

Academic sanctions and global solidarity for Palestinian liberation: A view from South Africa on the need to unfriend Israeli universities

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Introduction

This panel is not only devoted to considering arguments about implementing the call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel, but also about broader problems of progressive political positioning and backlash in the academy. Although I do not deal with the April 2 case of Richard Goldstone's unprincipled U-turn on the findings of the United Commissions commission into Israel's 2008-09 Gaza invasion, the incident suggests the extent to which South African commentary on the oppression of Palestinians has become acutely politicized. For if Goldstone's return to his Zionist past – recalling, too, his past as a minor apartheid-era judge (hence as a human rights ally, his zig-zag unreliability, reliability and now unreliability) – serves any purpose aside from empowering Israeli militarists, it will be to compel us to use South Africa as a base from which critical inquiry into the condition of Palestine must now be intensified.

Fortunately, just such an opportunity arises in the case of the University of Johannesburg faculty Senate's decision on March 23 to support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) struggle by breaking ties with Israel's Ben Gurion University of the Negev. Recall that in the most extreme black-and-white case, fighting to end apartheid, scholar-activists played a useful role that has relevance to the Palestinian situation. To be sure, academic boycotts of the apartheid regime were nowhere near as successful as the sports, cultural and economic sanctions that hit South African elites from the late 1960s, which were decisive in undermining the racist state and dividing/conquering the white population, especially from 1985. These experiences bear consideration as a site for ongoing Palestinian solidarity, and they point to a trajectory by which social consciousness can be ratcheted up into more sustained commitments.

But even in academia, my argument is that, reminiscent of the closing decade of apartheid, recent political developments in the Middle East allow sufficient compression of space and scale such that BDS campaigning against Israel can bear fruit in ways South Africans will recognize as potentially vital in ending a settler-colonial regime we justifiably label 'Apartheid Israel'. These developments include:

- the 2008-09 Israeli Defense Force (IDF) *invasion of Gaza and deaths of 1400 Palestinians*;
- the 2010 IDF boarding of a *civilian boat attempting to end the siege of Gaza*, resulting in the murder of nine solidarity activists from Turkey and the United States;
- the ongoing *expansion of West Bank settlements* even to the extent of unveiling the US Vice Presidency and State Department as impotent forces against the Netanyahu regime;

- debilitating *weaknesses within Palestine's competing political-party blocs* – Hamas in besieged Gaza and Fatah in the Occupied West Bank, as well as the US-Israeli-Fatah-backed unelected government in Ramallah led by the neoliberal prime minister (and former World Bank/IMF official) Salam Fayyad – combined with *popular democratic uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East* together confirm the 'Vichy'-style character of Palestinian-Israeli collaboration;
- increasing *interactions and partnerships within global academia* involving both Palestinians and Israelis, especially in fields such as water, energy and climate; and
- the emergence and growth of a *progressive Palestinian civil society*, which appears equipped to take up struggles against imperialism and neoliberalism with sophistication and vigour;
- the related rise and widespread *legitimation of BDS* as a specific strategy, led by a secular Palestinian progressive network, the Palestine Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI).

In 2006, 170 Palestinian organizations initiated the BDS campaign, insisting on three unifying demands: the retraction of illegal Israeli settlements (a demand won in the Gaza Strip in 2005) and the end of the West Bank Occupation and Gaza siege; cessation of racially-discriminatory policies towards the million and a half Palestinians living within Israel; and a recognition of Palestinians' right to return to residences dating to the 1948 ethnic cleansing when the Israeli state was established. At one time, 'one-person, one-vote in a unitary South Africa' appeared just as ambitious and impossible a demand – but from the depth of despair in the 1980s, the liberation movement used BDS to win precisely this democratic demand.

The South African precedent

The BDS movement draws inspiration in part from the way we toppled apartheid: an internal intifadah from townships and trade unions, combined with financial sanctions that in mid-1985 peaked because of an incident at the Durban City Hall. On August 15 that year, apartheid boss PW Botha addressed the Natal National Party and an internationally televised audience of 200 million, with his belligerent 'Rubicon Speech' featuring the famous finger-wagging command, "Don't push us too far."

It was the brightest red flag to our anti-apartheid bull. Immediately as protests resumed, Pretoria's frightened international creditors – subject to intense activist pressure during prior months – began calling in loans early. Facing a run on the SA Reserve Bank's hard currency, Botha defaulted on \$13 billion of debt payments coming due, shut the stock market and imposed exchange controls in early September 1985. Within days, leading English-speaking businessmen Gavin Relly, Zac de Beer and Tony Bloom began dismantling their decades-old practical alliance with the Pretoria regime, met African National Congress leaders in Lusaka, and began supporting the transition that would free South Africa of racial (albeit not class) apartheid less than nine years later.

But BDS was not completely straightforward, for recall that over the prior eight years, futile efforts to seduce change were made by Rev Leon Sullivan, the Philadelphia preacher and General Motors board member whose 'Sullivan Principles' aimed to allow multinationals in apartheid SA to remain so long as they were non-racist in employment practices while paying taxes to apartheid and supplying crucial logistical support and trade relationships. Hence Sullivan's effort merely amounted, as Archbishop Desmond

Tutu put it, to polishing apartheid's chains. Across the world, taking a cue from the internal United Democratic Front, activists wisely ignored attempts by Sullivan as well as by ANC foreign relations bureaucrat (later president) Thabo Mbeki to shut down the sanctions movement way too early.

Civil society ratcheted up anti-apartheid BDS even when FW De Klerk offered reforms, such as freeing Nelson Mandela and unbanning political parties in February 1990. New bank loans to Pretoria for ostensibly 'developmental' purposes were rejected by activists, and threats were made: a future ANC government would default. It was only by fusing bottom-up pressure with top-down international delegitimization of white rule that the final barriers were cleared for the first free vote, on April 27 1994.

We were especially grateful for the leadership over many decades provided by Dennis Brutus (1924-2009), the black South African poet, literary professor and global justice advocate who is generally credited with forcing white apartheid-era sporting teams out of the Olympic Games, world rugby, cricket, tennis and other sports. His last 'toyitoyi' protest event was in January 2009 when the Israeli ambassador visited Durban, and within a month Brutus had successfully encouraged Durban dockworkers to protest the Israeli Zim shipping lines by refusing to unload cargo in the first such act of port solidarity.

Something similar has begun in the Middle East, as long-overdue international solidarity with Palestinians gathers momentum, while Benjamin Netanyahu's bad-faith peace talks with collaborationist Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas go nowhere. Yet if another sell-out soon looms, tracking the 1993 Oslo deal, we can anticipate an upsurge in BDS activity, drawing more attention to the three core liberatory demands. Abbas and Fayyad are sure to fold on each of these principles, so civil society is already picking up the slack. Boycotting Israeli institutions is the primary non-violent resistance strategy. According to PACBI co-founder Omar Barghouti, "BDS remains the most morally sound, non-violent form of struggle that can rid the oppressor of his oppression, thereby allowing true coexistence, equality, justice and sustainable peace to prevail. South Africa attests to the potency and potential of this type of civil resistance."

I want to take this opportunity to point to three areas where we learned lessons about staging academic boycotts as part of Israeli BDS: taking guidance from PACBI on principled relations; promoting institutional (not individual) sanctions; and stepping up from academic to harder-hitting economic sanctions. Our main case study is the campaign against Ben Gurion University (BGU), which I will explore in detail thanks to sustained advocacy and serious research by Palestine solidarity scholar-activists.

South Africans mobilize against BGU

During apartheid, the University of Johannesburg (UJ, then called Rand Afrikaans University) established a Memorandum of Understanding for scientific exchanges with BGU, which came up for renewal at the UJ Senate last September 29 (details are at <http://www.ujpetition.com/>). Crucial to this was an effort in prior days when more than 250 leading local intellectuals – notably, Neville Alexander, Breyten Breytenbach, John Dugard, Antjie Krog, Achille Mbembe, Sampie Terreblanche, Desmond Tutu and especially Ronnie Kasrils (to cite those who are best known, amongst 420 other academics) – endorsed BDS against UJ-BGU relations.

However, perhaps influenced by Mandela's ill-advised acceptance of an honorary doctorate from BGU more than a decade ago, the UJ Senate statement was not entirely pro-Palestinian, for it promoted a fantasy: reform of Israeli-Palestinian relations could be induced by 'engagement'. (Shades of Sullivan empowering himself, to try negotiating between the forces of apartheid and democracy.)

On the one hand, the UJ Senate acknowledged that BGU "supports the military and armed forces of Israel, in particular in its occupation of Gaza" – by offering money to students who went into the military reserve so as to support Operation Cast Lead, for example. To its credit, the UJ Senate recognized that "we should take leadership on this matter from peer institutions among the Palestinian population."

On the other hand, in an arrogant display of constructive-engagement mentality, the UJ Senate academics – many of whom are holdovers from the apartheid era – resolved to "amend the MOU to include one or more Palestinian universities chosen on the basis of agreement between BGU and UJ." This was quite frustrating to BDS activists, for the UJ statement forgets that Palestinian universities are today promoters of BDS. Even Al Quds University, which historically had the closest ties (and which until Operation Cast Lead actually encouraged Palestine-Israel collaboration), broke the chains in early 2009, because, "Ending academic cooperation is aimed at, first of all, pressuring Israel to abide by a solution that ends the occupation, a solution that has been needed for far too long and that the international community has stopped demanding."

The man tasked with reconciling UJ's Senate resolution with Middle East realpolitik was UJ Deputy Vice Chancellor Adam Habib. In 2001 he founded our University of KwaZulu-Natal Centre for Civil Society, and led substantial research projects nurturing progressive social change. Habib was banned from entering the United States from 2006-10, for his crimes of being Muslim and speaking at a 2003 anti-war protest in Durban, and he is arguably the most eloquent and highest-profile political analyst in South Africa today.

However, Habib made a serious mistake, when remarking to the press last September, "We believe in reconciliation... We'd like to bring BGU and Palestinian universities together to produce a collective engagement that benefits everyone." Even Habib's enormous persuasive capacity failed, if he expected liberal Zionists to recognize the right of Palestinians to self-determination and Israel's obligation to comply with international law. For writing in the newspaper Haaretz in early October 2010, BGU official David Newman sleazily celebrated Habib's remark and simultaneously argued, point-blank (with no acknowledgement of the South Africa case), "Boycotts do nothing to promote the interests of peace, human rights or – in the case of Israel – the end of occupation."

In reality, even Israel's reactionary Reut Institute recognizes BDS power, correctly arguing in February 2010 that a "Delegitimization Network aims to supersede the Zionist model with a state that is based on the 'one person, one vote' principle by turning Israel into a pariah state." As one example that needed reversing, according to the Reut institute, "the Goldstone report that investigated Operation Cast Lead" caused "a crisis in Israel's national security doctrine... Israel lacks an effective response." Reflecting the brief importance of Goldstone's role in this 'Network', a major pressure campaign was launched by South African Zionists that included threatening to picket his grandson's bar mitzvah ceremony. Such pressure appeared to have compelled Goldstone into a reputation-destroying reversal.

At UJ, Habib deserved far better than a role as a latter-day Leon Sullivan uniting with the likes of Newman, and was ultimately unsuccessful in his 'engagement' with Zionism. In early 2009, I witnessed his attempt to do something similar with a BGU research centre on civil society. At the time of Operation Cast Lead and the imposition of the siege, Habib, Brutus, Walden Bello, Alan Fowler and I tried to persuade two academic colleagues – Jan Aart Scholte of Warwick University and Jackie Smith of Notre Dame – to respect BDS and decline keynote speaking invitations to an Israeli 'third sector' conference at an Israeli Dead Sea resort hotel (http://web.bgu.ac.il/NR/rdonlyres/E6905E1E-6760-4E01-9BB2-D9161225BF97/0/ICTR_0209_En.pdf).

We failed, and the crucial lesson is not just that individuals (Scholte and Smith) suffer obvious ethical lapses, but also that we need a stronger set of BDS principles applied to *institutions*, from which it will be much easier to shame those who break solidarity with Palestine. For in that case, BGU's Institute for Third Sector Research refused to add Palestinian perspectives (a suggestion from Habib), providing us the obvious lesson that 'constructive engagement' with Zionists, even liberals, was utterly futile. The January 2009 efforts we made to discuss BDS entailed inviting well-respected academics at the Institute to join us on a skypecast debate, but their reaction was haughty, ultimately amounting to their own boycott of an academic discussion. Similarly, between last September and last month, BGU failed to even answer the extensive charges set out by UJ BDS advocates.

The BDS showdown at UJ

Thus it was logical that on March 23, sufficient pressure was applied by UJ BDS advocates that, in lieu of any progress in BGU-Palestine relations, the UJ Senate voted by a substantial majority in favour of breaking ties to BGU. The "UJ-BGU Report" of March 15 2011 was crucial to the documentation of "institutional complicity and active collaboration with Israeli military, occupation and apartheid practices." The report identified

- BGU's role in military and occupation activities,
- controversies surrounding academic freedom and the freedom of expression at BGU and in Israel,
- critique of a specific research project on water linking UJ and BGU (in the context of Israeli water theft from Palestine), and
- the overall context of discrimination within education in Palestine and Israel.

The report was based upon a February 2011 fact-finding investigation in Israel and Occupied Palestine, and is worth quoting at length.

- *The report demonstrates BGU's active role in supporting and extending the efficacy of the Israeli military and the occupation. Exposing BGU's development of research specifically aimed for application in military uses (such as un-manned robot technologies) as well as BGU's participation in programs specifically sponsored by and benefitting the Israeli Defense Forces (such as an advanced technologies park and the Israeli state's atomic research programmes and facilities), this report documents BGU's ongoing, deliberate and wideranging support for the Israeli military and illegal occupation.*

- *BGU threatens Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression. Attempting to limit the pressure of internal and international criticism, the Israeli state has initiated a series of repressive measures (including the widely-condemned Prohibition on Boycott Bill) as part of a concerted effort to limit the purview of academic freedom and political expression. Based on evidence provided mainly by primary sources this report exposes not only a failure by BGU to oppose such concerning measures, but also its active support for extending state efforts to limit academic freedom and political expression. BGU's president, Professor Rivka Carmi, conspicuously and actively supports the attempts by the Israeli Government to curb academic freedom and dissenting voices on Israeli University campuses. There is a trend that BGU vigorously and consistently undermines and disciplines groups, students and academics who voice their criticism of Israel or their support for Palestinian rights. In this regard, the values of BGU are in stark contrast to the values of academic freedom and respect for diversity which are promoted by UJ.*
- *BGU's water research project contributes to the violation of human rights. The current relationship between UJ and BGU involves research into water purification and energy technologies. The report contextualises the water research agreement between UJ and BGU by highlighting the manner in which water policies of the Israeli State are discriminatory against Palestinians (particularly the residents of the West Bank) and are in flagrant contravention of International Law. The findings of the report demonstrate how the research supported and undertaken by BGU forms part of an intricate nexus which supports and entrenches the discriminatory policies on water availability consumption within Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. Collaborative links with the activities of the Israeli Water Authority and the Jewish National Fund are exposed as a necessary and pernicious result of any relationship with BGU's water research units.*
- *BGU perpetuates structural discrimination against Palestinians. This report uncovers the manner in which BGU not only mirrors Israeli discriminatory policies and practices, but actively reinforces its exclusions and differential treatment. The report analyses and systematically uncovers how BGU's preferential treatment for military enlisted students further cements and extends the inequality already prevalent within the make-up of tertiary educational institutions in Israel.*

These findings were well documented and were not rebutted. What they represent is another instance of South Africans learning from and being inspired by Palestinians – no matter all efforts to confuse BDS advocacy with claims of academic freedom and the merits of water research.

However, just as occurred with Goldstone, we can expect all manner of countervailing forces to intensify. For what I fear Habib forgot in 2009, last September and in recent days was Barghouti's clear assessment of power: "Any relationship between intellectuals across the oppression divide must be aimed, one way or another, at ending oppression, not ignoring it or escaping from it. Only then can true dialogue evolve, and thus the possibility for sincere collaboration through dialogue."

UJ academics supportive of the BDS petition hope and expect that Habib will consider this stance, and now transcend the spin-doctoring for which on April 12, he was (correctly) accused of on a local talk-radio station by the *SA Jewish Report*: "Habib, stressing that UJ was not engaged in an academic boycott but nuanced politics... bemoaned the fact that UJ had become a battleground after receiving the petition." Johannesburg-based BGU representative Brenda Stern rebutted Habib, "we must be

careful of not trying to put a spin on" [UJ's BDS decision], as she attempted to mobilize an international boycott of UJ.

Habib emphasised on that occasion and in a newspaper article (in *Business Day*) that UJ would not bow to bullying

How is one to interpret the implicit threats about getting international institutions to boycott UJ? As a public South African university, we do not respond to threats, whether foreign or domestic. We are convinced that our partnership with our peer institutions around the world is constructed on sound and equitable foundations and they will not allow themselves to be used as instruments to threaten a South African public university. But imagine the temerity of citizens threatening to use foreign institutions to boycott a South African public university because they did not like a decision its senate made.

Sorry, but this is exactly what the Zionist pressure can generate, and BDS advocates taking the major and necessary step of institutional unfriending should bear this mind. And yet we've been here before; unfriending through BDS is a step we should all take with confidence. After all, the growing support for Palestinian liberation via BDS reminds of small but sure steps towards the full-fledged anti-apartheid sports, cultural, academic and economic boycotts catalyzed by Brutus against racist South African Olympics teams more than forty years ago.

Today, these are just the first nails we're collectively hammering into the coffin of Zionist domination, in solidarity with a people who have every reason to fight back with tools that we in South Africa proudly sharpened: non-violently but with formidable force. In the process of increasing pressure against Israeli apartheid, Palestinian BDS advocates and their international supporters have done a splendid job. Of course, the options for Sullivan-style reforms are obviously available, but they are generating so few returns that the logic of full-fledged BDS support appears now inexorable.

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