

# How Boycotts Can Help Israel

When South Africa was ruled by white supremacists and faced boycotts, Pretoria's defense was that many black-ruled African states were worse and apartheid shouldn't be singled out. Now, Israel is advancing a similar argument, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

As a matter of intent, justice, legality and morality, the recent decision by the American Studies Association to boycott Israeli academic institutions is a righteous action. The problem that the association's decision (approved by two-thirds of its membership) addressed cannot be restated often enough, because although the nature of the problem should be obvious there are continuous efforts from other quarters to obscure it.

The government of Israel, while paying lip service to the idea of a Palestinian state, occupies indefinitely, and continues to colonize, land that Israel conquered in a war it initiated 46 years ago and is home to Palestinian Arabs, and in so doing is depriving Palestinians not only of self-determination but of most of their political and civil rights as well as keeping them in economic subjugation.

The situation is commonly described, of course, as a bilateral conflict in which there are political and security concerns on both sides, which there are. But Palestinian leaders and the community of Arab states long ago accepted the idea of peace based on a Palestinian state limited to the 22 percent of the British mandate of Palestine left in Arab hands after earlier warfare in the 1940s.

The shape of such a peace has long been clear. Israel is the occupier. It is easily the most powerful state in the region. It is in control. The Israeli government could make such a settlement a reality within weeks if it decided to. It instead prefers to cling to conquered land rather than to make peace, and to continue the colonization that threatens to put a peace out of reach.

That a gesture is righteous is not, however, sufficient grounds for judging that it is wise, or maybe even that it represents justice if one takes a broader view beyond the immediate conflict. The ASA's move, besides being subjected to the usual chorus of calumny whenever there is any criticism of Israeli policy, raises several legitimate issues.

One issue concerns the targeting of academic institutions, which is probably where some of the more enlightened and liberal thinking occurs inside Israel. That might seem an odd channel for going against the illiberal thinking that is

the real target.

One response to this concern is to note that the ASA is a body of academics, so naturally academic institutions are the entities its members would normally deal with. It would be a meaningless gesture for the ASA to announce a boycott of, say, the Israeli Defense Forces, with which it presumably has no relationship anyway.

The ASA also supports its position by noting the denial of rights to Palestinian scholars as well as the multiple relationships that Israeli universities have, such as through training and technological development, with the Israeli military that administers the occupation.

Another legitimate question is whether a boycott, which inherently involves a cutting off of contact and communication, is an appropriate way to aim for an objective in which there would be a full peace with plenty of contact and communication among all concerned, including Israel. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas appears to raise this concern when he says he favors limiting boycotts only to the products of Israeli settlements in occupied territory.

“We don’t ask anyone to boycott Israel itself,” says Abbas. “We have relations with Israel, we have mutual recognition of Israel.” Abbas, however, may be showing the side of the Palestinian Authority that constitutes a Potemkin village of self-determination under the shadow of what is still Israeli occupation.

On this question he certainly is not speaking for Palestinian civil society, which strongly supports the broader boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel as a whole. In any case, the ASA’s move does not affect the work of, or contacts with, individual Israeli scholars, and of course it does nothing to curtail governmental contacts.

A further question that can understandably be raised about the ASA’s move is why it singles out Israel when the world is full of human rights violators. Saying, as one association member did, that one “has to start somewhere” does not quite cut it. The appropriate response starts with the fact that the members of this association are not just scholars of American studies; most of them are American scholars and American citizens.

A huge piece of context for all of this is the critical role that the United States has played, through multiple administrations, in condoning the offensive Israeli behavior by providing diplomatic cover and many billions of dollars in no-strings-attached assistance. The United States is doing nothing of the sort

for all those other human rights violators.

Ideally what should be changed is the official policy; at a minimum, strings ought to be placed on assistance. But until that happens, U.S. citizens need to use what levers and gestures are available to them.

Perhaps enough such gestures will start to change the political climate in the United States that supports the policies that condone the violations of human rights. Perhaps the gestures will chip away at the "standard trope of U.S. politics ... that Israel is America's major ally in the Middle East," as John Tirman of MIT puts it, when in fact "Israel's belligerent and persistent obstructionism is not the action of an ally."

That gets to another response why Americans in particular are justified in making the kind of gesture the ASA made, which has to do with how Israel's occupation and its policies in the occupied territory significantly damage U.S. interests.

Bruce Riedel powerfully and succinctly reviews why the unresolved Palestinian problem "is a national security threat to America. Indeed, American lives are being lost today because of the perpetuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The reasons for this are, "First, this conflict creates anger, frustration and humiliation that fuel the enemies that are killing Americans today. Second, this conflict weakens our allies and friends, the moderates in the Islamic world, who are trying to fight our enemies."

On the first of those points, other academic research has repeatedly shown how the continued Israeli occupation, and the U.S. condoning of it, fuels extremist violence of the al-Qaeda ilk against U.S. interests. The occupation is a topic on which considerations of justice and a realist's considerations of U.S. interests converge.

The BDS movement, and thus contributions to it such as the ASA resolution, have a chance to do some good on this issue even though boycotts might have little effect on the policies of some of those other prominent human rights violators, such as the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe or the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan.

If Israel, as its leaders and defenders are always quick to assert, shares with the United States important liberal democratic values, although the occupation represents the most glaring respect in which Israel does *not* share those values, or at least does not act on them, then those leaders and defenders ought to respect an expression of opposition that is peaceful and that is made through the free choices of consumers and scholars.

The example of overthrowing the South African version of apartheid continues to offer lessons in this regard. *The Economist*, in its [obituary on Nelson Mandela](#), observed:

“Mr. Mandela made political mistakes. The decision to abandon non-violence lost the ANC some support abroad, put no real military pressure on the government and, most seriously, diverted the movement’s energies from the task of organization at home, which was essential if strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience were to be effective.”

The ASA’s boycott is on balance the right thing to do, although it is not a slam dunk. Some who see the underlying issues rather clearly, [such as Tom Friedman](#), nonetheless criticize the move.

Everyone who expresses views on this or any other step relevant to the Israeli occupation should strive to get away from the all-too-prevalent, no-shades-of-gray tendency to lump every comment into a “pro-Israel” or “anti-Israel” camp.

That tendency is damaging because it encourages scurrilous responses such as indiscriminate playing of the anti-Semitism card, and because such labels fail to distinguish between fundamental Israeli interests and the policies of the current Israeli government. Careful, detailed attention to what is effective as well as what is just is in order.

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