

Solidarity with Palestine: ‘If They Suppress BDS, No Other Movement Is Safe’

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*As alarming, anti-democratic measures are aimed at Palestine solidarity activists in the UK and beyond, **Husna Rizvi** speaks to **Omar Barghouti**, co-founder of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement.*

‘We are armed only with our rights, and our dignity.’ Speaking earnestly to a crowd at a recent anti-racist event in King’s College London, **Omar Barghouti** repeats the words he said to Israeli Defence Force soldiers during a raid on his family’s home during the second Intifada.

Omar has been targeted by the Israeli military and [interior ministry](#) for several years as a result of his human rights activism. As a student at Columbia University in New York he began organizing within the South African anti-apartheid movement as well as the General Union of Palestinian Students and went on to co-found the [Boycott, Divestment Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#) in 2005, after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled Israel’s wall an ‘illegal situation’.

The ICJ ruling stated that the [700km barrier](#) in the West Bank contravened rights of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories set out by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – namely, ‘liberty of movement’, ‘the right to work, to health, to education and to an adequate standard of living’. It also concluded that all nation states were ‘not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by such construction’.

The [failure of the international community](#) to make good on those obligations directly motivated the BDS call, Omar tells me. ‘We felt this was the time to go global with our message of resistance, with our message of liberation. And to ask supporters of Palestinian rights the world over to end the complicity of their institutions, corporations and governments, which are enabling Israel’s system of oppression.’

One year after the ICJ ruling, the newly-formed BDS movement issued three core demands: end the occupation, end Israel’s system of apartheid (the UN defines this as ‘inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group’) and respect the rights of Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their homes in 1948, and now constitute 68 per cent of the Palestinian population – often described as ‘the right of return’.

This, he tells me, ‘formed a consensus among nearly all Palestinian society – among civil society, trade unions, women’s unions, farmers, academics, students, and so on.’

Ending Complicity

On a geopolitical level, things don’t look positive, he acknowledges. ‘Far-right white supremacists, Christian Zionists and all sorts of very fanatical groups are today in the White House,’ but this hasn’t stopped inspiring action from being taken on the grassroots level.

‘We’ve managed to win support even in the liberal mainstream. So today in the United States – where it matters the most – the American Civil Liberties Union, a massive organization defending constitutional rights of American citizens, is at the forefront of opposing anti-BDS legislation, whether in Congress or in state legislatures.’

He also reports a steady shift across progressive movements and social movements in Europe towards supporting Palestinian rights; in 2018, Leeds University became the first higher education institution to divest from corporations trading military equipment with Israel.

‘BDS has been successful at continuous growth: winning over social movements, churches, [pension funds](#), and impacting large complicit [corporations](#),’ he says. ‘The trade union movement in the [UK](#), Norway, increasingly in France, the Netherlands and Belgium have all called for serious accountability measures along the lines of BDS.’

Support has also stemmed from less traditional allies: ‘When Israel hosted Eurovision last year, instead of receiving around 50,000 tourists, they got only 5,000. More than a hundred LGBTQ+ groups in Europe came out in support of the BDS campaign against Eurovision in apartheid Tel Aviv.’

Despite Trump’s [widely criticized](#) proposal for a ‘peace’ plan – for which the Palestinian Authority was not consulted – and what Omar called a ‘cash for rights’ deal on Novara Media’s radio show, Tysky Sour – he says there’s still some cause for conditional optimism. ‘Presidential candidates in the Democratic Party – for the first time in US history – are calling for making aid to Israel conditional. A presidential candidate in the US has never dared to question aid to Israel – until now.’

Discrediting Dissent

Image on the right: Omar was awarded the Gandhi Peace Award in 2017 for his work as the co-founder of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions.



But BDS’s movement work is under attack from both Israeli and Western security establishments, which seek to discredit and delegitimize its activism. ‘Israel has been fighting the BDS movement since 2014 as “a strategic threat”. That’s their term, not ours,’ explains Omar. ‘[It] has formed a whole government ministry to fight the BDS movement. It has outsourced its McCarthyism, its antidemocratic repression to those Western governments – especially the US, France and the UK.’

‘The UK government has been fighting the BDS movement for Palestinian rights head on: interfering with trade unions and city councils; trying to suppress events on campuses;

government ministers making calls against the BDS movement.

‘This is unparalleled. Even the US government – until Trump – had not fought the BDS movement with the same passion as the UK government, believe it or not. It is undermining British democracy, not just free speech on Palestine,’ he adds.

All of what Omar describes, is consistent with the UK government’s broader ‘counter-terror’ strategy Prevent, a widely condemned surveillance operation largely affecting Muslim citizens and civil society groups. Under the programme, one [schoolboy](#) was labelled ‘extremist’ and referred to the government’s deradicalization program for wearing a ‘Free Palestine’ badge. An information pamphlet produced by Palestine solidarity group [Friends of Al-Aqsa](#) was also used by the police as evidence of ‘terrorist-like’ views.

Heightened surveillance, targeted harassment and shutting down activist events isn’t unfamiliar to Omar, who himself has been threatened with arrest, assault, and was the subject of a campaign calling for his expulsion while studying for a PhD in Ethics at Tel Aviv University.

The King’s College lecture theatre in London where Omar spoke in January was itself openly monitored by management. Several contract security staff hovered throughout the venue, and attendees’ names were checked multiple times.

Heavy surveillance tactics are likely to put off impassioned young activists pursuing ethical divestment policies. I ask, how much energy goes into protecting the right to campaign compared to the more positive, coalition-building work?

‘There’s always a golden balance,’ he replies. ‘Yes, we’ve got to defend our space and the space is shrinking for human rights defenders active on Palestine. But never fall into the trap of defence at the expense of building and growing the movement.’

A New McCarthyism

But a recent development in the UK troubles Omar. ‘We’re working with a broad tent of civil society organizations, human rights organizations that are all extremely alarmed at Boris Johnson’s government’s attempt to pass legislation that basically demonizes, or even criminalizes, support for BDS.’

The legislation Omar refers to is Boris Johnson’s plan to pass an anti-boycott bill, banning public institutions from engaging in trades boycotts, a move that harks back to Margaret Thatcher’s ban on councils refusing to trade with apartheid South Africa. Johnson, this time, plans to implement harsh financial penalties on already cash-strapped councils that pursue ethical divestment policies.

Omar is also concerned about developments in Europe, where the French and German parliaments have chosen to adopt the controversial [IHRA definition](#) of antisemitism, which he describes as a bogus framing designed to ‘shield Israel from criticism and accountability’.

‘Everyone is alarmed,’ he says. ‘Because if they succeed in suppressing freedom of expression on Palestine then no one is safe. The LGBTQ+ movement is not safe. The black justice movement is not safe, immigrant justice and climate justice.... Who knows who will be next.’

More worryingly for the BDS movement, these plans come at a time when [France](#), [Germany](#) and the [US](#) - where prominent CNN anchor Marc Lamont Hill was fired in 2018 for promoting Palestinian rights - are simultaneously cracking down on BDS.

Asked - blue skies style - about what a Bernie Sanders presidency could mean for the US-Israel relationship, Omar admits he's hopeful. 'The US has never had a progressive president like Sanders. If Bernie Sanders is elected, it will change the world, not just a US relations vis-a-vis Israel and the Palestinians.'

'Of course, we're not naive to think that a progressive president can with a magic wand alter decades of policies by an imperialist, neoliberal, very aggressive establishment that serves the one per cent. But I think the absolute majority of Palestinians - just like the majority of progressives in the world - are rooting for Bernie Sanders to be the first Jewish president of the US - the first social democratic president,' he adds.

Regarding the claim that BDS alienates Jewish communities, or even promotes antisemitism, Omar tells me that the movement targets complicity, not identity. 'It is not anti-Jewish to engage in a non-violent movement' to support Palestinians, he says.

In fact, he believes that it's the rise of Trump and his far-right Zionist and white supremacist base that has led Israel to drop its 'very thin[ly] worn warn mask of democracy' has actually increased support for BDS among a young Jewish demographic.

'We're seeing Jewish millennials in the United States and elsewhere become antagonistic towards Israel's current regime. We're noticing that across US campuses for example, where many Jewish activists are joining the BDS movement.'

He adds: 'Israeli injustice against Palestinians is one of the longest living actually, and one of the least accountable. Israel really gets away with murder - literally murdering Palestinian youth [protesting in Gaza](#) for the right of return and for ending the siege on Gaza - on television. And it's getting away with it. So there's a sense of urgency. We cannot wait. And I think more and more people across the world can see that.'

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