

Palestine: Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS). Breaking new barriers

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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The upcoming flotilla to break the Gaza siege is gathering steam from a flood of innovative Boycott, Divest and Sanctions activities around the world

From 7-20 March, more than 75 university groups on six continents held their seventh annual Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW). According to Palestinian activist Omar Barghouti, "Our South Africa moment has finally arrived." " Israel's version of apartheid is more sophisticated than South Africa's was. It's an evolved form," explains Barghouti in his hot-off-the-press *BDS: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*. "In South Africa, the overall plan was to exploit blacks, not throw them out."

The true nature of Israeli policy towards the Palestinians prompted Jewish-American folk legend Pete Seeger to speak out. Seeger, 92, used to participate in the Israeli Arava Institute's virtual rally "With Earth and Each Other", but Arava's behind-the-scenes partner is the Jewish National Fund, responsible for destroying Palestinian lands and building forests on them to hide their crimes. Seeger now realises Arava is in fact a subtle tool of "Rebrand Israel": "Now that I know more, I support the BDS movement as much as I can." Seeger has long given royalties from his famous Bible-based song from the 1960s "Turn, Turn, Turn," to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions for their work in rebuilding demolished homes and exposing Israel's practice of forcing Palestinians off their land to build Jewish villages and cities.

In the build-up to IAW, the Ramallah-based "Stop the Wall Campaign" and "It's Apartheid" media collective announced the winners of the first International Israeli Apartheid Short Film contest in February. The winners "Apartheid Road", "Ali Wall" and "Confronting the Wall" can be viewed at itisapartheid.info. Ali Al-Jadar's story is especially touching: as a callow 16-year-old, he built a ladder and planted a Palestinian flag at the top of the wall near his home. The IDF came in the night, arrested, tortured and sentenced him to eight years in prison, though mercifully he was release in a prisoner exchange after two years. He is one of the thousands of modest heroes that inspire IAW activists around the world.

In Beirut, South African anti-apartheid activist Salim Vally provided insights from the earlier South African struggle. Lebanese activist Rania Masri described the boycott movement as a vehicle against global and local neoliberalism. Iconic Palestinian freedom fighter Leila Khaled linked IAW goals with current anti-government revolts in the broader Arab world, which are dominated by social movements for justice and self-determination.

Ontario universities joined together to draw up a petition signed by 140 academics to divest from BAE Systems, Northrop Grumman, Hewlett Packard and Lockheed, all of which provide military and/or information technologies that help Israel violate international law.

A dramatic IAW event was staged by students from the Arizona chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace at the University of Arizona (UA) and UA migrant rights group No Más Muertes/No More Deaths (NMM), who erected a mock apartheid wall dividing the UA campus in Tucson for a week, drawing a parallel between the wall being built dividing Mexico and the US and the Israeli apartheid wall. "People are dying and suffering from abominable policies being funded with US tax dollars," remarked JVP coordinator Chicano-Jewish student Gabriel Matthew Schivone.

More than 6000 human remains of Mexicans seeking a better life have been recovered from the US/Mexico borderlands in the past two decades. "We will not stand idly by nor stay silent regarding the enormous suffering being inflicted either in our local deserts and cities, or 10,000 miles away in Israeli-occupied Palestine . Our wall symbolised our collective will to end global apartheid and work toward a world that truly offers justice for all."

Last year Hampshire College in Massachusetts, the first US college to divest from South Africa in 1979, became the first to divest from the Israeli occupation, following its anti-racism Action Awareness Week 2008. As in Arizona, students constructed a mock wall, distributed Palestinian and Israeli passports randomly to students, and when they tried to pass through, the activists showed them how they would be treated in Israel . As in Toronto they launched a petition drive to divest from firms supporting Israeli apartheid.

As a result student Will Delphia made his debut as documentary film producer last year with the 30-minute film "To Know is Not Enough", using Hampshire Students for Justice in Palestine archival footage, clips from media coverage, and interviews with the personalities involved. The film can be seen online at vimeo.com/13802936. Though the administration never admitted it divested because of Israeli apartheid, as one student says in the film, "The administration divested. But the administration is not the college. The staff, students and community are. We made the decision and we are making the statement."

University of Johannesburg went a step further to become the first South African university to implement an academic boycott of an Israeli university, Ben-Gurion University. The UJ Senate concluded that "there is significant evidence that BGU has research and other engagements that support the military and armed forces of Israel, in particular in its occupation of Gaza." Bishop Desmond Tutu argued: "Palestinians have chosen, like we did, the nonviolent tools of boycott, divestment and sanctions. South African universities with their own long and complex histories of both support for apartheid and resistance to it should know something about the value of this nonviolent option."

EuroPalestine is engaged in spectacular and frequent BDS actions that the European Israel lobby and the French government try relentlessly to block through legal actions. They recently made a 15-city tour of France with 200 activists and posted their documentary about it at europalestine.com. They plan to bring thousands to East Jerusalem and the West Bank 8-16 July for the Gaza Freedom March, with Palestinians hosting their foreign supporters. To join them, go to BienvenuePalestine.com.

The most important BDS-inspired event of 2011, marking the first anniversary of the tragic Israeli attack on the Mavi Marmara last May, will be the Free Gaza Movement flotilla expected in late May, when 12 ships carrying a thousand peace activists with humanitarian supplies will head for Gaza. Israel's Ambassador to Turkey Gaby Levy asked the Turkish government to help stop the activists, but was told the flotilla was "an initiative by civil

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The courage that Palestinians have shown under six decades of brutal occupation is now infecting people with a conscience around the world. It looks like the siege will finally be broken in June, with the flotilla and with Egypt’s promise to open the Gaza crossings, to be followed by the arrival at Ben-Gurion airport in July of thousands more activists determined to embrace their Palestinian brothers and sisters.

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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 UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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