

BDS, the New Enemy

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BINYAMIN NETANYAHU WAS racking his brain. His whole career is based on fear mongering. Since Jews have lived in fear for millennia, it is easy to invoke it. They are addicts.

For years now, Netanyahu has built his career on fear of the Iranian Nuclear Bomb. The Iranians are crazy people. Once they have the Bomb, they will drop it on Israel, even if Israel's nuclear second strike will certainly annihilate Iran with its thousands of years of civilization.

But Netanyahu saw with growing anxiety that the Iranian threat was losing its edge. The US, so it seems, is about to reach an agreement with Iran, which will prevent it from achieving the Bomb. Even Sheldon the Great cannot prevent the agreement. What to do?

Looking around, three letters popped up: BDS. They denote Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, a worldwide campaign to boycott Israel because of its 48 year-old subjugation of the Palestinian people.

Ah, here we have a real threat, worse than the Bomb. A second Holocaust is looming. Brave little Israel facing the entire evil, anti-Semitic world.

True, until now Israel has suffered no real damage. BDS is more about gestures than about real economic weapons. But who is counting? The legions of anti-Semites are on the march.

Who will save us? Bibi the Great, of course!

HONEST DISCLOSURE: my friends and I initiated the first boycott, which was directed at the products of the settlements.

Our peace movement, Gush Shalom, was deliberating how to stop the spread of the settlements, each of which is a land mine on the road to peace. The main reason for setting up settlements is to prevent the two-state solution—the only peace solution there is.

Our investigators made a Grand Tour of the settlements and registered the enterprises which were lured by government enticements to set up shop beyond the Green Line. We published the list and encouraged customers to abstain from buying these products.

A boycott is a democratic instrument of protest. It is non-violent. Every person can exercise it privately, without joining any group or exhibiting himself or herself in public.

Our main aim was to get the Israeli public to distinguish clearly between Israel proper and the settlements in the occupied territories.

In March 1997 we held a press conference to announce the campaign. It was a unique event. I have held press conference which were overflowing with journalists – for example, after my first meeting with Yasser Arafat in besieged West Beirut. I have held press conferences with sparse attendance. But this one was really special: not a single Israeli journalist turned up.

Still, the idea spread. I don't know how many thousand Israelis are boycotting the products of the settlements right now.

However, we were upset by the attitude of the European Union authorities, which denounced the settlements while in practice subsidizing their products with customs exemptions like real Israeli wares. My colleagues and I went to Brussels to protest, but were told by polite bureaucrats that Germany and others were obstructing any step toward a settlement boycott.

Eventually, the Europeans moved, albeit slowly. They are now demanding that the products of the settlements be clearly marked.

THE BDS movement has a very different agenda. They want to boycott the State of Israel as such.

I always considered this a major strategic error. Instead of isolating the settlements and separating them from mainstream Israelis, a general boycott drives all Israelis into the arms of the settlers. It re-awakens age-old Jewish fears. Facing a common danger, Jews unite.

Netanyahu could not wish for more. He is now riding the wave of Jewish reactions. Every day there are headlines about another success of the boycott movement, and each success is a bonus for Netanyahu.

It is also a bonus for his adversary, Omar al-Barghouti, the Palestinian organizer of BDS.

Palestine is well stocked with Barghoutis. It is an extended family prominent in several villages north of Jerusalem.

The most famous is Marwan al-Barghouti, who has been condemned to several life sentences for leading the Fatah youth organization. He was not indicted for taking part in any “terrorist” acts, but for his role as organiza-

tionally responsible. Indeed, he and I were partners in organizing several non-violent protests against the occupation.

When he was brought to trial, we protested in the court building. One of my colleagues lost a toenail in the ensuing battle with the violent court guards. Marwan is still in prison and many Palestinians consider him a prospective heir of Mahmoud Abbas.

Another Barghouti is Mustafa, the very likable leader of a leftist party, who ran against Abbas for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority. We have met while facing the army in several demonstrations against the Wall.

Omar Barghouti, the leader of the BDS movement, is a postgraduate student at Tel Aviv University. He demands the free return of all Palestinian refugees, equality for Israel's Palestinian citizens and, of course, an end to the occupation.

However, BDS is not a highly organized worldwide organization. It is more of a trade mark. Groups of students, artists and others spring up spontaneously and join the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Here and there, some real anti-Semites try to join. But for Netanyahu, they are all, all anti-Semites.

AS WE feared from the beginning, the boycott of Israel—as distinguished from the boycott of the settlements—has united the general Jewish population with the settlers, under the leadership of Netanyahu.

The fatherland is in danger. National unity is the order of the day. “Opposition Leader” Yitzhak Herzog is rushing forward to support Netanyahu, as are almost all other parties.

Israel's Supreme Court, a frightened shadow of its for-

mer self, has already decreed that calling for a boycott of Israel is a crime—including calls for boycotting the settlements.

Almost every day, news about the boycott hits the headlines. The boss of “Orange”, the French communications giant, first joined the boycott, then quickly turned around and is coming to Israel for a pilgrimage of repentance. Student organizations and professional groups in America and Europe adopt the boycott. The EU now vigorously demands the marking of settlement products.

Netanyahu is happy. He calls upon world Jewry to take up the fight against this anti-Semitic outrage. The owner of Netanyahu, multi-billionaire casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, has convened a war council of rich Jews in Las Vegas. His counterpart, pro-Labor multi-billionaire Haim Saban has joined him. Even the perpetrators of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion would not believe it.

AS COMIC relief, another casino owner is competing for the headlines. He is a much, much smaller operator, who cannot be compared to Adelson.

He is the new Knesset Member Oren Hazan, No 30 on the Likud election list, the last one who got in. A TV expose has alleged that he was the owner of a casino in Bulgaria, who supplied prostitutes to his clients and used hard drugs. He has already been chosen as Deputy Speaker of the Knesset. The Speaker has temporarily suspended him from chairing Knesset plenum sessions.

So the two casino owners, the big and the small, dominate the news. Rather bizarre in a country where casinos are forbidden, and where clandestine casino goers are routinely arrested.

Well, life is a roulette game. Even life in Israel.