

Progressive Voices Questioning BDS and Anti-Normalization:  
A Compendium  
October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015

Many activists and scholars who staunchly oppose the Israeli occupation—even some ardent critics of Zionism—are against the BDS (boycotts, divestment and sanctions) movement, including its strictures against “normalization” between Israelis and Palestinians. People on the left who are deciding how best to work for peace, justice and reconciliation for Israelis and Palestinians should be aware of these voices:

**The BDS movement**

[Michael Walzer](#), Institute for Advanced Study (Professor Emeritus)

*There are two lefts engaged today in what we might loosely call Middle Eastern politics. The first: the familiar left, is a left whose members are committed to defend people in trouble (wherever they live), to oppose oppression (wherever it occurs), to promote self-determination (for everybody), to fight for greater equality... The second is a single issue left, focused on the Israel-Palestine conflict and committed to criticize and delegitimize Israel—only Israel...*

*Let's imagine a divestment campaign sponsored by the first, the authentic left. How would we recognize it? First, this wouldn't be the only thing that this left was doing; Israel would not be the only country in the world, or (better) in the Middle East, that it was worrying about. And, second, any decent left would proclaim, from the beginning, its commitment to self-determination for both the Palestinian people and the Jewish people; it would defend the statehood of all the people in the world who need a state: Tibetans, Kurds, Palestinians—and, yes, the Jews, too.<sup>i</sup>*

[Noam Chomsky](#), Massachusetts Institute of Technology

*The opening call of the BDS movement, by a group of Palestinian intellectuals in 2005, demanded that Israel fully comply with international law by “(1) Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling the Wall; (2) Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and (3) Respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194...”*

*...The pursuit of (1) in the above list makes good sense: it has a clear objective and is readily understood by its target audience in the West... However, this is not the case for (3). While there is near-universal*

*international support for (1), there is virtually no meaningful support for (3) beyond the BDS movement itself. Nor is (3) dictated by international law. The text of UN General Assembly Resolution 194 is conditional, and in any event it is a recommendation, without the legal force of the Security Council resolutions that Israel regularly violates. Insistence on (3) is a virtual guarantee of failure.<sup>ii</sup>*

**[Norman Finkelstein](#)**, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Sakarya University

*We have to be honest, and I loathe the disingenuousness. They [leaders of the BDS movement] don't want Israel. They think they are being very clever; they call it their three tier: "We want the end of the occupation, we want the right of return, and we want equal rights for Arabs in Israel." And they think they are very clever, because they know the result of implementing all three is what? You know and I know what's the result. There's no Israel!*

*[They say] "Oh, we're agnostic about Israel." You're not agnostic. You don't want it.<sup>iii</sup>*

**Nancy Koppelman**, Evergreen State College

*The Israel/Palestine conflict is a puzzle that badly needs bold, brave and informed engagement among the parties that disagree. But the BDS movement generally expresses intense compassion for one of the contending parties, while showing spectacular indifference to the other. Academics who speak for the movement profess the conclusion that there is a quite simple solution to the conflict—just end the occupation, preferably today—which is naïve at best and ethically irresponsible at worst when proffered by intellectuals who ought to know better how international politics works – "not like a nursery," as Hannah Arendt once wrote...*

*BDS principles aim towards an outcome already known to its adherents, based on an analysis of causes they think they need not analyze again. This conclusion-driven approach threatens a wide range of emergent work by Israelis and Palestinians alike who are collaborating, often against terrible odds, to address the decades-long conflict plaguing their peoples, even as geography undeniably ties their fates, like their histories, tightly to one another.<sup>iv</sup>*

**Todd Gitlin**, Columbia University

*I want...to address the anti-Israeli BDS supporters I know. I want to tell them: You're acting like inverted tribalists, singling out one tribe to demonize. You've surrendered to the tribalist recoil, the tit-for-tat temptation, to tell "the other" to go fuck him- or herself (not to put too fine a point on it). I would say to them what I would say to Benjamin Netanyahu: Your self-righteousness is short-sighted, futile, and counterproductive. It*

*offers no vision but endless war and slaughter. It offers the hatred that curdles the hater.*<sup>v</sup>

## **Anti-Normalization**

**Edward Said**, author of *Orientalism* and *The Question of Palestine*

*Complete anti-normalization is not an effective weapon for the powerless: its symbolic value is low, and its actual effect is passive and negative...I believe we must try to penetrate the Israeli consciousness with everything at our disposal. Speaking or writing to Israeli audiences breaks their taboo against us.*<sup>vi</sup>

**[Joel Braunold and Huda Aburaquob](#)**, Alliance for Middle East Peace

*While the argument for anti-normalization is intellectually coherent, it is ultimately self-defeating. How, for example, will those who seek a full right of return for Palestinian refugees but refuse to allow them to engage with Jewish Israelis who reject the idea, succeed in convincing the Israelis that it is a viable option? How do they expect two conflicting parties to empathize with one another's narratives when neither side has the opportunity to learn of the other's struggle on a personal level? And how can they break the victim-perpetuator cycle if they do not seek an end to the victim-perpetrator identities? Preventing the conflicting sides from interacting enables anti-normalization activists to define the "other" in their own terms.*<sup>vii</sup>

**[Ghaith al-Omari](#)**, former Palestinian Authority negotiator

**My experiences as a member of the Palestinian-Israeli peace negotiations...confirmed the necessity of mutual understanding in navigating toward a peace agreement. At first, my view of the Israelis was simplistic. But as I experienced extended dialogue with Israelis, I saw their fears, concerns, hopes, and interests (and yes, hang-ups and dysfunctions) firsthand as they understood them. This mutual dialogue has enriched my personal insight into a conflict that continues to define the Palestinian experience. And while I will never adopt the Zionist narrative—just as I do not expect my Israeli friends to adopt the Palestinian narrative—I now understand that Israelis feel as passionately, as sincerely, and as genuinely about their collective identity as I do about my own.**

## **Academic Boycotts**

**[Sari Nusseibah](#)**, former President, Al-Quds University

*If we are to look at Israeli society, it is within the academic community that we've had the most progressive pro-peace views and views that have come*

***out in favor of seeing us as equals. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.***<sup>viii</sup>

Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi, former director of American studies, Al-Quds University  
***I'm against the boycott in general. We need more dialogue with the other. That's why I believe that you should not have a general boycott against Israel, or a boycott against Israeli universities. If you want to boycott anyone, target those universities that are calling for occupation or are supporting the continuation of the occupation...But don't target those Israelis and those universities and those institutions which actually are your partner.***

***Why is this occupation persisting? Because of all this mistrust. It's so important to overcome these challenges and build trust between the two people. How can we build trust with boycotts?***<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Walzer, "The Two Lefts: Debating Divestment at Princeton," *The Third Narrative*, April 29, 2015 (<http://thirdnarrative.org/author/michael-walzer/>).

<sup>ii</sup> Noam Chomsky, "On Israel-Palestine and BDS," *The Nation*, July 2, 2014 (<http://www.thenation.com/article/israel-palestine-and-bds/>).

<sup>iii</sup> Norman Finkelstein, Interview at Imperial College of London, Feb 9, 2012 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iggdO7C70P8>).

<sup>iv</sup> Nancy Koppelman, "'When you want to do something, join us!': The Limits of the Social Justice Movement in Higher Education," in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, eds. Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm (MLA Members for Scholars Rights, 2015) pp. 215-216.

<sup>v</sup> Todd Gitlin, "How My Father's Problems With Black's Mirrors the Left's Problems With Jews," *Tablet*, October 6, 2014 (<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/185944/left-problem-with-jews>).

<sup>vi</sup> Edward Said, "Music At the Limits: Three Decades of Essays and Articles on Music," (Bloomsbury, 2000) p. 298.

<sup>vii</sup> Joel Braunold and Huda Abuarquob, "A Bigger Threat Than BDS: Anti-normalization," *Haaretz*, July 2, 2015 (<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/the-jewish-thinker/.premium-1.664018>).

<sup>viii</sup> Associated Press, "Palestinian university president comes out against boycott of Israeli academics," in *Haaretz*, June 17, 2006.

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew Kalman, "Palestinians Divided Over Boycott of Israeli Universities," *New York Times*, January 19, 2014 ([http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/world/middleeast/palestinians-divided-over-boycott-of-israeli-universities.html?hpw&rref=education&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/world/middleeast/palestinians-divided-over-boycott-of-israeli-universities.html?hpw&rref=education&_r=1)).