

BDS and AAM: More of the Same?

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One of the main sources of inspiration repeatedly cited by the BDS movement is the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), which worked to abolish South African apartheid.¹ This article draws a comparative analysis between BDS and AAM in light of the rationale that the former is basing its attempt to achieve its goals on the success of the latter. The article begins by relating to the international arena, which provides the backdrop for the activities of both movements. This is followed by a description of the South African case study and the AAM operational infrastructure, and focuses on the similarities and the differences between the two movements. The concluding section emphasizes the central challenge to BDS as highlighted by the comparison to AAM and the danger that this movement currently presents to the State of Israel.

Diplomacy in the Changing International Arena

In 1918 President Wilson set the foundations for a new type of diplomacy in his fourteen-point speech by stating that diplomacy will always proceed openly and in public. Today, almost a century later, information and communication technology (ICT) and social media enable networks of non-state political actors to venture into territory once reserved solely for diplomats. Individuals and groups the world over are now able to organize across borders, relay their messages worldwide, create virtual communities to counter government efforts, and take their cases to the international court of public opinion.²

One of the means at their disposal is “naming and shaming,” i.e., reporting on human rights violations and those responsible for them in the context of conflicts, in the hope that this publicity will restrain them and perhaps push them into finding a solution.³ This practice is aided by the abovementioned ICT-facilitated networked context, and is indicative of a specific form of civil society (soft) power exercised in the international arena,⁴ as opposed to military hard power.

In addition to technological progress, a central driving force behind civil power is the changing of global norms. While killing power remains an advantage in certain wars against certain adversaries, it can be a serious disadvantage in other wars against other adversaries.⁵ Apart from the moral issues surrounding war, adversaries who employ violence have become more susceptible to normative and legal repercussions that may stain their international image through international organs and mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2005.

Contemporary civil society movements working globally against states can thus be characterized by two trends: significant reinforcement of civil power due to changes in diplomacy and progress in ICT; and increasing legitimization of the intervention of international players in cases of perceived severe human rights violations within the sovereign territory of a state. This is the environment in which BDS activists function today.

AAM operated in an entirely different context. It was established in 1959, strengthened significantly in the 1980s, and culminated in 1994 with the first multiracial democratic elections in South Africa. A central feature of the international arena during the years of AAM’s struggle was its bipolar nature, with the United States and the Soviet Union, the world’s two dominant powers, embroiled in the Cold War. In comparison to the current world order in which the BDS movement operates, which is characterized by wide international involvement in local conflicts, AAM worked in a far less welcoming environment. During the Cold War the international arena was shaped by strategic alliances that were not too concerned with information and human rights violations within the territory of sovereign states. Furthermore, the absence of ICT and mobile phones limited the ability of activists to “name and shame,” to reach out to mass audiences, to assemble across networked contexts, and to distribute provocative materials with the same ease, speed, and efficiency as today.

AAM and Apartheid South Africa

Apartheid in South Africa was an institutionalized system of racism whereby the white minority, de jure and de facto, oppressed a black majority through legal mechanisms that assigned racial groups to different residential and business areas, regulated the acquisition of land, and required all residents to be classified and registered according to their racial characteristics.

In the 1960s, based on South Africa's apartheid policy, the Soviet Union, East European countries, and other African states cut economic ties with it. The West, however, under the leadership of the United States, operated under the paradigm that American interests were best served by supporting or tolerating white minority rule in South Africa.⁶ In the face of increasing American civil action against US relations with South Africa, America adopted a policy of "constructive engagement" toward South Africa, namely, attempting to influence the white government's policy toward the blacks by engaging in quiet diplomacy rather than general sanctions. In 1985, backed by civil society actions against the apartheid regime, a bipartisan concession on partial sanctions was reached in open opposition to the Reagan administration, and in 1986 Republicans joined Democrats to override President Reagan's veto. This enabled the passing of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAA), which marked a dramatic shift in American policy and included divestment from and sanctions on South Africa.

After the passing of the CAAA, other countries, including Britain, aligned with the American policy, and an international sanctions regime, monitored by the UN, was imposed on South Africa.⁷ Less than ten years later, in 1994, South Africa held its first multiracial democratic elections, and the government shifted to a black majority. International sanctions were subsequently dropped, and South Africa was once again welcomed by the international community.

AAM and BDS: A Comparative View

In terms of the international, political, and geographical contexts, both Israel and South Africa, i.e., the target states of BDS and AAM, respectively, aspire to be affiliated with the world's liberal international community embodied by the West, and both states perceive themselves to be different and more progressive than other states in their natural, regional surrounding. Simultaneously, Israel and apartheid South Africa's conduct is/was incongruous with the international community's norms and expectations. As such, both

states can be seen as attractive targets for activists striving to bring about a change through “naming and shaming” or other means designed to tarnish states’ images and lead ultimately to their exclusion from the very international community to which importance is related.

In terms of infrastructure and methodology, BDS can be said to have been inspired by and replicated the following six AAM trademark characteristics:

- a. AAM worked to boycott South Africa internationally in many fields, including trade and industry, culture, and sports. BDS activists aspire likewise to boycott Israel in three central realms: academia, the economy, and culture (including sports, as seen in the attempt to oust Israel from FIFA in May 2015).
- b. AAM reached out to people who had never been involved in a formal political organization through the use of the concept of solidarity as a response to an essentially moral issue.⁸ The BDS call to action states that the movement is shaped “in the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency and resistance to injustice and oppression.”⁹ One illustration of this is the name chosen for the movement’s campaign during the summer of 2014: “Standing in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Gaza.”¹⁰
- c. AAM constructed transnational networks with the participation of people from more than 100 countries.¹¹ BDS too works in a global network; the movement’s initial call to boycott Israel was translated into seven languages and officially endorsed by pro-Palestinian civil society organizations not only from the Palestinian territories and local Arab states (such as Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan) but also internationally (by organizations active in America, Canada, Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Sweden).¹²
- d. AAM was transnational, and activists matched activities and narratives to local contexts of operation.¹³ This is also characteristic of the BDS movement, whose campaigns are often designed to integrate with their local national context. An example of this is the South African BDS campaign, which developed its own website and logo of the South African flag superimposed on the global BDS logo.
- e. AAM activists built coalitions with like-minded organizations such as trade unions, church organizations, local councils, and universities.¹⁴ A look at the signatories of the initial BDS call reveals that it too was endorsed both by large constituencies such as trade unions and associations and by smaller sectorial bodies such as women’s rights groups and professional

associations (from teachers through farmers to dentists)¹⁵ with which the movement cooperates.

- f. AAM launched media-oriented campaigns corresponding to the broadcast media's growing importance during that era.¹⁶ This can be compared to the BDS movement's employment of social media and ICT-related infrastructure in its campaigns. In fact, "media outreach ...based on a professional media strategy" is a central activity of the Palestinian BDS National Committee, the coordinating body for the global BDS campaign.¹⁷

Despite these striking similarities between the two movements on tactical and operational matters, there are three significant strategic differences between them. First, AAM activists framed the discourse of liberation primarily in inclusive terms, seeking to liberate the whole country from the system of racial oppression and not only the oppressed black population.¹⁸ The leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) professed an alternative concept of non-racialism and adopted the inclusive narrative of South Africa as a "rainbow nation," in which all races live together in peace and the whites are freed from the moral shackles of apartheid. Thus, the ANC's nationalism was a conscious attempt to broaden the definition of the nation,¹⁹ and these ideas bestowed on the ANC leadership an aura of pragmatism and reasonableness. Such consideration and awareness of the white population's fears and concerns stands in stark contrast to the goals and narrative adopted by the BDS movement,²⁰ whose three main goals, for example, amount to the annihilation of Israel in its current format as the homeland of the Jewish people. The language used by the movement's activists is awash with hate for Israel and Zionism and hovers between borderline and full-blown anti-Semitism.

Second, while AAM advocated a clear and well-articulated solution to the South African struggle for self-determination in line with the international community's vision – i.e., a new South Africa in which all citizens are equal before the law – BDS has so far failed to define a clear-cut political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, presenting neither a two-state nor a one-state paradigm. A thorough reading of the movement's three goals, as explained above, rules out the possibility that the movement is advocating a two-state solution. If the movement is in fact in favor of a one-state solution, the fact that such an alternative is not openly expressed would highlight two additional differences between BDS and AAM. First is the necessity to remain vague so as to attract mass support for a political alternative that is

not backed by the international community, the Arab world, or the official Palestinian leadership itself. Second is the clear absence of messaging that addresses the many complications of the one-state political approach. In this respect, the blatant absence of positive messaging advocating tolerance, acceptance of the other, and co-existence (as existed in the case of South Africa) becomes even more problematic.

Third, even though the black population of South Africa was subjected to brutal repression by the white regime, one of the admirable features of the ANC's struggle was their desire to hold the moral high ground and eschew terrorism. For two-thirds of its existence the ANC rejected violence and only adopted armed struggle as a secondary strategy to political mobilization at home and abroad.²¹ While it would be wrong to airbrush ANC leader Nelson Mandela as a pacifist who believed exclusively in non-violent civil disobedience, he seems to have towered above the provocations of the apartheid system and sought political reconciliation with the white regime, for example, in his invitation to the architects of apartheid to return to humanity.²² This approach is the very antithesis of the Palestinian struggle whose strategies include the use of terrorism against Israeli citizens.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Despite the structural and methodological similarities, BDS and AAM differ in both their goals and their strategies. These differences cast doubt on the ability of the BDS movement to enjoy the same success as AAM.

One of the most significant challenges for BDS is its poor moral grounding. The comparison to AAM substantiates this claim on three levels:

- a. Methodologically: the BDS narrative disregards Israel's narrative and security concerns and employs harsh and hateful anti-Zionist language, often peppered with anti-Semitic remarks.
- b. Strategically: there is a severe lack of clarity regarding the BDS movement's desired outcome. While this may be an asset when attracting supporters, it weakens the movement's moral grounding since it does not identify with the political solution endorsed by the official leaderships of the two sides themselves, the Arab world, or the international community (namely, two states for two peoples). This factor becomes more salient in light of the negative messaging employed by BDS, which is in direct contrast to the positive messaging that characterized AAM.

- c. Moral grounding: this relates not to the movement specifically but to the larger struggle that it supports. Although the struggle for an independent Palestinian state is perceived as justified, terrorism that at times accompanies this struggle is not regarded as a legitimate means. Such terrorism, however, is not always denounced by the official Palestinian leadership and is, in fact, supported by the Palestinian custom of naming streets, squares, and schools after the perpetrators of such acts.²³ This policy discredits BDS messaging, particularly against the current backdrop in which Europe appears to be dealing with growing terrorism.

All this, however, is not to say that the BDS movement will stop working towards fulfilling its goals or that Israel is immune to damage in the process. In the current digital age, the work of pro-Palestinian activists is facilitated by both the aforementioned global interventionist trends and the ability of dedicated activists to capture and spread heartbreaking images from the daily drama supplied by the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. While these dramatic images may pale in light of images from the region in general, the international community remains convinced of the connection between the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and growing extremism in the Middle East and between this latter situation and growing terrorism in Europe.²⁴ This conviction assists BDS attempts to malign Israel internationally.

Thus, although Israel has not to date been substantially harmed by BDS – certainly not even close to the extent of the damage caused to South Africa by AAM – the Israeli leadership should not underestimate the power of civil society in the current international setting. As long as the alternative of an independent Palestinian state does not feature on the political horizon and there are energetic, dedicated BDS activists in the background, Israel loses diplomatic credit. If the passage of time is added to this equation, should other variables remain unchanged, Israel's international standing is likely to deteriorate – even if the BDS movement fails in its ultimate mission.

Notes

- 1 The BDS call, namely, the “Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS” published in 2005, specifically notes that it is “inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid,” BDS, July 9, 2005, <https://bdsmovement.net/call>.
- 2 Eytan Gilboa, “Diplomacy in the Media Age: Three Models of Uses and Effects,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 12, no. 2 (2001): 1-28; Kristina M. Plavsak, “Communicative Diplomacy for the 3rd Millennium,” *Journal of Political Marketing* 1, nos. 2-3 (2002): 109-22; Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev, and Tamir Sheafer, “Social Media

- and the Arab Spring: Politics Comes First,” *International Journal of Press/Politics* 18 (2013): 115.
- 3 Andrea Ruggeri and Brian Burgoon, “Human Rights ‘Naming & Shaming’ and Civil War Violence – Proceedings of the 12th Jan Tinbergen European Peace-Science Conference,” *PEPS* 18, no.3 (2012): 1-12.
 - 4 Debora Spini, “Civil Society and the Democratization of Global Public Space,” in *Civil Society and International Governance: The Role of Non-State Actors in Global and Regional Regulatory Frameworks*, eds. David Armstrong, Valeria Bello, Julie Gilson, and Debora Spini (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).
 - 5 Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “Unconventional Deterrence – How the Weak Deter the Strong,” in *Complex Deterrence: Strategy in the Global Age*, eds. T. V. Paul, Patrick M. Morgan, and James J. Wirtzl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 204-21.
 - 6 Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).
 - 7 Millard Arnold, “Engaging South Africa after Apartheid,” *Foreign Policy* 87 (1995):139; Klotz, *Norms in International Relations*.
 - 8 Christabel Gurney, “The 1970s: The Anti-Apartheid Movement’s Difficult Decade,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 471-87; Rob Skinner, “The Moral Foundations of British Anti-Apartheid Activism, 1946–1960,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 399-416; Hakan Thorn, “The Meaning(s) of Solidarity: Narratives of Anti-Apartheid Activism,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): 417-36.
 - 9 “Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS,” BDS, July 9, 2005 (sixth paragraph), <https://bdsmovement.net/call>.
 - 10 “Standing in Solidarity with Our Brothers and Sisters in Gaza,” BDS, July7, 2016, <https://bdsmovement.net/2016/standing-solidarity-brothers-sisters-gaza-14317>.
 - 11 Skinner, “The Moral Foundations of British Anti-Apartheid Activism.”
 - 12 <https://bdsmovement.net/call>.
 - 13 Skinner, “The Moral Foundations of British Anti-Apartheid Activism”; Thorn, “The Meaning(s) of Solidarity.”
 - 14 Gurney, “The 1970s.”
 - 15 “Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS.”
 - 16 Thorn, “The Meaning(s) of Solidarity.”
 - 17 Palestinian BDS National Committee, <https://bdsmovement.net/bnc>.
 - 18 Alan Emery and Donald Will, “Liberation Movements, Universal Citizenship and the Resolution of Ethno-National Conflict: ANC Non-Racialism and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict,” *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2014): 447-67; Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Randburg: Macdonald Purnell, 1994).
 - 19 Christopher C. Saunders, *Illustrated History of South Africa: The Real Story*, expanded, 3rd ed. (Cape Town: Reader’s Digest Association, 1994).

- 20 The BDS call urges various forms of boycott against Israel “until it meets its obligations under international law by”: 1. “Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall”; 2. “Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality”; and 3. “Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194,” <https://bdsmovement.net/bdsintro>. These goals are discussed elsewhere in this publication and are therefore not related to in detail in this article.
- 21 Emery and Will, “Liberation Movements.”
- 22 Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “From a ‘Terrorist’ to Global Icon: A Critical De-Colonial Ethical Tribute to Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela of South Africa,” *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 6 (2014): 905-21.
- 23 Statement by the Quartet Principals on the Release of the Quartet Report, July 1, 2016, p. 4.
- 24 This is apparent from the protocols of UN Security Council discussions: “The attacks [in France] have highlighted the extent to which...more than ever, peace and stability in the Middle East are inseparable from that of Europe” (French Ambassador to the UN, UNSC 7360th meeting, January 15, 2015, p. 31); “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is a basic factor of instability in the entire Middle East” (Russian Ambassador to the UN, UNSC 7430th meeting, April 21, 2015, p. 23).