

Israel: Boycott, Divest, Sanction

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It's time. Long past time. The best strategy to end the increasingly bloody occupation is for Israel to become the target of the kind of global movement that put an end to apartheid in South Africa.

In July 2005 a [huge coalition of Palestinian groups](#) laid out plans to do just that. They called on "people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era." The campaign [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions](#)—BDS for short—was born.

Every day that Israel pounds Gaza brings more converts to the BDS cause, and talk of cease-fires is doing little to slow the momentum. Support is even emerging among Israeli Jews. In the midst of the assault roughly 500 Israelis, dozens of them well-known artists and scholars, sent a [letter](#) to foreign ambassadors stationed in Israel. It calls for "the adoption of immediate restrictive measures and sanctions" and draws a clear parallel with the antiapartheid struggle. "The boycott on South Africa was effective, but Israel is handled with kid gloves.... This international backing must stop."

Yet many still can't go there. The reasons are complex, emotional and understandable. And they simply aren't good enough. Economic sanctions are the most effective tools in the nonviolent arsenal. Surrendering them verges on active complicity. Here are the top four objections to the BDS strategy, followed by counterarguments.

1. Punitive measures will alienate rather than persuade Israelis. The world has tried what used to be called "constructive engagement." It has failed utterly. Since 2006 Israel has been steadily escalating its criminality: expanding settlements, launching an outrageous war against Lebanon and imposing collective punishment on Gaza through the brutal blockade. Despite this escalation, Israel has not faced punitive measures—quite the opposite. The weapons and \$3 billion in annual aid that the US sends to Israel is only the beginning. Throughout this key period, Israel has enjoyed a dramatic improvement in its diplomatic, cultural and trade relations with a variety of other allies. For instance, in 2007 Israel became the first non-Latin American country to sign a free-trade deal with Mercosur. In the first nine months of 2008, Israeli exports to Canada went up 45 percent. A new trade deal with the European Union is set to double Israel's exports of processed food. And on December 8, European ministers "upgraded" the EU-Israel Association Agreement, a reward long sought by Jerusalem.

It is in this context that Israeli leaders started their latest war: confident they would face no meaningful costs. It is remarkable that over seven days of wartime trading, the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange's flagship index actually went up 10.7 percent. When carrots don't work,

sticks are needed.

2. Israel is not South Africa. Of course it isn't. The relevance of the South African model is that it proves that BDS tactics can be effective when weaker measures (protests, petitions, back-room lobbying) have failed. And there are indeed deeply distressing [echoes](#): the color-coded IDs and travel permits, the bulldozed homes and forced displacement, the settler-only roads. Ronnie Kasrils, a prominent South African politician, said that the architecture of segregation that he saw in the West Bank and Gaza in 2007 was "[infinitely worse than apartheid](#)."

3. Why single out Israel when the United States, Britain and other Western countries do the same things in Iraq and Afghanistan? Boycott is not a dogma; it is a tactic. The reason the BDS strategy should be tried against Israel is practical: in a country so small and trade-dependent, it could actually work.

4. Boycotts sever communication; we need more dialogue, not less. This one I'll answer with a personal story. For eight years, my books have been published in Israel by a commercial house called Babel. But when I published *The Shock Doctrine*, I wanted to respect the boycott. On the advice of BDS activists, I contacted a small publisher called [Andalus](#). Andalus is an activist press, deeply involved in the anti-occupation movement and the only Israeli publisher devoted exclusively to translating Arabic writing into Hebrew. We drafted a contract that guarantees that all proceeds go to Andalus's work, and none to me. In other words, I am boycotting the Israeli economy but not Israelis.

Coming up with this plan required dozens of phone calls, e-mails and instant messages, stretching from Tel Aviv to Ramallah to Paris to Toronto to Gaza City. My point is this: as soon as you start implementing a boycott strategy, dialogue increases dramatically. And why wouldn't it? Building a movement requires endless communicating, as many in the antiapartheid struggle well recall. The argument that supporting boycotts will cut us off from one another is particularly specious given the array of cheap information technologies at our fingertips. We are drowning in ways to rant at one another across national boundaries. No boycott can stop us.

Just about now, many a proud Zionist is gearing up for major point-scoring: don't I know that many of those very high-tech toys come from Israeli research parks, world leaders in infotech? True enough, but not all of them. Several days into Israel's Gaza assault, Richard Ramsey, the managing director of a British telecom company, sent an e-mail to the Israeli tech firm MobileMax. "As a result of the Israeli government action in the last few days we will no longer be in a position to consider doing business with yourself or any other Israeli company."

When contacted by *The Nation*, Ramsey said his decision wasn't political. "We can't afford to lose any of our clients, so it was purely commercially defensive."

It was this kind of cold business calculation that led many companies to pull out of South Africa two decades ago. And it's precisely the kind of calculation that is our most realistic hope of bringing justice, so long denied, to Palestine.

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