

Yes to Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Against Israel

An Answer to Uri Avnery

Monday 12 October 2009, by [WARSCHAWSKI Michael](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2009).

The call for BDS—Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions—has finally reached Israeli public opinion. The decision of Norway to divest from Israeli corporations involved in settlement building made the difference, and provided the first big success to that important campaign. After having ignored the BDS campaign for several years, Uri Avnery finally felt obliged to react, twice, in his blog. Like Uri, I rarely react to other's opinions and in my own blog, as he put it nicely, "I don't want to impose my views, I just want to provide food for thought and leave it to the reader to form his or her opinion". Some of the arguments put forward by Avnery, however, require an answer, because they may mislead his readers.

Despite the fact that I sometimes disagree with Avnery's opinions—though much less than in the past—I have great respect for the man, the journalist, the activist and the analyst, and since the bankruptcy of Peace Now during the Oslo process, we have been closely active together, and I would dare say that we became friends. This is why I feel compelled to react to his criticism of the BDS campaign.

Let's start with the obvious and with what I consider to be a false debate. "Hatred is a very bad advisor" writes Uri, and I will be the last to disagree with him. I know also that he will agree with me if I add that in our political context, hatred is understandable.

"Israel is not South Africa" says Uri. Of course it isn't, and every concrete reality is different from every other. Nevertheless, these two countries have some similarities: both are racist states with (different kinds of) apartheid systems (the literal meaning of apartheid being "structural separation"). Both countries were established as "European states" in a national/ethnic environment composed of non-European who were considered a hostile environment, and rightly so. We do also agree—and this is even more important—that in order to achieve substantial results in our struggle, we need to build joint dynamics including the Palestinian national resistance, Israeli anti-occupation forces, and an international solidarity movement. Ten years ago, I call this the "winning triangle."

We share a lot in common indeed, until the issue of Uri's misrepresentation of his political opponents comes up. In his article debating Neve Gordon's article in LA Times, Uri writes: "Neve Gordon and his partners in this (BDS) effort have despaired of the Israelis." If this were true, why do Neve, myself and many other Israeli BDS campaigners devote so much of their time in building, together with Uri Avnery, an Israeli movement against war, occupation and colonization? The true question is not "changing Israeli society," but how and for what.

The political goal of Uri Avnery is "an Israeli-Palestinian peace," i.e., a compromise that should satisfy the majority of the two communities, on a symmetrical basis (in another important article, he called it "truth against truth"). Such symmetry is the result of another important political assumption by Avnery: the conflict in Palestine is a conflict between two national movements with

equal legitimacy.

Neve and many supporters of the BDS campaign disagree on both assumptions: our goal is not peace as such, because “peace” in itself doesn’t mean anything (almost every war in modern history was initiated under the pretext of achieving peace). Peace is always the reflection of relation of forces in which one side cannot impose on the other all that it considers being its legitimate rights.

Unlike Uri, our goal is the fulfillment of certain values, like basic individual and collective rights, an end of domination and oppression, decolonization, equality, and as-much-justice-as-possible. In that framework, we obviously may support “peace initiatives” that can reduce the level of violence and/or achieve a certain amount of rights. In our strategy, however, this support for peace initiatives is not a goal in itself, but merely a means to achieve the above-mentioned values and rights.

That difference between “peace” and “justice” is connected to the divergence concerning the second assumption of Uri Avnery: the symmetry between two equally legitimate national movements and aspirations.

For us, Zionism is not a national liberation movement but a colonial movement, and the State of Israel is and has always been a settlers’ colonial state. Peace, or, better, justice, cannot be achieved without a total decolonization (one can say de-Zionisation) of the Israeli State; it is a precondition for the fulfillment of the legitimate rights of the Palestinians—whether refugees, living under military occupation or second-class citizens of Israel. Whether the final result of that de-colonization will be a “one-state” solution, two democratic states (i.e., not a “Jewish State”), a federation or any other institutional structure is secondary, and will ultimately be decided by the struggle itself and the level of participation of Israelis, if at all.

In that sense, Uri Avnery is wrong when he states that our divergences is about “one state” or “two states.” As explained above, the divergence is on rights, decolonization and the principle of full equality. The form of the solution is, in my opinion, irrelevant as long as we are speaking about a solution in which the two peoples are living in freedom (i.e., without colonial relationships) and equality.

Another important divergence with Uri Avnery concerns the dialectics between the Palestinian national liberation agenda and the role of the so-call Israeli peace camp. While it is obvious that the Palestinian national movement needs as many Israeli allies as possible to achieve liberation as quick as possible and with as little suffering as possible, one cannot expect the Palestinian movement to wait until Uri, Neve and the other Israeli anti-colonialists convince the majority of the Israeli public. For two reasons: first, because popular national movements do not wait to fight oppression and colonialism; second, because history has taught us that changes within the colonialist society have always been the result of the liberation struggle, and not the other way round: when the price of occupation becomes too high, more and more people understand that it is not worth continuing.

Yes, a hand extended for coexistence is needed, but together with an iron fist fighting for rights and freedom. The failure of the Oslo process confirms a very old lesson of history: any attempt for reconciliation before the fulfillment of rights strengthens the continuation of the colonial domination relationship. Without a price to be paid, why should the Israelis stop colonization, why should they risk a deep internal crisis?

This is where the BDS campaign is so relevant: it offers an international framework to act in order to help the Palestinian people achieve their legitimate rights, both on the institutional level (states and international institutions) and on that of civil society. On the one hand it addresses the international community, asking it to sanction a State that is systematically violating international law, UN resolutions, the Geneva Conventions and signed agreements; on the other hand, it calls on

international civil society to act, both as individuals as well as social movements (trade-unions, parties, local councils, popular associations etc) to boycott goods, official representatives, institutions etc. that represent the colonial State of Israel.

Both tasks (boycott and sanctions) will eventually be a pressure on the Israeli people, pushing them to understand that occupation and colonization have a price, that violating international rules will, sooner or later, make the State of Israel a pariah-country, not welcome in the civilized community of nations. Just like South Africa in the last decades of apartheid. In that sense, and unlike Uri's claim, BDS is addressed to the Israeli public, and, right now, is the only way to provoke a change in Israeli attitudes towards occupation/colonization. If one compares this BDS to the anti-apartheid BDS campaign that took twenty years to start bearing real fruits, one cannot but be surprised at how efficient the anti-Israeli occupation campaign has already been, and even in Israel we already witness its first effects.

The BDS campaign was initiated by a broad coalition of Palestinian political and social movements. No Israeli who claims to support the national rights of the Palestinian people can, decently, turn his or her back to that campaign: after having claimed for years that "armed struggle is not the way," it will be outrageous that this BDS strategy will too be disqualified by those Israeli activists. On the contrary, we must all together join to "Boycott from Within" in order to provide Israeli support to this Palestinian initiative. It is the minimum we can do, and it is the minimum we should do.

Michael Warschawski

Boycotting Those Calling for Boycott Against Israel: The More the Merrier

In an op-ed piece published in the *Los Angeles Times*, Dr. Neve Gordon, professor of political science at Ben-Gurion University in Beer Sheva, called for international support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. I have already explained in my blog that the point of this international campaign is to sanction Israel for its occupation policies, colonization and systematic violation of international law and United Nations' resolutions regarding the conflict in Palestine. Dr. Gordon is part of an activist Israeli group that has decided to support the BDS campaign from within Israeli society. This group, "Boycott from Within," aims to support the claim that Israel must pay for its crimes, based on the understanding that only an unyielding position from the International community can put pressure on the leaders of the Jewish state to finally abide by international laws.

Abiding by international law is actually in Israel's interest because the alternative to international law is "law of the strongest" and this, sooner or later, will prove fatal to the Israeli people.

The fact that Israelis participate in the BDS campaign means that there is a will to switch from the law of the jungle to the reign of rights. This is the choice that Gordon has made along with hundreds of other Israeli activists.

This stance was harshly criticized: leaders of the Jewish community in Los Angeles have asked Ben Gurion University to expel Neve Gordon, and threatened to suspend their financial aid to the university and call for a boycott of the institution if this is not carried out.

Mission accomplished for Neve Gordon, who could ask for more: BDS is at work against his university. His message in the *L.A. Times* has been soundly heard. This being said, it is of primary

importance that the academic world mobilizes itself to support and defend Neve Gordon, who is currently threatened in his institution and profession. The issue at stake today involves freedom of expression as well as the right of a citizen to express an opinion on his country's policy. The L.A. Jewish community may very well keep its money if it means receiving a right of veto on what academics can and cannot express in the media.

For the remainder of us in Israel, we will double our efforts to support the international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions against our rogue state. The issue at stake is one of "public hygiene" in the realm of international relations. Following in the footsteps of white activists against the Apartheid regime in South Africa, we are saying out loud, "Please boycott our country to transform it into a state of rights."

Michael Warschawski

Monday, 31 August 2009

P.S.

* From Michael Warschawski's blog:

<http://www.alternativenews.org/michael-warschawski/.html>