

Boycott for Peace; Divest for Justice; Sanctions for Liberty

BRICUP's response to the Board of Deputies policy statement 'A Better Way than Boycotts'

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The Board of Deputies of British Jews (BoD) have performed a valuable service in compiling the common mis-representations of the BDS campaign, along with a few original ones, in [a single glossy 50 page document](#). To respond to all the misrepresentations presented by the BoD would require a document at least as long which would tax the patience of the reader so we will only highlight some of the most egregious arguments here.

This analysis reviews some of the most serious problems with, and inaccuracies in, the report. It concludes with some observations on their mis-characterisation of the academic and cultural boycotts and how the greatest threats to academic freedom come from Israel's most vocal supporters.

The document starts from four axioms which are at best highly questionable and are, in our view demonstrably false.

- Firstly, that although the Israeli Government may have made mistakes, some serious, it has done nothing criminal or beyond the usual failures of democratic states.
- Secondly, all calls for BDS arise from malevolence at best and outright antisemitism at worst.
- Thirdly, there is no fundamental imbalance of power between Israelis and Palestinians and so an open and productive dialogue between equals can be straightforwardly fostered and will be effective.
- Fourthly, that a two state solution is desired by the Israeli government and is still a feasible outcome.

The document was prepared before the recent Israeli election campaign; it is not clear how discomfited the authors now are by Netanyahu's inflammatory statements; by Lieberman's even more racist than usual rants; or by Bennett's total rejection of any chance of the creation of a Palestinian state. It would be good to know whether they are merely embarrassed or whether they would wish to change these postulates, particularly the last.

The executive summary states, "Such a policy [settlement boycott] incorrectly places settlements as the key stumbling block, overlooking past Israeli territorial concessions for peace, ignoring terrorism and forgetting the obstruction of some Palestinian leaders." (p. 4). It then proceeds to argue that if only Palestinians would engage constructively in talks the settlements could be dismantled. However they produce no evidence that any existing or prospective Israeli leaders have any interest in, or intention of, evicting any illegal settlers.

Rather, the population of the settlements has [grown by 50% since 2010](#) and [settlement expansion remains a key Government policy](#).

They claim “Proponents of BDS advocate a tactic which fundamentally divides and discriminates between the two populations” (p. 8); a claim that fundamentally misplaces the locus of responsibility for division and discrimination. It was, rather, the basis of Israeli state policy in division and discrimination that was a principle trigger for the BDS campaign. The Document’s claim is the same as the complaint by US Jim Crow officials blaming ‘northern liberal troublemakers’ for dividing the population of the southern states between Blacks and Whites or South African white leaders claiming that the global anti-Apartheid movement caused discrimination where none existed.

BDS is based in a tradition of non-violent mass civil society opposition to injustice; a truth explicitly denied in the document “the BDS campaign is not rooted in liberal values and is counter-productive in the pursuit of peace” (p. 10).

Mis-describing Zionism

The BoD present Zionism simply as “Jewish self-determination” (p. 9) as though it has no territorial component and does not involve the displacement of anyone from their land. It bears no relation to the reality of Zionism as practiced by the Israelis and experienced by the Palestinians. Casting Zionism in this abstract form allows the BoD to identify opposition to Zionism with antisemitism – a recurrent theme of the document.

This confusion erupts on page 10 “It is important to emphasise that the Jewish connection to the land does not diminish Palestinian rights to self-determination based upon their own sense of national identity. Most Israeli and British Jews support a two-state solution, and therefore the creation of a Palestinian State, because supporting self-determination and nationhood for two peoples who have suffered statelessness are two sides of the same coin.” Such a formulation resolves the competing claims for the territory within pre 1967 Israel by pretending they do not exist; the land claims to remedy the Nakba are invisible; the refugees have been airbrushed. Nothing justifies the Holocaust but neither does the pain and terror of the Holocaust justify the Nakba as the document implies in statements like “Israel is a country that was born on the ashes of the Holocaust” (p.14).

Palestinian statelessness is the direct result of Zionist settler-colonialism. Jewish statelessness was not caused by the Palestinians. American and European Jews making [Aliyah](#), immigrating to Israel under ‘the Right of Return’, were already Jewish citizens of their home states

Who is making the sacrifices?

The document claims that “Israel has consistently demonstrated that it is willing and able to make painful sacrifices in the hope of achieving a lasting peace with its neighbours.” (p. 11) without revealing that every concession has been more than matched by later seizures. The withdrawal from the settlements in Gaza, themselves illegal, has been matched forty times over by the construction of new settlements on illegally confiscated land in East Jerusalem

and the West Bank. Return of the Sinai to Egypt has been followed by the displacement of the Bedouin communities of the Negev. Oslo concessions, mostly abrogated by Israel, were followed by the construction of the Apartheid Wall along a line that seized much West Bank land and aquifers. The release of 104 prisoners in 2013 was followed by the re-arrest of many of those freed and the arrest and detention, often without trial, of many others.

The partiality of the document is shown in statements like “consistent antisemitic incitement that occurs in Palestinian society notably schools.” (p. 13). The document ignores [a US Government funded](#) study that found no “dramatic differences in how Israeli and Palestinian textbooks portray the other.” Further, Professor Peled-Elhanan of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, author of a comprehensive study of Israeli school books observed, ["Arabs and Palestinians don't do much in Israeli school books except for lurking, attacking in all sorts of ways and multiplying."](#)

Who singles out Israel?

The BoD believes that Israel is singled out by the BDS movement. Many abusing countries are subject to regular criticism by our government and face sanctions when they outrage the British government, media and public opinion. Israel’s crimes go systematically unnoticed; they go unpunished by our Government even when public opinion, roused by such events as assaults on Gaza, forces them into mouthing outrage. The UK government rarely supports motions critical of Israel’s actions at the United Nations. The US Government has gone much further. It has methodically used its [UN Security Council veto to block motions critical of Israel](#), a favour it does not regularly offer other abusing states; vetoes include defending aggression against Gaza and the illegal Apartheid Wall.

Israel, far from the poorest country, is [the second largest recipient of US Government aid](#) (after Afghanistan): now over \$3bn a year and over \$120bn in total. Currently it receives over [\\$400 per head](#) compared with [\\$1.59 for Bangladesh](#).

This is the special treatment that singles out Israel; BDS is a reaction to this privileged status.

In 2005 Marinov in [a study of sanctions](#) reported “In the last decade, virtually nowhere could democratic rights and freedoms be suspended, human rights grossly abused, or a civil war break out without causing a group of states to react with economic sanctions”. The abrogation of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has not led to Sanctions. Civil society action for Boycott and Divestment as well as exerting direct pressure on Israel is also action on other Governments to end this anomaly and impose Sanctions on Israel. BDS is not singling out Israel for punitive action is seeking to end the strange, almost unique, protection of a serial offender against human rights and international law.

Most recently pressure from the BoD and others, including cabinet minister Eric Pickles, induced Southampton University to [cancel an academic conference](#) on the legitimacy of the Israeli state which was organised by their law department. The opponents of the conference claimed that discussing the legitimacy of Israel was antisemitic as it singled out Israel for examination in away no other state is questioned. They ignored that the legitimacy of divided

territories is often questioned. They ignored arguments about East Germany, South Vietnam and North Korea, to say nothing of China's constant interrogation of the status of Taiwan. Equally, the legitimacy of unified states is often problematised: the United Kingdom in the face of first Irish and more recently Scottish and Welsh claims; Spain in the light of Catalan and Basque demands; Yugoslavia.

Israel is labelled an apartheid state because it practices apartheid

In attempting to dispute Israel's characterisation as an Apartheid state the document proposes: "Israel is a country that prides itself on its democratic values enshrined for all of its citizens, as outlined in Israel's Declaration of Independence" (p. 17). It does not inform readers either of the differential funding of education, health and other social services of citizens depending upon their 'nationality' within pre 67 Israel. In Israel while all are Israeli citizens, nationality is differentiated; there is no Israeli nationality, citizens are 'Jewish' nationals, 'Arab' nationals, or Druze or Russian or one of many other categories.

[Uzzi Osman has commented](#) "The [Israeli Supreme] court's refusal to recognize the Israeli nation is derived from the correct assertion that a person cannot belong to two nations. Therefore, according to the court's logic, a Jew in Israel cannot be a member of the Israeli nation because they already belong to another nation, the Jewish nation." While this may make some sort of sense in the Israeli context many people worldwide have dual nationality.

This notion of a non-territorially defined Jewish nation, to whom ownership of Israel belongs even if they live in New York or London or Rome, defines Israel as a state that privileges one part of citizenry against others and, in itself, defines Israel as an apartheid state; a state that is, in [Oren Yiftachel's terminology](#), an [ethnocracy](#) with a [galaxy of discriminatory law](#). Israel describes itself as a state 'both Jewish and Democratic', we do not contest the first apartheid loaded half, but this makes democratic claims at best partial.

The issue is most acute in the Orwellian category of 'present absentee'. Palestinians who were driven out or fled during the Nakba lost all claims to their homes and land even if they managed to return to them shortly after, being described by Israeli law as continuing to be absent even when they are physically present and even if they managed to gain Israeli citizenship. Jews from abroad were allowed to take over the houses and land by virtue of their Jewishness. The success of a small minority of Israeli Palestinians in gaining significant public office does not detract from the systematic exclusion of the vast majority.

Misuse of allegations of antisemitism

Predictably and disappointingly a sparsely illustrated document includes a photo of a Jewish shop in Nazi Germany with 'Jude' and a Magen David painted on the window to falsely equate BDS, a non-violent citizen boycott, with a violent state-mandated one. The document does not include a photo of a Palestinian shop sealed by settlers in Shuhada Street in Hebron also emblazoned with a Magen David nor a nearby one decorated with the slogan "Arabs to the gas chambers".



The Board of Deputies explicitly tries to link the BDS movement to neo-Nazis. It uses the case of one individual with no standing in the movement who quotes a neo-Nazi website. (p. 25). This is a crass attempt to establish guilt by association, especially as many BDS activists are Jews and many are veterans of the Anti-Nazi league and other anti-racist campaigns. The activists of the BDS movement continue to oppose all forms of racism and challenge the rare hints of antisemitism they encounter. They wish the BoD were as vigilant in challenging the use of their materials in anti-muslim incidents and writings.

There is a long section detailing alleged abusive incidents, practically all of which are exaggerated and some of which are completely false. For instance they mention an incident of alleged antisemitism at St Andrew's University; the nature of the flawed investigation and the exaggerated claims made about the incident have been documented in a short film, [*A Tale of Two Sheriffs*](#).

Curiously, they do not list any of the many incidents where peaceful protestors have been abused or even assaulted by pro-Israel thugs or where pro-Palestine events have been aggressively invaded and disrupted. Zionist activists regularly come to pro-Palestine events, they are allowed to attend and ask questions which are answered seriously. Such courtesy is rarely afforded to supporters of Palestine, even Jewish supporters. They are regularly barred from events and should they gain entrance are ejected if they try to ask critical questions in a non-aggressive manner. The stewarding for such meetings, and the evictions, are frequently carried out by the Community Security Trust. CST is a Jewish charity which interprets whether incidents are antisemitic in order to provide data to the Home Office who then present their figures on the prevalence of antisemitism as impartial.

The document mis-represents the importance of Israeli products to Britain. For example, on page 31 it states: "Teva tablets (an Israeli company) is the largest supplier of medicines in the UK. One in six prescription packs in the UK is a Teva product. Moreover, with products varying from painkillers to essential life-saving cancer drugs, Teva is a vital company for the welfare of British patients. To boycott companies like Teva would have a devastating effect

on many families across the UK.” Teva is simply a producer of generic medicines in a highly competitive market and there are many substitutes for its products and many pharmacies have ceased using their products with no adverse effects on their patients.

Where does the call for BDS come from?

There is a missing section in the document: there is no account of where and when and by whom the BDS call was launched. The implication is that it was concocted in Europe or America. On page 14 it talks about “parties external to the conflict” and “no other country in the world is being singled out for such treatment by the BDS campaign”.

The call was launched by Palestinians in the light of the success of the ANC-led boycott campaign in weakening South African apartheid and assisting the internal resistance in bringing about regime change. The first call for a comprehensive economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel was [issued by Palestinians in August 2002](#), the following year Palestinian academics and intellectuals called for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions and in 2004 the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel ([PACBI](#)) was launched in Ramallah.

The following year the [Palestinian call for general boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel](#) was launched by the Boycott National Committee ([BNC](#)) a coalition of all the main civil society organisations and trade unions in Palestine.

There is no similar call by any other broadly representative constituency facing oppression and occupation; groups in other countries have called for other forms of action and support. There is only one global BDS campaign because no others have been called for.

BDS is legitimate mass non-violent civil society action against a massive injustice; all of the BoD’s special pleading cannot obscure that basic fact. We engage in it to lower the risk of the emergence of more violent forms of struggle.

When the BoD talk about “parties external to the conflict” (p.14) they do not seem to notice the activities of Jewish organisations and individuals supporting Israel, curiously they seem to believe themselves to be internal parties. They somehow also fail to notice either the support given by the US and other governments and the EU to Israel; or the support by Christian Zionists; or the investment by foreign companies. It seems that only critics of Israel are external not its cheerleaders and funders. Critics may indeed be ‘external’ to Israel but they are nationals of countries whose governments and corporations support Israel.

The document mis-describes all aspects of BDS; BRICUP though has a special interest in the Academic and Cultural Boycotts.

The Academic Boycott and academic freedom in the document and in practice

The section on the Academic Boycott starts by stating: “The very notion of discriminating against academics based on their nationality, regardless of their personal beliefs, runs contrary to the ideals and principles of academia; namely freedom of thought and the sharing

of ideas.” (p.34). As is clear from all BRICUP and PACBI literature the boycott does not mention of the nationality of academics. That is because the boycott is of Israeli academic *institutions*. Its effects on any Professor working there are at most indirect, and apply equally be they Israeli, British, Romanian; Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Atheist. No Israeli academic working outside Israel is affected by the boycott.

Unsubstantiated claims about infringement of academic freedom are made. An irrelevant reference is made to Israeli Nobel laureates. The boycott would not seek to prevent them presenting their academic research to a conference or publishing their findings. On the contrary it is Israel’s defenders, through groups like [Campus Watch](#), who routinely use lobbying and threats: to [prevent pro-Palestinian academics speaking on campus](#) or [bar them from being appointed to posts for which they are well qualified](#); or even to [have them dismissed](#). Pressure is applied to Universities to stop academic events discussing Israel’s actions being held and to [deny use of campus facilities to student events](#). It is the actions of Israel’s apologists that constitute the real threat to academic freedom. The campaign to have the law conference at Southampton University banned, already mentioned, well illustrates this.

As the document correctly states, “The right to freedom of thought and expression is a crucial facet of democracy” (p. 35). Scholars in Israeli universities who attempt to make the Nakba an issue to be critically investigated have their employment threatened. Well-funded pressure groups such as [Israel Academic Monitor](#) and [Im Tirtzu](#) put extreme [pressure on individuals](#) and [departments](#) not to deviate from these pressure groups preferred view of history and politics.

Why boycott cultural events?

The document states: “The justification for a cultural boycott will inevitably be some link with the State of Israel, most likely related to funding. Ultimately, the targeting of artists only serves the purpose of demonising Israelis.” (p. 37). If Israeli state support for artists was neutral this might have some foundation, however such support is part of the ‘Brand Israel’ project. As the [Israeli consulate in Toronto revealed](#) ‘the “Brand Israel” program aims to publicize Israeli culture in order to distract public attention from its human rights record.’

Even more bluntly [Paragraph 12 of the standard contract](#) issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Israeli artists performing abroad states:

"The service provider undertakes to act faithfully, responsibly and tirelessly to provide the Ministry with the highest professional services. The service provider is aware that **the purpose of ordering services from him is to promote the policy interests of the State of Israel via culture and art, including contributing to creating a positive image for Israel."**

Interruptions of performances, a tactic borrowed from [the Zionists who disrupted Soviet concerts in support of Soviet Jewry](#) but without their resort to violence, are interruptions of events that are politically freighted by their funders not cultural vandalism.

Conclusion

That the Board of Deputies have devoted considerable time and resources to issuing a well-produced, if poorly researched and evidenced, report demonstrates again that for all their claims that BDS is having little effect it is the activity that they fear the most. The BDS campaign is the most effective tool for ending the oppression of Palestinians. It is that rather than the hand-waving and endless talking shops suggested by the BoD which is the prerequisite for peace in the region.