

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

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INTRODUCTION¹

In 2005, Palestinian civil society activists called for boycotts, disinvestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel, stating they were ‘inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid’.² Indeed, the South African experience and analogy is central to their campaign. It provides a framework for a moral critique of Israel as an ‘apartheid state’, creating an imperative for outsiders to support Palestinians as they did black South Africans, in the name of ‘moral consistency’. More problematically, the South African anti-apartheid movement’s (AAM) use of BDS provide a

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²Omar Barghouti, *Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (Chicago, 2011), 240.

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new strategy to fight Israeli oppression following the failure of other approaches, including armed struggle and the Oslo peace process. BDS is ‘the South Africa strategy for Palestine’.³

Framing current struggles using historical analogies is a well-worn practice. Marx, observing the 1848 Paris Commune, noted that revolutionaries ‘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’.⁴ Later, US foreign policymakers repeatedly invoked the Munich debacle to justify militarily confronting, rather than ‘appeasing’ communism during the Cold War.⁵ And many other advocates of international sanctions have used the South Africa analogy. US Senator Mitch McConnell, for example, justified sanctions against Myanmar (Burma) by claiming that ‘sanctions worked in South Africa, and they will in Burma too’, while Archbishop Desmond Tutu branded Myanmar the ‘South Africa of Southeast Asia’, urging the world to ‘do for Burma what it did for South Africa’.⁶ The Free Burma Campaign explicitly sought to ‘recreate what went on during the AAM’, employing its methods and even its now-redundant activists.⁷

Such framing, while potentially useful, carries significant risks. Marx argued that the ‘awakening of the dead’ from earlier revolutions was justified only 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’. As this implies, historical analogies can distract from contemporary realities and priorities, preventing genuine progress. This, Marx argued, was the case in the upheavals of 1848–1851, when, ‘only the ghost of the old revolution circulated’.⁸

⁴Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” *Die Revolution* (1852), ch. 1, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>

⁵Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, 1992).

⁶Morten B. Pedersen, *Promoting Human Rights in Burma: A Critique of Western Sanctions Policy* (Lanham, 2008), 33, 49–50.

⁷Free Burma Coalition (FBC), *The Free Burma Coalition Manual: How You Can Help Burma’s Struggle for Freedom* (Madison, 1997).

⁸Marx, “18th Brumaire”.

This chapter argues that this is also true of the BDS movement's use of the South African analogy, where easy rhetoric distracts from the hard task of meaningful strategising and popular mobilisation. Focusing on domestic political economy and social conflict in the target state, rather than international dynamics, I argue that the analogy masks critical differences between these two cases. Crucially, in South Africa, BDS was a *supplementary* tool used by a powerful, strategically led and mass-mobilised liberation struggle. In Palestine, BDS is partly intended to *create* such a movement, following the liberation struggle's ruination. This asks too much: BDS did not serve this function in South Africa, and its prospects for doing so in contemporary Israel/Palestine are weak. Furthermore, the absence of mass struggle in Israel/Palestine makes it unlikely that BDS will be effective; it was only such struggle that allowed BDS to 'bite' in South Africa. Finally, lacking the ANC's clarity on goals and strategy, the Palestinian BDS campaign is politically incoherent, lacking consensus on the end goals and the mechanisms by which BDS is meant to achieve them. Consequently, it neither focuses on activating these mechanisms, nor does it evaluate 'success' sensibly.

My purpose in highlighting these problems is not to dismiss the BDS campaign or the Palestinians' plight. Rather, it is to stimulate critical, sympathetic reflection on political strategies for those seeking liberation. As Marx argued, 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.⁹

The chapter comprises four parts. The first briefly outlines the African National Congress's (ANC) view of BDS. The second highlights the critical difference between the ANC's use of BDS and the Palestinian movement's position. The third argues that the absence of Palestinian mass struggle will constrain the efficacy of BDS. The fourth highlights the BDS campaign's strategic incoherence.

⁹Ibid.

THE ANC'S VIEW OF BDS

The ANC's perspective on BDS reflected its sophisticated analysis of South African society and its associated strategy to hasten apartheid's demise. Its analysis was grounded in a Marxist reading of South Africa's political economy and the social forces underpinning the apartheid regime. Based on this, the ANC adopted a revolutionary strategy based on 'four pillars': mass struggle, underground organisation, armed resistance, and international solidarity. BDS measures formed part of the fourth 'pillar' and were always supplemental to the primary 'pillar', mass mobilisation. BDS were intended to help alter the balance of forces struggling for power in South Africa: to fragment the ruling bloc and to bolster anti-apartheid forces, thereby forcing the regime to negotiate. Mass struggle was thus indispensable for BDS to have meaningful impact.

The ANC viewed apartheid as functional for a 'colonial' form of capitalist development, and saw the regime as rooted in a coalition of class forces benefiting from this arrangement.¹⁰ Following classical Marxist theories of revolution, they argued that regime change would occur when this ruling coalition—English and Afrikaner capitalists, the white middle and working classes, and subordinate, non-white elites running the Bantustans and other apartheid institutions—was overwhelmed by mass, non-white opposition, through civil disobedience, strikes, and sabotage aimed at rendering society 'ungovernable', compelling the regime to negotiate a transition to multiracial democracy.¹¹ The ANC's 1955 Freedom Charter specified clear, democratic-socialist end goals, subsequently adopted by most anti-apartheid forces, including the trade unions and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

BDS fit coherently into this overall strategy. They were seen as useful in 'restraining the regime's capacity [to suppress opposition], dividing the alliance of forces behind the apartheid state, [and] uniting and broadening the anti-apartheid support base'.¹² The first two—destructive—mechanisms were particularly emphasised, as a means to help weaken the ruling coalition vis-à-vis the rising power of the mass opposition constructed by the

¹⁰ ANC, "The Nature of the South African Ruling Class," Document of the National Preparatory Committee, ANC National Consultative Conference, Kabwe, Zambia, June 1985, <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/1985/nature-ruling-class.htm>

¹¹ ANC, "Strategy and Tactics of the ANC," Morogoro Conference, Tanzania, April 25–May 1, 1969; <http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/anc/1969/strategy-tactics.htm>

¹² Mac Maharaj, ANC senior official, interview with author, September 8, 2011.

other ‘pillars’. ANC President Oliver Tambo argued that external flows of trade, investment, technology, and military cooperation bolstered the state’s repressive capacity. By severing these flows, sanctions would ‘weaken the system and making it less capable of resisting our struggle’.¹³ Thabo Mbeki argued that undermining white prosperity would support the ‘breaking up of the power structure... out of this you will get a realignment of forces’.¹⁴ In particular, since the ANC’s Marxist analysis indicated that big business exerted predominant influence over the state, ‘the real target’, a senior trade union leader states, ‘was internal capital’. Harming its interests would encourage it to defect from the ruling coalition, engage in ‘civil disobedience’ and ‘put pressure on’ the regime. Sanctions were thus ‘designed to turn as many significant forces within this society as possible against apartheid’.¹⁵ BDS played only a minor role in constituting the rising mass opposition that would exploit this growing regime weakness. The BDS campaign, being nonviolent, included groups like churches that were squeamish about other ANC tactics.¹⁶ However, it was the campaign itself, not the effects of BDS measures, that had this mild effect, and the primary factor mobilising opposition was obviously apartheid rule itself.

By the 1980s, the AAM sought BDS targets that reflected this strategy. Early boycott campaigns, launched in 1960, did not do so, focusing instead on symbolic South African products like fruit, and sporting and cultural boycotts. ANC strategists did not expect these measures to coerce pro-apartheid forces; they were instead intended to mobilise Western publics, to build support for more meaningful sanctions later on, which would harm key groups inside South Africa.¹⁷ Consequently, despite fantastical claims about the sports boycotts’ efficacy, the primary means by which BDS were intended to work was material not, as liberals often suggest, psychological. As one analyst argued: ‘sanctions are not intended primarily to influence the

¹³ Starnberger Institute, *The Impact of Economic Sanctions Against South Africa* (Harare, 1989), 49–50; Joseph Hanlon and Roger Omond, *The Sanctions Handbook* (Harmondsworth, 1987), 26.

¹⁴ Tom Lodge, ‘State of Exile: The African National Congress of South Africa, 1976–86’, in: *State, Resistance and Change in South Africa*, eds. Philip Frankel, Noam Pines, and Mark Swilling, (London, 1988), 250–251.

¹⁵ Alec Erwin, former Congress of South African Trade Unions senior official, interview with author, September 12, 2011.

¹⁶ Allan Boesak, former United Democratic Front (UDF) patron, interview with author, September 12, 2011.

¹⁷ Maharaj, interview.

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'.¹⁸ Thus, in the 1980s, as internal opposition mounted, the ANC advocated sanctions that would inflict maximal damage on South Africa's economy, hoping to damage large-scale business interests perceived as central to the ruling bloc.¹⁹

Crucially, BDS were only ever a supplement to the primary 'pillar' of ANC strategy: mass mobilisation. ANC leaders repeatedly emphasised that BDS alone 'will not bring results'.²⁰ The AAM's Abdul Minty stated: 'victory will come through the struggle of the people... sanctions must be regarded as a complement to that struggle and not as an alternative'.²¹ The ANC's political analysis told them that, since objectionable regimes are always underpinned by powerful societal interests, they cannot be 'persuaded' to change, including by BDS; they must be forced to do so by mass struggle. This analysis was proven correct since, without mass struggle, BDS failed to compel political change. Sanctions were imposed on South Africa for decades, including oil embargoes from the 1960s and an arms embargo in 1977. However, the regime evaded these by creating import-substituting industries, enriching many loyal businesses and individuals. The exorbitant cost—over US\$ 50bn—was borne as the price of white domination and was affordable so long as the non-white labour that generated South Africa's wealth remained quiescent. Because sanctions were imposed following defeats of the internal opposition (the 1960 Sharpeville massacre and the 1976 Soweto uprising), the regime was able to deflect their costs onto the oppressed population.²²

Only mass resistance rendered this strategy defunct. By the mid-1980s, black urban unrest was so intense and sustained that the regime could no longer repress it by force. Crucial here was the strategic centrality of the

¹⁸ Davies, cited in Koos van Wyck, 'State Elites and South Africa's International Isolation: A Longitudinal Comparison of Perception,' *Politikon*, vol. 15, no. 1, (1988), 64–65.

¹⁹ Erwin, interview.

²⁰ Tom Lodge, 'Sanctions and Black Political Organisations', in: *Sanctions Against Apartheid*, ed. Mark Orkin, (New York, 1989), 38–39.

²¹ Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (GPAAWC), "Towards a Global Movement: A Framework A For Today's Anti-Apartheid Activism," June 2007, 129, <http://bdsmovement.net/files/bds%20report%20small.pdf>

²² Lee Jones, *Societies Under Siege: Exploring How International Economic Sanctions (Do Not) Work* (Oxford, 2015), ch.2.

black working class: while the UDF was temporarily neutralised by police crackdowns, the regime could not quash the unions without crippling the economy; consequently, labour militancy actually rose. Accordingly, the regime was forced to try to undercut the rebellion by increasing welfare spending. However, as the then finance minister recalls, because sanctions—in combination with an unrelated, deep, and structural economic crisis—constrained overall resources, the regime struggled to finance sanctions busting, coercion, and welfare simultaneously. Consequently, the government ‘saw a revolutionary type of situation developing, where we would not [even] have been able to deal with conflict control’.²³ Absent mass mobilisation, this dilemma would simply not have existed. Mass struggle also disabled the regime’s attempt to draw non-white elites into neo-apartheid political structures: Bantustan governments, coloured and Indian legislatures, and black local authorities. Rent and service-charge payment strikes, street protests, and attacks on collaborators paralysed these institutions, causing this strategy of co-optation to fail. The white ruling elite thus faced a choice between spiralling unrest or negotiations. Powerful and wealthy groups increasingly realised that their interests could no longer be served by apartheid, and began demanding change. The rest is history.²⁴

In South Africa, then, BDS were part of a coherent strategy aimed at clearly defined goals. They were expected to modestly assist the overall strategy of fragmenting the ruling power bloc, which, in combination with rising mass opposition, would compel the regime to negotiate a settlement. Crucially, they harmed the ruling coalition only in combination with mass struggle.

CRITICAL DIFFERENCES: THE WEAKNESS OF THE PALESTINIAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT

While in South Africa BDS supported a mass liberation struggle, Palestinian activists want BDS to construct one. Here, there is no burgeoning, strategically led, mass-mobilised movement seeking an additional means to coerce its enemies, but a legacy of defeat, fragmentation, and despair. BDS activists lack clear goals, hoping instead that their campaign might generate

²³Barend Du Plessis, former South African Finance Minister, interview with author, September 5, 2011.

²⁴Jones, *Societies Under Siege*, ch.2.

political consensus and revive collective struggle. There is no analysis of power relations in Israel/Palestine, nor any strategy for shifting these into which BDS fits; BDS is simply grasped at because ‘nothing else has worked’.²⁵ Accordingly, the suggested mechanisms through which BDS might ‘work’ are often contradictory or copied unreflectively from the South African experience, without asking whether they are replicable in Israel/Palestine—and they typically are not. This strategic incoherence leads activists to confuse means and ends, making spurious claims of ‘success’ despite negligible results on the ground.

The Weakness of the Palestinian Liberation Movement

While it is rarely stated explicitly, the 2005 BDS Call was clearly a response to the dramatic decline of the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) was once in the vanguard of a worldwide anti-imperialist movement, modelled on the Vietnamese struggle and receiving extensive transnational support. However, following the defeat of progressive forces in Arabia and beyond, the PLO was cut adrift and fell into decay.²⁶ Although hopes were raised by the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, many Palestinians now view the ‘peace process’ as a sham that co-opted their leaders and demobilised their movement.²⁷

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... decision-making power’.²⁸ The PNA’s circumscribed mandate left it ‘*inherently incapable* of supporting any effective resistance strategy... Indeed... [it] has actually been detrimental’.²⁹ As a de facto gendarme of the Israeli state, the PNA assumed the worst aspects of authoritarian Arab regimes, demobilising the masses and repressing dissent, often violently. It became absorbed with municipal

²⁵ Neve Gordon, ‘Boycott Israel’, in: *The Case for Sanctions Against Israel*, ed. Audrea Lim, (London, 2012), 191.

²⁶ Paul T. Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford, 2012).

²⁷ Edward W. Said, *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After*, 2nd ed. (London, 2002). See also Tariq Dana, “The Prolonged Decay of the Palestinian National Movement,” *National Identities*, early online (2017).

²⁸ Ramzy Baroud, ‘Palestine’s Global Battle that Must be Won’, in: *Generation Palestine: Voices from the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions Movement*, ed. Rich Wiles, (London, 2013), 11.

²⁹ Barghouti, *BDS*, 56.

administration and state-led ‘development’, backed by the international financial institutions, which created vested interests in the status quo and further undermined political resistance. The Authority became ‘a kind of mafia’, dispensing monopolies, contracts, and special deals to build patronage networks.³⁰ These measures, including 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’.³¹ By 2002, the Authority employed around 140,000 people, making up to one million Palestinians indirectly dependent upon PNA patronage and thus unlikely to challenge its rule.³² Others formed numerous NGOs, dependent on foreign funding and constrained to pursue only technocratic agendas, thereby ‘mirroring [the loss of credibility] experienced by the political leadership’.³³ Thereby, as a leading BDS activist observes, many ‘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’.³⁴

By the early 2000s, then, the Palestinian resistance was in ruins. As Edward Said lamented, under the PNA’s

large, corrupt, bureaucratic and repressive apparatus... people are cowed into silence and apathy... [they] seem to have given up all hope and all will to resist the extraordinary disasters visited on them by their leadership, which cares not a whit for anything except its own survival... [it] has simply abandoned them... We are an unmobilised people. We are unled. We are unmotivated... It is as if we have been anaesthetised as a people, unable to move, unable to act.³⁵

The situation worsened after Said’s death, with the Fatah-Hamas split. One former PLO official observed:

every institution or overarching structure that once united Palestinians has now crumbled and been swept away... no single body... [can] claim legiti-

³⁰ Said, *Peace Process*, 22.

³¹ Omar Barghouti, ‘Palestine’s South Africa Moment has Finally Arrived’, in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 217.

³² Said, *Peace Process*, 344.

³³ GPAAWC, ‘Towards a Global Movement’, 133–134.

³⁴ Mustafa Barghouti, ‘Freedom in Our Lifetime’, in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 10.

³⁵ Said, *Peace Process*, 18–19, 291.

mately to represent all Palestinians; no body [is] 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.³⁶

Accordingly, the contemporary BDS campaign is not intended to bolster a powerful, well-led and mobilised liberation struggle, as in 1980s South Africa, but rather to try to produce such a struggle. BDS activists state this explicitly. Said himself stumbled towards calling for an international BDS campaign as a means of ‘reactivat[ing] o[ur] will’ and ‘mobilis[ing] ourselves and our friends’.³⁷ Others state that the BDS Call was needed merely to ‘affirm that our national liberation movement is still alive’ and to ‘revive our culture of collective activism’.³⁸ Activists deliberately adopted very minimalist goals as a ‘basis... to campaign upon and a means to limit sectarianism’ for ‘organisations unable to present a stronger platform’, hoping to ‘recreate the sense of unity and purpose’ lost since the 1980s.³⁹ BDS would, it was hoped, serve as a ‘political catalyst and moral anchor for a strengthened, reinvigorated international social movement’.⁴⁰

Understandable and necessary as these goals are, BDS are unlikely to help achieve them. Despite deliberately appealing to the lowest common denominator, the BDS Call still does not command universal support. It specifies three demands: (1) an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the dismantling of the West Bank Barrier, (2) recognition of the rights of Arab citizens of Israel to full equality, and (3) respect for Palestinian refugees’ right to return. Beyond this, unlike the ANC’s detailed Freedom Charter, the movement eschews substantive goals and programmes. As one leading figure notes: ‘individual BDS activists and advocates may support diverse political solutions’, so the ‘movement... does not adopt any specific political formula’.⁴¹ The BDS Call thus expresses rather than surmounts Palestinians’ disorganisation and division, compelling the avoidance of substantive political goals. Although one might argue that this is merely a starting point to rebuild consensus, in practice, even this minimalist platform has not unified Palestinians.

³⁶ Karma Nabulsi, ‘Lament for the Revolution,’ *London Review of Books*, vol. 32, no. 20, (2010), 34–35.

³⁷ Said, *Peace Process*, 194–195.

³⁸ Barghouthi, “Freedom in Our Lifetime”, 6.

³⁹ GPAAWC, “Towards a Global Movement”, 159, 162.

⁴⁰ Barghouti, *BDS*, 193.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 51–52, 218.

Several NGOs opposed BDS as a ‘blow to the P[N]A and a subversion of the strategic direction of the Palestinian national movement’.⁴² The comprador Palestinian business elite opposes BDS,⁴³ as did the PNA for five years, before timidly endorsing only a minimal boycott of products from illegal Israeli settlements.⁴⁴ Thus, BDS seems not to be facilitating political reunification.

Nor is it clear how BDS can revive collective activism. Some BDS advocates apparently recognise that ‘the “South African treatment” [involves] global boycotts from outside supporting mass struggle inside’.⁴⁵ Yet they do not explain how this mass struggle is to be produced. BDS did *not* create this struggle in South Africa; ANC leaders explicitly denied that sanctions were required to spur the masses into action, insisting they would only supplement an already-mobilised mass movement. Key to this was the emergence of a well-organised black working class, whose labour was essential to South African capitalism, and of Charterist civic organisations through decades of grassroots organising. Contemporary conditions in Israel/Palestine are markedly different. The Palestinian working class is poorly organised and led and entirely lacks a strategic position in the Israeli economy. Although Israeli capitalism became dependent on Palestinian labour after 1967, following the First Intifada (1987), Israeli businesses deliberately reduced their Palestinian workforces, turning instead to migrant workers and new Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet bloc. Accordingly, economic dependency has been reversed: Palestinians now rely on Israeli firms to provide them with livelihoods,⁴⁶ even being compelled to help build illegal Israeli settlements.⁴⁷ As for civic organisations, while the BDS Call may provide a platform for some collaboration, unlike UDF groups, many NGOs are beholden to foreign donors and the PNA, constraining their political freedom. It is unclear how BDS can transform this structural constraint.

Moreover, BDS are generally better at creating division than unity. Notwithstanding the simplistic myths peddled about South Africa by BDS campaigners, sanctions were extremely divisive there, being opposed by

⁴² Noura Erakat, ‘BDS in the USA, 2001–2010’, in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 88.

⁴³ GPAAWC, “Towards a Global Movement”, 135.

⁴⁴ Barghouti, *BDS*, 56–57; Erakat, “BDS”, 89.

⁴⁵ Barghouti, *BDS*, 64.

⁴⁶ GPAAWC, “Towards a Global Movement”, 119, 123–124, 132.

⁴⁷ Jihan Abdalla, “A Palestinian Contradiction: Working in Israeli Settlements,” *Al-Monitor*, February 18, 2014.

the anti-apartheid white opposition party, some non-white unions, and non-ANC black leaders like the Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who all argued that they harmed non-whites and provoked white intransigence. It took active political mobilisation to win the majority over to the ANC/UDF position, including a violent struggle against Buthelezi's Inkatha organisation. Similarly, in the 1990s, Iraqi opposition groups initially rallied around sanctions, but as soon as sanctions began to bite, they caused fatal divisions.⁴⁸ In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's call for sanctions alienated middle class urbanites, unemployed workers, other opposition parties, and ethnic minority groups desperate for economic development.⁴⁹

Given the Palestinian opposition's parlous state, if an analogy must be drawn to South Africa it should be to the 1960s, not the 1980s. In 1960, rising social unrest was quashed by the Sharpeville massacre, and the ANC was banned and its leaders jailed or exiled. Serious mass resistance did not resurface until 1976, when it was again suppressed by force. Sanctions, imposed after each crackdown, did not 'bite' until *sustained* mass unrest re-emerged in the mid-1980s, alongside a profound economic crisis. Palestine remains remote from this scenario.

Contradictions and Incoherence in Goals and Tactics

Reflecting the overall lack of political direction, the BDS campaign exhibits significant confusion over its goals and methods.

Disagreement over the *goals* of BDS is fundamental. As noted, BDS campaigners cannot specify even the bare outlines of a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, for example, while Barghouti claims that most BDS advocates support a two-state solution,⁵⁰ Erakat suggests that the BDS Call is 'an implicit endorsement of the one-state solution'⁵¹—possibly because only this seems compatible with the right of return for all Palestinian refugees. Without a collective political vision, it is difficult to build a substantive consensus, or to make or measure progress towards its realisation.

Accordingly, there is also considerable confusion over the mechanisms by which BDS are meant to contribute to Palestinians' struggle. Writing on

⁴⁸ Jones, *Societies Under Siege*, ch.4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ch.3.

⁵⁰ Barghouti, *BDS*, 51–52.

⁵¹ Erakat, "BDS", 89.

South Africa, Crawford and Klotz suggest four basic mechanisms by which sanctions might ‘work’:

1. ‘Compellance’: BDS increases the cost of objectionable policies over their benefits, causing targets to change course.
2. ‘Normative communication’: BDS signals moral condemnation, ‘persuading’ targets to change their policies.
3. ‘Resource denial’: BDS denies the target the resources required to sustain its objectionable policies.
4. ‘Political fracture’: BDS stimulates a domestic legitimacy crisis, leading to a change of government and policy.⁵²

As noted, the ANC saw sanctions working primarily through ‘political fracture’. The ‘resource denial’ and ‘compellance’ mechanisms were only *co-constituted by* ‘political fracture’, since the costs of maintaining apartheid were affordable until mass unrest created new demands on state finances; consequently, these mechanisms did not work independently of mass mobilisation. The ANC had little faith in ‘normative communication’, rightly believing that oppressive regimes cannot be ‘persuaded’ to relinquish power.

Unlike the ANC, however, Palestinian BDS campaigners lack a coherent analysis of social power relations in Israel and a strategy for shifting these in which BDS is situated. Instead, they grasp at diverse, contradictory possibilities. Many propose that BDS can help in ‘raising awareness’ of Palestinians’ plight, harming Israel’s ‘image’ and diminishing its legitimacy—that is, ‘normative communication’.⁵³ Exactly how this will generate political change, however, is never specified. As Falk observes, ‘winning the “legitimacy war” may not be enough. It has not... [been for] the people of Tibet or Chechnya’.⁵⁴ 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

⁵²Neta C. Crawford and Audie Klotz, ‘How Sanctions Work: A Framework for Analysis’, in: *How Sanctions Work: Lessons from South Africa*, eds. *idem*, (London, 1999).

⁵³Erakat, “BDS”, 95; Barghouti, *BDS*, 15–16; Global Exchange, *Divesting from Israel: A Handbook* (San Francisco, 2003), 6; GPAAWC, “Towards a Global Movement”, 4–5, 62.

⁵⁴Richard Falk, ‘International Law, Apartheid and Israeli Responses to BDS’, in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 97.

Palestinian homeland'.⁵⁵ To make strategic sense, one must specify a plausible causal sequence whereby delegitimising Israeli behaviour through BDS produces *some other change* which, *in turn*, leads to concrete political transformation. For example, the goal could be, as with early South African boycotts, to build Western public support for terminating US aid or more meaningful sanctions that would materially diminish Israel's repressive capabilities, or foster domestic political realignments.⁵⁶ On this view, the initial target of 'normative communication' is not actually Israel, but rather Western publics and governments, with a view to enabling later sanctions that would be aimed at Israel, to produce 'resource denial' or 'political fracture'.

However, not only is this two-stage strategy not articulated, but other activists openly reject the idea of an intermediate step, insisting that BDS will directly create change in Israel/ Palestine. Furthermore, this group is divided over how this might work. Some favour 'normative communication', suggesting that BDS 'relies on persuasion', seeks to 'convince Israel of its moral degradation and ethical isolation', and promotes 're-education in Israel'.⁵⁷ More common, however, is an ANC-esque perspective that 'the basic logic of BDS is... pressure – not diplomacy, persuasion, or dialogue'.⁵⁸ Yet exactly how this 'pressure' can generate change is, again, not clearly specified.

Some imply a 'compellance' logic, suggesting that BDS should 'raise the cost of the occupation'.⁵⁹ The problem with 'compellance', however, is that sanctioned governments are frequently willing to pay handsomely to pursue cherished political ends—over US\$ 50bn in South Africa, for instance. The Israeli occupation's cost is already increasing without sanctions: after yielding net profits from 1967 to 1987, it now costs an estimated US\$ 9bn yearly, of which military costs (US\$ 6bn) are rising by 7

⁵⁵ Chamberlin, *Global Offensive*, 262.

⁵⁶ See US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation (USCEIO), "Divest Now! A Handbook for Student Disinvestment Campaigns," September 16, 2010, 9, <http://www.bdsmovement.net/2009/divest-now-handbook-5144>; GPAWWC, "Towards a Global Movement", 54–55; Erakat, "BDS", 96.

⁵⁷ Falk, "International Law", 88; Banks, cited in Barghouti, *BDS*, 212; Ilan Pappé, 'Colonialism, the Peace Process and the Academic Boycott', in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 136.

⁵⁸ Lisa Taraki and Mark LeVine, 'Why Boycott Israel?', in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 165.

⁵⁹ Dalit Baum and Merav Amir, 'Economic Activism Against the Occupation: Working From Within', in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 41; see also Barghouti, *BDS*, 18, 25, 207.

per cent annually.⁶⁰ Yet, there is no prospect of the occupation ending. The key challenge, then, is not simply to raise Israel's costs, but to create conditions where Israel can no longer absorb rising costs. In South Africa, this took sustained mass mobilisation. In Palestine, there is no prospect of this.

Other activists suggest a 'resource denial' logic, similar to the second part of the two-step strategy suggested above. Disinvestment, it is suggested, can 'cut-off the funding used to sustain the occupation'; tourism boycotts can deny Israel 'vital investments and foreign currency'⁶¹; academic boycotts can weaken Israeli universities that supply 'the ideology and tools of occupation'⁶²; and an arms embargo would make Israel 'unable to continue its war crimes'.⁶³ Whether 'resource denial' makes strategic sense ultimately depends on the importance of these external flows in sustaining Israeli dominance. This is asserted by many BDS advocates, but never actually demonstrated.⁶⁴

Consider just the suggested arms embargo. Israel has received about US\$ 3bn of US aid annually since the 1980s, much of which finances arms imports. However, Israel has also developed a large domestic armaments industry, which exports around three-quarters of its output, yielding US\$ 6.5bn in 2016.⁶⁵ Because this industry probably relies heavily on international technical collaboration, components supplies, and so on, it would likely suffer if these links were severed. However, the South African experience shows that even embargoed states without an arms industry can develop one and produce sophisticated conventional, chemical, and even nuclear weapons. Sanctions never deprived South Africa's security forces of their coercive capacity; rather, sustained unrest made coercion an impractical means of maintaining long-term social order. Even if Israel's arms industry suffered relative decline under BDS, its existence and adaptive capacity makes it extremely unlikely that the Israeli state would be

⁶⁰ Shir Hever, 'BDS: Perspectives of an Israeli Economist', in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 115–116.

⁶¹ GPAWWC, "Towards a Global Movement", 70–73.

⁶² Nadia Ella, 'The Brain of the Monster', in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 53–55.

⁶³ GPAWWC, "Towards a Global Movement", 53–54.

⁶⁴ For example, Barghouti, *BDS*, 50, 209, 232; Taraki and LeVine, "Why Boycott Israel?", 169; GPAWWC, "Towards a Global Movement", 42, 52.

⁶⁵ Anna Ahronheim, "Israeli Military Exports Rise to \$6.5 Billion," *Jerusalem Post*, March 30, 2017.

starved of the equipment necessary to repress the Palestinians. And, again, without mass mobilisation, coercion will remain a viable option.

A final group of BDS activists invoke ‘political fracture’ logics. Barghouti envisages that under BDS pressure, initially Israel’s ‘colonial society bands together’ but later, this

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 system of oppression then becomes a matter of time... we’ve seen it all before in South Africa.⁶⁶

Others likewise suggest that BDS will ‘catalyse an anti-Zionist movement in Israeli society’, ‘create a critical mass of minority dissidents’ and ‘prompt the Israeli public to reconsider’.⁶⁷

There are two problems here. First, again reflecting the lack of clear strategic leadership, activists disagree over whether BDS actually targets Israeli society and, if so, how. As Said had earlier insisted,⁶⁸ Warschawski asserts that ‘the Palestinian national movement needs as many Israeli allies as possible... [consequently] BDS is addressed to the Israeli public’.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ Similarly, while Falk maintains that ‘Israeli participation is valued highly’⁷¹ and Pappé asserts ‘it is vital to keep in touch with the progressive and radical Jewish dissidents’ as a ‘bridge to the wider public in Israel’,⁷² Barghouti is openly suspicious of ‘soft Zionists’ and the ‘Zionist left’ hijacking BDS to ‘save Israel’ as an apartheid state.⁷³ Unsurprisingly, despite the BDS committee’s official invitation to

⁶⁶ Barghouti, *BDS*, 222–223.

⁶⁷ GPAWWC, “Towards a Global Movement”, 53; Greenstein, cited in Atallah Hanna, ‘Towards a Just and Lasting Peace: Kairos Palestine and the Lead of the Palestinian Church’, in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 103; USCEIO, “Divest Now!”, 10.

⁶⁸ Said, *Peace Process*, 284, 329, 296–297.

⁶⁹ Michael Warschawski, ‘Yes to BDS! An Answer to Uri Avnery’, in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 195–197.

⁷⁰ Taraki and LeVine, “Why Boycott Israel?”, 174, 170.

⁷¹ Falk, “International Law”, 87.

⁷² Pappé, “Colonialism”, 133.

⁷³ Barghouti, *BDS*, 32, 60.

‘conscientious Israelis to support [their] call’, even sympathetic Israelis perceive that ‘Palestinian society does not welcome Israeli solidarity anymore’.⁷⁴

A second problem concerns the simplistic South African analogy: it is simply inaccurate to suggest that BDS spurred a politically significant AAM among whites. When sanctioned, historically more liberal, English-speaking South Africans typically rallied around the incumbent government.⁷⁵ Afrikaners, meanwhile, expressed little guilt over their treatment of non-whites, even by the 1980s.⁷⁶ A late-1980s survey of Afrikaner elites found moderate to strong racism, hostility to majoritarian democracy, and fear of a ‘communist’ takeover.⁷⁷ Despite their growing sense of isolation, white elites overwhelmingly adopted a defiant attitude to BDS.⁷⁸ A 1989 poll found that, despite widespread falling living standards, only 24 per cent of whites favoured negotiations with the ANC and just 2 per cent a transfer of power to the black majority, while 59 per cent believed that those imposing sanctions were making ‘extreme’ demands and favoured making no concessions.⁷⁹ Rather than changing attitudes, popular responses to BDS were filtered through party affiliations, thereby confirming people’s pre-existing beliefs.⁸⁰ Insofar as attitudes changed, they hardened: the right-wing Conservative Party increased its share of the vote from 17 to 29 per cent from 1981 to 1987, displacing the anti-apartheid Progressive Federal Party as the official parliamentary opposition.⁸¹ Thus, there was no simple connection between BDS-induced economic pain and progressive changes in white opinion. As mentioned earlier, the really decisive shift

⁷⁴ Ra’anan Alexandrowicz and Rebecca Vilkomerson, ‘An Effective Way of Supporting the Struggle’, in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 205.

⁷⁵ L. Schlemmer, ‘External Pressures and Local Attitudes and Interests’, in: *International Pressures and Political Change in South Africa*, ed. F. McA. Clifford-Vaughan, (Cape Town, 1978).

⁷⁶ Robin Cohen, *Endgame in South Africa? The Changing Structures and Ideology of Apartheid* (London, 1986), 10–13.

⁷⁷ Kate Manzo and Pat McGowan, ‘Afrikaner Fears and the Politics of Despair: Understanding Change in South Africa,’ *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, (1992).

⁷⁸ Van Wyck, “State Elites.”

⁷⁹ Investor Responsibility Research Centre (IRRC), *The Impact of Sanctions on South Africa: Part II, Whites’ Political Attitudes* (Washington, DC, 1990), 11, 14, 17.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 12, 14.

⁸¹ Merle Lipton, “The Challenge of Sanctions,” Discussion Paper 1, Centre for the Study of the South African Economy and International Finance, London School of Economics, 1990, 38.

was in the orientation of large-scale capital—not the wider public. As the ANC had perceived, big business leaders exercised profound structural influence over the state, and they played a significant role in lobbying for change and preparing the wider population for a negotiated settlement.⁸²

From this perspective, targeting sanctions at particularly powerful social groups could be an important element of BDS strategy. However, reflecting its lack of coherent strategic vision, the Palestinian BDS National Committee has apparently undertaken no sustained analysis of the key forces and alliances underpinning the Israeli regime. The only individual who has apparently begun this vital analysis is the Israeli economist Shir Hever. He identifies large-scale conglomerates as the key linchpin of the Israeli state: their ‘taxes 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 ‘pressure... them to create positive change’, inflicting maximal damage on companies’ markets, investment flows, and stock prices, since only a ‘painful impact’ will force their hand.⁸³

However, because the BDS movement lacks a centralised leadership and strategy, individual activists are instead left to decide how they think BDS might work and, accordingly, who to target. Barghouti 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’.⁸⁴ ‘Your preferences’, one campaign tells activists, should dictate the choice of target.⁸⁵ A ‘narrow focus’, for example, on settlement products is ‘perfectly fine’.⁸⁶ But this may simply be false. If the movement adopts the two-stage strategy suggested earlier, then initially focusing on firms in the Occupied Territories which ‘epitomise the most oppressive aspects of the occupation’⁸⁷ may be sensible, insofar as no significant economic or political consequences within Israel are anticipated at this stage. However, if the intention is to immediately damage the Israeli economy, this focus is completely pointless. These firms are ‘marginal... [they] do not contribute substantially to the

⁸² Jones, *Societies Under Siege*, 81–90.

⁸³ Hever, “BDS”, 112–115.

⁸⁴ Barghouti, *BDS*, 61, 217.

⁸⁵ Global Exchange, *Divesting*, 7.

⁸⁶ Barghouti, *BDS*, 219.

⁸⁷ USCEIO, “Divest Now!”, 16.

settlements' economic sustainability',⁸⁸ they do not 'play the most significant role in shoring up Israel's occupation', and nor do they exercise significant political leverage.⁸⁹ Instead of adapting BDS to the context where activists are located, it would make far more sense to adapt them to the context in Israel/Palestine.

Means-Ends Confusion and Spurious 'Success' Claims

As some BDS activists recognise, '*BDS is not a goal in itself*. Rather, it is a means by which to pressure the Israeli government'.⁹⁰ Logically, therefore, success should be measured by the political effects BDS measures produce on the ground, and whether/how these advance the overall liberation strategy towards its final goal. However, because the campaign lacks both clear end goals and a strategy, this is impossible. Instead, the relationship between ends and means becomes muddled and spurious claims of 'success' are made despite no improvement in Palestinians' situation.

The US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, for instance, defines the *achievement of BDS measures* as the end goal, with BDS campaigns as the means to achieve them.⁹¹ Activists report 'success' and 'achievements' merely when the volume of boycotts and disinvestment increases.⁹² 'Success' is implicitly defined circularly: the 'immediate noteworthy outcomes' of one cultural boycott are further cultural boycotts.⁹³ This may make sense as part of the two-stage strategy hypothesised earlier, but even then we would still want to distinguish and evaluate: (1) the achievement of the initial boycott or disinvestment, (2) whether this generates political support for tougher sanctions, and then, for stage two, (3) the imposition of those sanctions, and (4) the consequential impact on the situation in Israel/Palestine. Given the extreme distance between (1) and (4), declar-

⁸⁸ Baum and Amir, "Economic Activism", 43.

⁸⁹ Hever, "BDS", 112.

⁹⁰ Hanna, "Towards a Just and Lasting Peace", 102.

⁹¹ "Divest Now!", 16.

⁹² For example, Hind Awwad, 'Six Years of BDS: Success!', in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 180–184; Rafeef Ziadah, 'Worker-to-Worker Solidarity: BDS in the Trade Union Movement', in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 180–184; Australians for Palestine, *BDS: Boycott, Disinvestment, Sanctions – A Global Campaign to End Israeli Apartheid* (Melbourne, 2010), 41–46.

⁹³ Omar Barghouti, 'The Cultural Boycott: Israel vs. South Africa', in: *The Case for Sanctions*, ed. Lim, 30.

ing ‘success!’ at (1) is obviously premature. While it may boost campaigners’ morale, it is nonetheless essential to maintain a clear means-end distinction, within an overall strategy, with clearly defined goals, to avoid hasty, romantic self-congratulation and to stimulate continual reflection on the efficacy of individual tactics.

This is doubly important because BDS has so far made no appreciable difference to Palestinians’ situation. Sourani 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’.⁹⁴ Economically, ‘BDS has not had a significant impact on companies’ outside of the Occupied Territories.’⁹⁵ Indeed, ‘the Israeli economy is stronger than ever’.⁹⁶ Politically, the Israeli left has been completely ‘marginalised’, with growing ‘public sympathy for police and army violence against protestors’.⁹⁷ Even among those directly targeted by BDS, like academics, ‘not much has changed’.⁹⁸ Peace talks, resumed in July 2013, collapsed in May 2014, with almost 70 per cent of Israelis backing their government’s decision to walk away.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

Comparing the Palestinian BDS movement to its chosen analogue, South Africa, reveals several interrelated shortcomings. Unlike the ANC, the BDS movement lacks political leadership, clearly defined political goals, a coherent economic and political analysis of Israel/Palestine, and a strategy for transforming that situation. Instead, Palestinians have grasped at BDS out of desperation, seeking to reincarnate a meaningful liberation movement. Yet BDS has not catalysed greater Palestinian unity, nor is it realistic to hope that external solidarity can rebuild the Palestinian resistance. Reflecting Palestine’s socio-political divisions, the BDS campaign exhibits strategic incoherence, generating muddled activist thinking and practices that are disconnected from the situation on the ground. The South African analogy distracts activists from confronting and surmounting these reali-

⁹⁴ Raji Sourani, ‘Why Palestinians Called for BDS’, in: *Generation Palestine*, ed. Wiles, 66.

⁹⁵ Hever, “BDS”, 119.

⁹⁶ GPAWWC, “Towards a Global Movement”, 137.

⁹⁷ Baum and Amir, “Economic Activism”, 39.

⁹⁸ Pappé, “Colonialism”, 134.

⁹⁹ Yifa Yaakov, “Most Israelis Support Peace Talks Freeze, Poll Shows,” *Times of Israel*, May 7, 2014.

ties, permitting the comforting but ultimately delusional fantasy that victory is just around the corner.

This analysis suggests several priorities. The most urgent task remains the rejuvenation of the Palestinian liberation movement. BDS can play little meaningful role until Palestinians' divisions, disarray, and demobilisation are overcome and the masses are re-engaged in a sustained struggle for their own liberation. Many activists clearly recognise this, but are misled—partly by misrepresentations of the South African case—into thinking that BDS can catalyse this renewal. Actually, South Africa shows that, at best, BDS can supplement an active struggle, not create one. Second, the BDS National Committee must exert more forceful leadership, defining clear goals and a plausible strategy for achieving them. The current disarray—mindlessly celebrated by some as 'horizontalism'—must be supplanted by clear analysis of Israel/Palestine and appropriate strategic planning. Sympathetic scholars can contribute by studying the mechanisms used to maintain Israeli oppression and identifying weak points where external pressure could induce change. However, Palestinian activists remain responsible for building these evaluations into an overall strategy and supporting tactics and winning mass support.

Finally, the South African analogy must be used appropriately. Its main force is moral, equating the regimes to demand an equivalent international response. However, the alleged moral similarities of two targets tell us absolutely nothing about their relative vulnerability to BDS. 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 produce divergent outcomes in different times and places. Invoking South Africa may help to reinspire the struggle for Palestinian freedom. However, as Marx warned, we must avoid 'parodying the old' or risk failing to confront present-day realities and priorities. The conditions that allowed South Africans to succeed do not exist in Israel/Palestine. They must be made anew.