

The Great BDS Debate

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HELP! I AM walking into a minefield. I can't help myself. The minefield has a name: BDS—boycott, divestment, sanctions.

I am often asked about my attitude towards this international movement, which was started by Palestinian activists and has spread like wildfire throughout the world.

The Israeli government now considers this movement a major threat, more so, it seems to me, than Daesh or Iran. Israeli embassies all over the world are mobilized to fight it.

The main battleground is the academic world. Fanatical adherents of BDS are conducting fierce debates with equally fanatical adherents of Israel. Both sides use experienced debaters, diverse propaganda ploys, phony arguments and outright lies. It is an ugly debate, and getting uglier.

BEFORE EXPRESSING my own attitude, I would like to clear the ground. What is it all about?

For the last 70 years, since age 23, I have devoted my life to peace— Jewish-Arab peace, Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Many people on both sides of the divide speak of peace. By now, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson, “peace” has become the last refuge of the hate-mongers.

But what does peace mean? Peace is made between two enemies. It presupposes the existence of both. When one side destroys the other, as Rome destroyed Carthage, it puts an end to the war. But it is not peace.

Peace means that the two sides not only stop hostilities against each other. It means conciliation, living together side by side, and, hopefully, cooperating and, eventually, even getting to like each other.

Therefore, proclaiming a wish for peace while conducting a mutual hate campaign just isn't the real thing. Whatever it is, it is not a struggle for peace.

BOYCOTT IS a legitimate instrument of political struggle.

It is also a basic human right. Everybody is entitled to buy or not to buy whatever he or she desires. Everybody is entitled to ask others to buy or not to buy certain merchandise, for whatever reason.

Millions of Israelis boycott shops and restaurants that

are not “kosher”. They believe that God told them so. Since I am a strict atheist, I never followed that call. But I always respect the attitude of the religious.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany, American Jews organized a boycott against German wares, the Nazis reacting by proclaiming a day of boycott of Jewish shops in Germany. I was 9 years old and still clearly remember the sight: brown shirted Nazis posted in front of Jewish shops, waving signs “Germans, defend yourselves! Don't buy from Jews!”

The first boycott against the occupation was proclaimed by Gush Shalom, the Israeli peace organization to which I belong. That was long before BDS came into being.

Our call was addressed to the Israeli public. We called on them to boycott the products of the settlements in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. To make it easier, we published a list of all the enterprises concerned.

I also took part in talks with the European Union, here and in Brussels, asking them not to encourage the building of settlements on conquered land. It took a long time for the Europeans to decide that products of the settlements must be clearly marked.

Buying or not buying, whatever the motive, is a private affair. Therefore, it is very difficult to know how many Israelis followed our call. Our impression is that quite a considerable number of Israelis did and do.

We did not ask people to boycott Israel as such. We considered this counter-productive. Faced with a threat against the state, Israelis unite. This would mean pushing decent, well-meaning citizens into the arms of the settlers. Our aim was the very opposite: to separate the general public from the settlers.

THE BDS movement has quite a different point of view. It was initiated by Palestinian nationalists, directed at a world audience and totally indifferent to Israeli sentiments.

A boycott movement does not need a precise program. The general aim of ending the occupation and enabling the Palestinians to found their own state in the occupied territories would have been enough. But BDS published right from its beginning a clear political program. And

there the problem starts.

The proclaimed aims of BDS are three: ending the occupation and the settlements, assuring equality for Arabs inside Israel, furthering the return of the refugees.

This sound innocuous, but is not. It does not mention peace with Israel. It does not mention the two-state solution. But the main point is the third.

The exodus of half the Palestinian people from their homes in the 1948 war—partly fleeing the fighting in a long and cruel war, partly deliberately evicted by the Israeli forces—is a complicated story. I was an eye-witness and have extensively written about it in my books. (The second part of my memoirs has just appeared in Hebrew.) The salient fact is that they were not allowed to return after the end of the war, and that their homes and lands were given to Jewish immigrants, many of whom were refugees from the Holocaust.

Reversing that process now is as realistic as demanding that white Americans go back to where their ancestors came from, and returning the land to its original native owners. It would mean the abolition of the State of Israel and the creation of a State of Palestine from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, a state with an Arab majority and a Jewish minority.

How can this be achieved without a war with a nuclear-armed Israel? How does this relate to peace?

All serious Palestinian negotiators until now have tacitly conceded this point. I spoke several times with Yasser Arafat about it. The tacit understanding is that under a final peace agreement, Israel will undertake to take back a symbolic number of refugees, and that all the others and their descendents—now some five or six million—will receive adequate compensation. All this as a part of the two-state solution.

This is a peace program. Actually, the only peace program there is. The BDS aims are not.

THE OTHER side of the furious debate at Oxford and Harvard is even less peace-oriented.

Legions of Zionist “explainers”—many of them paid professionals—are let loose to rebut and push back the BDS attack. They start by denying the most obvious facts: that the State of Israel is oppressing the Palestinian people, that a merciless military occupation is turning the lives of the Palestinians into misery, that “peace” has become a cuss-word in Israel.

A few days ago an extreme-right Israeli TV commentator announced, only half in jest: “The danger of peace has passed!”

THE SIMPLEST way to exorcise and outlaw the BDS people is to accuse them of anti-Semitism. This puts an end to any sensible discussion, especially in Germany and generally abroad. People who deny the Holocaust are no partners for debate.

There is no evidence whatsoever for the accusation that the majority of BDS sympathizers are indeed anti-Semites. I am convinced that the vast majority of them are devoted idealists, whose heart goes out to the downtrodden Palestinians, as Jews throughout the ages have rushed to the aid of oppressed people, whether American blacks or Russian mujiks.

However, and this must be said, there are some BDS adherents who utter statements with an unmistakable anti-Semitic smell. For an honest-to-goodness anti-Semite of the old school, BDS is nowadays a safe pulpit from which they can preach their odious gospel, under the guise of anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism.

I would like (again) to warn the Palestinians and their true friends that the anti-Semites are in practice their dangerous enemies. It is they who are pushing Jews from all over the world to settle in Israel. These anti-Semites don't give a damn for the Palestinians, they exploit their plight in order to indulge in their own age-old anti-Jewish perversion.

And conversely: Jews who happily join in the new wave of Islamophobia, under the false impression that they are thereby helping Israel, commit a similar grievous mistake. Today's Islam-haters are yesterday's and tomorrow's Jew-haters.

PALESTINIANS NEED peace in order to get rid of the occupation and attain, at long last, freedom, independence and a normal life.

Israelis need peace because without it, we will sink deeper and deeper into the morass of an eternal war, lose the democracy which was our pride and become a despised apartheid state.

The BDS debate can sharpen the mutual hatreds, widen the abyss between the two peoples, tearing them even further apart. Only active cooperation between the peace camps on both sides can attain the one thing both sides desperately need:

PEACE.