and its activists. This time you were targeted. How do you assess such attacks?

FE: They made a tactical huge blunder to attack me because BDS on the whole is deeply committed against all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism. But in this particular case they were dealing with a character that had spoken very consistently against anti-Semitism. For the last 25 years, I have been addressing the question of anti-Semitism in general, but more particularly inside the Muslim community. That is why so many of my colleagues could rally to my support.

The pro-Israel lobby very conveniently locates the BDS narrative inside the history of European anti-Semitism, where the Nazis had first come out with the call to boycott the Jews. But they do so in a very calculated, strategic and in a manipulative manner.

Those same Zionists, for example, both in Europe, and more particularly in Israel, would happily call for sanctions against Iran. They won't say a word about the damage that it causes to the Iranian people. It is only in the case of the Jews that they invoke the narrative of Nazi anti-Semitism.

The same Europeans who accuse us and invoke the Nazi anti-Semitic discourse, those same Europeans would be happy to impose sanctions against Russia because of the alleged Russian maneuvers inside Ukraine. The same countries would be unanimous on imposing sanction on, say, North Korea or Zimbabwe. The same United States that invokes the argument of anti-Semitism imposed sanctions against Cuba for fifty years.

So there is nothing principled about their argument. It is simply a devious, technical device on the part of the Zionist lobby and to appeal to the guilt of the Europeans and other Westerners for a crime that was committed by the Europeans against other Europeans. This has got nothing to do with the Palestinians.

Our discourse of boycott, they very well know, is located in a left tradition, in a progressive tradition. Ranging from, for example, — at a liberal level — choosing to buy products with a fair trade label, when you choose to buy products where the maximum amount of the profits will go to the farmers. By choosing fair trade, you are boycotting another product that maximizes profit to the middlemen and to the capitalist exploiters and businessmen at the end of the food chain.

Or when a vegetarian decides to not eat meat, to boycott meat, the vegetarian has got nothing against the farmer. The vegetarian is making an ethical choice that I do not want to participate in the cruelty inflicted upon animals. The vegetarian is a boycott, divestment and sanctions activist in relation to the cruelty inflicted upon animals.

So the BDS movement is located in a progressive, humanist, left discourse. It has got nothing to do with the Nazi discourse. The pro-Israel lobby damn well knows. It is simply a

question of expediency and playing the guilt card with Europe and the US.

AN: How do you assess the role of the BDS movement against Israel in comparison with BDS activism against the apartheid regime in South Africa?

FE: The South African struggle only acquired sexiness in the last five years before the end of apartheid. And Mandela acquired sexiness only after he was released and became the reconciler. But BDS was alive 25 years before that. This year we are celebrating ten years of BDS against Israel. It is far more developed, has notched up far more victories than what the anti-apartheid movement had notched up when it was ten years old.

Another difference is that South Africa never had as its project the importation of all white races throughout the world into South Africa. BDS is now dealing with a movement that has as its fundamental project the importation of other settlers, other colonialists from other parts of the world. In South Africa we dealt with a settled colonialism. In the case of Israel, you are dealing with a colonialism that is ongoing and being entrenched every single day. So the nature of the enemy, the extent of its viciousness and its determination accelerates every single day.

As the BDS movement, we are facing challenges. Unlike South Africa, where we had a clearly focused liberation movement, liberation movement forces in Palestine are very truncated. You have the equivalent of the South Africa homeland governments still pretending to be liberation movements, while they have already sold out. Then you have very large resistance movements, all of Palestine's civil society and in theory all the political parties that have called for BDS.

After the Arab Spring, the solidarity with the Palestinians from the front line states completely collapsed. In South Africa, we could count on support — in different degrees — from all the surrounding countries except Malawi. Palestine is surrounded by collaborationist, sell-out client regimes of the West. Not only can we expect no support from them, on the contrary, in some cases, for example Egypt and Saudi Arabia, they have effectively joined the camps of the enemy and are collaborating actively with the Israeli state to destroy the resistance movement.

This makes the urgency and the need for a BDS movement much more significant than it was in the case of apartheid South Africa.

Because of the BDS successes, the Israeli lobby have really upped their game. With every victory that we have achieved, we are creating much more work for ourselves. The challenge is how to transform the broad level of support that we have in most countries throughout the world into a larger base of activists to take on the bigger task and the greater urgencies that we are facing.

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