

Israel and the Middle East. Divestment

ANALYSIS

The Global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement: The Economic War Against the Jewish State

*“The actual goal of divestment and the broader BDS movement is to isolate Israel, and make it embarrassing to support Israel.”
A pro-divestment activist speaking at a Sabeel conference in a church in Berkeley, California*

Seven years ago in September 2001, the [United Nations World Conference against Racism](#) convened in Durban, South Africa. Officially the aim of the event was the public recognition of slavery and colonialism as crimes; however the conference devolved into an anti-Israel campaign, led by Arab and Islamic states, to demonize Israel and brand Zionism as a form of racism.

For weeks the United States cautioned organizers that unless the anti-Israel language was removed, the US would withdraw from the conference. The US tried to negotiate a compromise, but failed, at which point the US and Israel withdrew in protest. In the end, and perhaps owing to the strong stance taken by the US and Israel, the final official declaration ended up without the language that the US and Israel had opposed.

The NGO Forum: The emergence of the “Durban Strategy”

A parallel conference in Durban during this time, called the NGO Forum, was in essence a tribunal against Israel and its right to exist. The wording of its final declaration was extreme and chilling:

“Declare(d) Israel as a racist apartheid state in which Israel's brand of apartheid as a crime against humanity has been characterized by separation and segregation, dispossession, restricted land access, denationalization, ‘bantustanization’ and inhuman acts.”¹

The NGO Forum Declaration also called

- for “the launch of an international anti-Israeli apartheid movement;”
- for a “complete and total isolation of Israel as in the case of South Africa which means the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargos, the full cessation of all links [diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military operation and training] between all states and Israel.”

¹ WCAR NGO Forum Declaration, September 3, 2001, http://www.unwatch.org/atf/cf/%7B6DEB65DA-BE5B-4CAE-8056-8BF0BEDF4D17%7D/durban_ngo_declaration_2001.pdf

- And accused Israel of “systematic perpetration of racist crimes including war crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing.”²

The NGO Forum’s Declaration came only a few days before the 9-11 attacks on the United States, which muted news coverage of the Declaration. Yet, the NGO Forum Declaration stands as the manifesto of what has become known as the “BDS Movement,” which is the effort to impose on Israel “complete and total isolation” via boycotts, divestment and sanctions.

Very soon after the NGO Forum’s Declaration was released, this manifesto’s results were seen. Divestment movements cropped up around the world, including the San Francisco Bay Area. Efforts to demand that universities, city councils, labor unions, and corporations divest from Israel became a frequent occurrence.

Turning Israel into an international pariah: “The Three Ds”

The characterization of Israel as a “racist apartheid state” is a *tactic* in the overarching strategy to isolate Israel as a pariah. The tactic is to utilize what can be described as the “Three D’s” which are:

1. Demonization of Israel
2. Delegitimization of Israel, and
3. Double Standard criticisms of Israel

The first two are accomplished by the constant repetition in the movement’s propaganda of distortions and lies that Israel and its foundational ideology of Zionism is irredeemably racist, to the point where the Israeli state and Israeli society are beyond the pale of civilized society, and as such should be completely and totally isolated via the use of “mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargos, the full cessation of all links [diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military operation and training] between all states and Israel.”

The use of the double standard in this propaganda campaign is the selective criticism of Israel. An example is the following story from the *New York Times* about the UN’s Human Rights Council:

When the 47 members of the new council were elected last March, tighter entry requirements succeeded in keeping the most notorious rights abusers off the panel, and there was some hope of less politicized behavior.

But member countries from Africa and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, an association of 57 states promoting Muslim solidarity, have dashed those hopes by voting as a bloc to stymie Western efforts to direct serious attention to situations like the killings, rapes and pillage in Sudan's Darfur region, which the United Nations has declared the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

² Ibid.

*Instead, the council has focused its condemnation almost exclusively on Israel. It has passed eight resolutions against Israel, and has cited no other country for human rights violations.*³

BDS: The multi-front attack on Israel and its right to exist

The website [Global BDS Movement](#) was “born out of the need to offer all those interested and active in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement a shared space for information, analysis, exchange of ideas and experiences.” The site is “overseen by the steering committee of the Palestinian BDS National Committee and has been adopted as a tool of the ICNP ([International Coordinating Network on Palestine](#)) to support efforts of networking and coordination.”⁴

The BDS movement bases its strategy on the one used against South Africa.

*The Boycott Movement against South African Apartheid started in the late 1950s with small groups of activists and exiles in Britain and Sweden. It took years, if not decades, before it became a global movement and before churches, trade unions, and political parties became directly involved in the struggle. But once it was initiated, this movement helped lead eventually and inevitably to the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa.*⁵

Currently, the BDS movement calls for

- academic, cultural, consumer and sports boycotts of Israel
- Divestment of “investments in Israel and companies supporting Israeli occupation and apartheid,”
- Sanctions in the areas of cooperation agreements between Israel and other states; the cutting of “all ties between municipalities or regional councils and Israel at cultural, economic, and diplomatic levels” and cutting all military ties between Israel and the world.⁶

The Divestment Movement in Mainline Churches

In the last four years, divestment emerged as a major issue in a number of key mainline Protestant denominations. While pro-divestment activists inside and outside the churches claim that they are seeking only limited and “selective” divestment, there is every reason to believe that the efforts in the churches are part of an incremental strategy of introducing the idea of divestment as a first stage, to be followed by more blanket divestment in later years.

³ “Dismay Over New U.N. Human Rights Council,” by Warren Hoge, *New York Times*, March 11, 2007 <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/world/11rights.html>

⁴ See <http://www.bdsmovement.net/?q=node/68>

⁵ See Global BDS Movement website at <http://www.bdsmovement.net/?q=node/71> (retrieved 8-14-08)

⁶ Ibid.

For instance, the Jewish Voice for Peace, which has supported selective divestment, describes this strategy on its website thusly:

Better keep the focus of our campaigns laserlike on the occupation itself (and other human rights violations.) A boycott of goods from settlements does precisely that. Likewise, campaigns against companies that do business with the Israeli military, such as Caterpillar. If we maintain that sort of focus, they cannot attack us effectively...

Here in the US, the Presbyterian Church resolved to explore "selective divestment of church funds from those companies whose business in Israel is found to be directly or indirectly causing harm or suffering to innocent people, Palestinian or Israeli". (Note that they wisely "did not approve a blanket divestment from companies that do business in Israel".) This was the first in what may soon be a torrent of church-based activism: the gigantic World Council of Churches has recently spoken in support of the Presbyterians. The genie is out of the bottle, and we may be entering an entirely new phase in the movement for justice and peace in Palestine/Israel.⁷

This is a reference to the Presbyterian Church, USA which, at its 2004 national gathering, passed a resolution that called “to initiate a process of phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel.”

In the aftermath of the 2004 Presbyterian vote for divestment, a number of other Protestant denominations, including the Episcopal Church USA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church considered divestment resolutions brought by pro-divestment activists within their churches.

As a consequence, a major strain on Christian-Jewish relations ensued. A coalition reflecting a very broad spectrum of American Jewish religious and political perspectives from left to right and from all religious streams (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist) began energetically to engage in meetings with the national leadership of the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Methodists and others. The leadership and the grassroots of these various denominations heard from this broad spectrum of American Jewry how divestment not only is unconstructive, one-sided, and lends credibility to Israel’s biggest detractors, but is destroying decades of trust-building between American Jews and Christians.

These national dialogues were replicated hundreds of times as local Jewish communities around the country initiated dialogues with their mainline Christian neighbors. JCRC, along with local rabbis, initiated several Christian-Jewish dialogues throughout the Bay Area, engaging with Christian clergy and laypeople on Israel and peace and justice issues toward the goal of developing a better relationship with our Christian friends and neighbors and to increase awareness of the central role Israel plays in our community’s daily life.

⁷ *op. cit.*

At the same time, a large number of anti-divestment activists emerged in these mainline Christian denominations who were deeply concerned about deteriorating Christian-Jewish relations, and the fear that the actions of their churches could revive anti-Jewish stereotypes among Christians. A number of Christian groups emerged such as [Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East](#) or [Presbyterians Concerned for Christian Jewish Relations](#).

As a result of all this, in 2006 the Presbyterians voted to reverse their position on divestment, and the other denominations backed off from divestment. In 2008, the United Methodists at their quadrennial national gathering defeated no less than five resolutions calling for divestment; the Presbyterians at their 2008 national gathering in San Jose also defeated resolutions trying to reinstate divestment, choosing to focus on truth and fairness in relation to Israelis and Palestinians and opting for diplomatic evenhandedness.

Why are the Mainline Churches being targeted by anti-Israel activists for divestment activities?

The Global BDS Movement seeks to co-opt mainline churches as a means of lending a religious moral cover for their anti-Israel message. The Global BDS Movement website explains:

“Members of faith-based organizations and their leaders can speak out for Palestinian rights, basing their language in fundamental religious precepts of peace and justice.”⁸

As such, the BDS movement views divestment efforts in mainline Christian churches as fully part and parcel of the broader BDS effort, that will in turn raise the profile and legitimate the BDS movement’s objectives:

“Divestment campaigns that target companies such as Caterpillar have been initiated in a number of major Christian churches. Not only will successful divestment campaigns financially weaken the Occupation (sic), but will raise both the public profile and legitimacy of the BDS campaign”⁹

Sabeel: The ‘Guiding Light’ for Christian Divestment

Guiding the divestment in the mainline churches is [Sabeel: The Palestinian Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center](#) in East Jerusalem. Led by an Anglican Canon Naim Ateek, an alumnus of the [San Francisco Theological Seminary](#), Sabeel has been an active force in efforts to promote divestment from the State of Israel.¹⁰

Sabeel’s publications, conferences, and group web site are platforms that espouse extremist anti-Israel views. They echo the positions of many Palestinian political groups, demonstrating that with the emphasis on *praxis* this liberation theology acquires characteristics that are much more

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <http://www.bdsmovement.net/?q=node/125>

¹⁰ “Sabeel’s Call for Morally Responsible Investment;” http://www.fosna.org/investment_activism/sabeels_call.html (Retrieved August 14, 2008)

Palestinian and much less Christian. In fact, critics¹¹ question the degree to which this movement's essence is Christian, or whether it is an exclusive political movement with a religious veneer.

Putting theology into the service of nationalism

Sabeel has created a unique anti-Israel ideology euphemistically called "Palestinian Liberation Theology." In essence, it is Palestinian nationalism given a theological patina. Their website states, "By learning from Jesus – his life under occupation and his response to injustice – this theology hopes to connect the true meaning of Christian faith with the daily lives of all those who suffer under occupation, violence, discrimination, and human rights violations. Additionally, this blossoming theological effort promotes a more accurate international awareness of the current political situation and encourages Christians from around the world to work for justice and to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people."¹²

What is Liberation Theology?

In essence, liberation theology frames Christianity in political activist terms, particularly in areas of social justice and human rights. Christian sacred texts are often interpreted through the lens of Jesus as a liberator and bringer of justice. Some interpret these biblical passages, in effect, as a "call to arms" to carry out Jesus' mission of justice. Marxist concepts such as the doctrine of class struggle often permeate liberation theology writings.

The uniqueness of liberation theology is that it speaks of God exclusively from the perspective of those who are perceived to be disadvantaged, oppressed, or suffering. They are viewed as inherently innocent, as a theological critique of society, and a vehicle for divine grace.

Liberation theology has its roots in Latin America in the 1960s. Led by Roman Catholic clergy and inspired by the Second Vatican Council, it is often considered a form of Christian socialism. Many liberation theologians serve on the faculty of prominent Catholic and Protestant seminaries and schools.

What is Palestinian Liberation Theology?

Classical liberation theology espouses that God is with the oppressed. Palestinian liberation theology casts Palestinians as the oppressed and Israel as the oppressor:

Christ is not in the tanks and jet fighters, fighting on the side of the oppressors [Israel]... God is in the city of Gaza, in the Jenin camp and in the old city of Nablus, Ramallah, and Bethlehem suffering with the oppressed.¹³

This follows a simplistic "good" vs. "evil" dichotomy in which one side is cast as the villain and the other as the innocent victim. In Palestinian Liberation Theology, Israel is thus cast as the

¹¹ See, for example, <http://ngo-monitor.org/article.php?id=150> or

¹² See <http://www.sabeel.org/etemplate.php?id=2>

¹³ Naim Ateek; "Suicide Bombers: What is theologically and morally wrong with suicide bombings? A Palestinian Christian perspective;" *Cornerstone*; Issue 25, Summer 2002; <http://www.fosna.org/cornerstone/documents/CornerstoneIssue25.pdf> (Accessed June 15, 2007).

villain bearing sole guilt for causing and sustaining the conflict with the Palestinians. All complexities in the situation are cast aside in this reductionist morality play.

Why is the Sabeel Center problematic?

While self-described as a Christian group invested in promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace, Sabeel promotes a theologically-based narrative that denies the legitimacy of any Jewish claim to the land of Israel. It asserts that American Christians should advance a foreign policy that is dismissive of Israel's security needs. According to the organization, anti-Israel violence is the result of Israeli actions and a lack of Palestinian autonomy. For Sabeel, peace will come from the birth of a Palestinian state without a previous dismantling of the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure. Some examples:

- **Sabeel's View of a Solution**

While Sabeel claims to accept a two-state solution, a closer reading of its statements and of its website reveal that it views a two-state solution as less optimal than a bi-national or one-state solution. Sabeel's [Jerusalem Document](#), explicitly expresses a preference for **“one state for two nations and three religions.”**

Further, Rev. Fahed Abu Akel, past Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, USA and a member of Friends of Sabeel North America's Steering Committee, stated that Sabeel's goal should be **“to create a cultural shock in America so as to change the debate from a two-state solution, to a one state solution.”**¹⁴

- **Sabeel's use of Imagery of Israel as “crucifying” Palestinians**

In his “Easter Message From Sabeel” in 2001, Ateek writes:

As we approach Holy Week and Easter, the suffering of Jesus Christ at the hands of evil political and religious powers two thousand years ago is lived out again in Palestine... In Palestine, Jesus is walking the via Dolorosa...

*In this season of Lent, it seems to many of us that Jesus is on the cross again with thousands of crucified Palestinians around him. **It only takes people of insight to see the hundreds of thousands of crosses throughout the land, Palestinian men, women, and children being crucified. Palestine has become one huge Golgatha. The Israeli government crucifixion system is operating daily. Palestine has become the place of the skull.***¹⁵

In a sermon entitled “Who Will Roll Away the Stone?” delivered in the Easter season of 2001, Ateek takes as his text for the day that famous passage in Mark 16:2-3:

¹⁴ Stated at the Sabeel Conference “Breaking Down the Wall of Silence: Voices We Need to Hear,” held at St. John's Presbyterian Church, August 25th, 2007

¹⁵ Naim Ateek; “An Easter Message from Sabeel;” April 6, 2001; <http://www.sabeel.org/old/reports/easter01.htm> (Accessed June 18, 2007).

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ ...

Israel has placed a large boulder, a big stone that has metaphorically shut off the Palestinians in a tomb. It is similar to the stone placed on the entrance of Jesus’ tomb, which Mark the evangelist describes as being “very large.” This boulder has shut in the Palestinians.¹⁶

In “The Massacre of the Innocents – A Christmas Reflection,” Ateek writes:

*At this Christmas time, when we remember the message of peace and love that came down from God to earth in the birth of Jesus Christ, our celebrations are marred by the destructive powers of **the modern day “Herods” who are represented in the Israeli government.**¹⁷*

These statements have particular resonance. They seek to revive outmoded and dangerous notions of Jews, in the form of the Jewish state, as the enemies of Christ and Christianity. Sabeel’s use of this hateful imagery is deeply troubling.¹⁸

- **Sabeel’s equivocation on terror**

Sabeel allegedly advocates non-violence and denounces terror; but rationalizes suicide bombings. In his 2002 paper on this subject, not only does Ateek shift accountability for suicide bombings from the terrorists who have carried out the attacks, to Israel but he fails to call for an end to such attacks. He writes

*[I]t is still important to help the readers, whether Palestinians or expatriates, to understand the phenomenon of suicide bombings that tragically arises from the deep misery and torment of many Palestinians... Be that as it may, the hope is that it will inspire the reader to become an ‘aggressive’ advocate for the **RIGHT OF BOTH PEOPLES** to live in freedom and security. So far, this right has been denied to the Palestinians, **hence the resistance to the occupation with all its multi-faceted forms including suicide bombings.**¹⁹ (emphasis added)*

¹⁶ Naim Ateek; “Who Will Roll Away the Stone?;” *Cornerstone*; Issue 21, Spring 2001; <http://www.sabeel.org/old/news/cstone21/ateekser.htm> (Accessed June 18, 2007).

¹⁷ Naim Ateek; “The Massacre of the Innocents - A Christmas Reflection;” *Cornerstone*; Issue 20, Christmas 2000 (Special Edition); <http://www.sabeel.org/old/news/news120/ateek.htm> (Accessed June 18, 2007).

¹⁸ See also Christians for Fair Witness on the Middle East’s, “Sabeel’s Use of Anti-Semitic Themes” at http://christianfairwitness.com/whatarethefacts/UCC_Synod_Handout_Sabeel%20Biblical_Themes_Anti-Semitism.htm (Retrieved 8-14-08)

¹⁹ Naim Ateek; “Suicide Bombers: What is theologically and morally wrong with suicide bombings? A Palestinian Christian perspective;” *Cornerstone*; Issue 25, Summer 2002; <http://www.fosna.org/cornerstone/documents/CornerstoneIssue25.pdf> (Retrieved 8-14-08).