

Israel: Why a Cultural Boycott is Necessary

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At what point does rhetoric stop and effective action begin? For Palestinians, decades of dialogue and supposed peace overtures have proved fruitless, only serving to protect the status quo: sixty years of continual dispossession, forty years of occupation, and a systematic repudiation of international and humanitarian law. The situation for Palestinians will not improve without constructive movement forward—which rejects collusion with the Israeli government by exercising boycott, divestment and sanctions (known as BDS).

During the 1980's, BDS of South Africa included a cultural boycott whereby musicians and artists from around the world were prohibited from performing in the apartheid state.

In addition to internationally supporting the subjugated black population, this policy was instituted to express that no real dialogue—economic, academic, or cultural—could take place in concert with the atrocities of apartheid. With regard to Israel, the implementation of international BDS is but one necessary measure to shift the balance away from the oppressor and help place it in the hands of the oppressed.

It is imperative to note that a cultural boycott is not aimed at individuals, but rather institutions and a state. Frequently, Israelis travel the world and speak out against their nation's policies, and many support a full cultural and academic boycott. A cultural boycott does not hinder the prospects for peace; rather it serves to empower conscientious Israelis and Palestinians, and provides the international community with a viable non-violent solution to the current impasse.

After traveling to the occupied Palestinian territories, a host of individuals have asserted that Israeli occupation is in fact worse than South African apartheid. Among these people are highly esteemed anti-apartheid advocate Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Jewish South African Minister of Intelligence Ronnie Kasrils. In an effort to pressure Israel to abort its destructive policies, both argue that the international community should impose a boycott on Israel, analogous to the one imposed on South Africa.

Many organizations and individuals have voiced opposition to an academic and cultural boycott. Their contention is that the arts and academic community in Israel will be denied the basic tenets of free speech. Ironically, the proposed model asserts that people of conscience, including conscious Israelis, are ostensibly encouraged to embrace “free speech” and “dialogue” over the most basic rights of an oppressed people. What remains missing from their argument is the fact that the Palestinian people have been methodically occupied, controlled, and embargoed by the Israeli government and many Israeli institutions for decades—with no effective recourse taken by the United Nations, European Union, or United States.

Just this week, the Associated Press reported that seven Palestinians from occupied Gaza were denied exit visas to “pursue their Fulbright scholarship studies” by the Israeli government. While their Fulbrights were reinstated *after* the AP article circulated, and the US State Department is now purportedly “trying” to get Israel to change its position, the vast majority of these incidents go unnoticed. There are countless other stories of hip hop artists, theater groups, and debke troupes not being able to travel to the West Bank from Gaza, and vice versa, never mind exiting the prison walls of the Occupied Territories. Moreover, one cannot downplay the multitude of instances where Palestinians—using means of non-violent protest—have been arrested, beaten, or shot by Israeli soldiers. Sadly, many of these detracting groups and individuals in Israel calling for “dialogue” based on “dual narratives” cannot be seen at any of the non-violent protests against the apartheid wall or part of the growing list of Israeli soldiers refusing to serve in the army. Onlookers in the so-called “left” in the US incessantly opine about the need for Palestinians to assert themselves non-violently—yet when Palestinians and their supporters embrace a fundamental tool of non-violent resistance, they are castigated.

Furthermore, those in a position to boycott must recognize the effects of Israel’s policies on the 1.3 million Palestinian citizens of Israel who have become relegated to third class status and have seen their own art and film community attacked by Israel’s discriminatory legal system. If the Israeli people and those in the international community truly want to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people, they will embrace what more than sixty Palestinian academic, cultural and civil society organizations have endorsed: a full academic and cultural boycott of the state of Israel.

Throughout the Oslo years, the purported time of peace, endless cultural dialogue took place. But as Omar Barghouti—dance choreographer, activist, and ardent sponsor of a cultural boycott—contends, “A decade of joint Palestinian-Israeli projects mostly resulted in providing a figleaf, covering up Israel’s relentless colonization of Palestinian land and its crimes against the Palestinian people.”

It is clear that even cultural dialogue with the Israeli establishment has only proven to normalize the occupation. Tutu once declared, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.” Now is not the time to be neutral, nor the time to be reticent; it is the time to act.

* A shorter version of this essay was first published as part of a collection of positions compiled by Randy Gener, titled: “[12 Positions on Cultural Sanctions — Theatre practitioners offer their views on a call to boycott Israel](#),” in the May-June 2008 issue of American Theatre Magazine.

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