

FIRST PERSON BY MOHANNAD AL KHAIRY

# Are Arabs swimming with or against the BDS tide against Israeli Apartheid?

“Charles C. Boycott seems to have become a household word because of his strong sense of duty to his employer. An Englishman and former British soldier, Boycott was the estate agent of the Earl of Erne in County Mayo, Ireland. The earl was one of the absentee landowners who as a group held most of the land in Ireland. Boycott was chosen in the fall of 1880 to be the test case for a new policy advocated by Charles Parnell, an Irish politician who wanted land reform. Any landlord who would not charge lower rents or any tenant who took over the farm of an evicted tenant would be given the complete cold shoulder by Parnell’s supporters. Boycott refused to charge lower rents and ejected his tenants. At this point members of Parnell’s Irish Land League stepped in, and Boycott and his family found themselves isolated without servants, farmhands, service in stores, or mail delivery. Boycott’s name was quickly adopted as the term for this treatment, not just in English but in other languages such as French, Dutch, German, and Russian.” This excerpt from *The American Heritage Dictionary* is so fitting it can be directly applied to today’s global Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli Apartheid, born in 1948 in what primarily began as a land issue between Zionist colonizers and the indigenous Palestinian people.

## Why BDS against Apartheid Israel matters

In 1950, when the disposition of Palestinian lands was placed under the Jewish National Fund (JNF)’s Settlement Department, a law was passed in 1953 granting the agency independent status as landowner for the Jewish state. According to Israeli professor Ilan Pappé, that law and others like it (like the Law of the Land of Israel) stipulate “the JNF wasn’t allowed to sell or lease land to non-Jews. The Knesset passed a final law in 1967, the Law of Agricultural Settlement, prohibiting the subletting of Jewish-owned land to non-Jews.

The law also prohibited water resources from being transferred to non-JNF lands.”

With Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank, the successive Judaization of Jerusalem by all Israeli governments, and the total control of border, water, and air space around the Gaza Strip, it is safe to say that, realistically speaking, the Zionist takeover of Historic Palestine has indeed reached its 100th percent.

From the lands as far north as the Safad District down to the southern Bersheebian desert (commonly referred to 1948 Palestine in Palestinian lingo); from the Northern areas of Jenin to the southern regions around Hebron (in the militarily occupied West Bank); and from the stolen Golan Heights to the largest open-air prison known as the Gaza Strip; what Israel has managed to achieve is the total invasion of Palestine. With the current Netanyahu government’s complete disregard of American “demands” to halt settlement activity in the occupied West Bank, even more land annexations, more settlement buildings, and more “Jews-only” highways are planned, on more of this stolen land. One can almost hear Charles C. Boycott shivering in his grave.

The Israeli economy, unlike others that are to a certain degree self sufficient, is innately on life support. While Israeli leaders pride themselves for having made “the desert bloom” and having exported the greatest minds and breakthroughs in modern science and technology, it is without a doubt the world’s money pouring into Israel that has enabled it to achieve its relative successes. Taking only American aid as an example, according to the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, a conservative estimate of total US aid to Israel puts the figure at a total \$114 billion since 1949. Having not counted the total cost of Israel to the United States, Washington DC-based economist Thomas Stauffer outlined in the same source that “total identifiable costs come to almost \$3 trillion [with] about well over half (\$1.7 trillion) [arising] from the US defense of Israel, where most of that amount has been incurred since 1973.” He adds that support includes special trade advantages, preferential contracts, and aid buried in other accounts.

Furthermore, approximately 275,000 American jobs each year are lost due to the American government’s regular pay-outs to Israel. Cumulatively, even excluding all of these extra costs, America’s aid to Israel from fiscal years 1949 through 1998, and the interest the US paid to borrow this money, has cost US taxpayers \$134.8 billion (not adjusted for

inflation). In other words, according to “If Americans Knew,” an independent research and information/dissemination institute, by the end of October 1997 the nearly \$15,000 every one of the 5.8 million Israelis received from the US government had cost American taxpayers over \$23,000 per Israeli. To understand to what extent Israel’s economy is on life support, one should simply factor in Canadian, European, and the rest of the world’s financial dedication to the apartheid regime in the holy land. Therefore divesting from the Israeli economy not only weakens a racist system, it saves almost every citizen living in the developed nations thousands of dollars a year.

To sanction, in the context of international relations, is to penalize in the form of moral, diplomatic and economic pressure to ensure compliance or conformity for violating a moral principle or international law. Well, the apartheid state of Israel is by no means a stranger to violating international laws. It has breached international conventions, UN resolutions, and human-rights declarations and infringed basic legality issues with its occupation of the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (such as the restriction and prevention of their movement.) More recently, Israel has not declared war on Hamas or the Gaza Strip because it would have to legally comply with more international rules of engagement, and thus treat the Palestinians in Gaza more humanely than it does today. As Israel’s recent attacks on the humanitarian aid flotillas to the Strip have

United Nations, and especially the General Assembly and the Security Council, should consider what further action is required to bring to an end the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall and the associated regime, taking due account of the present Advisory Opinion.”

Yet Israel continues to build its apartheid wall for “security” reasons. Stop the Wall ([www.stopthewall.org](http://www.stopthewall.org)) is a coalition of Palestinian non-governmental organizations and popular committees that mobilize and coordinate efforts on local, national and international levels with the aim to dismantle the apartheid wall and resist Israeli occupation and colonization. It states that upon completion the wall will de facto annex approximately 46 percent of the West Bank (itself 22 percent of historic Palestine) and isolate communities in bantustans, ghettos, and military zones. In fact, the complete isolation of certain villages has already taken place. In the case of Qalqilya north of the West Bank, Israel’s concrete wall surrounds the entire village from all sides, literally caging its inhabitants and restricting their movement into and out of their village to just one gate guarded by an Israeli Occupation Forces. As it snakes its way into the Occupied Territories, the wall will eventually be 760 kilometers long – three times longer than the 1967 Green Line separating Israel and the occupied West Bank.

The Israeli government proudly claims that it has “worked” to prevent suicide missions from entering

divestment bill with a 16-4 vote until it was undemocratically vetoed a week later by its president Will Smelko; according to UC Berkeley student sources, Smelko was “was pressured by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the most powerful Zionist lobby in Washington DC, with threats of being black-listed from grad-schools and career opportunities.” UC San Diego also presented a similar resolution and now over 20 other universities across the United States are preparing the same. It is imperative to note the following: given Corporate America’s zionized nature, many of these students, teachers and academic professionals are risking their careers by making BDS their choice on ethical grounds. Even more so, in reaction to the Arab League’s boycott in the 70s, anti-boycott laws in the United States have been enacted to further the agenda of SIGs (Special Interest Groups). One can be fined, have export privileges revoked, or even imprisoned, if they do not comply with a request for a boycott that the US government does not sanction. Even though there were major boycott efforts of apartheid South Africa and more recently of Sudan, this law has primarily only been enforced against companies that comply with requests for boycotts against or divestments from apartheid Israel. Despite all these constraints, American college students are managing, quite astonishingly, to organize and demand their universities to boycott, divest, and sanction Israel for its unlawful

removing “discriminatory barriers and terminating economic boycotts.” Indeed, with the establishment of Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) throughout the kingdom, some factories are partially owned by Israeli businesses now employing almost 15,000 Jordanians, according to Jordanian government sources. The QIZs now supply (i.e. render dependent) the Jordanian economy with \$500 million worth of exports to the United States, which can revoke the agreement at any time. An October 25, 1995, statement made by Israel’s Trade Ministry on the Israel-Jordan trade agreement clearly outlines the facilitation of Israeli products “enjoy[ing] import preferences to Jordan. [These include] plywood, tires, foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals, electronic components, medical equipment, communications equipment, locks and safes and other products.”

While the QIZs and free-trade agreements are being portrayed as positive initiatives “furthering peace and economic advancement” between Israel and Jordan, the reality is that Israel and its businesses greatly benefit from the cheaper labor in Jordan. The minimum wage rate in Israel is 3,850 new shekels/month (almost \$1,000), while in Jordan it is 110 Dinars/month (approximately \$155/month). That’s almost an 85 percent saving for Israeli firms.

Israeli companies are thus taking advantage of the political standoff with the Arab states by developing new economic ties with the Arab world to solidify its apartheid regime in Palestine. These are the broader outcomes of the peace treaties signed with Egypt and Jordan. There is a much more explicit Arab impediment to the global BDS movement, and its consequences can be directly felt in a particular Palestinian village in the West Bank; that village is Bil’in.

Bil’in is situated approximately 15 kilometers north-west of Ramallah. Like in so many other towns across the West Bank, Israeli occupation forces are building the apartheid wall right through it to annex more Palestinian lands, separate more Palestinian families, build more illegal Israeli settlements, with the ultimate goal to disenfranchise and ethnically cleanse the indigenous people from their country. The driving force behind this ethnic cleansing is Lev Leviev, a multi-billionaire Israeli businessman originally from Uzbekistan. His net worth is estimated at roughly \$1.5 billion following the global financial crisis.

His publicly listed investment firm, Africa Israel Investments, has operations in the jewelry real-state, telecom, energy, and fashion industries in Israel and around the world. His take-over of the Angolan diamond industry from De Beers rendered him an infamous enabler of blood diamonds. Adalah (<http://adalahny.org/>), a grassroots organization based in New York aiming to end US and US-sponsored Israeli aggression in the Middle East, defines Leviev’s business: “Africa-Israel has built housing units on occupied Palestinian lands in such settlements as Mattityahu, east on the land of the village of Bil’in, and in the settlements of Har Homa and Maale Adumim. [Leviev] owns and builds settlement homes in ... Zufim on the land of the village of Jayyous.”

Yet the story of Bil’in, along with its sister villages of Ni’in and Jayyous further westward, has a dark connection with one of the glitziest cities in the Arab world: Dubai. As Leviev planned to expand his jewelry branches in the Emirate, Dubai’s Department of Economic Development officially did not grant his company a trade license to operate in the city citing that they were “aware of these reports and have not granted a trade license to any business of this name,” as reported on April 29, 2008, in *Gulf News*. However, with the help of a local Palestinian Zionist businessman named Aref bin Khadra, Leviev managed to offer his products through bin Khadra’s Levant jewelry chains in al-Qasr and Atlantis hotels, as well as in Dubai Mall. Leviev Jewellers are prominently displayed for the local Arabs and tourists to purchase. And purchasing Leviev diamonds directly help increase Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank. “For me, Israel, [occupied] Jerusalem and Haifa are all the same. So are the [Syrian] Golan Heights. [What] to decide [on] the future of Jerusalem? It belongs to the Jewish people. What is there to decide? Jerusalem is not a topic for discussion,” Leviev once said to an Israeli newspaper shortly before the *Gulf News* report.

Another reason impeding the global BDS movements in the Arab world is the state of the Arab psyche. As a result of booming economies prior to the global financial crisis, young middle to upper-class Arabs, particularly those living the Gulf, bathed in arti-

ficially enhanced mode-de-vies. The Palestinian communities, both in and outside the region, are not immune to these comfort zones. Whilst the overall impression of Israel is naturally built in anger, reactionary generalizations against the Jewish people, and never-ending rhetoric of longing for a dispossessed land, grass-roots initiatives, pro-active political lobbying, and subsequent government support are minimal, if not totally absent. A worrying trend within the Arab mindset is the normalization of the conflict with apartheid Israel. Sending money to various charities or the development of certain projects in the Occupied Palestinian Territories do have their positive effects, but they are not enough. Local and expat Arabs have become so detached from the realities of what daily life is like in the occupied Palestine that it has become a form of silent collusion. This sense of political detachment is a direct result of the governments’ inability and refusal to exert political, diplomatic, economic, and strategic pressure on the apartheid state of Israel. Thus a vicious circle emerges as a result of this lack of government and public involvement in further isolating Israel economically. To break this vicious circle, personal initiatives are needed and have actually started.

## BDS going forward

One such initiative is the Oyooni Mobile Eye Clinic in Palestine ([www.oyooni.org](http://www.oyooni.org)). Founded by Kuwait-born Palestinian Doctor Ali Dabbagh, whose general practice spans more than two decades predominantly dedicated to the field of medical ophthalmology, Oyooni is a non-profit organization that raises funds to directly purchase equipment used for eye treatments of Palestinian children, for no charge. At a Pecha Kucha presentation session held in Dubai on May 26, 2010, Dr. Dabbagh posed the question: “Have we become so cocooned in our comfort zones, be they what they may, due to complacency, vanity, guilt, greed or simply guileless?” The reasoning behind simply donating money to the people of Palestine has become somewhat of a “guilt tax.” Dr. Dabbagh puts it this way: “Life has been turned from being rights-based to aids based.” Addressing the rights of the Palestinians thus means joining in and empowering the call for global BDS movement against the Israeli apartheid regime.

UCSD student Leena Barakat put the answer so succinctly following her university’s announcement for BDS against Israel: “What does it mean to be a Palestinian? A Palestinian is not defined by race, or by religion, or by place of origin, but by the will to resist inhumanity, the will to resist injustice, and the will to resist racism. ‘Palestinian’ means the will to sacrifice for the sake of the other, to give for the sake of a better future for all, to resist for the sake of a better living for future generations. So, with that said, how many of you have just become Palestinian?”

The questions thus remain: Why is Leviev operating in the Middle East when several global pension funds and investment banks in Europe and the United States have divested the Africa-Israel stock from their portfolios? Why are Arab governments allowing Leviev and other Israeli companies to even access Middle Eastern markets in the first place? More recently, during both the Gaza massacre of 2008/09 and the flotilla massacre of 2010, why haven’t the Jordanian and Egyptian governments recalled their ambassadors from Israel like Sweden, Spain, Turkey and Greece; let alone halt/cancel all economic treaties and relations that anyway do more harm than good to their people? Why is the Arab world being up-started by other nations like Turkey when it comes to confronting Israel’s daily crimes against Palestinian humanity? Isn’t it high time for Arab governments, corporations, universities, and citizens to come together, watch, learn, and extend their arms in solidarity with the global BDS momentum taking place around the world?

The legitimacy to boycott, divest, and sanction the apartheid state of Israel rests. Following the indiscriminate killing of aid activists on-board the flotilla ships to Gaza by Zionist forces this past week, and out of respect for those who have sacrificed their lives to bring much needed aid to the people of Gaza, it is now time for us, the Arab world, to embrace BDS and take to the next level. Indeed we must not only swim with the global tide against apartheid Israel; we must lead it.

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Israeli produce marketed in a UK supermarket.

shown, for a blockade to be legal under international maritime law, it must be approved by the UN Security Council. The Gaza blockade was not approved by the Security Council. A blockade therefore does not legitimize the Israeli Army’s boarding of the flotilla ships in international waters when the blockade itself is considered illegal. Let us explore another one of these international violations: Israel’s apartheid wall in occupied Palestine.

On July 9, 2004, the International Court of Justice in the Hague issued a five-point press release announcing that “the construction of the wall being built by Israel, the occupying power, in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), including in and around East Jerusalem, and its associated regime, are contrary to international law.” By 14 votes to one, “Israel is under an obligation to terminate its breaches of international law; it is under an obligation to cease ... the works of construction of the wall being built in the OPT, including in and around East Jerusalem, to dismantle ... the structure therein situated, and to repeal or render ineffective ... all legislative and regulatory acts relating thereto.” By 14 votes to one, “Israel is under an obligation to make reparation for all damage caused by the construction of the wall in the OPT, including in and around East Jerusalem.” By 13 votes to two, “all states are under an obligation not to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall and not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by such construction; all states parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of August 12, 1949, have in addition the obligation, while respecting the United Nations Charter and international law, to ensure compliance by Israel with international humanitarian law as embodied in that Convention.” And finally by 14 votes to one, “the

Israel. Instead of addressing and eliminating the root causes of extremism, namely its oppressive and illegal policies of theft, occupation, genocide, racism, destruction, and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, Israel’s security/fear card is once again dealt to its own people and the wider international community as a smokescreen tool to annex more Palestinian lands and further the oppression of the Palestinian people.

## How BDS against Apartheid Israel works – a case example

To boycott, divest, & sanction Israel is thus legitimate. Enabling its legitimacy is the global BDS movement for Palestine ([www.bdsmovement.net](http://www.bdsmovement.net)). Since its official call to action in 2005, hundreds of organizations worldwide have made BDS against Israel their choice for legal, ethical, humanitarian reasons. From pension funds and supermarket chains in Europe to workers’ unions and universities in North America, their demands for justice and equality for Palestinians have emphasized the ethical DNA built into the movement’s goals. One particular dimension that has proven its utmost resilience is the revival of BDS campaigns through various university student groups in the United States.

Countless universities across the US have been responding to the 2005 campaign call for boycott, divestments, and sanctions against Israel. Hampshire College, being the first US university to divest from apartheid South Africa in 1977, was also the first to divest from apartheid Israel in February 2009. Since then, over 20 universities have launched or are in the process of launching similar campaigns calling for divestments from corporations benefiting from Israeli occupation, war crimes, and human-rights violations. University of California (UC) Berkeley was the first of the California Universities to pass the historic SB 118

behavior against the Palestinians. So far, these universities include Hampshire, UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, Michigan, the University of Arizona, and Evergreen State College. Dozens more are expected to be announced in the coming year.

## The impediments to BDS in the Arab world

Whilst BDS has shown immense progress globally, the state of Israel is finding new opportunities and new markets in its own backyard.

On February 27, 2010, the BBC reported an Egyptian Supreme Court decision overturning an earlier ruling by a lower court banning natural gas sales to Israel. The decision now requires Egypt to make clear the quantity of gas it exports to Israel and how much it charges. According to the report, “lawyers had argued that the gas was being sold at preferential rates. Egypt’s gas trade with Israel is controversial as many Egyptians are opposed to links between the two countries – despite a 1979 peace deal.” This is revealing, as the Egyptian government is clearly not representing the will nor the demand of its people. In fact, only a week earlier the Associated Press ran a story on the increasing shortages of cooking gas for low-income neighborhoods in Egypt: “[Egyptian] Authorities [are] scrambling to find a solution and has once again fueled criticism that the government ... is unable to deal with the problems of its people. The report says “the government ... has blamed bad weather, which it said forced ports to close this month, delaying gas shipments,” but given the Supreme Court’s ruling the week after, it’s that the Egyptian government cares more about Israel than it does for its own citizens.

Israel also enjoys the benefits of free trade agreements with the Kingdom of Jordan. In Article 7 of its peace treaty signed in 1994 with the Hashemite state, the aim is to promote economic cooperation by