

Why Do Charities Want to “Normalize” Israeli Apartheid?

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Photo: Oxfam acknowledges Israel’s settlements are illegal but doesn’t call for ban on their products. ([Magne Hagesæter](#) / [Flickr](#))

Calls to hold Israel accountable for its crimes against the Palestinian people are gathering momentum. Words such as “boycott” and “[apartheid](#)” are no longer taboo and fast becoming mainstream.

Why, then, are well-respected charities such as IKV Pax Christi, a Dutch civil society organization in the [Netherlands](#), and [Oxfam](#) working against efforts to hold Israel, and complicit corporations, accountable for serious human rights violations and war crimes?

On 17 June, IKV Pax Christi organized a seminar titled “Playing and Paying: EU responsibility and the two state-solution for Israel and Palestine.” The event kicked off with a stirring and principled speech by Nikolaos Van Dam, a co-author of a recent report on Palestine that had been commissioned by the Dutch Senate (“[Between words and deeds: Prospects for a sustainable peace in the Middle East](#),” Advisory Council on International Affairs, March 2013 [PDF]).

Van Dam argued it was “naïve” to expect Israel to withdraw from the [West Bank](#) and [Gaza](#) “without enormous pressure from the outside.”

Under international law, he added, the Netherlands and the [European Union](#) were obliged to take action against Israel for its behavior. He stated that this obligation ought to mean that trade restrictions are introduced not only on products emanating from [Israel’s settlements](#) in the West Bank, but also on products from Israel itself.

“Sanctions should be imposed on those who are responsible for Israel’s policies, and that is the Israeli state, not just the Jewish settlers illegally residing on land forcefully expropriated from Palestinians,” he said. “We should finally put our political positions into practice” (“[What should the European Union do to save the two-state solution](#),” 17 June 2013 [PDF]).

“More love”

Van Dam’s contribution received enthusiastic applause from the audience. But then the event took a strange and unexpected turn.

Without exception, all of the panellists invited by IKV Pax Christi to respond to the report

launched strong and sometimes personal attacks against Van Dam.

Ilan Baruch, a former Israeli diplomat and military commander, argued that Van Dam's report would "wash away support" for Israelis who criticized the government.

Walid Salem, director of a Palestinian organization called Panorama, remarked that a [two-state solution](#) would not be accomplished by "harming Israel." Han Ten Broeke, a member of parliament (MP), claimed that "finger-pointing doesn't work" and that Israel doesn't need "tough love" but "more love."

Another MP, Sjoerd Sjoerdsma, was less caustic in his response. He said that both "carrots" and "sticks" were needed in order to break the current impasse in negotiations, but also maintained that the "time was not right for sticks" at this stage and that "Israel should be given an opportunity to show its commitment" to a two-state solution.

Both Baruch and Salem have been engaged in so-called dialogue projects between Israelis and Palestinians, some of which IKV Pax Christi has funded. Such projects are widely opposed by Palestinian political activists, who believe that they "[normalize](#)" Israel's decidedly abnormal occupation and its apartheid policies.

In an email message which he sent me during an exchange of views about the organizing of this seminar, Matthieu Hermans of IKV Pax Christi defended Salem's work. "Mr. Walid Salem is one of our esteemed Palestinian partners, whose openness towards constructive, solution-oriented dialogue with 'the other side' have gained him vicious anonymous threats from the so-called anti-normalization camp; threats from people whom — I would hope — you would not want to be associated with," he wrote.

Counterproductive

Hermans' stance was ill-informed. Far from promoting a sinister agenda, opponents of normalization insist that Israel be held accountable for its violations of human rights and advocate that Israel be subject to [boycott, divestment and sanctions](#) (BDS) until this is achieved.

During a recent [national BDS conference in Bethlehem](#), numerous Palestinian campaigners denounced such normalization projects ("[Report on the fourth national BDS conference](#)," Palestinian BDS National Committee).

Unlike the conference in Bethlehem, the seminar organized by IKV Pax Christi was not about justice or peace. It was not about serious, critical, open debate of issues that concern Palestinians and Israelis, and indeed all of us. It was about how Europe should play a role both in order to maintain Israel as an exclusive "Jewish state" and to continue its support to the discredited [Palestinian Authority](#).

IKV Pax Christi is not alone in pursuing a counterproductive strategy.

Oxfam International has been campaigning in [Britain](#), the Netherlands and elsewhere that products emanating from Israeli settlements ought simply to be labeled as such. Oxfam has refused to argue that Israel and companies profiting from the occupation face sanctions.

Barbara Stocking, the chief executive of Oxfam in the UK, has said: "We support the right of

consumers to know the origin of the products they purchase. Trade with Israeli settlements — which are illegal under international law — contributes to their economic viability and serves to legitimize them. It is also clear from our development work in West Bank communities that settlements have led to the denial of rights and create poverty for many Palestinians” (“[UK issues new guidance on labelling of food from illegal West Bank settlements](#),” *Guardian*, 10 December 2009).

While Oxfam clearly acknowledges that the settlements are illegal, it doesn’t appear to regard products from the settlements as illegal. It has not called for a ban on these products.

When faced by accusations that labeling amounts to a singling out of Israeli products and may lead to a boycott, Oxfam has quickly stepped in to emphasize that it is not in favor of boycotting Israeli goods (“[Oxfam agrees to conditions on Israel set by UK Jewry](#),” *The Times of Israel*, 12 January 2013).

Incomprehensible

Oxfam’s argument is not only self-defeating, it is contrary to international law. [The Fourth Geneva Convention](#) provides that any exploitation of resources from occupied territories — beyond the immediate needs of the occupying army, and that is not in the interests of the local population — is illegal and could amount to the crime of pillage.

In February 2009, IKV Pax Christi director Jan Gruiters argued that trade privileges granted to Israel by the EU should be suspended (“[Nioscoop](#),” 1 February 2009 [Video, in Dutch]).

It is therefore incomprehensible, both in light of Gruiters’ earlier statements and the stated mission of IKV Pax Christi, that the organization has seemingly dropped this position and now supports normalization.

The broad-based Palestinian-led BDS movement is striving towards a lasting and just peace for both Israelis and Palestinians. Through nonviolent critical engagement and insisting on Israel and companies’ compliance with international law, the BDS movement explicitly rejects the perpetuation of the international crime of apartheid. Why then are groups that claim to champion the dispossessed opposed to this movement?

Unless Oxfam and IKV Pax Christi seriously engage with the movement and reconsider their counter-productive positions, they risk being perceived as irrelevant to the realization of a just peace.

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