INTRODUCTION

Besiege your siege . . . there is no other way.

—Mahmoud Darwish

Since it is in a concrete situation that the oppressor-oppressed contradiction is established, the resolution of this contradiction must be objectively verifiable. Hence, the radical requirement—both for the individual who discovers himself or herself to be an oppressor and for the oppressed—that the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed.¹

—Paulo Freire

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.

—Mahatma Gandhi

Almost every day, the pale, slender woman complains to the ruthless, self-righteous ruffian about the miserable little shack she is confined to, not to mention the daily abuse she has to put up with. Sick of her endless whining, one day he brings in a goat to stay with them. Her complaints turn into desperate sobbing, quite expectedly, so he punches her
until she bleeds. She cries in silence, mourning for the day when she had more space, without the goat crowding the miserable shack.

After weeks of her begging, he gets rid of the goat. Now she feels she has her space again. Everything is finally back to normal—just the usual dose of abuse and exploitation. For a day she is content with her accomplishment, but the next morning she wakes up with an eruption of long-suppressed memories, erasing her forgetfulness and disturbing her “peace.” She remembers when he first abducted her and forced her into slavery. She realizes how she has rationalized and internalized the battering as part of surviving, as the lesser evil. She could no longer care less about an extra few square feet here or there. She wants to feel whole again, and nothing less than her freedom—unmitigated, unconditional—would do. So she sets out to resist and calls out for support.²

For more than six decades Israel has enjoyed the best of both worlds, a free hand to implement its extremist colonial agenda of ethnically cleansing as many indigenous Palestinians from their homeland and grabbing as much of their land as possible and, simultaneously, a deceptive, mythical reputation for democracy and enlightenment. It has effectively succeeded in cynically exploiting the Nazi genocide of European Jewish communities, transforming the pain and guilt felt across the West into an almost invincible shield from censure and accountability. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: “I think the West, quite rightly, is feeling contrite, penitent, for its awful connivance with the Holocaust. The penance is being paid by the Palestinians. I just hope again that ordinary citizens in the West will wake up and say ‘we refuse to be part of this.’”³

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower, and the ascension in Washington of a militarist neoconservative self-described “cabal” with uniquely strong ties to Israel⁴—and to warmongering Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu in particular—all allowed Israel to maximize its gains and influence over decision-making processes in the United States.⁵ Israel’s power in the US Congress had been established for quite some time⁶ during the George W. Bush era the White House was subject to many of the same influences. The criminal attacks of September 11, 2001, created what Netanyahu saw as a golden opportunity to further consolidate Israel’s already great influence over policy setting in Washington.⁷ And starting a decade earlier, the sham “peace process” launched by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Oslo in 1993 had rehabilitated Israel’s diplomatic and, crucially, economic ties with dozens of countries across the world,⁸ opening up badly needed markets for the state’s expanding industrial, particularly military manufacturing, prowess.

Ironically, at the peak of its military, nuclear, economic, and political power, Israel started becoming more vulnerable.

The fact that the United States got mired in a seemingly indefinite “war on terror” (which should aptly be called “the mother of all terror,” as it is the most egregious and immoral form of state terror, shedding any veneer of respect for international law, and simultaneously a cause of much terror by fanatic groups in many countries), causing death and destruction in Iraq and Afghanistan of genocidal proportions⁹ and a significant loss of US soldiers’ lives, has started to open some cracks in the otherwise iron wall of support for Israel in the US establishment. The 2008 defeat and democratic purge of the neocons helped widen those cracks.

John Mearsheimer, expert on the Israel lobby in the United States, describes the process of change, which has accelerated recently:

The combination of Israel’s strategic incompetence and its gradual transformation into an apartheid state creates significant problems for the United States. There is growing recognition in both countries that
their interests are diverging; indeed this perspective is even garnering attention inside the American Jewish community. Jewish Week, for example, recently published an article entitled "The Gaza Blockade: What Do You Do When U.S. and Israeli Interests Aren't in Sync?" Leaders in both countries are now saying that Israeli policy toward the Palestinians is undermining U.S. security. Vice President Biden and Gen. David Petraeus, the head of Central Command, both made this point recently, and the head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, told the Knesset [Israel's parliament] in June, "Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden."

For decades, Israel's supporters have striven to shape public discourse in the United States so that most Americans believe the two countries' interests are identical. That situation is changing, however. Not only is there now open talk about clashing interests, but knowledgeable people are openly asking whether Israel's actions are detrimental to U.S. security.10

This context of relative change in the US establishment, accompanied by more radical change at the grassroots level in the United States and Europe in reaction to Israel's war crimes and other grave violations of international law in its bloody suppression of the second Palestinian intifada, provided fertile ground for a well-conceived, nonviolent citizens' movement for Palestinian rights to flourish.

On July 9, 2005, Palestinian civil society launched what is now widely recognized as a qualitatively different phase in the global struggle for Palestinian freedom, justice, and self-determination against a ruthless, powerful system of oppression that enjoys impunity and that is intent on making a self-fulfilling prophecy of the utterly racist, myth-laden foundational Zionist dictum of "a land without a people for a people without a land." In a historic moment of collective consciousness, and informed by almost a century of struggle against Zionist settler colonialism, the overwhelming majority in Palestinian civil society issued the Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it fully complies with its obligations under international law.11 More than 170 Palestinian civil society groups, including all major political parties, refugee rights associations, trade union federations, women's unions, NGO networks, and virtually the entire spectrum of grassroots organizations, recalled how people of conscience in the international community have "historically shouldered the moral responsibility to fight injustice, as exemplified in the struggle to abolish apartheid in South Africa," calling upon international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world to "impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era."

Since 2008, the BDS movement has been led by the largest coalition of Palestinian civil society organizations inside historic Palestine and in exile, the BDS National Committee (BNC).12

Peace, Justice, and Rights

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, one of Africa's most important contemporary writers, wrote in the introduction to his Decolonising the Mind about how imperialism presents the struggling peoples of the earth with the "ultimatum" that they must "accept theft or death," adding:

The oppressed and the exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. ... It even plants serious doubts about the moral
righteousness of struggle. Possibilities of... victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended results are despair, resignation and a collective death-wish.\textsuperscript{19}

Ngugi goes on to suggest that the most appropriate response by those struggling for freedom and justice is “to confront this threat with the higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle.”

The BDS campaign is among the most important forms of such “resolute struggle” by the great majority of Palestinians, who resist the colonization of their land and minds and demand nothing less than self-determination, freedom, justice, and unmitigated equality. The BDS Call, anchored in international law and universal principles of human rights, adopts a comprehensive rights-based approach, underlining the fact that for the Palestinian people to exercise its right to self-determination, Israel must end its three forms of injustice that infringe international law and Palestinian rights by:

1. ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands [occupied in 1967] and dismantling the wall
2. recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality
3. respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties, as stipulated in UN Resolution 194

As South African archbishop emeritus Desmond Tutu once said: “I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights.”\textsuperscript{14}

For decades, but especially since the Oslo accords signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1993, Israel, with varying degrees of collusion from successive US administrations, the European Union, and complacent Arab “leaders,” has attempted to redefine the Palestinian people to include only those who live in Palestinian territory occupied in 1967. The main objective has been to deceptively reduce the question of Palestine to a mere dispute over some “contested” territory occupied by Israel since 1967, thus excluding the UN-sanctioned rights of the majority of the Palestinian people. In this context, peace devoid of justice becomes the objective, perpetuating injustice.\textsuperscript{15}

The so-called international community, under the hegemonic influence of the United States, the world’s only superpower, has not only failed to stop Israel’s construction of the wall and its settler colonies, both declared illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004; it has colluded in undermining hitherto UN-sanctioned Palestinian rights. This has prompted Palestinian society to again surpass its “leadership” and reassert its basic rights. The BDS Call, with unprecedented near-consensus support among Palestinians inside historic Palestine as well as in exile, reminded the world that the indigenous Palestinian people include the refugees forcibly displaced from their homeland—by Zionist militias and later the state of Israel—during the 1948 Nakba\textsuperscript{16} and ever since, as well as the Palestinian citizens of Israel who remained on their land and now live under a regime of legalized racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{17}

Ending the largely discernible aspects of the Israeli occupation while maintaining effective control over most of the Palestinian territory occupied in 1967 “in return” for Palestinians’ accepting Israel’s annexation of the largest colonial blocs, with the most fertile lands and richest water resources; relinquishing the right of return; and accepting Israel as an apartheid state—this has become the basic formula for the so-called peaceful settlement endorsed by the world’s hegemonic powers and acquiesced to by an unelected, unrepresentative, unprincipled, and visionless Palestinian “leadership.” The entire spectrum of Zionist parties in Israel and their supporters in the West,
with a few exceptions, ostensibly accept this unjust and illegal formula as the “only offer” on the table before the Palestinians—or else the menacing Israeli bludgeon. With the sharp rise of the ultraright in Israel, even this long-held Israeli formula no longer enjoys majority support in the Israel public.18

In fact, many Jewish Israelis are now vociferous in protesting what they see as a rise of “fascism” in the state, accompanied by an entrenched in racism and rejection of any meaningful peace. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) in a report titled As Israel’s Image Sinks, Whither Israeli PR? explains a key reason behind what it viewed as Israel’s failure in the battle for hearts and minds in the West despite its massive obsession with and substantial investments in “rebranding” its image: “The public face of Israel, the Netanyahu-Lieberman-Barak government, wins few points on the international stage. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is widely perceived as uninterested in making peace, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman is seen as a racist bully, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak is seen as not doing enough to press for more peace-oriented policies.”19

A Haaretz journalist, while typically reducing Israel’s injustices to the 1967 occupation only, still succinctly explains Israel’s loss of support at the international grassroots level thus:

Underlying the anger against Israel lies disappointment. Since the establishment of the state, and before, we demanded special terms of the world. We played on their feelings of guilt, for standing idle while six million Jews were murdered.

David Ben-Gurion called us a light unto the nations and we stood tall and said, we, little David, would stand strong and righteous against the great evil Goliath.

The world appreciated that message and, even according to the foreign press, enabled us to develop the atom bomb in order to prevent a second Holocaust.

But then came the occupation, which turned us into the evil Goliath, the cruel oppressor, a darkness on the nations. And now we are paying the price of presenting ourselves as righteous and causing disappointment: boycott.20

Coming on the heels of Israel’s devastating war of aggression on Lebanon (2006), its latest bloodbath in the Gaza Strip (2008–9), and its multiyear illegal and immoral siege of the Strip have stimulated a real transformation in world public opinion against Israeli policies. The United Nations and leading human rights organizations have amply documented the devastating consequences of the siege on the health of the Palestinian population, especially children, among whom stunted growth and anemia have become widespread. A May 2010 report by the BBC in fact reveals how Israel, through its siege, has allowed only the “minimum calorie intake needed by Gaza’s million and a half inhabitants, according to their age and sex,” as a form of severe collective punishment.21 It has prevented not only candles, various types of medicines, books, crayons, clothing, shoes, blankets, pasta, tea, coffee and chocolate, but also musical instruments22 from reaching the 1.5 million Palestinians incarcerated in what has been called the world’s largest open-air prison and even a “prison camp,” in the words of British prime minister David Cameron.23

When the heart-wrenching images of Israeli phosphorus bombs showering densely populated Palestinian neighborhoods and UN shelters in Gaza were beamed across the world during Israel’s Operation Cast Lead in 2008–9, they triggered worldwide outrage that translated into boycotts and divestment initiatives in economic, academic, athletic, and cultural fields. Former president of the UN General Assembly Father Miguel D’Escoto Brockmann, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, distinguished artists, writers, academics, and filmmakers, progressive Jewish groups, major trade unions and labor federations, church-affiliated
organizations, and many student groups have all endorsed, to varying degrees, the logic of boycott, convincing many that our “South Africa moment” has finally arrived.

As the JTA news service put it: “The fear is that Israel is subject to a growing tide of delegitimization that, if unchecked, could pose an existential threat. The nightmare scenario has the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement gaining more traction and anti-Israel opinion moving from Western campuses to governments, followed by a lifting of the protective American diplomatic umbrella.” In the same vein, in May 2009, at a policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), executive director Howard Kohr warned that BDS was reaching the American mainstream and “laying the predicate for abandonment [of Israel].” Kohr added, “This is a conscious campaign to shift policy, to transform the way Israel is treated by its friends to a state that deserves not our support, our contempt; not our protection, but pressure to change its essential nature.”

Despite massive investments of money and projection of intimidating power, the Israel lobby has largely failed, to date, to quell the spread of support for BDS on US campuses as well as among faith-based organizations, cultural figures, and even progressive and liberal Jewish groups. Confronted with this failure to quash BDS in its infancy, Zionist groups everywhere, and especially in the United States, have resorted to naked bullying, intimidation, and other increasingly McCarthyesque measures, further alienating a fast-growing number of Jewish Americans, especially the younger generation. At times one feels that Zionist groups have lost their touch in playing the carrot-and-stick game, so much so that they have forgotten what a carrot even looks like. If a stick does not work, they use a thicker one.

Writing in the New York Review of Books, the influential Jewish American author and academic Peter Beinart considers this failure of the Jewish establishment in the United States as a foregone conclusion:

For several decades, the Jewish establishment has asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism’s door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.

Morally, American Zionism is in a downward spiral. If the leaders of groups like AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations do not change course, they will wake up one day to find a younger, Orthodox-dominated, Zionist leadership whose naked hostility to Arabs and Palestinians scares even them, and a mass of secular American Jews who range from apathetic to appalled.

John Mearsheimer takes a different angle to explain the same phenomenon, the seemingly inexorable decline of the Israel lobby’s ability to convince:

The lobby’s unceasing commitment to defending Israel, which sometimes means shortchanging U.S. interests, is likely to become more apparent to more Americans in the future, and that could lead to a wicked backlash against Israel’s supporters as well as Israel.

The lobby faces yet another challenge: defending an apartheid state in the liberal West is not going to be easy. Once it is widely recognized that the two-state solution is dead and Israel has become like white-ruled South Africa—and that day is not far off—support for Israel inside the American Jewish community is likely to diminish significantly.

The most consequential achievement of the first five years of the BDS movement was indeed to expose the “essential nature” of Israel’s regime over the Palestinian people as one that combines military occupation, colonization, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid. Israel’s mythical and carefully cultivated, decades-old image as a “democratic” state seeking “peace” may, as a result, have suffered irreparable damage.

The September 13, 2010, Time magazine cover story, “Why Israel Doesn’t Care about Peace,” may be the most prominent indicator yet
of the growing feeling among many in the West, even in the environments most supportive of Israel's policies, that Israel truly has no interest in peace, particularly given that it is has not yet been compelled to pay a serious price for its belligerence and persistent violations of international law.

While analysts and legal experts continue to debate to what degree—or whether—the UN definition of apartheid applies to Israel's system of legalized racial discrimination, it has become more common in the mainstream Israeli media to read and hear the term fascism used by prominent figures to describe Israel. To cite one recent reason for increased usage of the term, the Israeli Supreme Court, in line with its long history of justifying racial discrimination and other violations of international law, sanctioned the planned construction of three apartment buildings for Jews only in the Jaffa neighborhood of Ajami, despite the fact that such a decision entails blatant racial discrimination.²⁰

Hundreds of academics, artists, and other intellectuals signed a “Declaration of Independence from Fascism” right after the Israeli government overwhelmingly voted to adopt an amendment to the Citizenship Act, dubbed the “loyalty oath,” whereby “non-Jews” applying for Israeli citizenship would have to pledge allegiance to Israel “as a Jewish democratic state.”²¹ Far-right Knesset member Michael Ben-Ari said following the vote, “Twenty years have passed since the assassination of Rabbi Kahane, and today Likud admits he was right. It’s a refreshing change to see the Likud government, which persecuted the rabbi over his call to have Arabs sign a loyalty oath, admit today that what Kahane said 20 years ago was correct.”²² Meir Kahane was a fanatically racist rabbi elected to the Knesset in 1984. In 1988, Kahane’s party, Kach, was banned for its incitement of racism. While in office, Kahane’s legislative proposals included “revoking Israeli citizenship from non-Jews and banning Jewish-Gentile marriages or sexual intercourse.”²³ He advocated ethnic cleansing and plotted acts of terrorism. While his views were regarded in the 1980s as extremist, mainstream Israeli parties today have adopted several of his most extreme positions.

In reaction to the loyalty oath, Israeli award-winning academic Gavriel Solomon went so far as to compare today’s Israel to Germany in the 1930s: “The idea of Judenrein (Jew free zone) or Arabrein is not new. . . Some might say ‘how can you compare us to Nazis?’ I am not talking about the death camps, but about the year 1935. There were no camps yet, but there were racist laws. And we are heading toward these kinds of laws. The government is clearly declaring our incapacity for democracy.”³⁴

The well-known Israeli writer Seffi Rachlevsky differed on the time frame of the comparison: “The struggle today is not between left and right but between democrats and fascists. . . Israel is becoming fascist and racist. In a sense you could say, we are not so much like the madness that was in Germany in 1933 but rather in 1944–45, when they were in danger of losing the war that madness prevented them from stopping.”³⁵

Israeli journalist and activist Uri Avnery has also compared the specter of fascism in Israel with the Nazi rise to power in Germany. He warns that fascism has started to take over the Israeli government and Knesset and that, unlike in the West where far-right groups are also growing in influence, “Israel’s very existence is threatened by fascism. It can lead our state to destruction.”³⁶

After the Knesset took a significant step toward criminalizing any call for boycott of Israel or its institutions by citizens, residents, and even foreigners entering the country, Avnery wrote, “No doubt can remain that Kahanism—the Israeli version of fascism—has moved from the margin to center stage.”³⁷ Reacting to the same development, the former chief editor of the influential Israeli daily Haaretz, David Landau, called for boycotting the Israeli Knesset “to stand against the wave of fascism that [has] engulfed the Zionist project.”³⁸
The by-now-customary calls by Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, even from the podium of the UN General Assembly, for ethnically cleansing Palestinian citizens of Israel and rejecting any peaceful settlement demanding a significant withdrawal of Israel from occupied Palestinian territory have only accelerated the spread of the view of Israel as a world pariah. A prominent Israeli academic commented thus on the far-right politics of Israeli cabinet ministers: “Israel is currently the only Western country whose cabinet includes the likes of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, Justice Minister Yaakov Neeman and Interior Minister Eli Yishai. The last time politicians holding views similar to theirs were in power in post–World War II Western Europe was in Franco’s Spain.”

An Israeli BDS activist’s mother, who lives in Tel Aviv, jokingly asked her son, “Has Lieberman been recruited to your [BDS] movement, too!”

This growing outcry about Israel “becoming fascist” reflects an unprecedented level of anxiety among “liberal” Zionists in Israel and elsewhere that Israel’s system of colonial and racist repression, under which indigenous Palestinians have suffered since 1948, will now target Jewish Israeli dissenters as well.

The facade of democracy, not democracy itself, is what is truly collapsing in Israel, as democracy has never existed in any true form—nor could have existed—in a settler-colonial state like Israel. Apartheid South Africa was a “democracy” for whites, after all, and the United States was a “democracy” when Southern states were still holding on to apartheid laws against African Americans and other non-whites. But when the facade of democracy and enlightenment collapses, the entire Israeli regime of apartheid, settler-colonialism, and occupation is put at serious risk of collapse as well, as it will be even less tolerated by the world and more likely to trigger even fiercer internal resistance to it.

In this context, the BDS movement has played a major role in intensifying the now public fear in Israel that Israel is becoming a world pariah, as apartheid South Africa was, with all the expected consequences. Witnessing exceptional growth, and winning over voices in the Western mainstream, BDS has produced an unmistakably loud alarm in Israel’s highest political echelons.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, reacted angrily to a boycott call issued by prominent Israeli artists, supported by academics, in August 2010 against performing in Israel’s illegal colonies: “The State of Israel is under an attack of delegitimisation by elements in the international community. This attack includes attempts to enact economic, academic and cultural boycotts. The last thing we need at this time is to be under such an attack—I mean this attempt at a boycott—from within.”

The term delegitimisation was first used by a shady Tel Aviv “think tank” that described the international boycott of Israel as “increasingly sophisticated, ripe and coherent,” warning that the boycott is a “strategic threat,” even a “potentially existential threat,” to the state. In a report presented to the Israeli government, the organization partially—albeit implicitly—admitted what exactly the boycott movement was “delegitimizing”: “A consistent and honest Israeli commitment to end its control over the Palestinians, advance human rights, and promote greater integration and equality for its Arab citizens is essential in fighting the battle against delegitimization. Such commitment must be reflected in a coherent and comprehensive strategy towards Gaza and the political process with the Palestinians.”

While these recommended policy changes hardly meet the minimal rights of the Palestinian people, their mention indicates that the authors of the report realize that the boycott targets Israel because of its denial of these basic rights. Otherwise it would not make sense to prescribe recognizing them to combat the boycott. Indeed, BDS strives to
delegitimize Israel's settler-colonial oppression, apartheid, and ongoing ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian people, just as the South Africa boycott was aimed at delegitimizing apartheid there. In no other boycott against any state has the preposterous claim been made that this nonviolent tactic is intended to end the very physical existence of the target state.

The "delegitimization" scare tactic further failed to impress any reasonable person because its most far-reaching—and entirely unsubstantiated—claim against BDS is that the movement aims to "supersede the Zionist model with a state that is based on the 'one person, one vote' principle"—hardly the most evil or disquieting accusation for anyone even vaguely interested in democracy!

In contrast to Israel, some leading legal experts have taken a far more sanguine attitude to the issue of legitimacy and delegitimization. UN special rapporteur for human rights in the Occupied Territories, Richard Falk, argues:

At the present time I'm very sceptical [whether] inter-governmental diplomacy can achieve any significant result. And the best hope for the Palestinians is what I call a legitimacy war, similar to the [South African] anti-apartheid campaign in the late-1980s and 1990s that was so effective in isolating and undermining the authority of the apartheid government. I think that is happening now in relation to Israel. There's a very robust boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign all over the world that is capturing the political and moral imagination of the people, the NGOs and civil society and is beginning to have an important impact on Israel's way of acting and thinking.48

Besieging Israel's Siege

BDS is perhaps the most ambitious, empowering, and promising Palestinian-led global movement for justice and rights. BDS has the capacity to challenge Israel’s colonial rule and apartheid in a morally consistent, effective, and, crucially, intelligent manner.

Figures as diverse as Desmond Tutu, Jimmy Carter, and former Israeli attorney general Michael Ben-Yair have described Israel as practicing apartheid against the indigenous Palestinians.49 Characterizing Israel's legalized and institutionalized racial discrimination as such does not attempt to equate Israel with South Africa under apartheid; despite the many similarities, no two oppressive regimes are identical. Rather, it stems from the argument that Israel's system of bestowing rights and privileges according to ethnic and religious identity fits the UN definition of the term as enshrined in the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid and in the 2002 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The disingenuous or manifestly misinformed argument that rejects the apartheid charge on the basis that Jewish Israelis form a majority, unlike the whites in South Africa who were in the minority, ignores the fact that the universally accepted definition of apartheid has nothing to do with majorities and minorities. Rather, it is defined as "inhumane acts ... committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime."50

While Palestinian and other BDS advocates may support diverse solutions to the question of Palestinian self-determination and the colonial conflict with Israel, by avoiding the prescription of any particular political formula the BDS Call insists on the necessity of realizing the three basic, irreducible rights of the Palestinian people in any just solution. It presents a platform that not only unifies Palestinians everywhere in the face of accelerating fragmentation, but also appeals to international civil society by evoking the same universal principles of freedom, justice, and equal rights that animated the
anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and the civil rights movement in the United States.

Since July 2005, there has never been a period with as many BDS achievements as after the Israeli massacre in Gaza in the winter of 2008–9 and the bloodbath on the Gaza-bound Freedom Flotilla in May 2010, which rudely awakened a long-dormant sense of international public outrage at Israel’s exceptional status as a state above the law. People of conscience around the world seem to have crossed a threshold in challenging Israel’s impunity through effective pressure, not appeasement or “constructive engagement.”

“Besiege your siege,” the haunting cry of Palestine’s most celebrated poet, Mahmoud Darwish, suddenly acquires a different meaning in this context. Since attempts to convince a colonial power to give up its privileges and heed moral pleas for justice are at best delusional, many now feel the need to “besiege” Israel though boycotts, raising the price of its siege and apartheid. Rather than get bogged down in trying to convince Israel to recognize us as humans and then to win from it an emaciated set of our rights and bits and pieces of our dignity, the overwhelming majority of the Palestinian people have opted for this all-encompassing nonviolent civil resistance that counters the entire array of Israeli injustices.

Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel Takes Off

Refusing to be complicit in whitewashing settler-colonial Jewish extremism did not start after Israel’s flotilla attack or even its atrocities in Gaza. It actually started even before Israel was established on the ruins of Palestinian society. In February 1930, Zionist leaders asked Sigmund Freud, as an iconic Jewish figure, to contribute to a petition condemning the 1929 Palestinian riots against the intensifying Zionist colonization of Palestine.25 Despite his outspoken Zionist tendency at the time, Freud refused to be complicit in what he regarded as the “baseless fanaticism” of Jewish colonial settlers, writing:

Whoever wants to influence the [Jewish] masses must give them something rousing and inflammatory and my sober judgement of Zionism does not permit this. I certainly sympathise with its goals, am proud of our University in Jerusalem and am delighted with our settlement’s prosperity. But, on the other hand, I do not think that Palestine could ever become a Jewish state, nor that the Christian and Islamic worlds would ever be prepared to have their holy places under Jewish care… I concede with sorrow that the baseless fanaticism of our people is in part to be blamed for the awakening of Arab distrust.25

In the same spirit of rejecting complicity in Israel’s violations of international law and Palestinian rights, British academics were the pioneers in launching international academic pressure campaigns against Israel. A petition initiated by Hilary and Steven Rose for a moratorium on EU funding of research collaboration with Israel was published in the Guardian in April 2002, with 130 signatures, triggering a singular backlash from Israel and its lobby groups but also giving birth to a new form of solidarity with Palestinian rights. Later, in response to the call by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI),26 the British Committee for Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) was formed and subsequently led several successful campaigns in British academic unions at the front of adopting the logic of a boycott of Israel.27

Established in 2009, USACBI, a US-based campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel, recently announced having gained five hundred academic endorsements of its call, not to mention the hundreds of cultural figures who have also signed.28

Most recently, in October 2010, a Norwegian petition calling for an institutional cultural and academic boycott of Israel (in line with the
PACBI principles) has gathered one hundred impressive signatories—academics, writers, musicians, other cultural workers, and sports celebrities, including Egil “Drillo” Olsen, the coach of the Norwegian national soccer team. Around the same time, the European Platform for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (EPACBI) was announced, with participation of boycott campaigns from across the continent, in full coordination with PACBI.

Weeks earlier the Indian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel had been launched, with the endorsement of some of India’s most famous writers and academics. In the campaign’s statement, the signatories declared: “Just as it was in the case of the international call against South Africa in the apartheid years, we are confident that this boycott will be effective in contributing to international pressure on Israel to abandon its oppression and expulsion of the indigenous population based on military aggression, legal discrimination and persecution, and economic stranglehold.”

A South African petition issued in September 2010 calling on the University of Johannesburg to boycott Israel’s Ben Gurion University was endorsed by 250 academics and prominent figures, including the heads of four South African universities, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Breyten Breytenbach, John Dugard, Antjie Krog, Barney Pityana, and Kader Asmal. Invoking the moral weight of South Africa, the precedent-setting statement did not mince words in condemning the complicity of Israeli academic institutions in violations of international law: “While Palestinians are not able to access universities and schools, Israeli universities produce the research, technology, arguments and leaders for maintaining the occupation.”

Citing Nelson Mandela’s caution not to be “enticed to read reconciliation and fairness as meaning parity between justice and injustice,” Archbishop Tutu has defended the call to sever links with complicit Israeli institutions: “It can never be business as usual. Israeli Universities are an intimate part of the Israeli regime, by active choice.” Reiterating his unwavering support for the Palestinian-led global campaign for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel, he eloquently adds: “Together with the peace-loving peoples of this Earth, I condemn any form of violence—but surely we must recognise that people caged in, starved and stripped of their essential material and political rights must resist their Pharaoh? Surely resistance also makes us human? Palestinians have chosen, like we did, the nonviolent tools of boycott, divestment and sanctions.”

Most recently, and in a development that will be recorded as historic, artists in South Africa supporting the BDS Call against Israel issued a declaration titled “South African Artists against Apartheid.” It stated:

As South African Artists and Cultural Workers who have lived under, survived, and in many cases resisted apartheid, we acknowledge the value of international solidarity in our own struggle. It is in this context that we respond to the call by Palestinians, and their Israeli allies, for such solidarity.

As artists of conscience we say no to apartheid—anywhere. We respond to the call for international solidarity and undertake not to avail any invitation to perform or exhibit in Israel. Nor will we accept funding from institutions linked to the government of Israel. This is our position until such time as Israel, in the least, complies with international law and universal principles of human rights. Until then, we too unite with international colleagues under the banner of “Artists Against Apartheid.”

Academic and cultural boycott campaigns have also spread to Canada, France, Italy, and Spain. In Canada, college student activists in Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA) who are part of the Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid (CAIA) pioneered in 2005 the largest campus BDS campaign around the world, Israeli Apartheid
Week, which by now reaches dozens of international universities, including some of the most prestigious, spreading support for BDS and raising awareness about Israel’s occupation and racial discrimination system.

Best-selling authors like Iain Banks, Alice Walker, and Henning Mankell have recently endorsed the boycott against Israel, and so did eminent scholar Ann Laura Stoler. Top artists have shunned Israel due to its violation of international law and Palestinian rights. News of megastar Meg Ryan’s canceling her visit to Israel and of concert cancellations by Elvis Costello, Gil Scott-Heron, Carlos Santana, The Pixies, and Faithless, among others, has finally put to rest skepticism about the potential of the campaign. World-renowned filmmakers from Jean-Luc Godard and the Yes Men to Mike Leigh have also heeded the boycott call and stayed away from Israeli festivals. Explaining his visit cancellation, Leigh addresses Israelis saying:

As I watched the world very properly condemn [the Flotilla] atrocity, I almost canceled. I now wish I had, and blame my cowardice for not having done so. . . . Since then, your government has gone from bad to worse. . . . The resumption of the illegal building on the West Bank made me start to consider it seriously. . . . And now we have the Loyalty Oath. This is the last straw—quite apart from the ongoing criminal blockade of Gaza, not to mention the endless shooting of innocent people there, including juveniles. . . . But in any case, I am now in an untenable position, which I must confront according to my conscience.

Even long before this latest swelling of support for the cultural boycott of Israel, renowned authors and cultural figures of the caliber of John Berger, Naomi Klein, Arundhati Roy, Ken Loach, John Greyson, and Judith Butler have supported BDS.

In September 2010, in nothing less than a watershed in the cultural boycott, more than 150 US and British theater, film, and TV artists issued a statement, initiated by Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), supporting the spreading cultural boycott inside Israel of Ariel and the rest of Israel’s colonial settlements, illegally built on occupied Palestinian territory (OPT), due to their violation of international law. Frank Gehry, of Guggenheim fame, joined the supporters of this cultural boycott. While falling short of endorsing a comprehensive cultural boycott of Israel, this initiative broke a long-held taboo in the United States against calling for any pressure, let alone boycott, to be brought to bear against Israel in response to its ongoing violations of international law and war crimes. In the US context, where dissent from the two-party line that treats Israel as above the law of nations and, often, ahead of US interests may dearly cost an artist, a journalist, an elected official, an academic, or just about anyone else, this artists’ statement is beyond courageous. Condemning Israel’s colonial settlements and “ugly occupation,” expressing “hope for a just and lasting peace” (emphasis added) in the region, and endorsing the logic of boycott as an effective and perfectly legitimate tool to end injustice, the statement is precedent-setting.

Countering the argument by anti-boycott groups that art, the academy, or any profession should be exempted from the boycott for being “above politics” despite evidence of being implicated in a very real political regime of oppression, Israeli architect Abe Hayeem, who founded Architects and Planners for Justice in Palestine (APJ), holds up architecture as an example of complicity:

Architecture and planning are instruments of the occupation and constitute part of a continuing war against a whole people, whether as a minority within Israel’s green line or in the occupied territories. Since this involves dispossession, discrimination and acquisition of land and homes by force, against the Geneva conventions, it can be classified as participation in war crimes.

What can one say about the Israeli architects who follow the state’s policies and aims yet deny that their role is political? Despite all the
evidence of illegality under international law and breaches of human rights in the land grabs, house demolitions and evictions, Israeli architects and planners continue their activities. They cannot claim that they do not know: there have been plenty of calls for them to stop.  

Sanctions, Divestment, and Economic Impact

Dismissing all the spectacular and concrete achievements of the still very young BDS movement as “largely symbolic,” BDS opponents, including some who are widely seen in the West as supporters of—at least some—Palestinian rights, have argued that the boycott of Israel, unlike that waged against apartheid South Africa, is unrealistic and impractical, as it cannot possibly hurt Israel’s formidable economic interests, protected by Western powers. Established analysts and leaders of the struggle against apartheid rule in South Africa who now support the Palestinian BDS movement against Israel recall how this same flawed and often disingenuous argument of economic unfeasibility was used against their struggle as well, often by liberals who ostensibly opposed apartheid but preferred “softer” tactics than boycott and divestment. Rejecting those softer tactics, a former South African cabinet minister and ANC leader, Ronnie Kasrils, who happens to be Jewish, writes in the Guardian:

When Chief Albert Luthuli made a call for the international community to support a boycott of apartheid South Africa in 1958, the response was a widespread and dedicated movement that played a significant role in ending apartheid. Amid the sporting boycotts, the pledges of playwrights and artists, the actions by workers to stop South African goods from entering local markets and the constant pressure on states to withdraw their support for the apartheid regime, the role of academics also came to the fore. . . .

Almost four decades later, the campaign for boycott, divestment and sanctions is gaining ground again in South Africa, this time against Israeli apartheid.  

Durban-based economist Patrick Bond, in a lecture in Ramallah on September 26, 2010, cautioned his Palestinian audience not to fall for the insincere argument that the economic “invincibility” of Israel translates into the ultimate futility of BDS tactics. Seemingly unconquerable economic powers, he argued, have fallen much faster than many had thought possible. South Africa was no exception.  

While it is still too early to fairly expect BDS to have a considerable economic impact on Israel, in actual fact the movement has started to bite and, crucially, to empower activists worldwide, illuminating to them a path with great potential for raising the price of Israel’s intransigence and disregard of international law.

Trade unions around the world, especially in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and South Africa, have endorsed boycotting Israel to end its impunity. The British Trades Union Congress, for instance, representing more than 6.5 million workers, unanimously passed a motion in September 2010, supported by the public-sector union Unison and the Fire Brigades Union as well as by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (UK), calling for boycotting the products of and divesting from companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory.  

The South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) initiated a campaign to rid all municipalities in South Africa of Israeli products to make them “apartheid Israel free zones,” a campaign that has started firing the imagination of BDS activists elsewhere.

Dockworkers’ unions in Sweden, India, Turkey, South Africa, and the United States heeded, to various degrees, a unified appeal by all Palestinian trade unions and the BDS National Committee (BNC) for a boycott of loading and offloading Israeli ships to protest Israel’s bloody flotilla attack.  

As early as April 2009, in the aftermath of the Israeli bloodbath in Gaza in the winter of 2008–9, the Israel Manufacturers Association reported that “21% of 90 local exporters who were questioned had felt a
drop in demand due to boycotts, mostly from the UK and Scandinavian countries.\textsuperscript{83}

A number of young, creative, well-conceived and -executed BDS campaigns, while not yet yielding any direct impact on the Israeli economy, are quite promising for the near future. Across the United States, especially on campuses, divestment and boycott campaigns are swelling as one campaign’s success and lessons feed another. A national BDS conference of college students was held at Hampshire College in 2009,\textsuperscript{84} months after BDS activists there succeeded in pressuring their school to divest from companies profiting from the Israeli occupation.\textsuperscript{85} The sharing of experiences and best practices was invaluable for arguably the most important component of the BDS movement in the United States at present: campus-based groups.

Adalah-NY: The New York Campaign for the Boycott of Israel, was among the very first to innovate BDS tactics best suited for the New York setting. From parodies, music, and street dancing to meticulously researched and compelling press releases, they have scored a number of successes, inspiring many newer campaigns in several states and in many countries.\textsuperscript{86}

The spectacular media triumph of the CodePink-led campaign—brilliantly named Stolen Beauty—against Israeli cosmetics company AHAVA, which manufactures in an illegal colony, had a distinctly inspiring effect on BDS campaigns across the Atlantic, particularly in France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{87}

In California, BDS activists and partners have launched one of the most ambitious BDS campaigns to date. With the slogan “Divest from Israeli Apartheid,” they describe their initiative thus:

If successful, the measure will appear on the next statewide ballot after March 2011. Then, if approved by a majority of voters, it will become California law. This means that the two public retirement systems, the Public Employees’ Retirement System (CalPERS) and the State Teachers’ Retirement System (CalSTRS), would be required to engage in a divestment process with corporations providing equipment and services to Israel that are used in the violation of human rights and international law, including but not limited to the building of the “Separation Wall” and settlements.\textsuperscript{88}

Another ambitious US-based divestment campaign that is exceptionally promising has been initiated by JVP,\textsuperscript{89} with several partners, and endorsed by the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation. The TIAA-CREF campaign aims at convincing the large pension fund manager to divest from companies implicated in Israel’s occupation and violations of international law.\textsuperscript{90} The Palestinian leadership of the BDS movement, the BNC, has warmly welcomed and endorsed the TIAA-CREF campaign.\textsuperscript{91}

Perhaps the most economically significant international BDS campaign to date is the one waged against the two French conglomerates, Veolia and Alstom, due to their involvement in the so-called Jerusalem Light Rail, a manifestly illegal project intended to cement Israel’s colonial hold on occupied Jerusalem as well as on the colonies surrounding it. Since the special BDS campaign targeting this project—named Derail Veolia/Alstom—was launched in November 2008 in Bilbao, Basque Country (Spain), Veolia in particular has lost contracts worth billions of dollars, largely due to intensive campaigning against the company in several countries.\textsuperscript{92}

Several campaigns spearheaded by the Irish Palestine Solidarity Campaign are now being designed to target Israel’s “blood diamonds.” Given the fact that Israel today is the world leader in exporting polished diamonds, with revenues reaching almost $20 billion in 2008\textsuperscript{93}—far larger than its lucrative and often scrutinized arms trade—I cannot overemphasize the significance of effective BDS campaigns to raise
awareness about Israel's violations of human rights and international law and to convince diamond buyers to boycott Israeli diamonds.

Progressive lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) groups in the United States,\textsuperscript{64} Canada,\textsuperscript{65} and elsewhere have also challenged support for Israeli apartheid in LGBT communities in the West and joined the ranks of the global BDS movement. This was buoyed by the launch on June 27, 2010, of the Palestinian Queers for BDS initiative. Their statement reads:

[W]e, Palestinian Queer activists, call upon the LGBTQI communities around the globe to stand for justice in Palestine through adopting and implementing broad boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until the latter has ended its multi-tiered oppression of the Palestinian people, in line with the 2005 Palestinian civil society call for BDS.\textsuperscript{96}

Following the Palestinian queer group’s call, an Israeli LGBT call was announced, endorsing BDS.\textsuperscript{97} In addition, several campaigns by LGBT groups have opposed “pink-washing” Israeli crimes by portraying it as a state that is tolerant of sexual diversity and gay rights.\textsuperscript{98}

State-level sanctions against Israel have also been on the rise since the Israeli war of aggression on Gaza. Venezuela and Bolivia severed diplomatic relations with Israel.\textsuperscript{99} The parliament of Chile voted in September 2010, with a large majority, to boycott Israeli products originating from the colonial settlements.\textsuperscript{100} In September 2010 even the Netherlands, despite its long-standing foreign policy bias toward Israel, canceled a tour of the country by Israeli mayors because their group included representatives of colonial settlements.\textsuperscript{101} The Dutch pension fund Pensioenfonds Zorg en Welzijn (PFZW), which has investments totaling 97 billion euros, has divested from almost all the Israeli companies in its portfolio.\textsuperscript{102} The government of Spain, in September 2009, excluded an Israeli academic team from participating in an international university competition promoting sustainable architecture because the academics on the team represented the colony college of Ariel. The official statement explaining this decision, which came after intensive lobbying by Palestinian, Israeli, Spanish, and British civil society groups, asserted: “The decision has been taken by the Government of Spain based upon the fact that the University is located in the [occupied] West Bank. The Government of Spain is obliged to respect the international agreements under the framework of the European Union and the United Nations regarding this geographical area.”\textsuperscript{103}

The Court of Justice of the European Union, the highest legal authority mandated with interpreting EU laws, ruled in a landmark decision that may have significant consequences for the Israeli economy that Israeli products originating in colonies built in the occupied Palestinian territory “do not qualify for preferential customs treatment under the EC-Israel Agreement.”\textsuperscript{104}

In September 2009, Norway announced that its government pension fund, the third largest in the world, was selling its shares in a leading Israeli military manufacturer, Elbit Systems, because of the company’s complicity in Israel’s violations of international law. A year later, in September 2010, the Norwegian Department of Foreign Affairs (UD) also decided to ban testing German submarines built for Israel in Norwegian harbors and coastal waters. “We have extremely rigorous restrictions on exporting security goods and services … we don’t export materials or services to states at war or in which there is a danger of war,” said Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre.\textsuperscript{105}

In March 2010, a major Swedish investment fund said it would eschew Elbit Systems shares on the same grounds. In August of the same year, the Norwegian pension fund divested from Africa Israel and its subsidiary Danya Cebus because of their involvement in constructing illegal colonial settlements.\textsuperscript{106}
Also in 2010, Germany’s biggest bank, Deutsche Bank, sold its 2 percent stake in Elbit Systems. Germany-based human rights groups Pax Christi and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) had lobbied bank shareholders to vote against a routine motion of confidence in the board of directors because of its failure to divest from Elbit, while protesters outside the shareholders’ meeting demanded divestment. In response, Deutsche Bank chair Josef Ackermann told the meeting, “Deutsche Bank is out of Elbit.” Ackermann justified the decision based on the bank’s commitment to voluntary codes of conduct such as the UN Global Compact, and he went as far as to deny that Deutsche Bank had ever held shares in Elbit—conflicting with figures published by NASDAQ, which showed that as of March 31, 2010, Deutsche Bank had still owned 2 percent of Elbit Systems and was the fifth largest investor in the company.197 In January 2010, Danske Bank, the largest in Denmark, had also divested from Elbit and Africa Israel.198

Commenting on a small set of the above instances, a Haaretz economics reporter wrote: “The sums involved are not large, but their international significance is huge. Boycotts by governments give a boost to boycotts by non-government bodies around the world.”199

Anticolonial Israeli Support for BDS

Significantly, the BDS Call, as it has come to be known, invites “conscientious Israelis to support this Call, for the sake of justice and genuine peace,” thereby confirming that principled anticolonial Jewish Israelis who support the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination, freedom, and equality in the pursuit of a just, comprehensive, and sustainable peace are partners in the struggle.

Principled Israeli anticolonialists committed to full Palestinian rights, such as Ilan Pappe, the late Tanya Reinhart, Rachel Giora, Haim Bresheeth, Moshe Machover, Oren Ben-Dor, Anat Matar, Michael Warschawski, Kobi Snitz, Shir Hever, Dalit Baum, Yael Lerer, and Jonatan Stanczak, among many others, have truly been partners in this struggle for Palestinian rights. Many of them, aside from their unequivocal commitment to Palestinian rights, realize that Israelis cannot possibly have normal lives without first shedding their colonial status and recognizing those Palestinian rights, paramount among them the right to self-determination.

Since 2009, Boycott! Supporting the Palestinian BDS Call from Within (or Boycott from Within, for short),110 a growing movement in Israel, has fully adopted the Palestinian BDS Call and adhered to its principles, showing the way for genuine Israeli opposition to occupation and apartheid. Among the commendable principles that Boycott from Within has upheld is that progressive Israelis should focus most of their energies not on eating hummus with Palestinians in Ramallah, Bethlehem, or Jenin, or on sharing gestures of perceived “coexistence,” but by working within their communities, the colonial oppressors, to educate and mobilize support for ending Israel’s system of oppression and by supporting the Palestinian-led global BDS campaign.

Israeli groups that have endorsed the BDS Call include, among others, the Alternative Information Center (AIC),111 the Israeli Committee Against House Demolition (ICAHD),112 and Who Profits from the Occupation? (a project of the Coalition of Women for Peace),113 all of which have played key roles in providing political, moral, and often logistical and information support to the BDS movement. For instance, Who Profits? keeps an updated database of Israeli and international corporations involved in the occupation. The list, available at www.whoprofits.org, is exceptionally useful and is often consulted by stockholders of pension funds, banks, and international institutions as well as activists to select their BDS targets and build their cases against them.

The spectacular growth of the Palestinian-initiated and Palestinian-led global BDS campaign against Israel, especially after the Israeli
massacre in the besieged Gaza Strip, has also prompted some on the so-called Zionist left to abandon their long battle against the BDS movement (connected to their self-assigned role as gatekeepers for Palestinian aspirations and international solidarity) and adopt a wiser position. After the entry of BDS into the Western mainstream, some of these figures realized that reclaiming the limelight now demands flirting with BDS, even nominally adopting it, though they do not acknowledge its Palestinian leadership or frame of reference. Their new motto seems to be “If you can’t beat it, hijack it.”

Rather than focusing on the true objectives of the BDS movement—realizing Palestinian rights by ending Israeli oppression against all three segments of the indigenous Palestinian people—members of the Zionist “left” often reduce the struggle to ridding Israel of “the occupation,” presenting BDS as a “weapon” to save Israel, essentially as an apartheid, exclusivist state. They raise the slogan “Boycott the occupation, not Israel,” or “We are against Israeli policies, not against Israel”—as if one could have opposed South African apartheid without being “against South Africa,” or as if one could join a campaign against Saudi Arabian oppression of women, say, without being against Saudi Arabia! Only when it comes to Israel and safeguarding its exceptionalism, its exclusive, unquestionable “right” to exist as a racist state, do we read such insufferable nonsense. One would have understood if the argument had been, instead, that BDS targets Israel as a colonial state that violates international law and Palestinian rights but not the Israeli people per se; that would be more accurate in describing the BDS movement’s goals.

While the BDS movement is not an ideological or centralized political party, it does have a Palestinian leadership, the BNC, and a well-thought-out and clearly articulated set of objectives that comprehensively and consistently address Palestinian rights in the context of upholding international law and universal principles of human rights. The heart of the BDS Call is not the diverse boycotting acts it urges but this rights-based approach that addresses the three basic rights corresponding to the main segments of the Palestinian people. Ending Israel’s occupation, ending its apartheid, and ending its denial of the right of refugees to return together constitute the minimal requirements for justice and the realization of the inalienable right to self-determination. Endorsing BDS entails accepting these irreducible rights as the basis for a just peace.

Moreover, BDS is categorically opposed to all forms of racism and racist ideologies, including anti-Semitism. Individuals who believe that some are more human or deserve more rights than others based on differences in ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, or any other human identity attributes cannot belong to this consistently antiracist struggle for universal rights.¹³

At a practical level, after the principles in the Call are accepted, activists and solidarity groups set their own BDS targets and choose tactics that best suit their political and economic environment. Context sensitivity is the overriding principle for planning and implementing successful BDS campaigns.

BDS, as a distinctly Palestinian form of struggle that is rooted in a century of civil resistance against settler colonialism, inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle and the US civil rights movement, and supported by a global solidarity movement, is effective, flexible, and inclusive enough to welcome all those committed to the irreducible entitlement of all humans to equal rights.

Conclusion

Many around the world still lack the courage, moral consistency, or both to speak out against Israel’s multi-tiered system of oppression. Despite all the compelling analyses showing the gradual decline of the power of the Israel lobby,¹³ it still commands indisputable weapons in its arsenal that allow it to commit character assassination, to end
careers of dissidents—whether members of the US Congress or other parliaments or artists or academics or trade unionists—and to muzzle serious debate about Israel’s increasingly indefensible flouting of international law and basic human rights. Unfortunately, many still choose silence or toeing the line to avoid all this trouble.

Edward Said eloquently writes:

Nothing in my mind is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so to remain within the responsible main stream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship.

For an intellectual these habits of mind are corrupting par excellence. If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits. Personally I have encountered them in one of the toughest of all contemporary issues, Palestine, where fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history has hobbled, blinkered, muzzled many who know the truth and are in a position to serve it. For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate intellectual.116

Heeding Said’s memorable words, this book is an attempt to speak truth to power, to encourage others to speak truth to power, and to make a humble analytical, conceptual, and informative contribution to the most effective effort to date aimed at ending Israel’s impunity and realizing Palestinian rights: the global BDS movement.

The current grim reality on the ground in occupied Palestine makes a comprehensive boycott of Israel and its complicit institutions not only a moral obligation but also an urgent political necessity—first and foremost to avert genocide, and second, for those who may be oblivious to the moral argument and subscribe to what they perceive as a realpolitik approach, to head off a meltdown of the geopolitical system in the entire Arab/Middle Eastern region. Beyond preventing total, bloody chaos, the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) aims to hold Israel accountable to international law and universal principles of human rights, in the pursuit of freedom, justice, self-determination, equality, and sustainable peace.

BDS is urgent because of the nightmarish conditions facing the Palestinian people and because the UN and the world’s dominant states, led by the United States, have not only failed to hold Israel accountable to its obligations under international law but afforded it immunity, practically turning it into a state above the law of nations. This chapter focuses on the most serious of Israel’s crimes against the
Palestinian people and why BDS promises to be an effective and potentially decisive response to them.

When the most stringent phase of Israel's ongoing siege of the occupied Gaza Strip started in June 2007, right after Hamas took over "power" there from a US-Israeli-backed faction of Fatah, few human rights and international law experts were able to accurately analyze the real motives and policy objectives behind Israel's patently illegal and immoral form of collective punishment. Even fewer had the insight to foretell the long-lasting consequences this siege would have on the 1.5 million Palestinians cramped in what was accurately described as the world's largest open-air prison. Richard Falk, a leading international law expert and the current UN special rapporteur for human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, stood out among those few. In 2007 he wrote:

Is it an irresponsible overstatement to associate the treatment of Palestinians with (the) criminalized Nazi record of collective atrocity? I think not. The recent developments in Gaza are especially disturbing because they express so vividly a deliberate intention on the part of Israel and its allies to subject an entire human community to life-endangering conditions of utmost cruelty. The suggestion that this pattern of conduct is a holocaust-in-the-making represents a rather desperate appeal to the governments of the world and to international public opinion to act urgently to prevent these current genocidal tendencies from culminating in a collective tragedy. If ever the ethos of "a responsibility to protect," recently adopted by the UN Security Council as the basis of "humanitarian intervention" is applicable, it would be to act now to start protecting the people of Gaza from further pain and suffering.³

Falk was not only diagnosing Israel's hermetic siege and its cruelty; he was actually predicting the slow genocide that has transpired as a result of the blockade and the December 2008–January 2009 Israeli war of aggression that aggravated it. Insightful indicators of the scale of the crime committed by Israel in Gaza were revealed in the report issued by UN Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, headed by the prominent South African judge Richard Goldstone, who happens to be a Zionist with ties to Israel. Among its damning findings, the Goldstone Report states:

1688. It is clear from evidence gathered by the Mission that the destruction of food supply installations, water sanitation systems, concrete factories and residential houses was the result of a deliberate and systematic policy by the Israeli armed forces. It was not carried out because those objects presented a military threat or opportunity but to make the daily process of living, and dignified living, more difficult for the civilian population.

1689. Allied to the systematic destruction of the economic capacity of the Gaza Strip, there appears also to have been an assault on the dignity of the people. This was seen not only in the use of human shields and unlawful detentions sometimes in unacceptable conditions, but also in the vandalizing of houses when occupied and the way in which people were treated when their houses were entered. The graffiti on the walls, the obscenities and often racist slogans all constituted an overall image of humiliation and dehumanization of the Palestinian population.

1690. The operations were carefully planned in all their phases. Legal opinions and advice were given throughout the planning stages and at certain operational levels during the campaign.

There were almost no mistakes made according to the Government of Israel. It is in these circumstances that the Mission concludes that what occurred in just over three weeks at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 was a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population, radically diminish its local economic capacity both to work and to provide for itself, and to force upon it an ever increasing sense of dependency and vulnerability.⁴ (emphases added)
Although the UN report, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council with a comfortable majority despite hypocritical objections from the United States, the European Union, and Israel—and the unrecognized Hamas government in Gaza—to “launch appropriate investigations that are independent and in conformity with international standards.” It goes on to dampen any hope that Israel is capable, let alone willing, to do so:

1755. The Mission is firmly convinced that justice and respect for the rule of law are the indispensable basis for peace. The prolonged situation of impunity has created a justice crisis in the OPT that warrants action.

1756. After reviewing Israel’s system of investigation and prosecution of serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law, in particular of suspected war crimes and crimes against humanity, the Mission found major structural flaws that in its view make the system inconsistent with international standards. With military “operational debriefings” at the core of the system, there is the absence of any effective and impartial investigation mechanism and victims of such alleged violations are deprived of any effective or prompt remedy. Furthermore, such investigations being internal to the Israeli military authority, do not comply with international standards of independence and impartiality.

The necessity of holding Israel accountable by referring it to the International Criminal Court is the only logical conclusion one can reach from the above. This becomes more self-evident once the other, more fatal, long-term and genocidal aspects of Israel’s war on and siege of Gaza are exposed.

The systematic Israeli targeting of Gaza’s water and sanitation facilities has compounded an already “severe and protracted denial of human dignity,” wrote Maxwell Gaylard, UN resident and humanitarian coordinator in the occupied Palestinian territory, causing “a steep decline in standards of living for the [Palestinians] of Gaza, characterized by erosion of livelihoods, destruction and degradation of basic infrastructure, and a marked downturn in the delivery and quality of vital services in health, water and sanitation.”

A 2009 report by Amnesty International on Israel’s intentional and long-standing policy of denying Palestinian fair access to their water resources has shed light on a particularly fatal aspect of Israel’s designs for the 1.5 million Palestinians in the occupied Gaza Strip. “In Gaza,” the report affirms, “90–95 per cent of the water supply is contaminated and unfit for human consumption.” The report cites an earlier study by the UN Environmental Programme (UNEP), which correlates the widespread contamination of Gaza’s water resources to the rise in nitrate levels in the groundwater “far above the WHO accepted guideline,” inducing a potentially lethal blood disorder in young children and newborns called methemoglobinemia, or the “blue babies” phenomenon. Some of the disease symptoms of this disorder in Gaza infants include “blueness around the mouth, hands and feet,” “episodes of diarrhea and vomiting,” and “loss of consciousness.” “Convulsions and death can occur” at higher levels of nitrate contamination, the report concludes.

Contamination from Israel’s assault and siege did not stop at Gaza’s water resources; it dangerously polluted the soil as well. An independent group of scientists and physicians from the New Weapons Committee, an Italy-based group that researches the effects of recently developed weapons on civilian populations in war zones, conducted a study on Israel’s use of “non-conventional weapons” and their “middle-term effects” on the Palestinian residents of areas in Gaza that were bombed by the Israeli army on two separate occasions. “The 2006 and 2009 Israeli bombings on Gaza,” the study shows, “left a high concentration of toxic metals in soil, which can cause tumours, fertility problems, and serious effects on newborns, like deformities and genetic pathologies.”
In a report tellingly titled *Rain of Fire: Israel's Unlawful Use of White Phosphorus in Gaza*, Human Rights Watch confirms Israel's deliberate targeting of civilians with devastating results. It states that the Israeli army's "repeatedly exploded white phosphorus munitions in the air over [densely] populated areas, killing and injuring civilians, and damaging civilian structures, including a school, a market, a humanitarian aid warehouse and a hospital," adding that the recurrent and indiscriminate use of this deadly weapon "indicates the commission of war crimes."

Corroborating such findings by international human rights organizations and UN agencies on the impact of Israel's attacks on Gaza, on December 20, 2009, Al Dameer Association for Human Rights in Gaza published a position paper on the health and environmental problems caused by Israel's extensive use of proscribed radioactive and toxic materials throughout its assault on Gaza. Among the many grave, "long-lasting," and "tragic" effects of Israel's intentional choice of munitions and its indiscriminate and recurring targeting of densely populated civilian neighborhoods, schools, and even UN shelters, the paper gives special attention to the "dramatic" increase in the incidence of cancer—especially among children—as well as the rise in the number of birth defects and miscarriages, "particularly, in Jabalya, Biet Lahia, and Biet Hanoun as these areas witnessed the fiercest Israeli aggression." Drawing attention to the considerable "impact on men's fertility" that this radioactive and toxic weaponry is causing, the report warns that this wide deterioration in the health status of people in Gaza will "plague the future generation" and calls for "serious measures" toward "pressurizing Israel to lift the siege."

The above, mostly ongoing, Israeli crimes do not occur in a vacuum; they are products of a culture of impunity, racism, and genocidal tendencies that has overtaken Israeli society, shaping its mainstream discourse and "commonsense" approach to the "Palestinian problem." Weeks after the end of Israel's attacks, for instance, testimonies of Israeli soldiers who participated in the commission of the Gaza massacre were published. Although the incidents they recount are merely the tip of the iceberg, these testimonies provide rare insight into prevailing Israeli thinking about the Palestinians and how best to "deal with them." The testimonies' significance is underscored by the fact that Israel's military remains a "people's army" based on mandatory service for men and women alike and, as a result, the army has long been regarded as the country's foremost melting pot and an accurate representation of a wide spectrum in Israeli society.

Explaining orders to indiscriminately shoot civilians in residential buildings and civilian neighborhoods, one soldier says: "From above they said it was permissible because anyone who remained in the sector and inside Gaza City was in effect condemned, a terrorist, because they hadn't fled."

Another narrates how a well-reported incident of intentionally shooting and killing an elderly Palestinian woman took place: "A company commander saw someone coming on some road, . . . an old woman. She was walking along pretty far away, but close enough so you could take [her] out. . . . If she [was] suspicious, not suspicious—I don't know. In the end, he sent people up to the roof, to take her out with their weapons. From the description of this story, I simply felt it was murder in cold blood." When asked why they shot her despite recognizing her as an older woman who posed no threat, the soldier replies: "That's what is so nice, supposedly, about Gaza: You see a person on a road, walking along a path. He doesn't have to be with a weapon, you don't have to identify him with anything and you can just shoot him."

An honest soldier from an elite army brigade explains why a fellow sharpshooter who deliberately fired at a mother and her two children, killing all three, did not feel "too bad about it." He says: "After all, as far as he was concerned, he did his job according to the orders he was given. And the atmosphere in general, from what I understood from
most of my men who I talked to... I don’t know how to describe it... The lives of Palestinians, let’s say, [are] something very, very less important than the lives of our soldiers.”

Gideon Levy, a renowned Israeli journalist, contextualizes this phenomenon among soldiers as a “natural culmination” of killing thousands of Palestinians over the previous nine years, “nearly 1,000 of them children and teenagers.” He writes:

Everything the soldiers described from Gaza, everything, occurred during these blood-soaked years as if they were routine events. It was the context, not the principle, that was different. An army whose armored corps has yet to encounter an enemy tank and whose pilots have yet to face an enemy combat jet in 36 years has been trained to think that the only function of a tank is to crush civilian cars and that a pilot’s job is to bomb residential neighborhoods.

To do this without any unnecessary moral qualms we have trained our soldiers to think that the lives and property of Palestinians have no value whatsoever. It is part of a process of dehumanization that has endured for dozens of years, the fruits of the occupation.

During the Israeli war on Gaza, fundamentalist Zionist rabbis played an unprecedented role in urging soldiers to “show no mercy” to any Palestinian in Gaza, citing popular, yet fanatic, interpretations of Jewish law as justifying genocide against Gentiles in the “Land of Israel” in any war of “revenge” or of necessity, as all Israeli wars are labeled by definition. The late Israeli academic and human rights advocate Israel Shahak was among the very first to expose this critical dimension, which had been intentionally overlooked by most analysts based on inexplicable sensitivities, as if Jewish fundamentalism were more benign or should be tolerated more than Islamic, Christian, Hindu, or any other fundamentalism.

It is crucial to note that fundamentalist interpretations of the Halacha, or Jewish law, openly justify massacres, even genocide (as in mass murder of “non-Jewish” civilians, including children), in what is termed a “war of revenge” or a “necessary war.” A war of necessity in fundamentalist teachings would be waged against the entire “enemy” population without sparing anyone. The only limit is on committing any act that might lead to more injury of the Jewish community in retribution. So if a massacre of, say, ten thousand Gentiles would cause damage to Israel that outweighed the “benefits,” it should be avoided.

This is the sole consideration that is allowed in such fanatical religious teachings, which have become dominant among the religious Zionist community in Israel and beyond and have seeped into the thinking of the general Israeli public in many ways.

And of course every war so far has been perceived by the absolute majority of Israeli Jews, including members of the traditional “peace movement,” as a “war of necessity.” This pattern was broken only after many days of the Lebanon 2006 war, specifically because the losses in the Israeli army far outweighed—in fundamentalist Jewish calculations, that is—the “benefits” of slaughtering Lebanese civilians and wantonly destroying the civilian infrastructure. Only then was there a substantial outcry against the war.

Gaza was different, though. Palestinian armed resistance could hardly put up a fight, especially given the condition of siege, against the far superior Israeli army, armed as it was with the United States’ latest military technologies as well as diplomatic, financial, and political support. The extremely lopsided balance of fatalities on either side ensured overwhelming public support in Israel for the war. Many otherwise self-described liberals, even leftists, cheered their army while it was committing a live, televised massacre. While this was true in almost all sectors of Israeli society, one expression of racist fanaticism that stood out was popular army T-shirts.

Israeli army battalions and companies often compete in designing the most outrageously racist shirt that they can show off in front
against the indigenous Palestinians, as Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, among others, has shown,26 was premeditated, meticulously planned years in advance by Zionist leaders, including David Ben-Gurion, and executed systematically, brutally, and without compunction. As a result, over 800,000 Palestinians were dispossessed and uprooted and more than five hundred Palestinian villages were methodically destroyed to prevent the return of the refugees.

Today, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) make up two-thirds of the Palestinian population. According to a survey by Badil Resource Center, a leading refugee rights advocacy group based in Bethlehem, “By the end of 2008, at least 67 percent (7.1 million) of the entire, worldwide Palestinian population (10.6 million) were forcibly displaced persons. Among them were at least 6.6 million Palestinian refugees and 455,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs).”27

Under the influence of Zionist ideology and decades of deceptive indoctrination, a great majority of Israelis today, including those in the Zionist “left camp,” indulge in a convenient forgetfulness when it comes to recognizing that they, the colonial settlers, have always viewed the natives as relative humans28 who are accordingly not entitled to the equal rights that only “full” humans can claim. Former deputy mayor of Jerusalem Meron Benvenisti commented in 2003 on the nature of this “conflict,” saying:

In the past two years I reached the conclusion that we are dealing with a conflict between a society of immigrants and a society of natives. If so, we are talking about an entirely different type of conflict. If so, we descend from the rational level to a completely basic, atavistic level that goes to the bedrock of personal and collective existence. Because the basic story here is not one of two national movements that are confronting each other; the basic story is that of natives and settlers. It’s the story of natives who feel that people who came from across the sea infiltrated their natural habitat and dispossessed them.29
Israel’s savagery in Gaza, whose population is 80 percent refugees, has gone well beyond dispossession, however. International law experts have debated whether Israel’s crimes in Gaza, which largely conform to the UN definition of genocide, are committed with a clear intent—a necessary condition to consider these acts as constituting full-fledged genocide. Israel’s most recent crimes in Gaza and ongoing medieval-style siege can accurately be categorized as acts of genocide, albeit slow. According to article II of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the term is defined as any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part...

Clearly, Israel’s hermetic siege of Gaza, designed to kill, cause serious bodily and mental harm, and inflict conditions of life calculated to bring about partial and gradual physical destruction, qualifies as an act of genocide, if not yet all-out genocide.

While lawyers continue to argue, Palestinian “relative humans” are being subjected to what feels very much like slow genocide. Many Palestinian babies are still being born disfigured, “blue,” or otherwise condemned to stunted growth, anemia, and a short, tormented life in the Gaza open-air prison camp. Palestinian soil and water are still being contaminated relentlessly, and not only in Gaza. Necessary sustenance requirements are still being denied to 1.5 million Palestinians there. Patients with chronic diseases as well as those suffering from a wide range of curable illnesses are dying a slow death, away from the mainstream media’s radar. The forcible displacement of Palestinians has not stopped since the Nakba, with the latest campaigns in and around Jerusalem, as well as in the Naqab (Negev), showing a clear intensification. Fragmentation of the Palestinian people in dozens of isolated communities to obliterate their national and social coherence and common identity is escalating.

In short, Palestinians cannot wait. Israel is no longer “just” guilty of occupation, colonization, and apartheid against the people of Palestine; as the evidence above suggests, it has embarked on what seems to be its final effort to literally disappear the “Palestinian problem.” And it is doing so with utter impunity. The world cannot continue to watch. Thus BDS. Thus now.

Indeed, Israel’s latest bloodbath in Gaza and its ongoing illegal and immoral siege of the Strip have stimulated a real transformation in world public opinion against Israeli policies. The heart-wrenching images, beamed across the world, of Israeli phosphorus bombs showering densely populated Palestinian neighborhoods and UN shelters triggered worldwide boycotts and divestment initiatives in economic, academic, athletic, and cultural fields of the kind that Palestinian civil society called for back in 2005.

The most inspiring and dramatic developments have taken place in South Africa and certain Western European countries. In February 2009, weeks after the end of Israel’s assault on Gaza, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union made history when it refused to offload an Israeli ship in Durban. In April, the Scottish Trade Union Congress followed the lead of the South African trade union federation, COSATU, and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions in adopting BDS. In May 2009, at its annual congress, the University and College Union (UCU), representing some 120,000 British academics, called for organizing an interunion BDS conference later this year to discuss effective, legal strategies for implementing the boycott.
Richard Falk commented on the seemingly inexorable spread of BDS across the world in an oral statement before the UN Human Rights Council on March 23, 2009:

The public reaction to the Israeli military operations has led to a global reaction that has taken the form of an upsurge in civil initiatives that can be comprehended as part of a worldwide boycott and divestment campaign that has taken diverse forms; this development amounts to waging "a legitimacy war" against Israel on the basis of its failure to treat the Palestinian people in accord with international human rights law and international humanitarian law.¹⁰

2

WHY BDS?

The BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) Call, launched in July 2005, was endorsed by an overwhelming majority of Palestinian civil society unions, political parties, and organizations everywhere. Rooted in a long tradition of nonviolent popular resistance in Palestine against Zionist settler-colonialism¹ and largely inspired by the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, it adopts a rights-based approach that is anchored in universal human rights, just as the US civil rights movement did. It resolutely rejects all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

BDS unambiguously defines the three basic Palestinian rights that constitute the minimal requirements of a just peace and calls for ending Israel's corresponding injustices against all three main segments of the Palestinian people. Specifically, BDS calls for ending Israel's 1967 military occupation of Gaza, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and other Arab territories in Lebanon and Syria; ending its system of racial discrimination against its Palestinian citizens; and ending its persistent denial of the UN-sanctioned rights of Palestine refugees, particularly their right to return to their homes and to receive reparations.
Calling Israel an apartheid state does not imply that its system of discrimination is identical to apartheid South Africa’s. It simply states that Israel’s laws and policies against the Palestinians largely fit the UN definition of apartheid, which was adopted in 1973 and went into effect in 1976.²

For decades efforts to promote peace between Israel and the Palestinian people have categorically failed, further entrenching Israeli colonial hegemony and Palestinian dispossession. The main culprit is the insistence of Israel and successive US governments on exploiting the current massive power imbalance to impose a peace devoid of justice and human rights on the Palestinians, an unjust “solution” that fails to address our basic rights under international law and undermines our inalienable right to self-determination.

In parallel, official Western collusion manifested in unconditional diplomatic, economic, academic, and political support of Israel has further fed Israel’s already incomparable impunity in violating human rights and spurred civil society worldwide to support boycotts against Israel as an effective, nonviolent form of struggle in the pursuit of peace based on justice and precepts of international law.

For too long, while nonviolence has been the mainstay of Palestinian resistance to settler-colonial conquest for decades, the term nonviolence has been associated among Palestinians with appeasement of Israel or submission to some of its unjust demands.³ There are two main reasons for this negative connotation. First, many of those who advocated “nonviolence” in the past, and who received lavish Western media attention as a result, categorically vilified and denounced armed resistance, presented nonviolence as a substitute for it, and advocated only a minimal set of Palestinian rights, usually excluding or diluting the internationally recognized right of Palestinian refugees to repatriation and compensation, as well as ignoring the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel. They therefore stood isolated from the Palestinian grass roots and virtually all respected civil society organizations. Second, Palestinian nonviolent campaigns were often funded, if not directed, by Western organizations, governmental or otherwise, with their own political agendas that conflicted with the publicly espoused Palestinian national agenda as expressed by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). This entrenched association between nonviolence and a minimalistic and seemingly “imported” political program made the term nonviolence subject to suspicion and antipathy among most Palestinians, particularly since armed resistance has been largely linked to a maximalist political program.

I beg to differ from this general characterization. While I firmly advocate nonviolent forms of struggle such as boycott, divestment, and sanctions to attain Palestinian goals, I just as decisively, though on a separate track, support a unitary state based on freedom, justice, and comprehensive equality as the solution to the Palestinian-Israeli colonial conflict. To my mind, in a struggle for equal humanity and emancipation from oppression, a correlation between means and ends, and the decisive effect of the former on the outcome and durability of the latter, is indisputable. If Israel is an exclusivist, ethnocentric, settler-colonial state, then its ethical, just, and sustainable alternative must be a secular, democratic state, ending injustice and offering unequivocal equality in citizenship and individual and communal rights both to Palestinians (refugees included) and to Israeli Jews. Only such a state can ethically reconcile the ostensibly irreconcilable: the inalienable, UN-sanctioned rights of the indigenous people of Palestine to self-determination, repatriation, and equality in accordance with international law and the acquired and internationally recognized rights of Israeli Jews to coexist—as equals, not colonial masters—in the land of Palestine.⁴

While individual BDS activists and advocates may support diverse political solutions, the BDS movement as such does not adopt any specific political formula and steers away from the one-state-versus-two-
states debate, focusing instead on universal rights and international law, which constitute the solid foundation of the Palestinian consensus around the campaign. Incidentally, most networks, unions, and political parties in the BNC still advocate a two-state solution outside the realm of the BDS movement.

Starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the premature end of the first Palestinian intifada (1987–1991), through the launching of the Madrid-Oslo “peace process” and until a decade ago, the question of Palestine had been progressively marginalized, if not relegated to a mere nuisance factor, by the powers that be in the new unipolar world. Edward Said reflected on the “peace process” thus:

> What of this vaunted peace process? What has it achieved and why, if indeed it was a peace process, has the miserable condition of the Palestinians and the loss of life become so much worse than before the Oslo Accords were signed in September 1993? And why is it, as the New York Times noted on 5 November, that “the Palestinian landscape is now decorated with the ruins of projects that were predicated on peaceful integration”? And what does it mean to speak of peace if Israeli troops and settlements are still present in such large numbers? Again, according to RISOT, 110,000 Jews lived in illegal settlements in Gaza and the West Bank before Oslo; the number has since increased to 195,000, a figure that doesn’t include those Jews—more than 150,000—who have taken up residence in Arab East Jerusalem. Has the world been deluded or has the rhetoric of “peace” been in essence a gigantic fraud?

In quite a revealing turn of history, among the very first substantial consequences of this “new world order” was the UN General Assembly’s 1991 repeal, under intense US pressure, of its 1975 “Zionism Is Racism” resolution, thus removing a major obstacle on the course of Zionist and Israeli rehabilitation in the international community. This was followed by the PLO’s formal recognition of Israel under the Oslo accords, which furthered the transformation of Israel’s image from that of a colonial and inherently exclusivist state into a normal member of the international community of nations, one that is merely engaged in a territorial dispute. After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), primarily, from Israel’s perspective, to relieve Israel’s colonial burdens in the West Bank and Gaza and to cover up its ongoing theft of Palestinian land to build Jewish-only settlements, Israel embarked on an ambitious public relations campaign in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Arab world, establishing diplomatic ties and opening new markets for its growing industries. Former sworn enemies suddenly warmed up to Israel, importing from it billions of dollars’ worth of military hardware and other goods, and, convinced that the road to the US Congress passed through Tel Aviv, wooing it politically. As a result, Israel multiplied the number of states with which it holds diplomatic relations from a few dozen before Oslo to more than 160 at present.

Meanwhile, the election of George W. Bush in 2000 as the president of the United States and the rise of his neoconservative associates (erstwhile advisers to the far-right Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu) brought Zionist influence in the White House to unprecedented heights, finally matching its decades-old, almost unparalleled influence on Capitol Hill.

But shortly before the US presidential elections, in September 2000, after years of a sham “peace process” that served to disguise Israel’s ongoing occupation and the enormous growth of its colonies in the occupied territories, the second Palestinian intifada broke out. As the uprising intensified, Israel’s brutal attempts to crush it, through means described by Amnesty International and other human rights organizations as amounting to war crimes, reopened—at least in intellectual circles—long-forgotten questions about whether a just peace can indeed be achieved with a colonial, ethnocentric, and expansionist Zionist state. It was against this background that the UN World Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001 revived the 1975 debate on Zionism.
Although, as expected, the official assembly failed to adopt a specific resolution on Israel's multi-tiered oppression of the Palestinian people due to direct threats from the United States and, to a lesser extent, powerful European states, the NGO Forum condemned Zionism as a form of racism and apartheid. This was an expression of the views of thousands of civil society representatives from across the globe whose struggle against all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism, is mostly informed by humanist and democratic principles. Despite the official West's unwillingness to hold Israel to account, Durban confirmed that grassroots support, even in the West, for the justness of the Palestinian cause was still robust, if not yet channeled into effective forms of solidarity.

With the new intifada, boycott and sanctions were in the air. Campaigns calling for divestment from companies supporting Israel's occupation, for instance, spread to many US campuses, initially causing panic among the ranks of the Israel lobby and its student arm. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa was among the earliest internationally renowned figures to support divestment from Israel. The impromptu nature of these early, largely abortive efforts soon gave way to a higher degree of coordination and sharing of experience at a national level in the United States, culminating in the establishment of the Palestine Solidarity Movement and later the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, a broad coalition of over three hundred groups working to change US foreign policy in favor of a just peace. Across the Atlantic, particularly in the United Kingdom, calls for various forms of boycott against Israel started to be heard among intellectuals, academics, and trade unionists. These efforts intensified with the massive Israeli military reoccupation of Palestinian cities in spring 2002, with all the destruction and civilian casualties it left behind.

By 2004, academic associations, trade unions, and solidarity organizations in the United States and Europe calling for boycott had been joined by mainstream churches, which began to study divestment and other forms of boycott against Israel, similar in nature to those applied to South Africa during apartheid rule. The most significant development at that stage was the precedent-setting decision of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) in July 2004, in a resolution that was adopted by a resounding majority of 431 to 62, to start "a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations doing business in Israel." Unlike similar declarations adopted by student and faculty groups, the Presbyterian move could not be dismissed as "symbolic" or economically ineffective. Although PCUSA in 2006 dropped the term divestment, opting for "investment in peace" due to threats and intimidation by Israel lobby groups, its initiative managed to inspire many faith-based organizations, especially, in the West to consider halting their investments in Israel as well.

A development of signal importance for these efforts was the historic advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague on July 9, 2004, condemning as illegal both Israel's wall and the colonies built on occupied Palestinian land. Ironically, the PLO scored this momentous political, legal, and diplomatic victory at a time when it was least prepared to build on it. A similar advisory opinion by the ICJ in 1971, denouncing South Africa's occupation of Namibia, had triggered what became the world's largest and most concerted campaign of boycotts and sanctions directed against the apartheid regime, eventually contributing to its demise. Though the ICJ ruling on the wall did not prompt similar reaction, chiefly due to Palestinian structural and political powerlessness, it did fuel a revival of principled opposition to Israeli oppression around the world.

Days before the ICJ ruling, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), formed in April 2004, issued a call for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel endorsed by some sixty unions, organizations, and associations in the Palestinian occupied territories urging the international community to boycott all
Israeli academic and cultural institutions as a "contribution to the struggle to end Israel's occupation, colonization, and system of apartheid." This call was greatly and qualitatively amplified on the first anniversary of the ICJ ruling, when more than 170 Palestinian civil society organizations and unions, including the main political parties, issued the Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel "until it fully complies with international law." After fifteen years of the so-called peace process, Palestinian civil society reclaimed the agenda, articulating Palestinian demands as part of the international struggle for justice long obscured by deceptive "negotiations." In a noteworthy precedent, the BDS Call was issued by representatives of the three segments of the Palestinian people—the refugees, the indigenous Palestinian citizens of Israel, and those under the 1967 occupation. It also directly "invited" conscientious Israelis to support its demands. The Palestinian boycott movement succeeded in setting new parameters and clearer goals for the growing international support network, sparking, or giving credence to, boycott and divestment campaigns in several countries.

A genuine concern raised by solidarity groups in the West regarding the calls for boycott has been the conspicuous absence of an official Palestinian body behind them. "Where is your ANC?" is a difficult and sometimes sincere question that faced Palestinian boycott activists everywhere. The PLO, in total disarray for years, has remained largely silent. The PA, with its circumscribed mandate and the constraints imposed upon it by the Oslo accords, is inherently incapable of supporting any effective resistance strategy, especially one that evokes injustices beyond the 1967 occupation. Indeed, with rare exceptions, the PA's role has actually been detrimental to civil society efforts to isolate Israel. This started to change in 2009, when the Sixth Conference of Fatah, the leading secular political party, adopted a political platform highlighting popular nonviolent struggle as the main form of resistance to the occupation. Much criticism has been leveled at Fatah for holding its conference under occupation, accommodating Israeli demands, and, more substantively, transforming the Palestinian cause from a struggle for self-determination and comprehensive rights to what is seen by many pundits as a hollowed-out process of coexisting with Israeli injustices and denial of some of those basic rights.

Still, the enthusiasm for a strong commitment to nonviolent means of countering Israel's occupation and sprawling colonization eventually led the Fatah-dominated PA to adopt a—belated—policy of boycotting and calling on other states to boycott products of Israeli colonial settlements. While many Palestinians saw this PA call for a partial boycott of Israel as "too little, too late," coming five full years after the great majority of Palestinian civil society had called for comprehensive BDS measures, there was a sense of vindication nonetheless. "Even" the PA, BDS leaders can now argue, eventually understood the immense power of boycott and popular resistance. It also has helped underline the consensus among Palestinians in support of boycott as a form of struggle against Israel's violations of international law.

As for " unofficial" Palestinian bodies, a tiny minority of them did not support the July 2005 BDS call. These were mostly smaller NGOs, ever attentive to donor sensitivities, that declined to endorse, some citing as "too radical" the clause on the right of refugee return (despite the fact that it is "stipulated in UN Resolution 194"). Some, bowing to pressure from their European "partners," feared that the term boycott would invite charges of anti-Semitism. Also, initially the largest Palestinian political factions, with their predominant decades-old focus on armed struggle, seemed unable to recognize the indispensable role of civil resistance, particularly in the unique—and certainly very different from South Africa's—colonial conditions of siege that the Palestinians had to resist. By either inertia or reluctance to critically evaluate their programs in light of a changed international situation, these forces became addicted to the armed model of resisting the occupation, ignoring the
troubling moral and legal questions raised by certain indiscriminate forms of that resistance and its failure to date to achieve concrete and sustainable results in an international environment dominated by Israel’s main sponsor and enabler, the United States. Despite this initial reluctance, all major Palestinian political parties signed on to the BDS Call, widening the circle of consensus around it.

In order to realize Palestinian aspirations for self-determination, freedom, and equality and to pose a real challenge to Israel’s dual strategy of, on the one hand fragmenting, ghettoizing, and dispossessing Palestinians and on the other hand projecting a reduced image of the colonial conflict as a symmetrical dispute over rival claims and a diminished set of Palestinian rights, the PLO must be resuscitated and remodeled to embody the aspirations, creative energies, and national frameworks of the three main segments of the Palestinian people. The PLO’s grassroots organizations need to be rebuilt from the bottom up with mass participation, inclusive of all political forces, and must be ruled by unfettered democracy through proportional representation.

In parallel, the entire Palestinian conceptual framework and strategy of resistance must be thoroughly and critically reassessed and transformed into a progressive action program capable of connecting the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and justice with the international social movement. The most effective and morally sound strategy for achieving these objectives is one based on gradual, diverse, context-sensitive, and sustainable campaigns of BDS—political, economic, professional, academic, cultural, athletic, and so on—and other forms of popular resistance, all aimed at bringing about Israel’s comprehensive and unequivocal compliance with international law and universal human rights.

BDS will unavoidably contribute to the global social movement’s challenge to neoliberal Western hegemony and the tyrannical rule of multi/transnational corporations. In that sense, the Palestinian boycott against Israel and its partners in crime becomes a small but critical part in an international struggle to counter injustice, racism, poverty, environmental devastation, and gender oppression, among other social and economic ills. Reflecting on this aspect of the BDS movement, and connecting it with the 2009 environmental international summit held in Denmark, John Pilger, the widely acclaimed journalist and writer, states:

The farce of the climate summit in Copenhagen affirmed a world war waged by the rich against most of humanity. It also illuminates a resistance growing perhaps as never before: an internationalism linking justice for the planet with universal human rights, and criminal justice for those who invade and dispossess with impunity. And the best news comes from Palestine.

...To Nelson Mandela, justice for the Palestinians is “the greatest moral issue of the age.” The Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) was issued on 9 July 2005, in effect reconvening the great, non-violent movement that swept the world and brought the scaffolding of [South] African apartheid crashing down.20

In this context, it is important to emphasize that it is not just Israel’s military occupation and denial of refugee rights that must be challenged but the wider Zionist-Israeli system of racist exclusivism.20 Jewish groups that historically stood in the front lines of the struggle for civil rights, democracy, equality before the law, and separation between church and state in many countries should find Israel’s unabashedly ethnocentric and racist laws and its reduction of Palestinians to relative humans, whether in the occupied territories, in exile, or within Israel itself, to be politically indefensible and ethically untenable. Ultimately, then, successful nonviolent resistance requires transcending the fatally ill-conceived focus on the occupation alone to a struggle for justice, equality, and comprehensive Palestinian rights.
I am aware that reducing Palestinian demands to ending the occupation alone seems like the easiest and most pragmatic path to take, but I firmly believe that it is ethically and politically unwise to succumb to the temptation. The indisputable Palestinian claim to equal humanity should be the primary slogan raised, because it lays the proper moral and political foundation for effectively addressing the myriad injustices against all three segments of the Palestinian people. It is also based on universalist values that resonate with people around the world. While coalescing with diverse political forces is necessary to make this direction prevail, caution should be exercised in alliances with “soft” Zionists lest they assume the leadership of the BDS movement in the West, lowering the ceiling of its demands beyond recognition. On the other hand, principled Jewish voices—whether organizations or intellectuals consistently supporting a just and comprehensive peace—in the United States, Europe, and Israel have courageously supported various forms of boycott, and this helps shield the nascent boycott movement from charges of anti-Semitism and the intellectual terror associated with them.

Supporting the UN-sanctioned rights of all segments of the Palestinian people does not, however, entail adopting BDS tactics that necessarily target all Israeli institutions. Tactics and the choice of BDS targets at the local level must be governed by the context particularities, political conditions, and the readiness (in will and capacity) of the BDS activists. In the United States, for instance, two of the most active and creative BDS groups, Adalah-NY and CodePink, endorse the 2005 BDS Call with its comprehensive rights-based approach and run effective campaigns that are very targeted and nuanced, focusing only on companies indisputably implicated in Israeli violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territory. The same can be said of the largest BDS-related coalition in France, Coalition against Agrexco-Carmel.

Besides the need to extend the struggle beyond ending the occupation, two other pertinent points in connection with BDS initiatives bear emphasizing. First, they should be guided by the principles of inclusion, diversity, gradualness, and sustainability. They must be flexibly designed to reflect realities in various contexts. Second, although the West, owing to its overwhelming political and economic power as well as its decisive role in perpetuating Israel’s colonial domination, remains the main battleground for this nonviolent resistance, the rest of the world should not be ignored. Aside from South Africa and some beginnings elsewhere, the BDS movement has yet to take root in China, India, Malaysia, Brazil, and Russia, among other states that seek to challenge the West’s monopoly on power. It is worth noting that Zionist influence in those states remains significantly weaker than in the West.

With the formation of the Palestinian BDS National Committee, BNC, in 2008, it became the reference and guiding force for the global BDS movement, which was all along based on the Palestinian-initiated and-anchored BDS Call. The BNC is the coordinating body for the BDS campaign based on the Palestinian civil society BDS Call of 2005. Upholding civil and popular resistance to Israel’s occupation, colonization, and apartheid, the BNC is a broad coalition of the leading Palestinian political parties, unions, coalitions, and networks representing the three integral parts of the people of Palestine: Palestinian refugees; Palestinians in the occupied West Bank (including Jerusalem) and Gaza Strip; and Palestinian citizens of Israel.

The BNC adopts a rights-based approach and calls for the international BDS campaign to be sustained until the entire Palestinian people can exercise its inalienable right to freedom and self-determination and Israel fully complies with its obligations under international law.

BDS is not only an idea. It is not merely a concept. It is not just a vision. It is not all about strategy. It is all those, for sure, but also much more. The Palestinian Civil Society Campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel is above everything else a deeply rooted yet qualitatively new stage in the century-old Palestinian resistance to
the Zionist settler-colonial conquest and, later, Israel's regime of occupation, dispossession, and apartheid against the indigenous people of Palestine.

The global BDS campaign's rights-based discourse and approach decisively, almost irrefutably, exposes the double standard and exceptionalism with which the United States and most of the other Western states have to varying degrees treated Israel ever since its establishment through the carefully planned and brutally executed forcible displacement and dispossession of the majority of the Palestinian people in the 1948 Nakba.26

More crucially, the BDS movement has dragged Israel and its well-financed, bullying lobby groups into a confrontation on a battlefield where the moral superiority of the Palestinian quest for self-determination, justice, freedom, and equality neutralizes and outweighs Israel’s military power and financial prowess. It is the classic right-over-might paradigm, with the right being recognized by an international public that is increasingly fed up with Israel’s criminality and impunity and is realizing that Israel’s slow, gradual genocide places a heavy moral burden on all people of conscience to act, to act fast, and to act with unquestionable effectiveness, political suaveness, and nuance, and above all else with consistent, un tarnished moral clarity. Thus BDS.

THE SOUTH AFRICA STRATEGY FOR PALESTINE

In 2006, in an insightful and unprecedented exposé of the deep military and economic partnership, the shocking similarities, and the unmistakable sense of common destiny between Israel and apartheid South Africa, the Guardian's award-winning Middle East correspondent Chris McGreal, who reported from Jerusalem for several years, wrote the following:

Many Israelis recoil at the suggestion of a parallel because it stabs at the heart of how they see themselves and their country. . . . Some staunch defenders of Israel's policies past and present say that even to discuss Israel in the context of apartheid is one step short of comparing the Jewish state to Nazi Germany, not least because of the Afrikaner leadership's fascist sympathies in the 1940s and the disturbing echoes of Hitler's Nuremberg laws in South Africa's racist legislation. Yet the taboo is increasingly challenged.1

Whether it is legally accurate or politically astute to describe Israel as a state guilty of the crime of apartheid against the Palestinian people is of unquestionable importance and consequence. The significance to the Palestinian struggle for self-determination of the fact that