

# Engaging Critics of BDS

*A Resource for Activists*

from the Quaker Palestine Israel Network

“May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not.”<sup>1</sup>

— JOHN WOOLMAN



# *Introduction*

This document was inspired by discussions held at a Quaker consultation in April, 2016 organized by the Quaker Palestine Israel Network (QPIN) and hosted by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). They are written as a resource for activists engaging critics of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

QPIN was organized to continue the efforts of generations of Quakers who have devoted their lives to supporting the rights of Palestinian refugees, to opposing the Israeli military occupation, and to promoting equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel. QPIN's purpose is to increase Quaker participation in these efforts by facilitating the sharing of ideas, energy, and experiences among Friends as they seek to educate their meetings, churches, and schools about Palestine and Israel. QPIN works with Quakers to support the Palestinian civil society call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions as well as other nonviolent efforts to promote justice, equity, and shared security for Palestinians and Israelis.

Quakers have a long history of supporting economic activism, including boycotts, to advance movements for social justice. In the 18th century, John Woolman and Anthony Benezet argued that the purchase of slave-produced goods helped keep the institution of slavery viable. In the 19th century, Quaker activists such as Lucretia Coffin Mott spearheaded the Free Produce movement to undermine the market for goods produced by enslaved people and to promote the buying and selling of goods produced by free labor. “By defining slavery as immoral and unprofitable, Free Produce advocates hoped to eliminate the market for slave-produced goods. It was a form of moral and economic boycott.”<sup>2</sup> More recently, Quakers and Quaker organizations like the AFSC have supported boycott and divestment campaigns to support the rights of Black Americans, farm workers, the imprisoned, and Blacks in apartheid South Africa.

## *What is BDS?*

In 2005, 170 Palestinian civil society organizations issued a call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law. The goals of BDS are an end to occupation, equality between Palestinians and Israelis inside Israel, and justly addressing the rights of Palestinian refugees.<sup>3</sup> In the words of the 2005 call, “Inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid and in the spirit of international solidarity, moral consistency and resistance to injustice and oppression; We, representatives of Palestinian civil society, call upon international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era. We appeal to you to pressure your respective states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel. We

also invite conscientious Israelis to support this Call, for the sake of justice and genuine peace.”<sup>4</sup>

In the years since the Palestinian Call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions, Friends have responded to the call including passing minutes of support from Ann Arbor Monthly Meeting, Hanover (NH) Monthly Meeting, Madison Monthly Meeting, Swannanoa Valley Monthly Meeting, Lake Erie Yearly Meeting, and others.<sup>5</sup>

In 2008, AFSC put in place an internal investment screen that prohibited AFSC investments in companies engaged in business practices that run counter to their “Principles for a Just and Lasting Peace for Palestinians and Israelis.”<sup>6</sup> In November 2012, AFSC’s Board of Directors formally endorsed the use of boycott, divestment, and sanctions tactics to bring change in Israel/Palestine.

As Quakers and other supporters of BDS have come to realize, there is too little information and too much misinformation about the meaning and significance of BDS. The Quaker Palestine Israel Network has put together the following list of ten key claims made by critics of the BDS movement and what we understand to be useful, truthful, and spirit-led responses in support to BDS. We hope you will find this a useful tool as you begin to consider joining, or becoming more deeply engaged in, the international nonviolent BDS efforts promoting the application of international law and human rights in Israel/Palestine.

The BDS National Committee has also put together a list of Frequently Asked Questions which supplements this short list.<sup>7</sup>

*BDS:*

*Criticism & Response*

## **CRITIQUE #1:**

**Those seeking peace and reconciliation shouldn't take sides. Rather, we should remain neutral while calling on both sides to support nonviolence.**

- In a situation of injustice and power imbalances, remaining neutral means siding with the status quo and the powerful. Standing consistently in support of justice and against the violation of rights is not “taking sides” but rather speaking truth.
- BDS is on the side of rights and justice. The BDS Palestinian call issued in 2005 asks people to stand for freedom, equality and justice.

## **CRITIQUE #2:**

**BDS cuts off dialogue. Those committed to peace should encourage dialogue and programs that bring together Palestinians and Israelis instead of promoting BDS.**

- BDS lifts up the voices of Palestinians living under occupation and provides space for them to be heard in international debates where their voices have traditionally been absent.
- BDS encourages dialogue. It opens up conversation between those who support BDS and those who are opposed, or who are not sure what they think, or who go along with the status quo because the issue seems too controversial.
- It necessitates conversations about ethics and corporate actions and how institutions and corporations may sustain or be complicit in abusive behaviors.
- In short, BDS is about opening and not closing space for dialogue.
- BDS and other activists oppose endless dialogue within what they refer to as a “normalization” framework. “Normalization” involves bringing Israelis and Palestinians together to understand each other as individuals without paying attention to content or power differentials. Those opposed to normalization are not generally opposed to dialogue but also recognize that bringing Israelis and Palestinians together is not enough and can obfuscate asymmetries in power. Addressing the roots of the occupation and all of its structures of oppression must be prioritized over contact. Dialogue for the sake of dialogue does not promote justice and equal rights.
- BDS supports Palestinians and Israelis who come together for co-resistance against occupation and injustice. It does not support bringing Palestinians and Israelis together to discuss how they can co-exist within a fundamentally unjust system.

### **CRITIQUE #3:**

**BDS alienates many liberal Israelis and Jews who might otherwise work for peace. Peace activists should support actions that bring together people, not actions that push people apart.**

- The goals of BDS are an end to occupation, equality between Palestinians and Israelis inside Israel, and justly addressing the rights of Palestinian refugees. It seeks the realization of these goals through targeted campaigns to hold companies and institutions complicit in violations of law or human rights abuses accountable and pushing for changes in their behaviors. It never targets individuals because of their religious identity, beliefs, or political positions. If people are alienated by actions to bring justice, perhaps it is those people's positions that should be challenged and not the actions for justice that make them uncomfortable.
- The BDS movement includes Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and others. It brings together and provides space for all people committed to freedom, equality, and justice.
- Israeli actions and apartheid policies are much more alienating, violent and divisive than nonviolent actions to realize justice.
- Challenging injustice and power is a process that necessarily causes discomfort among those who currently hold power and are in positions of privilege. The discomfort caused by nonviolent actions to Israelis with power should not be placed over and above the pain and injustice of Palestinians living under occupation. Nor should the feelings of the dominant/privileged group outweigh the rights of the oppressed.

## **CRITIQUE #4:**

### **BDS singles out Israeli violence and human rights violations for attention and ignores war crimes and human rights violations in other parts of the world.**

- Those advocating BDS are responding to a direct call for nonviolent action that has come from Palestinians who need civil society's help in ending Israeli dispossession, occupation, and discrimination against them. Pursuing such goals in the context of Israel/Palestine does not stand in the way of seeking justice in other contexts.
- BDS activists support BDS based on a principled stand in support of human rights, international law, and equality for all people. That they may not advocate the use of BDS tactics in all other situations does not mean they do not support justice and rights in all situations.
- Although many activists support several causes, most tend to focus their primary energy on a single issue. Advocates for justice and rights in Iran are not singling out Iran if they do not also speak about Israeli human rights abuses. Advocates for justice in Saudi Arabia, or the Congo, or the United States are not singling out these countries if they do not also speak about human rights elsewhere. Equally, advocates for justice in Israel/Palestine are not singling out Israel if they do not speak about abuses in other locations when they speak about abuses in Israel/Palestine.
- Many US BDS activists do feel a special responsibility to support human rights in Israel/Palestine because of the massive military, diplomatic, and economic aid the US government has given to maintain the State of Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people over the decades as part of its own unjust foreign policy objectives. The US government has singled out Israel by giving it unconditional military aid and diplomatic support.

## CRITIQUE #5:

### The BDS Movement is anti-Semitic.

- The BDS movement does not target Jews or Judaism, but rather the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Israeli government against Palestinians, and the various states that enable this or the companies that profit from it.
- The goals of BDS are freedom, justice and equality for the Palestinian people without violating the human rights and security of Israelis. The BDS movement, which includes people of all religions, protests against the unjust policies of a state and it does not target individuals on the basis of their faith or ethnic or national identity. Its focus is getting the government of Israel (and the US as its main supporter) to comply with international law and to respect universal human rights.
- The BDS movement categorically rejects and condemns all forms of racism and bigotry, including anti-Semitism. A statement on the front page of the BNC website reads: “BDS is an inclusive, anti-racist human rights movement that is opposed on principle to all forms of discrimination, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.”<sup>8</sup>
- A growing number of Jews and Israelis, particularly youth and young adults, support BDS.<sup>9</sup> They feel that a repressive and cruel occupation does not embody the prophetic Jewish values they were taught growing up, values they cherish and believe in. They know that their work for BDS does not make them anti-Semitic.

## **CRITIQUE #6:**

**BDS is violent and punitive. It is a coercive use of economic power to punish and harm one group of people. Those seeking peace should support other nonviolent change processes.**

- BDS uses nonviolent means to challenge the violence and oppressive policies of the Israeli state. It never engages in or threatens violence against anyone.
- BDS calls for accountability and changes in the behavior of institutions and companies that are complicit in Israel's occupation and violations of human rights and international law. BDS is not about punishing these companies or Israel but rather ending their abusive behavior and ensuring accountability.
- BDS does not seek to harm Israelis. It seeks to end harmful Israeli government policies and actions with the goal of realizing an end to Israel's occupation, securing justice for Palestinian refugees, and achieving equality for Palestinians and Israelis.
- BDS actions target institutions - not individuals - for their complicity in Israel's occupation and/or human rights abuses.
- Boycotts and divestment are proven nonviolent tactics used in many situations -- from the Montgomery bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins in the segregated southern US, to boycotting grapes or strawberries in defense of farmworker rights in California. If we deny Palestinians the use of even nonviolent change tactics, what options do we leave open to them as they seek to realize their rights and end abusive Israeli actions and policies?

## **CRITIQUE #7:**

**BDS seeks to delegitimize and destroy Israel. BDS supports the right of return for Palestinian refugees and could therefore jeopardize the Jewish nature of Israel, effectively eliminating it as a Jewish state.**

- The goals of BDS are freedom, justice and equality for Palestinians. If asking for freedom and equal rights for Palestinians, including Palestinian citizens of Israel, is perceived as “destroying” Israel, what does that say about the current system that is in place?
- When the government of South Africa gave up its racist policies of Apartheid did it destroy the government of South Africa, or merely reform it and make it more democratic and respectful of human rights?
- If anything “delegitimizes” Israel in the eyes of the world it is Israel’s brutal and unjust policies towards the Palestinians, like the construction of illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land, the destruction of Palestinian homes and farmland, and a racist political and legal system that treats Palestinian Israelis and Jewish Israelis unequally.
- Eliahu Elath, the Israeli ambassador to the U.S. in 1949, stated that the 750,000 displaced Palestinian refugees could not be allowed to return to their homes, farms, and businesses because “Israel would commit suicide if she took back all the refugees.”<sup>10</sup> Palestinians were denied their right to return after the 1948 war because Israel saw them as a threat to a sustainable Jewish demographic majority. While it is true that the ethnic cleansing of most Palestinians from what became Israel is what allowed for a solid Jewish demographic majority in Israel, to deny Palestinians their legal right of return under international law because their return would shift demographics within the State of Israel again is to repeat the

same racist arguments made by Israeli officials like Eliahu 70 years ago.

- Israel's displacement of Palestinians is at the core of the conflict. To lift up the objective to maintain a Jewish demographic majority at all costs and as a reason for denying Palestinian refugees the legal right of return now is to accept the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948 as justified. A position that says that the Palestinians' legal right to return must be denied because it threatens current demographic realities makes it impossible to address the core component of the conflict.
- BDS activists believe that they should not support states in their efforts to unjustly create or retain a particular ethnic character or to privilege certain ethnic or religious groups over others. Rather, they support people in their search for equality and human rights for all citizens.
- UN Resolution 194 enshrines the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Since 1948 Israel has blocked the return of Palestinian refugees while enacting the "Law of Return" which allows any Jewish person in the world to move to Israel/Palestine and secure rights as a citizen. This double standard is racist.
- There are also different ways that the right of return for refugees might be addressed in a negotiated settlement that could include compensation, attractive opportunities in a new Palestinian state alongside Israel, in addition to the option of physically returning to live within the internationally recognized borders of Israel.

## **CRITIQUE #8:**

### **BDS seeks a single democratic state in all of Israel/Palestine, which means the destruction of Israel.**

- The Palestinian BDS National Committee, which leads the global BDS movement, takes no position on whether there should be a one-state or two-state resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While there are prominent supporters of BDS who call for a democratic, one-state solution with equality and justice for all Palestinians and Israelis, there are other key BDS supporters who support a two-state solution. Ultimately, there is no consensus on what a final agreement will entail. Where there is consensus among the Palestinian initiators of the BDS call is that an end to the occupation, equality for Palestinians inside Israel, and justice for refugees are rights that must be addressed to realize peace and justice no matter what the final resolution of the political structures in Israel/Palestine.
- It is also true that many prominent observers of Israel/Palestine, including former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, have noted that the window for realizing a two-state solution is closing and may even have closed.<sup>11</sup> If that is the reality, then those seeking peace have a choice: accept the ongoing oppression of Palestinians by the State of Israel or push for the transformation of Israel into a single democratic government in all of Israel/Palestine or a binational democratic secular state that protects the rights of Israelis and Palestinians equally.
- The purpose of BDS activism, however, is not to preserve or create particular government structures, but rather to protect the rights of all people whether or not a one or two state solution is ultimately chosen.

## **CRITIQUE #9:**

### **BDS puts all its attention on Israel's abuses and ignores violence by Palestinians.**

- BDS is about accountability for the unaccountable. It uses an international law framework and nonviolent tactics to call attention to Israeli human rights abuses that are not currently addressed and pressures institutions and corporations complicit in those abuses to end their complicity. Palestinians who engage in violence are already subject to sanction by Israeli and international actors, often through abusive military or security services.
- All imports and exports to the occupied Palestinian territory are controlled by Israel, key aspects of the Palestinian economy in the West Bank are controlled by Israel, and Gaza is under siege by Israel. Palestinians are effectively sanctioned. At the same time, Israeli receives over \$3 billion in military support from the US annually. It is not Palestinian violence that is being ignored.
- BDS also builds on a long legacy of Palestinian nonviolent action and strengthens the strategic focus by the majority of Palestinian civil society on nonviolent civil resistance as the best means for achieving freedom, justice, and equality.

## **CRITIQUE #10:**

**Peace activists should support positive actions like investment in the Palestinian economy, not negative actions like divestment and boycott. Otherwise, BDS will hurt Palestinians first.**

- BDS activists support positive actions and encourage investment in the Palestinian economy. However, positive actions cannot be a replacement for calls for accountability from companies that are currently complicit in Israel's occupation and violations of Palestinian rights. Investment in the Palestinian economy does not preclude divestment and boycott.
- Divestment and boycott are not negative or punitive actions. They are nonviolent actions designed to bring accountability and to end ongoing human rights abuses. Once this end is achieved, both Palestinians and Israelis will benefit.
- The Palestinian economy is completely controlled by Israel. Long-term development cannot happen unless the occupation is ended and Israeli controls are removed. While investment in the Palestinian economy is important, there cannot be sustainable investment and economic growth under occupation. If it is to be impactful, positive investment must therefore be paired with divestment and boycott initiatives which aim at political as well as economic change.
- The BDS movement is led by Palestinians themselves. BDS has been endorsed by over 170 Palestinian political parties, organizations, trade unions, and movements, and enjoys overwhelming support among ordinary Palestinians, even though they may face increasing challenges because of it.
- Palestinians often say that they value their freedom more than the few jobs brought about by Israel's occupation, which takes their land, water, and other resources, and imprisons them in ghetto-like bantustans where poverty is rife and there is no room for self-determination.

- Palestinians know that their economy will never thrive or be sustainable as long as the occupation remains in place. Many are willing to endure more deprivation if, in the end, they achieve equality.
- During divestment from apartheid South Africa, Black South Africans initially suffered some effects as a result of divestment, and they knew that would happen. It was a price they were willing to pay however, because they knew that in the long run it would help them achieve their freedom. The same is true for Palestinians.

# Citations

- <sup>1</sup> John Woolman, "A Plea for the Poor or A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich," in John Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Phillips P. Moulton, ed. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 255.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, The AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University, 2008), 266.
- <sup>3</sup> To read more about the BDS Call, see the website of the BDS National Committee (BNC): <https://bdsmovement.net/>
- <sup>4</sup> "Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS," July 9, 2005, *bdsmovement.net* <https://bdsmovement.net/call> (accessed June 27, 2017) The call includes a list of the original signatories.
- <sup>5</sup> See the website of Quakers with a Concern for Israel-Palestine for minutes and statements by Quaker bodies in support of BDS: <http://quakerpi.org/Q-Action.shtml> (accessed June 27, 2017). Another list of minutes and statements is: Madeline Schaefer, "Calling for economic action to end Israel's occupation: Minutes and statements of Quaker meetings & organizations," *Acting in Faith*, September 19, 2013 <https://www.afsc.org/friends/calling-economic-action-to-end-israel%E2%80%99s-occupation-minutes-and-statements-quaker-meetings> (accessed June 27, 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> Mike Merryman-Lotze, "Refusing to Water the Seeds of War: AFSC and BDS" *Acting in Faith*, November 6, 2015 <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/acting-in-faith/refusing-to-water-seeds-war-afsc-and-bds> (accessed June 27, 2017). Also <https://www.afsc.org/document/principles-just-and-lasting-peace-between-palestinians-and-israelis>
- <sup>7</sup> "FAQs", *bdsmovement.net* <https://bdsmovement.net/faqs> (accessed June 27, 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> "What is BDS?" *bdsmovement.net* <https://bdsmovement.net/what-is-bds> (accessed June 27, 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> Jewish Voice for Peace ([www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org](http://www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org)), which supports BDS, is the fastest growing Jewish organization in the United States.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted in "Palestinian Refugees and the Right of Return," American Friends Service Committee <https://www.afsc.org/resource/palestinian-refugees-and-right-return> (accessed June 27, 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> Jeremy Diamond and Elise Labott, "Secretary of State John Kerry: Two-State Solution in 'serious jeopardy'," *CNN*, Dec. 28, 2016 <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/26/politics/john-kerry-middle-east-peace-plan/index.html> (accessed June 28, 2017).

We hope these talking points will help support people discuss both the myths and realities about BDS goals and objectives with questioning bystanders, respectful and open-minded opponents, and hardline apologists for Israel's policies towards the Palestinian who are quick to malign BDS activists, misrepresent the BDS movement, and falsely accuse them of anti-Semitism in order to shame and silence BDS activists.

“Nonviolent protest is the most effective weapon of an oppressed people.”

— MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“Our word is a cry of hope, with love, prayer and faith in God. We address it first of all to ourselves and then to all the churches and Christians in the world, asking them to stand against injustice and apartheid, urging them to work for a just peace.”

— KAIROS PALESTINE, 2009

<http://www.kairospalestine.ps>

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