

Confronting BDS: The Limits of Marketing

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The ultimate purpose of the Palestinian founders of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement is the destruction of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state. Disillusioned by the 100-year old Palestinian and Arab failure to prevent or reverse the creation of Israel by direct military means, the hard core of the BDS movement appear to believe, instead, that the most promising strategy to pursue their objective is indirect and non-violent: political delegitimization and economic subversion leading to isolation, demoralization, internal decay (including large-scale emigration), acceptance of the demands of BDS, including the so-called “right of return” for several million descendants of Palestinian Arab refugees, and eventual disintegration.

Aware that there is little chance of mobilizing decisive international support for the explicit denial of Israel’s rightful existence, BDS activists have instead focused on aspects of Israeli behavior that resonate more strongly in international political discourse: policies in or about the West Bank and Gaza, especially the use of land and other resources for Jewish civilian settlements that seem logically to contradict Israel’s rhetorical commitment to a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the principle of “two states for two peoples.”

By most reasonable standards of judgment, the BDS campaign strategy has been a signal failure.¹ Israel’s diplomatic relations have been sustained throughout the Western world, even throughout eight years of an American president widely believed to lack any real emotional sympathy for Israel and to detest its prime minister. In fact, relations with other major powers like

Russia, China, and India – whose approach to Israel for decades ranged from indifferent to hostile – have intensified by several orders of magnitude. And by most indicators – trade with Europe (almost unchanged in 2015 in euro terms but down in dollar terms because of a 16 percent drop in the euro’s value against the dollar), foreign direct investment (which reached an all-time high in 2015²), movement of persons – Israel’s economic interactions have also continued to intensify. Even some Sunni Muslim states, increasingly concerned more with the regional policies of Iran (that also threaten Israel) than with the Palestinian cause, seem prepared to search (covertly) for common ground. No less noteworthy is the fact that the counter-campaign against BDS has registered some notable successes, including legislation outlawing compliance with boycotts of Israel by a number of American states and Canadian provinces.

True, Israel does continue to incur international damage of various sorts. Some of this, like the ritualistic denunciations by United Nations organs and agencies, long predates the foundation of the BDS movement. Much, however, is an outgrowth of conscious BDS organizational efforts. These occasionally produce refusals of invitations to perform in Israel or cancellations of performances already scheduled by international concert artists (usually of the second rank). There are also periodic condemnatory declarations by labor organizations (especially by civil/public servants). A few union or church pension funds have sold off stocks of companies operating in the West Bank under Israeli auspices or otherwise “assisting in the occupation,” and there have been a few minor cases of consumer boycotts of exports of the products of such companies (though hardly any permanent severing of economic ties by major Western retailers). The most highly publicized and widespread result of BDS activity has been in Western academia, where some senior scholars have refused contact with Israel or Israelis, some student associations have voted to urge their universities’ investment committees to divest from Israel (votes invariably ignored and often condemned by senior university administrators), and some marginal professional associations and university departments, especially in the humanities and to a lesser extent in the social sciences, have declared a policy of boycotting their Israeli counterparts.

These effects have been embarrassing and uncomfortable enough to prompt an occasional debate on the consequences of BDS and even to produce a budgetary allocation (to the Ministry of Strategic Affairs) and

introduce restrictions on the entry into Israel of BDS advocates for the purpose of countering it. But they have hardly been painful enough to have an appreciable effect on the policy preferences of Israeli voters or the policy decisions of their elected representatives. There are several reasons for this. One is the inclination to dismiss the bona fides of the BDS movement because it only targets Israel while ignoring the behavior of dozens of other states with arguably much worse human rights records – that is, because of a blatant double standard that can easily be interpreted as the modern state-focused equivalent of traditional anti-Semitism. There is no doubt that authentic anti-Semites are deeply involved in BDS, and there is little that Israel can do to influence their beliefs. On their own, however, anti-Semites in Western society are not numerous or powerful enough to produce actions that can inflict intolerably painful costs on Israel.

That leads to a second explanation for the negligible effect thus far: the likelihood that the majority of those Israelis – academics and graduate students, journalists, and concert-goers – who do feel the brunt of whatever successes BDS enjoys are already skeptical about or critical of government policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians and the territories, whereas those who tolerate or support government policies are less discomforted by cultural and academic boycotts. After all, few in the religious-nationalist camp will be particularly distressed if groups like The Pixies refuse to perform in Israel, especially if their absence is overshadowed by appearances of the Rolling Stones, Elton John, or Aerosmith.

In these circumstances, it is fairly obvious why the government has chosen to counter the threat of BDS with *hasbara* (public information campaigns) but not with any fundamental revision of policy. The former only requires a modest budget allocation; the latter risks serious domestic political upheaval. But it is less obvious that a response based on *hasbara* alone will be sufficient to reverse the damage already caused by BDS or to prevent the damage from intensifying in the future.

True, a positive outcome cannot be categorically excluded. In his 2016 annual report, for example, the State Comptroller argued that a confused and inadequately coordinated and funded public information campaign had caused serious damage to Israel's fight against BDS. However, even if all the funding, personnel, and technical, managerial, and administrative resources needed to mount an effective campaign somehow become available, the

ability of marketing efforts to overcome consumer resistance to the Israeli government's "product" will be severely tested.

After all, even some of the greatest marketers of all time – economic giants like the Ford Motor Company and Coca-Cola – were ultimately unable to make a success of products like the Edsel and New Coke, judged by their target audiences (for whatever reasons) to be unacceptable. With the possible exception of Evangelical Christians, Israel's target audiences in the West judge its activities in the occupied territories – seemingly perpetual military control and especially continued support of civilian settlements – to be unacceptable. The general attitude, in its more moderate form, has been articulated by Hillary Clinton, a long-standing and committed supporter of Israel, who in 2014 told *CNN*: "The continuing settlements which have been denounced by successive American administrations on both sides of the aisle are clearly a terrible signal to send if at the same time you claim you're looking for a two-state solution."³

Defenders of settlements can muster a range of arguments to justify the record, ranging from historical rights and security considerations to the argument that a two-state solution is in any case impossible regardless of what Israel does or doesn't do because of intractable Palestinian rejectionism. It doesn't really matter whether their arguments are intrinsically correct or not. What matters politically is how widely and strongly settlements are opposed abroad and whether *hasbara* alone can reverse opposition to settlements, contain it, or even prevent its further spread.

The answer to the first question seems to be fairly obvious. Foreign hostility to settlements by public opinion (in the West) and by most governments (everywhere in the world – at least on a pro forma basis) is extremely widespread, even among people who in no way share the more extreme views or ultimate aspirations concerning Israel of the BDS hard core. Efforts by settlers and their advocates to deny this phenomenon rather than merely to downplay its intensity or significance inevitably fall flat. And attempts to dispel criticism by arguing after every new announcement of approval of construction plans that settlements are not the real obstacle to peace – whatever the intrinsic merits of the argument may be – have been singularly unsuccessful. Those who object to the occupation/settlements without grounding their position in some intrinsic hostility to Israel per se are not the hard core of the BDS movement, which consists of those hostile to Israel's very existence. They do, however, form the human reserve for the

BDS movement, the ones who can potentially be recruited to endorse some of its actions, to transform it from a marginal curiosity to a significant force, and to become unwitting promoters of BDS' more ambitious objectives.

The answer to the second question, however, is not quite so self-evident. Two points seem noteworthy, however. The first is that the ability of the BDS hard core to eliminate the conceptual distinction between Israel and the Israeli presence in the territories that works to its disadvantage – that is, to make Israel and the territories, especially the settlements, a seamless whole – is very much influenced by what Israeli governments and prominent Israeli individuals and social groupings themselves say and do. Many Israeli statements and actions seem designed to mute the territorial distinction while highlighting the ethnic distinction in the mind of the Israeli authorities. Examples include the financial encouragement given to settlers, the application of Israeli civilian law to Jewish residents of the territories, mischaracterizing the European labeling of products from the settlements and the refusal to apply to them EU-Israel free trade agreements as a boycott of Israel, and the election or appointment of settlers to cabinet positions and diplomatic postings. Given the inevitable publicity involved, the practical effect is to make it more difficult for many people abroad to separate their opposition to such statements and actions from their general support for or at least toleration of Israel *per se*. In other words, the more the settlers and their supporters in the Israeli body politic succeed in entrenching their message, the more they become functional allies in the BDS hard core strategy of using settlements and the territories as a lever to delegitimize and weaken Israel.

Other things being equal, a more sophisticated marketing campaign that properly contextualizes the issue of the occupation/settlements in the broader historical conflict between Jews and Arabs and/or brands Israel as something more (and more positive and appealing) than a single-issue issue might make some headway in reducing receptivity to the BDS message. The latter rationale explains why opponents of BDS expend no little effort on branding Israel as an essential hi-tech partner or – to mention an example from an entirely different sphere of life – as a haven of tolerance for gays and lesbians (an effort that BDS activists try to discount as “pink washing”).

However – and this is the second point – other things are unlikely to be equal. Instead, even if the realities of the situation in the arena (e.g., legal status of the territories, absence of large-scale military conflict) are unchanged, the passage of time is likely to intensify the challenge of confronting BDS.

That is simply a function of demographics in the West. The audiences in the West more receptive to the BDS message are those likely to become more influential (college students) and more numerous (Muslims) with the passage of time. For example, a recent Ipsos poll revealed that one-third of American college students believe that a boycott is a justifiable means of applying political pressure on Israel, far higher than the number among the general population; the equivalent number in Great Britain was 40 percent.⁴ Of course, many students are “deradicalized” after they graduate, and to the extent that that happens, it will mitigate any growth in receptivity to BDS messages as graduates socialized in the intellectual climate of universities in the last decade or two assume an increasingly prominent role in the media, the political class, and general public opinion. Similarly, it is possible that the growth of Muslim populations in Europe will slow if resistance to immigration increases (as seems to be happening as part of a general vitalization of the political right) and growth rates of Muslims already there level off. Such developments could counter what otherwise appears to be a growing challenge of warding off BDS threats in Western societies.

What is to be Done?

Better *hasbara* – the instinctive response of every Israeli government to every political/diplomatic challenge – is not something to be blithely dismissed. After all, if public diplomacy were not important, major global powers like the United States, China, and Russia, far less dependent than Israel on international goodwill, would not invest the huge sums of money they do in order to improve their international image. But in the case of BDS, it is surely incomplete. In fact, there may well not be a complete response in the sense of totally eliminating the problem. However, a more comprehensive response, in the form of policy changes, would undoubtedly have a greater impact than relying on public diplomacy alone.

On its own, foreign disapproval, whether private or governmental, does not necessarily warrant a substantial change in policy. It is only one factor in the overall diplomatic, military, economic, and – yes – domestic political cost-benefit calculus of policy choices and changes. Nor is it always the most critical one. And until now, the overall Israeli calculus has obviously not produced a clear policy reversal, even by governments not notably sympathetic to the cause of the settlers. But the cost of BDS, while clearly tolerable thus far, has also been growing, and there is little to indicate that

that the upward trend line will level off, much less decline, in the foreseeable future. At some point, therefore, the calculus may well change, and a response confined to *hasbara*, though it could delay the arrival of that point for some time, is unlikely to prevent it indefinitely.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Shlomo Ben Ami, "Israel Unbound," *Project Syndicate*, March 3, 2016, <http://project-syndicate.org/commentary/israel-foreign-policy-opportunities-by-shlomo-ben-ami-2016-03>.
- 2 "Israel Foreign Direct Investment 1995-2017," Trading Economics, <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/israel/foreign-direct-investment>.
- 3 "Fareed Zakaria GPS," *CNN*, July 27, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1407/27/fzgps.01.html>.
- 4 "Ipsos Survey: One Third of American Students Support Boycotting of Israel," *Jewish Press*, May 30, 2016, <http://www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/ipsos-survey-one-third-of-americans-support-boycotting-israel/2016/0>.