

BDS and BLM: Positionality, Intersectionality and Nonviolent Activism

Written by Maia Hallward

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MAIA HALLWARD, AUG 5 2020

The Israel-Palestine conflict has been a focal point for international activists for years and the Black Lives Matter movement has seen remarkable support around the world in recent months. A defining feature of both struggles has been the dynamics of solidarity activism in cross-border struggles where there are multiple levels of power, privilege, and perspective. This piece compares the case of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) activism directed at Israeli policies and practices to Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism directed at US policies and practices. How can civil society groups involved in these contexts work to un-do decades of silencing 'Other' narratives and combat systems of oppression?

Everyone brings their own positionality to both of these contentious issues. My experience as a white Quaker woman who was raised as a cultural outsider in the U.S. and who was privileged to live and work in several other countries shapes how I conceive of Israeli and Palestinian civil society activism and its parallels to anti-racism activism back home. Likewise, personal experiences with racism, sexism, misogyny and xenophobia shape how I conceptualize activism in both contexts. Ijeoma Oluo (2018) asserts that each of us has our own privileges (as well as oppressions) based on our race, class, gender, ability, etc., and we need to be mindful of those privileges as we engage in work for political, economic, and social change. These intersectionalities are critical to understanding varying responses to peace and justice activism related to Palestinians and black Americans as well as increasing connections between the two movements.

I taught at an elite private school in the West Bank for two years at the end of the Oslo era, lived in Jordan the year that the second Intifada erupted, and later returned to live in Jerusalem for a year during the end of the second Intifada. This period included the death of long time Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, the election of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority, and the announcement by Ariel Sharon of a "disengagement" from the Gaza Strip. I experienced checkpoints and closures, saw the rapid expansion of Israeli settlements, and witnessed the vastly different social-economic circumstances of West and East Jerusalem. I found extensive areas of overlap between the anti-Iraq war activism waged in the U.S. against a president (George W. Bush) who many felt had been imposed after the flawed 2000 election, and the Israeli anti-occupation activists who mistrusted a Prime Minister who had been declared unfit for public office by the Kahane Commission decades earlier due to his connection to the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Lebanon. I have written about these dynamics and experiences elsewhere (see, for example Hallward 2009; Hallward 2011).

The BDS movement was launched in July 2005, on the one-year anniversary of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion on the legal consequences of the construction of a wall in Occupied Palestinian territory. Among the court's recommendations were that Israel immediately cease its violation of its international obligations and that the international community take action to end the illegal occupation (ICJ Ruling). In the absence of any state action to hold Israel accountable for returning the land and dismantling the wall as called for by international law in that year, a cross section of Palestinian civil society took action, drawing on the example of the South African BDS movement in the 1980s to call on transnational civil society, including Israelis, to exert nonviolent pressure for political change. This call was grounded in decades of Palestinian nonviolent activism, as well as previous efforts at civil society-led boycott efforts, including the general strike of 1936-1939, boycotts during the first intifada

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(1988-1991) and the 2004 call for an academic and cultural boycott (Hallward 2013; Barghouti 2010).

While some Israelis joined with Palestinians in response to the BDS call, such as the Boycott from Within movement and academics including Ilan Pappé (The Boycott will work) and Neve Gordon (Boycott Israel 2009), the Israeli government declared BDS activism to be illegal, leveraging fines for those engaging in the activity, and barring individuals supporting BDS from entering the country. Further, Israeli think tanks like the Reut Institute have declared BDS to be a strategic and existential threat (Contending with BDS). Although Israel has long called for Palestinians to renounce violence and engage in nonviolence, when presented with nonviolent resistance such as BDS, government officials called activists terrorists of other means, and leveraged punishments, such as travel restrictions and fines against them. A similar dynamic has been evident in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States, where nonviolent activism, such as taking a knee during the national anthem to protest systemic racism and police brutality against blacks, resulted in a backlash against professional football quarterback Colin Kaepernick.

Nonviolence is often glorified by those in positions of power, as convention holds that Westphalian states hold a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. However, nonviolent action, or civil resistance, is neither passive nor always morally utopian; instead, such movements can exert nonviolent forms of coercion, and do so for strategic and instrumental, not merely principled, reasons. In other words, nonviolence can pose a threat to institutions, policies, and practices that benefit and sustain the status quo (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Hallward and Norman 2015). Nonviolent activism often targets structural and cultural violence, which are relatively invisible to those who benefit from the status quo. According to peace studies scholar Johan Galtung, cultural violence is what legitimizes direct violence, making it seem acceptable or normal (Galtung 1990). Jim Crow laws and redlining policies that deny services such as mortgages to minority communities are examples of structural or institutional violence (racism) in the U.S. whereas Palestinian citizens of Israel, Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and Palestinian refugees face their own (somewhat different) forms of structural and cultural violence.

The fundamental attribution error holds that when one is faced with something negative in another person, that quality or tendency is attributed to the entire group of which that individual is a member, rather than seen as reflective of that one person's personality or character traits. This tendency downplays the structural and contextual factors that shape and inform individual agency, and can also lead those in comparatively privileged groups to suggest problems are due to "bad apples." Frequently the "bad apples" thesis is used to downplay the institutional policies and practices carried out by the Israeli government and Israeli military against Palestinian civilians and pinpoint blame instead on a few individuals. Israeli groups such as Breaking the Silence and B'Tselem have tried to challenge this thesis by documenting the widespread pattern of human rights abuses in the Occupied Territories, and for their efforts, have often been targeted as traitors. Similar conversations in the U.S. focus on the actions of police officers and whether police brutality, such as the killing of George Floyd, is the result of individual behavior or reflective of a policing culture that engages in militarized tactics and racial profiling. Relatedly, an outdated understanding of racism as a form of personal prejudice rather than a set of institutional policies and structures (Oluo 2018) also contributes to individuals taking personal affront at their statements or actions contributing to racial injustice.

The "American Dream" presented in traditional U.S. history books presents an imagined land of opportunity, where everyone could reach great heights if only they worked hard enough. Rooted in a rugged individualism and a constitution that privileged white, male property-holders, this dream was not for all. Indeed, Ibram Kendi has called this the "American Nightmare" given the cost extracted from indigenous populations and African slaves. Women, too, continue to pay the price; white women did not earn the right to vote until 1920, Black women's suffrage was delayed due in part to racism within the women's movement, and the U.S. has neither an equal rights amendment nor guaranteed paid family leave after childbirth or adoption. This American Dream bears many similarities to the Zionist dream of the Jewish Diaspora, who wished to escape anti-Semitism and persecution in Europe and create a country of their own, where they could be a Jewish majority free from the fears of another Nazi government. For those pioneers, they were building a socialist utopia; however, as was the case in the U.S., this utopia was built for one group at the expense of others already living on the land (Khalidi 2020; Shavit 2013).

For those who grew up benefiting from the 'first among equals' structures of the U.S. and Israel, it is challenging to hear one's assumptions and privilege questioned, particularly when one suffers from other forms of oppression within

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the country based on one's class, gender, sexual orientation, or geographic location (i.e. center vs. periphery or urban vs. rural). The very nature of systems of racism and oppression is that they are invisible to those who benefit from them. The founder of the Israeli NGO Zochrot, for example, had never heard about the Palestinian Nakba, or 'Catastrophe', which caused hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to become refugees as that was not part of the Israeli curriculum. Political, legal, and social structures contribute to the 'invisibility' of other ways of knowing the past and present, such as Israeli laws that prevent commemorating the Nakba, separation of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens into different (public) school systems, and physical and psychological barriers preventing Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from meaningful interaction. All this means that Israelis do not see the Palestinian 'Other' except through the terrorist tropes portrayed in the media and official curriculum (Peled-El Hanan 2012). Blacks and whites in the U.S. are no longer officially segregated, but are practically so, with over half of U.S. students in schools that are 75% white or nonwhite.

Palestinians and black Americans have long histories of unarmed protest against the government policies that restrict their freedom. Often their efforts to share their pain and struggle are met with white tears (DiAngelo 2018) or Jewish emotions of victimhood and vulnerability (Ben Hagai and Zurbriggen 2017; Hallward 2013) that displace attention from those who have experienced physical and emotional harm, witnessed loved ones imprisoned or killed unjustly, and who have been routinely silenced when seeking to tell their stories. Despite the Israeli government alternately portraying the BDS movements as "terrorism by other means" (Hallward 2010) or critics decrying solidarity efforts as symbolic stunts, the BDS movement has had an impact over the years, helping push firms like Veolia, Orange, and G4S out of the West Bank and led to the cancellation of performances by famous artists and filmmakers. Likewise, BLM has experienced a number of successes in 2020, including moves toward police reform, the removal of Confederate statues, and some corporate efforts to be more consciously anti-racist. Both movements are, however, frequently misunderstood, misrepresented, and, because of their decentralized nature, face challenges by those who hijack the message or the modality and undermine the image of the movement in the eyes of skeptics. Further, while symbolic victories can serve as catalysts for education and social change, broader institutional and structural changes requiring voter pressure and political will of those in power, are necessary for achieving the long term goals of BDS and BLM activists. Government backlash against these movements "damages the rights of ordinary [Israeli] citizens and the organs of democracy", and has led to violence by federal agents against peaceful protestors in Portland and other U.S. cities by the Trump administration.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that Palestinian activists and BLM activists have increasingly forged connections between their movements. In response to the forceful response to protestors in Ferguson, Missouri in the wake of the killing of Michael Brown in 2014, Palestinians offered advice on how to deal with tear gas via Twitter. Given the role of the Pentagon in arming police departments in Ferguson (and other U.S. localities) and with Israeli military police, the similarities in the armed responses to the protestors were many. Both BLM and BDS are movements that have been challenged for being "too radical," particularly by the "liberal" movements in Israel and the U.S., particularly because they challenge status quo narratives and ask the U.S. and Israel to face uncomfortable truths about their settler-colonial pasts.

As eloquently written by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, the White Moderate of the suburbs, or the good Zionist leftist, is the real threat, as they do not want to disturb their zone of comfort or question their own role in the unjust systems that enable racism and persecution. Such individuals are likely to point to their (only) black friend or their (construction worker/domestic worker) Arab friend, and yet those relationships are often asymmetrical rather than rooted in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial integrated society of equals. At the same time, nonviolent strategy suggests that activists should engage in efforts to shift the spectrum of allies, so that those who are neutral or passive opponents become passive allies or neutral. How does one balance the need to be an active ally to people calling for solidarity in their movements for justice with the importance of bringing along more individuals to the movement? I have heard Jewish leftists decry the BDS movement for alienating Israelis—making them more right wing—and for hurting liberal Israeli academics who work for Palestinian rights. I have heard liberal white Americans decry slogans such as "defund the police" for alienating individuals with friends and family in law enforcement and for undermining the social need for law and order. For those of us who share in white privilege/Jewish privilege, it is critical to actively listen to and support those speaking their truths. At the same time, building a movement requires strategically forging connections with other movements and finding intersectional

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connections.

Working to end systems of injustice and privilege is uncomfortable work and requires self-examination regarding how one intentionally and subconsciously contributes to and benefits from systems that oppress others. Both protest and pressure are critical for bringing about social change, and boycott, divestment and sanctions efforts are indeed this kind of uncomfortable pressure that raises awareness of the need for change from those who can otherwise ignore the pain caused by the status quo. Peace scholar-practitioner Adam Curle noted that in situations of unequal power relations where there is low awareness of the conflict or injustice, one first needs to move through confrontational, educational phases in order to move toward peace and justice. The confrontational nature of BLM and BDS fits in this progression—a wake-up call for those benefiting from a particular form of privilege to educate themselves and work for social change. The question is, how can allies best support this process of education and social change? How can allies humanize the Other and bring them along to engage in changes to the systems from which they benefit?

In comparison to the South African BDS movement, the Palestinian movement has gained international support more quickly. However, fifteen years after the BDS Call, the Gaza Strip remains under siege and almost uninhabitable, Prime Minister Netanyahu is threatening annexation of the land (but not the people) of the West Bank, the 2018 Nation State law affirms the lower class status of Israel's Palestinian citizens (20% of the population) and Palestinian refugees remain stateless, with the UN agency that supports them under attack. However, public opinion regarding Palestinians has begun to change significantly in the international community, and particularly among the younger generation of U.S. Jews, who no longer give unqualified and unquestioning support to Israel. Such shifts illustrate the utility of the spectrum of allies and power mapping exercises that identify points of leverage and activist connections to building intersectional and cross-movement campaigns. Movement discipline and coordination, as well as taking the long-term view, are critical to lasting success. Blowback against the oppressive tendencies of regimes is a powerful tool in the civil resistance toolbox (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011) and campaign ads by the Lincoln Project show that even the President of the United States is not immune to such effects.

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