

Fighting a Cultural Boycott of Israel

Cultural and economic boycotts helped isolate white-supremacist South Africa and encouraged a shift to multi-racial democracy – and a similar strategy has ratcheted up pressure on Israel to reach a peace deal with Palestinians – but there is a new pushback against that strategy, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

There is a new British organization called Culture for Coexistence with the aim of ending the cultural boycott of Israel, which has been relatively effective in raising public awareness of oppressive Zionist policies, and replace it with “open dialogue” and “cultural engagement.” A “galaxy of 150 British artists and authors” signed an open letter published in the *Guardian* newspaper on Oct. 22 announcing the group’s position:

“Cultural boycotts singling out Israel are divisive and discriminatory and will not further peace,” while “open dialogue and interaction promote greater understanding and mutual acceptance and it is through such understanding and acceptance that movement can be made towards a resolution of the conflict.”

While concepts such as open dialogue and cultural interaction are, in principle, hard to disagree with, their efficacy as agents of conflict resolution has to be judged within a historical context. In other words, such approaches are effective when circumstances dictate that all parties seriously dialogue and interact meaningfully – in a manner that actually promotes “mutual acceptance.”

Is this the case when it comes to Israel? The burden of proof here is on Culture for Coexistence because they are the ones asking the Palestinians and their supporters to put aside a strategy (boycott) that is actually putting pressure on Israel to negotiate seriously.

The Culture for Coexistence signatories do not address this question of efficacy. Instead they make the simple assertion that cultural boycotts are bad and won’t help resolve the conflict while cultural interaction is good and will work to that end. How do they know this? Without evidence of its workability, such an assertion is merely an idealization of cultural engagement that ignores that pursuit’s historical futility during a nearly century long conflict.

Do Israeli Leaders Want a Just Peace?

Cultural interaction with Israel went on for decades before the boycott effort got going. It had no impact on the issue of conflict resolution. Such cultural

activity certainly did not change the fact that Israel's leaders have never shown interest in negotiating a resolution with the Palestinians except solely on Israeli terms.

And, that stubbornness is a major part of the reason why peace talks (and also the Oslo agreements) never worked. There is a whole set of histories, written by Israelis and based on archival research that support the claim that Israel has not sought a just resolution to the conflict. Here I would recommend the Culture for Coexistence signatories read the books of the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé.

Given this historical Zionist attitude, what sort of "greater understanding and mutual acceptance" does Culture and Coexistence expect to accomplish by swapping the boycott for "cultural engagement"? It is a question the signatories of the open letter might address to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who just recently was reported to have proclaimed that Israel will control all Palestinian land indefinitely.

The "galaxy of British artists and authors" aligned with Culture for Coexistence seems oblivious to all these contextual issues. Of course, there is a good chance that some of them are more interested in undermining the boycott of Israel than in the alleged promotion of peace through "cultural engagement."

As the Guardian article discussing the group notes, "Some of the network's supporters are closely aligned with Israel," including individuals associated with Conservative Friends of Israel and Labour Friends of Israel.

Does Cultural Contact Lead to Peace?

There is another, more generic misunderstanding exhibited in the group's statement. It is found in the letter's closing assertion that "cultural engagement builds bridges, nurtures freedom and positive movement for change" – a position reiterated when Loraine da Costa, chairperson of the new organization, told the *Guardian* that "culture has a unique ability to bring people together and bridge division."

No matter how you want to define culture, high or low, there is no evidence for this position except on the level of individuals or small groups. On the level of larger or whole populations, the assertion that "cultural engagement builds bridges" is another naive idealization that is belied by historical practice. Historically, culture has always divided people (both across borders and across classes) and acted as a barrier to understanding. At a popular level, most people are uninterested in, or suspicious of, foreign cultures and are unwilling to try to pursue cultural interaction.

Israel is a very good example of this cultural xenophobia. Historically, the

European Jews who established the state despised Arab culture. They tried to eradicate it among the Mizrahi Jews who came to Israel from Arab lands. This intra-Jewish Israeli prejudice is still a problem today. What aspects of Arab culture (mostly having to do with cuisine) Israeli Jews are attracted to they try to repackage as “Israeli.”

There are two final considerations here: First is the need to be serious and clear in the use of language. One can, of course, say “culture has a unique ability to bring people together” but is this a statement that has any real meaning or is it just a platitude?

And second: If you are going to give advice about a century-old conflict you should know enough about its history to be sensible in your offering. Thus, in this case, if you know that high or low cultural intercourse with Israel (and, as suggested above, there has been plenty of it since the founding of the state in 1948), has actually improved the prospects for Israeli-Palestinian peace, you should lay out the evidence. However, if one is just offering a banal cliché, well, only the ignorant can take that seriously.

Those who first proposed the cultural boycott did not do it out of some anti-Semitic dislike for Israeli artworks, music, literature or theater. They did it because cultural interaction with Israel had not only failed to promote an equitable peace, but in fact camouflaged the policies of a nation-state that practices ethnic cleansing and other destructive policies against non-Jews.

The logical conclusion was drawn that if you want to pressure the Israelis to change their ways, you withdraw from cultural contact and make any reconnection a condition of their getting serious about conflict resolution.

How is it that the 150 artists and authors who signed the Culture for Coexistence open letter do not know the relevant facts? Setting aside the confirmed Zionists, whose ulterior motive is pretty clear, do these people take this stand because it “*feels right*” – that is, because they believe cultural interaction *ought to*, or even *must*, promote conflict resolution? Alas, this is wishful thinking and, taking history seriously, Palestine may go extinct before such an approach actually helps lead to a just peace.

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Israel's Endless Cycles of Violence

Israel's near-half-century-old occupation of Palestinian territory has fueled such animosity that Israelis fear that ending it could unleash even worse violence, a self-perpetuating conundrum that if left unresolved will doom Israelis and Palestinians to chronic bouts of death and destruction, as Alon Ben-Meir describes.

By Alon Ben-Meir

The Netanyahu government has conveniently and consistently separated the occupation of the West Bank from the repeated eruption of violence, insisting that the Palestinians' unrest is a result of incitement by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, when in fact he has been attempting to reduce the tension.

Not once has any Israeli official suggested that nearly 50 years of occupation might have brought the Palestinians to a boiling point. Any incident could have ignited a new violent flare-up, and the conflict over the Temple Mount/Haram el-Sharif provided the spark that led to the current fire, regardless of whose side was at fault.

The most troubling issue is that successive Israeli governments remained blind and refused to connect much of the Palestinian violence to the occupation; what is worst is that the Israeli public has largely bought into the fallacy of this argument.

They are persuaded by the pervasive and misleading official narrative that even if Israel were to evacuate the West Bank, the Palestinians will not end their violent resistance to Israel's very existence. They insist that the Palestinians are determined to take over all of Mandatory Palestine rather than establishing a Palestinian state limited to the West Bank and Gaza, to live side-by-side with Israel in peace.

Ironically, whereas this charge against the Palestinians is deeply ingrained among right-wing Israelis, they cheer the fact that many members of the Israeli government categorically reject the establishment of a Palestinian state on any part of the Jews' "biblical homeland."

To make the case against the withdrawal from the West Bank, Israeli officials point to Israel's evacuation of Gaza in 2005, its subsequent takeover by Hamas, and the violence emanating from it. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ultra-conservative cohorts argue that Israel must learn from this experience and

thus should not withdraw from the West Bank, which is far closer than Gaza to Israel's urban centers.

They further argue that should Israel evacuate the West Bank, Hamas will certainly take over and turn it into another staging ground from which to launch rocket attacks, cut Israel in half, and inflict incalculable losses in lives and property. Ironically, this suggests that Palestinian radicalism can be contained under occupation when in fact the occupation itself is the prime cause behind the intensified Palestinian extremism.

Brigadier General Guy Goldstein, Deputy Director of Government Activities in the Territories no less, stated this week: "It's a rebellion of ... terror that comes from pain and frustration."

But then leave it to the hypocrites in Netanyahu's government to justify continuing the occupation, presumably to stem the rise of violent extremism. Indeed, if Israel were to precipitately and unilaterally withdraw from the West Bank, as it did from Gaza, a similar result could theoretically reoccur.

As such, the withdrawal from Gaza offers a different kind of lesson from which Israel must learn. Unlike the conditions that existed in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority has begun in earnest to build the foundations of a state with schools, clinics, a network of roads, and private and government institutions.

They were even praised by Israel's top security officials for their full cooperation with Israel on all security matters, even in times of increased tension between the two sides, as is currently the case. What is most worrisome, however, is that neither Netanyahu nor any of his coalition partners know where Israel will be if the occupation continues for another five to ten years, how many more Palestinian uprisings will occur, and what will be the death toll and destruction both sides sustain?

I believe that the Israelis who have been traumatized by the violent events of the past few weeks should ask themselves a simple question: If a handful of Palestinians have managed to cause such havoc with the entire Israeli security apparatus in place and thousands of Israeli troops stationed throughout the West Bank, by what logic can any honest person say that the occupation bolsters Israel's national security?

If anything, the occupation has been and will continue to be the very evil that Israel needs to rid itself from, and they must do so for their own sake rather than the Palestinians', as the occupation poses the greatest threat to Israel's future well-being.

To remove this perpetual threat, Israelis must examine this disastrous state of

affairs and demand the withdrawal from the West Bank under terms and conditions consistent with Israel's requirements to ensure the safety of its citizens. The Gaza experience in a way was positive and instructive in that it has shown the mistakes that the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made and how to avoid similar mistakes in any future disengagement from territories in the West Bank.

The Palestinians, with the support of the Arab states and the international community, will never give up their aspiration to establish a state of their own. Israel should sooner than later accept this fact, particularly because of its unchallenged military prowess and that it is in a perfect position to withdraw from the West Bank, with some land swaps, without risking any aspect of its legitimate national security concerns.

The Israeli withdrawal should be based on a number of agreed-upon phases to be implemented over a period of ten years or more, and entail well-defined reciprocal measures by both sides to be executed on a schedule with monitoring mechanisms to ensure full compliance. In fact, a withdrawal based on preconceived security plans and collaborative economic developments will prompt the Palestinians to develop vested interests and give them the incentive to preserve it and in return, it would dramatically enhance rather than undermine Israel's security.

More importantly, the Palestinians know only too well that should they threaten Israel by violating such an agreement, Israel is and will remain in a position to reoccupy the land almost at will, except this time Israel will have a solid moral and tangible ground to stand on that potentially engenders the support of the international community.

Is this a risk worth taking by any Israeli government? I believe the answer is clear. The occupation is not sustainable; it is costly both in blood and treasure, Israel's national security will remain at risk, and the country will become ever more internationally isolated while risking its very identity as a Jewish state.

I am not naive enough to suggest that the current Netanyahu government will ever be willing to end the occupation. It is now up to the Israelis to seek new leaders who will, because it is they who will pay the ultimate price that the evil of occupation will exact.

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