

Sanctioning Apartheid: Comparing the South African and Palestinian Campaigns for Boycotts, Disinvestment and Sanctions

Lee Jones

Queen Mary, University of London

l.c.jones@qmul.ac.uk

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Abstract

The South African experience and analogy is central to Palestinian calls for boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel, providing a framework for moral critique – the charge of ‘apartheid’ – and a set of tactics. However, a serious comparison of the two cases suggests stark dissimilarities that seriously undermine the likelihood that Palestinians’ BDS call will succeed in its present form. The most serious difference is that while in the South African case BDS was a tool used to support an advanced, coherent, strategically-minded, well-led and mass-based liberation struggle, the Palestinian BDS call is in part intended to help bring such a struggle into being. This is too much to expect from BDS. Two further limitations stem from this. First, without a mass-based liberation struggle, Palestinians lack the main mechanism by which change was achieved in South Africa and which gave sanctions their force. Second, lacking coherent goals, leadership and strategy, the BDS campaign displays contradictions and confusion about exactly how BDS will bring about change, what the best targets are, and what defines ‘success’.



Gaza – Boycott Israel

A photograph taken by the author during fieldwork in Johannesburg, South Africa, August 2011.

Introduction

The South African experience and analogy is central to Palestinian civil society's call for boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. Issued in 2005, the BDS Call states it was 'inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid' (Barghouti, 2011: 240). This 'inspiration' has two interlinked aspects. First, South Africa provides a framework for a moral critique of Israeli practices: the charge that Israel is an 'apartheid state' – not identical to South Africa, but nonetheless guilty of the international crime of apartheid. Consequently, the world is called upon to support Palestinians, as they did black South Africans, in the name of 'moral consistency'. Secondly, the anti-apartheid movement's use of BDS provides a new means by which to fight Israeli oppression following the failure of other mechanisms including armed struggle and the Oslo peace process. Prominent Palestinian activists see BDS as 'the South Africa strategy for Palestine' (Barghouti, 2011: 63). In two recent edited volumes advocating BDS against Israel, there are 190 references to South Africa in 234 pages in the first, and 169 references in 218 pages in the second (Wiles, 2013; Lim, 2012). This framing has garnered significant sympathy and international support for the BDS movement.

Framing present struggles using historical analogies is a long-established political practice. Karl Marx (1852) noted the dominance of the 'poetry of the past' during the 1848 Paris Commune, observing that revolutionaries often 'anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language'. Yuen Foong Khong's (1992) study of US Cold War foreign policy found decision-makers repeatedly invoking the Munich debacle as a justification for confronting the Soviet Union. And the Palestinians are hardly the first sanctions advocates to invoke South Africa. US Senator Mitch McConnell, for example, justified sanctions against Myanmar (Burma) by claiming: 'Sanctions worked in South Africa, and they will in Burma too' (Pedersen, 2008: 33). Archbishop Desmond Tutu made an identical claim, calling Burma 'the South Africa of Southeast Asia' and urging the world to 'do for Burma what it did for South Africa' (Liddell, 2001: 168; Pedersen, 2008: 49-50). The Free Burma Campaign explicitly sought to 'recreate what went on during the anti-apartheid movement', employing its methods and even its now-redundant activists (Free Burma Coalition, 1997). Rather less plausibly, the exiled opposition Iraqi National Congress, which supported sanctions against Saddam Hussein's regime, took its name from the African National Congress (ANC).

Such framing can be useful, but carries real risks. Marx observed that the ‘awakening of the dead’ in earlier revolutions was justified insofar as it ‘served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in the imagination, not recoiling from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk again.’ However, as this suggests, historical analogies could easily serve to distract revolutionaries from contemporary social realities and the hard tasks of the present. For Marx, this had occurred in the upheavals of 1848-1851 when ‘only the ghost of the old revolution circulated’ (Marx, 1852).

This paper argues that the South African analogy may serve a similar spectral function for the Palestinian BDS movement. The movement’s claim that ‘Palestine’s South Africa moment has finally arrived’ (Barghouti, 2013) masks important differences between the South African and Palestinian cases. This does not refer to the differences between South African and Israeli apartheid: despite significant divergence, they clearly have much in common (Greenstein, 2012), but this seems a pointless debate since rejecting the label for Israel hardly justifies its grotesque treatment of Palestinians. Rather, the differences highlighted here relate to the Palestinian opposition’s coherence, strategy and power compared to South Africa’s anti-apartheid forces, and the relationship of BDS to this. In South Africa, BDS was a tool used by a powerful, strategically-minded, well-led liberation struggle that successfully mobilised the oppressed masses. In Palestine, BDS is in important part intended to *create* such a movement rather than serve as a tool for an existing one. The BDS call emerges out of the decline and profound disarray of the Palestinian liberation struggle – some might say its death. To expect BDS to resuscitate the struggle seems to ask too much: it did not serve this function in South Africa or elsewhere and it is difficult to see it doing so in contemporary conditions in Israel/Palestine. Two further limitations flow from this fundamental difference. First, the absence of mass struggle in Palestine makes it unlikely that BDS can succeed. It was the presence of this struggle that gave sanctions their force in South Africa – not the instruments themselves – and also prevented their costs being deflected onto oppressed groups. Secondly, lacking the ANC’s strategic vision and coherent goals, the Palestinian BDS campaign is internally incoherent and contradictory. It does not have a clear sense of the mechanisms by which BDS are meant to translate into desired political change, it is not targeting its efforts to pursue these mechanisms, and it has a confused definition of ‘success’.

The paper’s goal in highlighting these problems is not to dismiss or denigrate the BDS campaign or minimise the Palestinians’ plight. Rather, it is to stimulate critical, sympathetic

reflection on political strategies for those seeking liberation. As Marx argued of proletarian revolution, a genuinely radical movement ‘cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past’. Its agents must ‘constantly criticise themselves, constantly interrupt themselves in their own course, return to the apparently accomplished, in order to begin anew; they deride with cruel thoroughness the half-measures, weaknesses, and paltriness of their first attempts... until a situation is created which makes all turning back impossible’ (Marx, 1852). This is the spirit in which these thoughts are offered.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four parts. The first briefly outlines the ANC’s view of sanctions. The second highlights the critical difference between the ANC’s use of sanctions and the Palestinian BDS movement’s position. The third underscores the importance of the absence of mass struggle in Palestine as a factor likely to constrain the efficacy of sanctions. The fourth explores some contradictions and incoherence within BDS advocates’ discussion of sanctions as a tactic.

The ANC View of Sanctions

The ANC’s view of sanctions corresponded to its analysis of South African society and the resultant strategy it had adopted to hasten the demise of apartheid. The ANC had a sophisticated understanding of the apartheid regime, grounded in a Marxist analysis of the political economy and the social forces underpinning the system. Based on this analysis it adopted a revolutionary strategy based on ‘four pillars’: mass struggle, underground political work, armed resistance and international solidarity. BDS measures were part of this fourth ‘pillar’ and were always seen as supplemental to the primary ‘pillar’, mass mobilisation. ANC leaders had a correspondingly clear and coherent sense of *how* sanctions were supposed to contribute to their struggle. Fundamentally they were intended, alongside the other pillars, to alter the balance of forces struggling for power in South Africa: to fragment the ruling power bloc, prompting defections from the apartheid coalition, and to boost the position of anti-apartheid forces, thereby shortening the system’s demise. Mass struggle was critical in enabling sanctions to have this effect: without it, the apartheid regime would not have been forced to compromise.

The ANC’s understanding of the apartheid regime was significantly shaped by its longstanding alliance with the South African Communist Party (Ellis and Sechaba, 1992). Although beginning life as a moderate nationalist movement, it increasingly adopted third-

world liberation and ‘black consciousness’ ideology that emphasised the ‘colonial’ nature of apartheid. It also embraced a Marxist analysis which saw the racist regime as functional for capitalism and understood political regime as being rooted in coalitions of social forces, notably classes and class fractions (Lipton, 2007). Regime change would come about when the ruling coalition – comprising English and Afrikaner capitalists, the white middle and working classes but also comprador black and coloured elites staffing the *Bantustans* and local apartheid structures – was overcome by the mass struggle of anti-apartheid non-whites, through civil disobedience, strikes, terrorist attacks and other measures to render apartheid society ‘ungovernable’. Although a few romantics dreamed of seizing state power by force, most saw the goal as compelling South Africa’s rulers to negotiate a transition to multiracial democracy. The ANC and its allies in the trade unions and the civic organisations which formed the United Democratic Front (UDF) were guided in this by the ANC Freedom Charter. Issued in 1955, this clearly identified the democratic-socialist goals towards which the ‘charterist’ majority were mobilised.

From this perspective, ANC President Oliver Tambo explained, sanctions were intended to help hasten the transition by ‘weaken[ing] the system and making it less capable of resisting our struggle’ (Hanlon and Omond, 1987: 26). Specifically they were seen as useful in ‘restraining the regime’s capacity [to suppress the opposition], dividing the alliance of forces behind the apartheid state, [and] uniting and broadening the anti-apartheid support base’ (Maharaj, 2011). Tambo argued that external flows of trade, investment, technology and military cooperation enhanced the regime’s ability to control opposition groups; severing these links via sanctions would thus tilt the balance of forces against the government (Starnberger Institute, 1989: 49-50). Furthermore, Thabo Mbeki argued, inflicting economic damage on whites would cause the ‘breaking up of the power structure... out of this you will get a realignment of forces’ (Lodge, 1988: 250-251). Since the ANC’s Marxist analysis indicated that big business exerted particular influence over the state, ‘the real target’, argues a senior official of COSATU, the leading trade union federation, ‘was internal capital’. Harming big business would encourage it to split from the apartheid coalition, engage in ‘civil disobedience’ and ‘to put pressure on’ the regime. ‘It was designed to turn as many significant forces within this society as possible against apartheid policy’ (Erwin, 2011). Finally, the call for sanctions helped broaden the ANC’s counter-hegemonic coalition by drawing groups into the mass struggle who, whilst sharing the ANC’s charterist goals, disliked its more violent methods. Calling for sanctions gave religious groups, for example, an alternative method of participating in the anti-apartheid struggle (Boesak, 2011).

By the 1980s, the kinds of targets sought by anti-apartheid BDS advocates reflected this political analysis and strategy. Early boycott campaigns did not: when the Anti-Apartheid Campaign was launched in London in 1959, it initially focused on symbolic South African products like fruit, and later sports and cultural boycotts. ANC strategists did not expect these measures to significantly coerce pro-apartheid forces. Instead, these campaigns actually targeted the publics of Western states: they were intended to raise awareness of apartheid crimes and build support for more meaningful sanctions that would actually be directed at internal forces within South Africa (Maharaj, 2011). Thus, although grossly exaggerated claims were subsequently made about the efficacy of the sports boycott in ending apartheid, the primary means by which sanctions were intended to work was *material*, not – as liberal sympathisers have often suggested – psychological.¹ As Davies correctly argued at the time: ‘sanctions are not intended primarily to influence the subjective intentions of the existing power holders... Rather, they are seen as contributing, in conjunction with other forms of struggle, towards creating objective conditions in which... a transfer of power is placed on the agenda’ (cited in van Wyck, 1988: 64-65). In the 1980s, as internal anti-apartheid struggles mounted, the ANC consequently advocated sanctions that would inflict maximal damage on the South African economy, with a particular view to harming large-scale business interests perceived as central to the ruling bloc (Erwin, 2011).

Critically, BDS measures were only conceived as a supplement to the primary ‘pillar’ of ANC strategy: mass mobilisation. ANC leaders repeatedly emphasised that sanctions alone ‘will not bring results’ (Lodge, 1988: 38-39). Abdul Minty, for example, stated: ‘victory will come through the struggle of the people of [South Africa], and sanctions must be regarded as a complement to that struggle and not as an alternative’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 129). They had good reasons for this perspective. First, the ANC’s political analysis told them that mass and class struggle made history. More specifically, it suggested that, given the powerful class interests behind the apartheid regime, it could not be ‘persuaded’ to change, including by sanctions; it had to be forced to do so. Crucially, without mass struggle, the regime would not be compelled to negotiate. Sanctions had been imposed on South Africa at several junctures, including oil embargoes since the 1960s and an arms embargo in 1977. However, South Africa had easily surmounted these challenges by developing an oil-from-coal industry, creating a large arms manufacturing sector (turning it into a major arms *exporter*), and widespread sanctions-busting – which enriched many people loyal to the regime. The very

¹ For example, Waldmeir (1998: 52, 57, 119) underscores the ‘psychological’ effects of sanctions in ‘assaulting the psyche’ and ‘preparing’ whites for change, portraying Afrikaners as ‘insecure children’.

high costs of these measures could be met, so long as the non-white labour that generated South Africa's wealth remained acquiescent. Because the sanctions were imposed in the wake of *defeats* of the internal opposition (the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre and the 1976 Soweto uprising), the costs of sanctions could be deflected onto the oppressed population. Sanctions would *only* 'bite' pro-apartheid forces if mass resistance made it impossible for the regime to repeat this strategy.

Events substantially bore out the centrality of mass struggle in two ways. First, economically, mass struggle created a zero-sum dilemma exacerbated by sanctions. By the mid-1980s, black urban unrest was so intense and sustained that the regime could no longer repress it by force. Instead it was compelled to spend increasing sums on township 'upliftment' to improve housing and services. According to the then finance minister, by constraining the resources available to the state, sanctions sharpened a trade-off between financing the cost of repression – needed to maintain short-term order – and welfare – needed to restore long-term order. Consequently, the government 'saw a revolutionary type of situation developing, where we would not [even] have been able to deal with conflict control' (Du Plessis, 2011). Indeed, although the UDF was temporarily neutralised by police crackdowns, labour agitation actually increased, because the black unions could not be suppressed without crippling the national economy (Bethlehem, 1988: 305). Without this crisis of rising expectations and demands for socio-economic equality, this dilemma would not have existed, removing incentives to negotiate with the opposition. Second, politically, the apartheid regime was also pursuing a 'reformist' agenda to co-opt non-white elites, relaxing some apartheid restrictions and creating limited forms of non-white political participation: *Bantustan* governments, coloured and Indian legislatures and black local authorities. Again, without mass struggle, this might have succeeded. Instead, rent and service-charge payment strikes, coupled with street protests and violent attacks on collaborationist local elites rendered these institutions largely defunct. The ANC was thus able to confront the white ruling elite with a choice between perpetual unrest or a negotiated settlement. Powerful and wealthy groups increasingly realised that their interests could no longer be served by apartheid, and began calling for a political settlement.

For the ANC, then, BDS was very much a supplementary means of supporting a mass societal campaign. It aimed at very clearly defined goals – negotiations for a transition to democracy – behind which the ANC and its allies mobilised the masses. BDS measures were expected to contribute modestly to a coherent strategy aimed at strengthening opposition forces whilst fragmenting the ruling power bloc, hastening progress towards negotiations.

This substantially succeeded as large-scale white capital broke from the ruling coalition, demanding constitutional reform, financing a reformist candidate for the National Party leadership, and negotiating with the opposition through the Consultative Business Movement, which later served as the secretariat to the negotiations for a democratic transition.

Critical Differences: The Weakness of the Palestinian Liberation Movement

In stark contrast to the ANC's use of sanctions as a tool to be used by an already-advanced liberation struggle, for pro-Palestinian activists, BDS is seen as a means to *construct* such a struggle. The context in Israel/Palestine is not an increasingly powerful political movement seeking an additional means to coerce its enemies, but a legacy of defeat, fragmentation and despair. BDS is resorted to out of a sense that 'nothing else has worked' (Gordon, 2012: 191), and 'we have reached a dead end in the tragedy of the Palestinian people' (Khader, 2012: 141). BDS activists articulate no clear political goals precisely because they hope the BDS campaign will generate the political consensus that the movement currently lacks, as well as reviving collective struggle. Consequently, the campaign lacks a clearly articulated sense of the relationship between its means and ends. Although campaigners can articulate possible mechanisms by which BDS might 'work' to help Palestinians, many of these are essentially lifted from the South African experience. Moreover, because they are not rooted in a coherent political analysis and strategy specific to Israel/Palestine, these mechanisms are sometimes contradictory. Campaigners thus end up depicting the securing of individual instances of boycotts, disinvestments or sanctions as 'successes' in their own right, despite the fact that they appear to produce no change on the ground.

(a) The Weakness of the Palestinian Liberation Movement

The 2005 BDS Call was a direct response to the apparently terminal decline of the Palestinian opposition. BDS advocates rarely say this explicitly: there is often a very curious silence about the woeful state of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and the civil war between Fatah and Hamas following the 2006 elections. Nonetheless, the link is clear. The PLO was once in the vanguard of a worldwide, radical liberation movement, modelling itself on the Vietnamese struggle for independence and receiving transnational support from many allies. However, with the defeat of progressive forces in the Arab world and later elsewhere, the PLO was essentially cut adrift (Chamberlin, 2012). Although hopes were raised by the

1993 Oslo Peace Accords, many BDS activists now view the ‘peace process’ as a sham that co-opted and tamed their leaders.

This occurred in several ways, they argue. First, through the creation of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) ‘a small clique of leaders who were mostly detached from the struggling Palestinians on the ground hijacked the Palestinians’ decision-making power’ (Baroud, 2013: 11). Largely abandoning the revolutionary struggle for independent statehood, they instead became ‘absorbed with the tasks of day-to-day administration’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 39). While the PLO has now been ‘in total disarray for years’, the PNA ‘with its circumscribed mandate and the constraints imposed upon it by the Oslo accords, is *inherently incapable* of supporting any effective resistance strategy... Indeed... the P[N]A’s role has actually been detrimental’ (Barghouti, 2011: 56). The actions of this ‘unelected, unrepresentative, unprincipled and visionless Palestinian “leadership”’ (Barghouti, 2011: 7) have been heavily ‘dictated’ by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, producing development plans that were ‘fragmented, detracted from a national vision, and unable to confront the further theft of lands and the strengthening of economic dependency upon the occupation’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 133). Second, these measures, which promoted joint ventures with Israeli firms, led to the ‘systematic... corruption and co-optation of a whole class of Palestinian politicians, businessmen and intellectuals, [such that] the Palestinian culture of resistance and heritage of struggle has been distorted and undermined’ (Barghouti, 2013: 217). Consequently, ‘sectors of Palestinian society have become so dependent upon interim arrangements and foreign aid... as to put paid to the possibility their contributing to the fight for real change’ (Barghouthi, 2012: 10). Even ‘within the ranks of the PLO and elected PNA... many elements... participated in the construction of a peripheral Palestinian economy’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 133). Third, ‘several years of intense occupation attacks, closures and assassinations’ severely damaged grassroots activism. Although over 700 NGOs have emerged to promote development and welfare, their work ‘has detracted from the national vision of Palestine’ and their co-option into development processes led to a ‘general loss in the political credibility of the NGO sector... mirroring that experienced by the political leadership’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 133-134). As a former PLO official laments, the net result is that ‘every institution or overarching structure that once united Palestinians has now crumbled and been swept away... no single body [is] able to claim legitimately to represent all Palestinians; no body able to set out a collective policy or national programme of liberation. There is no plan... we are at a nadir in our history of resistance’ (Nabulsi, 2010).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, BDS is not a tool to be used by a powerful, well-led and mobilised liberation struggle but is rather used to try to bring such a struggle into being by invoking the ‘ghost’ of the successful South African revolution. The BDS call represented a ‘repudiation of the state-building project in place since 1993 and a return to the liberation model’ (Erakat, 2012: 88). Given its parlous state, activists argued it was necessary even to ‘affirm that our national liberation movement is still alive’, and to ‘revive our culture of collective activism’. Due to its thin goals (discussed further below), the BDS Call was seen as having the potential to ‘engage the broadest swath of the population... and revive the culture and spirit of communal collaboration’ (Barghouthi, 2012: 6). The Call articulated ‘a unified set of goals and aims, bringing together a wide range of social and political forces all over the homeland and throughout the diaspora... by which ties and solidarity can be renewed, strengthened and formed’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 128). Although rather limited, BDS offered a ‘basis... to campaign upon and a means to limit sectarianism’ for ‘organisations unable to present a stronger platform’. The hope was to ‘recreate the sense of unity and purpose’ lost since the 1980s (GPAAWC, 2007: 159, 162). BDS would, Barghouti (2011: 193) hoped, serve as a ‘political catalyst and moral anchor for a strengthened, reinvigorated international social movement’.

Understandable and necessary as these goals are, it is not clear that BDS can actually serve as the means by which they can be achieved. Reflecting the demise of the Palestinian revolution, the BDS Call represents a very thin, lowest-common-denominator platform that, even so, does not command universal support. The short document – the list of signatories is three times longer than its substantive content – articulates three goals: (1) an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the dismantling of the West Bank Barrier (aka the ‘apartheid wall’); (2) a recognition of the rights of Arab citizens of Israel to full equality; (3) respect for the Palestinian refugees’ right to return. Beyond this thin, rights-based approach which couches Palestinians’ plight in terms of universal liberal, human rights discourses in an attempt to garner international support, the BDS movement eschews any more substantive goals. As Barghouti (2011: 51-52, 218) notes, ‘individual BDS activists and advocates may support diverse political solutions’ and ‘the BDS movement as such does not adopt any specific political formula... BDS is not an ideology or run by a political party’. In what is meant as an admiring comment, Pappé (2013: 183) observes BDS is ‘without any clear focal point’. Arguably, this is a profound weakness, not a strength. Regardless, even this thin ‘consensus’ has failed to unite Palestinian society. The comprador Palestinian business class generated by the Oslo process is, understandably, opposed to BDS (GPAAWC, 2007:

135). Several Palestinian NGOs also initially opposed BDS as a ‘blow to the P[N]A and a subversion of the strategic direction of the Palestinian national movement’ (Erakat, 2012: 88). The PNA, hobbled by the Oslo framework, took five years to reluctantly embrace BDS, and even then it only endorsed a boycott of products originating in illegal Israeli settlements (Barghouti, 2011: 56-57; Erakat, 2012: 89).

Given the profound structural forces that destroyed Palestinian unity and purpose, it is unsurprising that the limited goals and method of BDS have not provided a mechanism by which to reunite and galvanise the liberation movement. It was never clear how an international solidarity call, even if responded to sympathetically, was meant to do this. The transnational revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, with its crucial components of mass mobilisation and armed struggle, managed this; today’s insipid ‘civil society’ activism cannot. Nabulsi (2010) recalls: ‘Palestinians who dared not join in – businessmen, academics, the money-grubbing classes – were carried along in its wake, and obeyed its mandate. Today we could not be further from that fleeting moment of unity the revolution once afforded’. The dramatic change in context and tone is symbolised by the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. In 1973, he wrote: ‘we are part of an international revolutionary movement... Crawling on our knees so as to gain the sympathy of Western quarters will do nothing to diminish our alienation from the world’ (Chamberlin, 2012: 176). Today, his phrase ‘besiege your siege’ is invoked to support BDS appeals to the Western world.

Arguably, it was always expecting too much of BDS to believe it could remake the liberation movement. It did *not* have that effect in South Africa. The crucial dynamic there was the explosive growth of an emiserated non-white urban population and the formation of a powerful black working class whose labour was essential for the reproduction of South African capitalism, and the harnessing of emergent trade unions and civic associations by charterist leaders. Although many BDS advocates recognise that ‘the “South African treatment” [involves] global boycotts from outside supporting mass struggle inside’ (Barghouti, 2011: 64), they do not suggest any means by which this mass struggle is to be produced. Certainly organised labour cannot serve as its basis: although Israeli capitalism became dependent on Palestinian labour after the 1967 occupation, following the First Intifada (1987), Israeli businesses deliberately reduced their reliance on Palestinian workers, turning to migrant workers and new Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet bloc. Today, economic dependency runs in the opposite direction: Palestinians rely on Israel to provide them with livelihoods and jobs (GPAAWC, 2007: 119, 123-124, 132). Although the non-violent call for sanctions provides a means for religious groups to actively support the anti-

apartheid movement, it did not create their opposition to apartheid, which already existed, and nor did it specify their goals, which were instead articulated in the ANC's Freedom Charter. Moreover, sanctions also divided South Africans: they were opposed by the anti-apartheid white opposition party, by some black unions, and by *Bantustan* leaders like the Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who all argued that they harmed the non-white population whilst provoking a white backlash. It took active political mobilisation to win the majority of the population over to a pro-sanctions, charterist position. This included a violent and increasingly bloody struggle against Buthelezi's Inkatha organisation. Similarly, Iraqi opposition groups initially rallied around sanctions, but this unity dissolved as soon as sanctions began to bite, provoking massive divisions within the Iraqi National Congress (Francke, 1995). BDS was also divisive in Myanmar: the NLD's call for sanctions alienated some in the urban middle class, workers who lost their jobs, other opposition parties, and impoverished ethnic-minority groups desperate for economic development (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2004: 84; Khin Zaw Win, 2007: 286; Myo Nyunt, 2012; Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2010: 195-196, 334).

Given the parlous state of the Palestinian opposition, a more accurate analogy than 1980s South Africa – the focus of BDS activists' framing of Israel/Palestine – might be 1960s South Africa. In 1960, a rising crescendo of social unrest was halted by the Sharpeville massacre; the ANC leadership was imprisoned or exiled, and the ANC and SACP were outlawed. Serious mass opposition to apartheid did not resurface until 1976, when it was again suppressed. Sanctions did not 'bite' until mass opposition revived in the mid-1980s alongside a profound economic crisis with deep structural roots. Palestine remains very far indeed from this scenario.

(b) Contradictions and Incoherence in Goals and Tactics

A further problem with the Palestinian BDS campaign stems from this lack of political coherence and leadership: confusion as to the campaign's goals and the methods by which they should be attained. Some diversity of views on these things is a normal aspect of any political campaign, but the lack of forceful political leadership, clear and coherent political and economic analysis of the target state, and an overall guiding strategy is particularly telling here.

Disagreement as to the *goals* of BDS begin at the most fundamental level. As noted earlier, given severe intra-Palestinian divisions, BDS campaigners are unable to specify even

the bare outlines of a political solution to the Israel/Palestine crisis. While Barghouti (2011: 51-52) claims that most BDS advocates still support a two-state solution, Erakat (Erakat, 2012: 89) suggests that ‘the BDS call has been read as an implicit endorsement of the one-state solution’. Without a collective political vision it is difficult to build a substantive consensus or to measure progress towards its realisation.

There is also considerable confusion over the *mechanisms* by which BDS is meant to advance a rights-based approach. Writing of South Africa, Crawford and Klotz (1999) suggest four basic mechanisms by which sanctions might ‘work’ to deliver the political outcomes sought by the ‘senders’:

- (1) ‘Compellance’: BDS may increase the cost of objectionable policies, causing policymakers to revise their cost-benefit analyses, producing policy changes.
- (2) ‘Normative communication’: BDS signals moral condemnation that may ‘persuade’ policymakers to change their behaviour.
- (3) ‘Resource denial’: BDS deprives the target state of the resources required to sustain its objectionable policy.
- (4) ‘Political fracture’: BDS stimulates a domestic legitimacy crisis, increasing dissent in the target state, leading to a change of government and thereby political change.

As noted earlier, the primary mechanism by which the ANC saw sanctions working was ‘political fracture’. Moreover, the ‘resource denial’ and ‘compellance’ function of sanctions would only be *co-constituted* by ‘political fracture’ since the costs of apartheid and the resources required to sustain it were not fixed but were instead heavily dictated by the degree of mass resistance. Consequently, these functions would not ‘work’ independently. Unlike its liberal supporters in the West, the ANC put very little store in ‘normative communication’, rightly believing – in line with its anti-colonial analysis – that oppressive regimes could not be ‘persuaded’ to relinquish power but must be forced to do so.

Unlike the ANC, Palestinian BDS campaigners do not articulate a coherent strategic analysis of the target or how sanctions are supposed to work, but present a wide range of options that fall into several of these possible mechanisms. Many advocates suggest that BDS may be useful in ‘raising awareness’ of Palestinians’ plight and harming Israel’s ‘image’, diminishing its moral legitimacy (Erakat, 2012: 95; Barghouti, 2011: 15-16, 27-28; Global Exchange, 2003: 6; GPAAWC, 2007: 4-5, 62). This may be seen as ‘normative communication’. Exactly how this is meant to produce political change, however, is rarely specified. As BDS advocate Richard Falk (2013: 97) observes, ‘winning the “legitimacy war”

may not be enough. It has not been enough, for instance, to emancipate the people of Tibet or Chechnya'. Even in the far more favourable historical conditions of the mid-1970s, 'the PLO could point to a range of international supporters... but it was no closer to its goal of creating a Palestinian homeland' (Chamberlin, 2012: 262). Arguably, little has changed since. To make strategic sense, it is therefore necessary to conceptualise a sequence of events whereby delegitimising Israeli behaviour through BDS produces *some other change* which, *in turn*, leads to a concrete change of outcomes on the ground. For example, the goal could be, as with early South African boycott campaigns, to build Western public support for a withdrawal of US aid or more meaningful sanctions that would materially diminish Israel's capacity to keep repressing the Palestinians (this is glancingly implied in US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, 2010: 9; GPAAWC, 2007: 54-55; Erakat, 2012: 96). On this view, the initial target of 'normative communication' would not in fact be Israel but rather Western publics and states, with a view to enabling second-stage sanctions aimed at Israel that produce 'resource denial'.

Other activists, however, eschew this idea of an intermediate step and see BDS as a means of creating immediate, direct change in Israel/ Palestine. However, this group is again divided as to how this is meant to work. One group adopts a liberal perspective of 'normative communication', suggesting that BDS 'relies on persuasion', seeking to 'convince Israel of its moral degradation and ethical isolation' and 're-education in Israel' (Falk, 2013: 88; Banks, cited in Barghouti, 2011: 212; Pappé, 2013: 136). More common, however, is a coercive perspective closer to the ANC's, which insists that 'the basic logic of BDS is the logic of pressure – not diplomacy, persuasion, or dialogue' (Taraki and LeVine, 2012: 165).

However, exactly how this 'pressure' is meant to lead to change is again not clearly specified.² Some articulate an implicit 'compellance' logic, suggesting that 'pressure [should]... raise the cost of the occupation' (Baum and Amir, 2012: 41; see also Barghouti, 2011: 18, 25, 207). The trouble with 'compellance' is twofold. First, sanctioned governments have frequently been willing to absorb massive economic costs to pursue cherished political ends. South Africa is a case in point: busting the oil embargo, for example, cost an estimated \$34.6bn (Hengeveld and Rodenburg, 1995: 199). The Israeli occupation's cost is *already* increasing without sanctions: having profited the Israeli economy from 1967-1987, it now costs an estimated \$9bn yearly, of which military costs (\$6bn) are rising 7 percent annually

² In fairness to pro-Palestinian campaigners, this is hardly unique to them: Western policymakers frequently impose sanctions without any sense of how they are meant to generate the outcomes they seek (Kirshner, 1997; Rowe, 2001).

(Hever, 2012: 115-116). Second, as the South African experience shows, such costs may only become unbearable if they can no longer be deflected onto, or financed by the exploitation of, subordinated populations. Again, with no plan for or prospect of sustained mass mobilisation, the BDS campaign has no mechanism to ensure this.

Other activists propose a direct ‘resource denial’ logic, similar to the second part of the two-step strategy suggested earlier. Divestment, it is suggested, can ‘cut-off the funding used to sustain the occupation’, and tourism boycotts can deny Israel ‘vital investments and foreign currency’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 70-73). Academic boycotts can weaken Israeli universities, which supply ‘the ideology and tools of occupation’ via biased teaching, designing and constructing settlements and the apartheid wall, and generating military research and development (Ella, 2012: 53-55). An arms embargo would make Israel ‘unable to continue its war crimes... if it cannot replenish... [its] military arsenals’ (GPAAWC, 2007: 53-54). Whether ‘resource denial’ makes strategic sense ultimately depends on the centrality of external flows of aid, trade, investment, technical collaboration and political support in sustaining Israeli dominance. This is *asserted* by many BDS advocates, but never actually demonstrated (e.g. Barghouti, 2011: 50, 209, 232; Taraki and LeVine, 2012: 169; GPAAWC, 2007: 42, 52).

Considering just the arms embargo, Israel has received about \$3bn annually in US aid since the 1980s, much of which is expended on arms imports. However, Israel has also developed a large domestic arms industry that reportedly exports around three-quarters of its output. Exports reached \$7bn in 2012 (AFP, 2013). This industry is probably highly reliant on international technical collaboration, supplies of components, etc, and would probably suffer were these links severed. However, the South African experience shows that even embargoed states *without* an arms industry can develop one and even produce sophisticated chemical and nuclear weapons. South Africa’s security forces were never deprived of their coercive capacities through sanctions; instead, it was sustained and growing social unrest that made coercion an impractical means of maintaining long-term social order. Even if Israel’s arms industry suffered relative decline through BDS measures, the sector’s very existence – not to mention its capacity to adapt – makes it extremely unlikely that the Israeli state would be starved of the equipment necessary to repress the Palestinians. And, again, without mass mobilisation, coercion is likely to remain a viable option.

Finally, a further group of BDS activists rely on ‘political fracture’ logics, though here again there is considerable confusion. Barghouti (2011: 222-223) concedes that under BDS pressure, Israel’s ‘colonial society bands together’ but hopes that later ‘this seemingly

invincible or garrison-oriented unity starts to crack... the natural human quest for normalcy... will lead many... Israelis to withdraw their support for Israeli apartheid and occupation. Many may even join movements that aim to end both. Collapse of the multitiered sys of oppression then becomes a matter of time... we've seen it all before in South Africa'. Others similarly suggest BDS will 'catalyse an anti-Zionist movement in Israeli society', 'create a critical mass of minority dissidents' and 'prompt the Israeli public to reconsider' (GPAAWC, 2007: 53; Greenstein, cited in Hanna, 2013: 103; US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, 2010: 10).

But there are two points of confusion here. First, again reflecting the lack of clear strategic thought and leadership, activists are divided over whether Israeli society is really the target of sanctions. Warschawski (2012: 195-197) asserts that 'the Palestinian national movement needs as many Israeli allies as possible... [consequently] BDS is addressed to the Israeli public'; but Taraki and LeVine flatly assert: 'the BDS movement does not address the Israeli public directly in order to persuade it or to appeal to its sense of justice', despite having identified 'mov[ing] the Israeli body politic' as 'the logic of BDS' just four pages earlier (2012: 174, 170). Similarly, while Falk (2013: 87) maintains that 'Israeli participation is valued highly' and Pappé (2013: 133) asserts 'it is vital to keep in touch with the progressive and radical Jewish dissidents' as a 'bridge to the wider public in Israel', Barghouti (2011: 32, 60) is openly suspicious of 'soft Zionists' and the 'Zionist left' hijacking BDS to 'save Israel' as an apartheid state. Unsurprisingly, despite the BDS committee's official invitation to 'conscientious Israelis to support this call', even sympathetic Israelis sense this contradictory hostility, perceiving that 'Palestinian society does not welcome Israeli solidarity anymore' (Alexandrowicz and Vilkomerson, 2012: 205). This not only reflects a lack of clear political strategising but also the movement's very weakness, which generates fears – absent in the ANC's case – that it could easily be hijacked by external interests (see GPAAWC, 2007: 11, 13).

A second point of confusion is over the South African analogy. It is simply inaccurate to suggest that BDS spurred the formation of a significant anti-apartheid movement among whites. A survey of state elites found 'resistance rather than compliance to external pressure... [was] the dominant reaction' to BDS (van Wyck, 1988: 81). The wider white population actually lurched rightwards as sanctions intensified: the Conservative Party (a rightist splinter group from the ruling National Party) increased its vote from 17 to 29 percent from 1981-87, displacing the liberal People's Freedom Party as the official parliamentary opposition (Lipton, 1990: 38). The End Conscription Campaign, cited (inaccurately) by some

as a by-product of sanctions, was a tiny group with little appreciable influence. Arguably, as mentioned earlier, the really decisive shift was that of large-scale capital – not the wider public. Despite being a relatively small group, big business leaders exercised profound structural influence over the South African state. They played a significant role in lobbying for change and preparing the wider population for a negotiated settlement.

Targeting sanctions at particularly influential social groups could be an important aspect of BDS strategy. However, given the lack of coherent politico-ideological leadership, the Palestinian BDS National Committee has apparently undertaken no sustained political or economic analysis of Israeli society that might reveal the key forces and alliances underpinning the *status quo* and thus provides no compelling sense of how BDS might disrupt them. The only person who has provided anything close to this vital analysis is (ironically, perhaps) the Israeli economist Shir Hever. He undertakes a rare political economy analysis of Israel, identifying large-scale conglomerates as the key linchpin of the Israeli state: it is their ‘taxes [that] fund Israel’s military budget, and the owners... exert extensive political power over the Israeli political sphere’. Consequently, he suggests, BDS should target them to ‘apply pressure on them to create positive change’. This would involve inflicting maximal damage on companies’ markets, investment flows and stock prices since only a ‘painful impact’ will compel a change of strategy (Hever, 2012: 112-115).

However, because there is no centralised leadership or overall strategy, it is left up to individual activist groups to decide how they think BDS might work and, accordingly, what targets to select. Here the important practical consequences of the aforementioned strategic incoherence becomes apparent. Barghouti (2011: 61, 217) insists that ‘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... BDS can be adapted to according to the specific context in each country’. Similarly, Nieuwhof (2013: 162-163) celebrates ‘the freedom to organise tailor-made activities that fit the local situation’. ‘Your preferences’, one campaign tells activists, should dictate the choice of target (Global Exchange, 2003: 7). A ‘narrow focus’ – for example, on settlement products such as cosmetics – is ‘perfectly fine’ (Barghouti, 2011: 219). But this may simply be false. If the movement adopts a two-stage strategy, initially targeting Western publics to build support for later sanctions that will target Israel more powerfully, focusing on firms which ‘epitomise the most oppressive aspects of the occupation’ (US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, 2010: 16) may be a good idea, so long as no significant economic consequences are anticipated in the first stage. However, if the intention is to inflict direct damage on the Israeli

economy, such a focus may be completely pointless. As Israeli research has shown, settlement boycotts have ‘targeted mainly marginal products... [that] do not contribute substantially to the settlements’ economic sustainability’. Moreover, ‘this type of action can have no effect when the percentage of participants is almost negligible, and when these actions are not part of broader, collectively organised activism’ (Baum and Amir, 2012: 43, 49). Furthermore, settlement companies are emphatically *not* those ‘play[ing] the most significant role in shoring up Israel’s occupation’, and nor do they exercise significant political leverage (Hever, 2013: 112). Rather than adapting BDS to context where *activists* are located, it would make far more sense to adapt them to the context in Israel/Palestine.

This section has illustrated the considerable incoherence in the goals BDS activists advocate and the mechanisms they suggest will help achieve them. A lack of clear, ideologically-consistent leadership translates into a lack of concrete analysis, sloppy thinking, and inconsistencies even among BDS supporters. This in turn produces a haphazard approach to BDS activism, as if any form of activity is equally praiseworthy – when in fact, depending on the way one thinks about sanctions, many actions could simply be a waste of scarce time, energy and resources. As ANC veteran Ronnie Kasrils (2013: 20) rightly argues, South Africa’s experience shows that ‘the importance of a clear-cut strategy for all to follow cannot be over-emphasised and is an essential ingredient for success’.

(c) Means-Ends Confusion and Spurious ‘Success’ Claims

A final weakness of the Palestinian BDS campaign stems from the preceding one: lacking a clear sense of the goals and mechanisms of the campaign, activists often confuse means and ends and make spurious claims of ‘success’ when their activities actually produce no improvement in the situation for Palestinians.

The sensible way to think about BDS is as a means to achieve a desired political outcome. Some activists clearly grasp this basic point. For example, Hanna (2013: 102) argues: ‘*BDS is not a goal in itself*. Rather, it is a means by which to pressure the Israeli government’. From this perspective, success is measured by the practical political effects that BDS measures yield on the ground. However, because no clear political goals or mechanisms are articulated by the campaign, it is very difficult to conduct such measurement. Furthermore, the ends-means relation often becomes muddled in activists’ thinking. The US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation (2010: 16), for instance, defines the achievement of BDS measures as the end goal, with BDS campaigns as the means to achieve them. BDS

measures thus become delinked from the situation in Israel/Palestine. Accordingly, activists record as ‘success’ and ‘achievements’ merely the securing of a rising number of boycotts and disinvestment events (e.g. Awwad, 2012: 180-184; Ziadah, 2013; Australians for Palestine, 2010: 41-46). ‘Success’ is implicitly defined circularly: the ‘immediate noteworthy outcomes’ of a cultural boycott are further cultural boycotts (Barghouti, 2012: 30). This may make sense as part of a two-stage strategy, but then we would still want to distinguish and measure (a) the achievement of the initial boycott or disinvestment, (b) the way this translates into political support for tougher sanctions, and then, for stage two, (c) the imposition of those sanctions and (d) significant consequential impacts on the ground. Given the extreme distance between (a) and (d), declaring ‘success!’ at (a) is obviously premature. It makes even less sense to declare ‘success’ when firms investing in Israel withdraw, not from Israel, but from *other* countries (McCann, 2013), or when Western activists are able to protest Israeli crimes without going to prison (Napier, 2013).

Of course, Palestinian activists are hardly alone in these spurious claims of ‘success’. It is extremely common for sanctions advocates to claim that sanctions are ‘working’ merely when they inflict damage on a target economy, even when that damage does not translate into the political goals actually being sought. Furthermore, all activists need to tell celebratory stories about their work to maintain morale and create a sense of progress during long, often fruitless struggles; the alternative may simply be defeatism. But it remains important to maintain a clear means-end distinction, within an overall strategy, with clearly defined goals, to avoid hasty self-congratulation and to stimulate continual reflection on the efficacy of individual tactics. As Baum and Amir argue about settlements boycotts, such ‘ethical shopping practices’ make it ‘much too easy’ for people to ‘distance themselves from the settlements’ and think that is all they need do (Baum and Amir, 2012: 43). Many analysts have suggested that Western sanctions campaigners, however well-intentioned, are engaged in a form of moral posturing, focusing on ‘feeling good’ rather than actually ‘doing good’ (Preeg, 1999). No doubt the invocation of the ‘ghost’ of South Africa’s revolutionary struggle for racial equality makes many people feel part of a worldwide struggle for justice in an age where meaningful opportunities for political engagement are few and far between (Laidi, 1998). A rigid focus on the actual capacity of BDS measures to improve the life of Palestinians is the only way to avoid slipping into a romantic sense of self-satisfaction.

This is doubly important because, for all the claims of ‘success’, BDS seems to have made no appreciable difference in Israel/Palestine so far. Sourani (2013: 66) asks: ‘what has been the impact on Israel’s policies and practices? In short, we are living through the worst

period in the history of the occupation'. Economically, 'BDS has not had a significant impact on companies that do not operate directly in the OPT [Occupied Palestinian Territories]' (Hever, 2013: 119). In fact, 'the Israeli economy is stronger than ever' (GPAAWC, 2007: 137). Politically, the Israeli left has been completely 'marginalised', with growing 'public sympathy for police and army violence against protestors' (Baum and Amir, 2012: 39). 94 percent of Israelis reportedly backed Operation Cast Lead, the brutal attack on Gaza in 2008-2009 (US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, 2010: 10). Public opinion has apparently not developed since then. Even among those directly targeted by BDS, like academics, 'not much has changed' (Pappe, 2013: 134).

Conclusions

By comparing the Palestinian BDS movement to its own chosen analogue, the ANC experience in South Africa, this paper has highlighted several interrelated shortcomings. Unlike the ANC, the BDS movement lacks political leadership, clearly defined political goals, a coherent economic, political and social analysis of the situation in Israel/Palestine, and a developed strategy for transforming that situation. The BDS movement does not appear to have catalysed greater Palestinian unity and it seems unrealistic to hope that an international solidarity campaign can resolve the deep, local crisis of the Palestinian liberation movement. Reflecting the continued division of the Palestinian polity, the BDS campaign exhibits a wide variety of mutually inconsistent perspectives which generates muddled activist thinking and practices that risk being delinked from the actual situation on the ground.

This analysis suggests several priorities. First, the most urgent task remains the rejuvenation of the Palestinian liberation movement. It is difficult to imagine any successful outcome until the severe divisions between Fatah and Hamas and the disarray of the PLO are overcome and Palestinians again become engaged in sustained mass struggle for their own liberation. Many activists clearly recognise this, but appear misguided in thinking that BDS can serve as the catalyst for renewal. A distinction needs to be made between the revival of the internal political struggle and the mobilisation of external support in the service of that struggle.

Second, whilst this admittedly long-term project is ongoing, the BDS National Committee may need to take a more active and directive leadership role. The campaign cannot be effective without a more substantive set of goals and a plausible strategy for

achieving them. This will require both active political work and a great deal of careful analysis of the Israel/Palestine context. Here is where sympathetic scholars can contribute most directly, by providing detailed studies of the political, economic and social mechanisms used to maintain Israeli oppression of the Palestinians and identifying contradictions within these arrangements where pressure could be applied to encourage change, both domestically and internationally. Detailed analysis is required of the international contribution to various aspects of Israeli rule in order to better target BDS efforts at the most critical external ‘props’. Critical academics played an important role in supplying such intellectual services to the South African anti-apartheid opposition, but this is yet to occur on a similar scale in Israel/Palestine. However, it is for Palestinian activists themselves to use this information to develop an overall strategy and supporting tactics, and to win others over to this programme. This will be far from easy. As Barghouthi (2012: 8) observes: ‘the most difficult task that we face today is that of creating a unified leadership and strategy binding on all, from which no political or military decisions will depart’.

Finally, it is vital for all concerned to use the South African analogy appropriately. The analogy’s main force is *moral*: South Africa practised apartheid and was sanctioned; Israel does too, and therefore it, too, should be sanctioned. However, the alleged moral similarities of two targets tell us absolutely nothing about their relative susceptibility to BDS measures. It is wrong to think of sanctions as being uniformly successful, as if simply replicating instruments deployed in one case will have similar effects in another, even where oppressive practices seem somewhat similar. Marked differences in social power relations, the degree and extent of opposition mobilisation, the mechanisms of rule, the political economy, and so on, mean that even identical sanctions will produce very different outcomes in different times and places. Invoking the ghost of the South African revolution may help to re-inspire the struggle for Palestinian freedom. However, as Marx warned, in making such historical analogies we must avoid ‘parodying the old’. The two contexts are starkly different. The conditions that allowed South Africans to succeed no longer exist. In Palestine, such conditions must be made anew.

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