



After Gaza: Europe Scrambling to End Its Complicity

By Omar Barghouti



The “S” part of “BDS” was always thought to be quite distant and, logically, the last component of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement’s work that would materialise, after a critical mass of grassroots boycotts and institutional divestments. In 2014, talk about sanctions against Israel’s regime of occupation and oppression became far less taboo, even in Europe and the United States.

While still deeply complicit in enabling Israel’s occupation and grave violations of international law, the European Union (EU) has taken a number of measures lately that may indicate a growing appetite for sanctions against Israel for its failure to progress towards a “peaceful settlement” with the Palestinian Authority.

The Israeli daily *Haaretz* published a leaked EU document that discusses possible sanctions against Israel and against European companies involved in the construction and infrastructure of illegal Israeli colonial settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. The document also calls for banning contact with Israeli settlers and public figures who reject the “two-state solution,” a measure that “could lead to a boycott of senior government ministers such as Naftali Bennett and Uri Ariel of Habayit Hayehudi, many Knesset members from Likud, and, even in extreme cases, President Reuven Rivlin.”

European diplomats explained the background of this talk of sanctions: “This is a sign that a great deal of anger and frustration exists in the member states. In recent months there were meetings of European



foreign ministers in which ministers, who are considered extremely close to Israel, spoke in the most critical way against the policies of Netanyahu’s government.”

Despite its denial, the US administration was rumoured to be considering targeted sanctions against Israel over its incessant construction of illegal colonies in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt).

Israel’s latest assault on Gaza, condemned as a “massacre” by Brazil’s president and even France’s foreign

minister, has exacerbated international public anger and has eaten further into Israel’s already thinning support in European public opinion, more specifically. A former British deputy prime minister and former French prime minister openly called for sanctions. The deputy chairman of Germany’s second largest party called for an arms embargo on Israel, along with Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.



On November 7, the EU voted as a bloc in support of several UN resolutions upholding the rights of the Palestine refugees as stipulated in UN resolution 194 and condemning, among other violations, Israel's settlements as an infringement of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

A spate of resolutions by European parliaments recognising the "State of Palestine" has been seen by Israel as a clear indicator of official Europe's frustration with Israel and wide discontent with its policies, in spite of the fact that this recognition falls well short of meeting the European states' obligation to uphold the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, as I have argued elsewhere.

Seeing, however, how swiftly the EU adopted harsh sanctions against Russia for alleged violations of international law in Ukraine that pale in comparison to what Amnesty has described as Israel's "war crimes" in Gaza and Jerusalem, one cannot but accuse Europe of sheer hypocrisy for still debating mild sanctions against Israel after decades of occupation, ethnic cleansing, and other serious human rights violations.

Far from reflecting a principled approach that consistently upholds human rights and international law, gradual European punitive measures against Israel mainly reflect the attrition of support for Israel among European publics and the growing impact of the global, Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement at the grassroots and civil society levels.

For instance, a recent call on the EU to suspend its Association Agreement with Israel, the main mechanism of collaboration between the two sides, was signed by more than 300 European political parties, leading trade unions, and prominent NGOs for the first time ever.

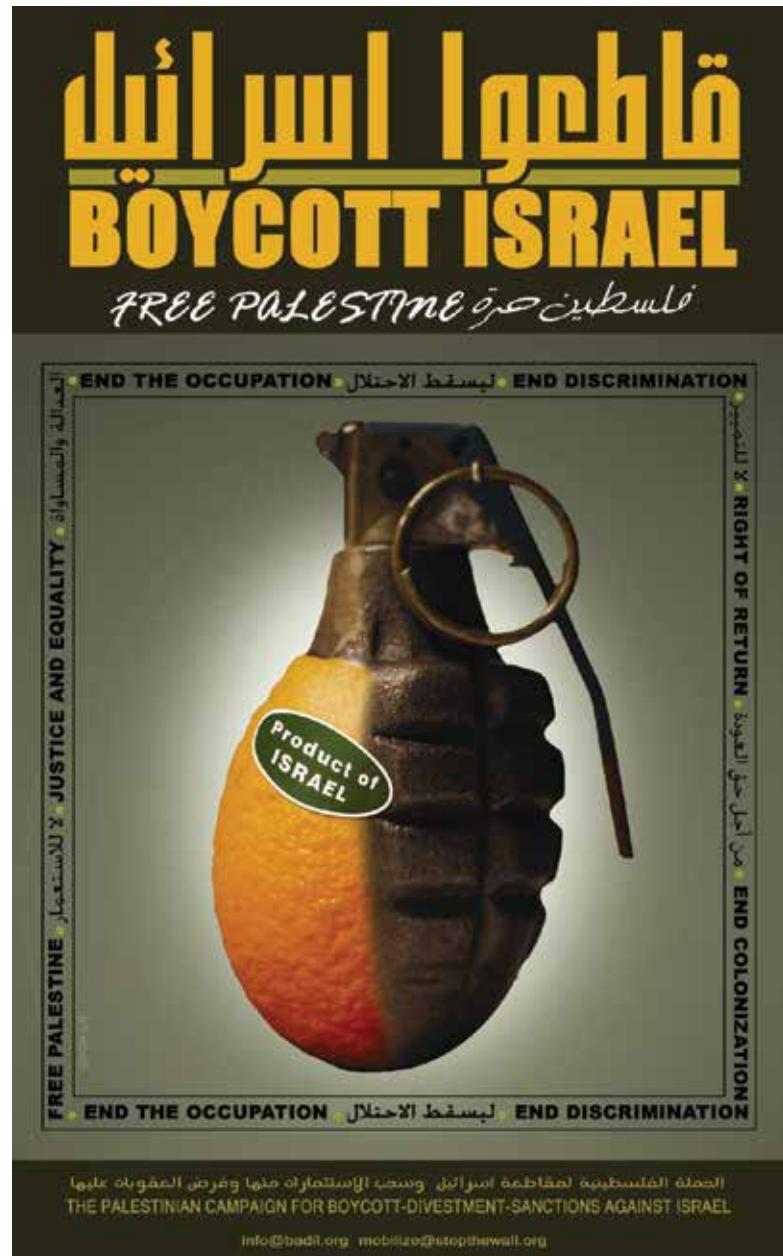
Even before Gaza, a 2014 BBC poll showed Israel competing with North Korea as the third- or fourth-worst-perceived country in the world in the opinion of a two-thirds majority across Europe.

Much of Israel's near pariah status among Europeans can be attributed to increased awareness of Israel's crimes against the Palestinians, its political shift to the fanatic right, and effective BDS campaigning.

Begin in 2005 by the largest coalition of political parties, trade union federations, and mass organisations in Palestinian society, BDS calls for ending Israel's 1967 occupation, ending its institutionalised racial discrimination, which fits the UN definition of apartheid, and upholding the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the homes and lands from which they were uprooted and dispossessed in 1948.

BDS was already perceived by Israel as a "strategic threat" well before the movement's substantial growth in light of Israel's latest intensification of its oppression against Palestinians. As a result of the steep human toll of Israel's assault on Gaza and its unprecedented colonisation of the occupied West Bank, especially in and around East Jerusalem, BDS has witnessed an exceptional streak of qualitative successes.

Israel's international isolation, which a White House official warned may become a "tsunami" if Israel failed to end its "occupations," is predicted to escalate. With Secretary of State John Kerry's mediation efforts spectacularly failing in the face of Israeli intransigence, a fresh Palestinian near-consensus has



BDS poster.

emerged seeking to achieve basic Palestinian rights outside the framework of endless negotiations begun in Oslo two decades ago.

Indeed, Palestinians are finding widespread international support,

including at the grassroots level in the United States and Europe, to pressure Israel economically, academically, and otherwise to abide by international law and end its subjugation of Palestinians. BDS has also started taking root in the



BDS poster.

Arab world. Kuwait was the first member of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to comply with the organisation's decision, taken at the height of the Israeli assault on Gaza in August, to "impose political and economic sanctions on Israel, and boycott the corporations that operate in the colonial settlements built on occupied Palestinian territory." The Kuwaiti ministry of trade and industry announced that it would no longer deal with 50 international companies and institutions that operate in settlements, a precedent-setting measure that is likely to have considerable repercussions on the viability of corporate involvement in settlements.

Five Latin American governments imposed various forms of diplomatic and trade sanctions, while the Bolivian president, Evo Morales, joined tens of leading Latin intellectuals and public figures in endorsing the boycott of Israel. The ruling Alliance of South Africa also explicitly adopted BDS.

Major European pension funds and banks have severed links with or withdrawn

investments from Israeli companies and banks involved in the occupation.

SodaStream, an Israeli drinks manufacturer that produces in a settlement in the oPt, has finally decided to shut down its settlement factory after BDS pressure, along with other economic factors, led to a sharp decline in its stock price. In 2014, the George Soros Fund Management divested all its stock in SodaStream.

Corporations that are complicit in the Israeli occupation and denial of Palestinian rights started to feel the BDS heat in 2014. In the last few months alone, the Presbyterian Church USA, one of the most important Protestant churches there, divested from three US companies involved in the Israeli occupation – Caterpillar, HP, and Motorola Solutions; the Gates Foundation divested its entire stake (more than \$180 million) in the world's largest security company, G4S, after an intense BDS campaign, while the pension fund of the United Methodist Church, the largest mainline Protestant church in the United States, decided to sell off all its G4S stock. G4S is experiencing major symbolic defeats due to BDS activism in Norway, South Africa, the European Parliament, several British universities, and elsewhere as a result of its involvement in Israeli prisons, where Palestinian prisoners, including children, are tortured, and in several projects that violate international law.

Israel's crimes in Gaza and the fact that its offensive won the support of 95 percent of Jewish Israelis have further eroded its support among

younger liberal and progressive Jews worldwide. A recent poll by J Street, a largely stagnant Israel lobby group in the United States, revealed that 15 percent of Jewish Americans support BDS against Israel. It also became considerably more tolerable for one-time Zionist thinkers to distinguish Israel from Judaism or to describe Zionism as a "xenophobic and exclusionary" ideology that is founded on "an untruth, on a myth, that Palestine was a country without a people," as the former leading Israel lobbyist, Henry Siegman, puts it.

Max Blumenthal, a well-read Jewish American journalist, went as far as creating a #JSIL, standing for "Jewish State in the Levant."

In a first, 327 Jewish Holocaust survivors and descendants published a half-page ad in the New York Times under the slogan, "Never Again for Anyone!" calling for "the full economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel."

A call for a military embargo on Israel launched by six Nobel laureates and dozens of celebrities has been signed by tens of thousands. Amnesty International has built on its call for a military embargo on Israel by urging the US government to block a shipment of fuel destined for use by the Israeli military. Oxfam International has also issued a call for an end to arms sales to Israel.

Israel's supporters in Hollywood reacted furiously when Oscar winners Penelope Cruz, Javier Bardem, and Pedro Almodovar joined almost 100 other artists in Spain in severely condemning Israel's assault on Gaza, with some producers "blacklisting" Cruz and Bardem, further indicating the rise of a new McCarthyism that uses unconditional support for Israel as

the ultimate test of loyalty.

More recently, Hollywood star Viggo Mortensen condemned Israel's "state terrorism."

Heeding calls by the BDS movement to block Israeli ship operations at ports, dockworkers and community activists in Oakland, California, succeeded in preventing an Israeli ship from offloading for several consecutive days.

Particularly alarming to Israel is the fact that the boycott this time went well beyond Europe, reaching India, Turkey, South Africa, and even the captive economy of the occupied Palestinian territory. For the first time in decades, Palestinian consumers, businesses, and a number of municipalities joined a flood of effective popular boycotts against Israeli goods, despite the practical challenges posed by the occupation.

The uninterrupted rapid growth of BDS in mainstream circles over the last two years has caused an acute sense of urgency in Israel to up the ante of its efforts to crush the nonviolent human rights movement.

The growth of the BDS movement is starting to turn the tide against Israel's regime of occupation, settler-colonialism, and apartheid, even among decision makers.

Israel may soon be facing its South Africa moment.

Omar Barghouti is a Palestinian human rights activist and co-founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian Rights.

Due to space limitations, the 71 footnotes from this article may only be found in the online edition of This Week in Palestine (<http://thisweekinpalestine.com>).

* An earlier version of this article was published on Middle East Eye.