

NONVIOLENT DIRECT ACTION UNDER THREAT: THE CASE OF PALESTINIAN ADVOCACY

By Jonathan Brenneman

“Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., *Beyond Vietnam*, April 4, 1967 (quoting John F Kennedy)

Oppressed people around the world are turning to nonviolent tactics to take on powerful governments and corporations in order to achieve social justice. Chilean protesters used mass demonstrations to demand a new constitution; Wet'suwet'en protectors used blockades to stop colonization; and here in Syracuse, SU students and faculty are using sit-ins and strikes to demand a more racially just campus. Even in the midst of these successes the effectiveness of nonviolence is being continually challenged by extreme repression.

Over the last year more than 300 activists were assassinated worldwide. Repressive regimes are changing laws and removing protections for activists (including in this country). Moreover, massive misinformation and smear campaigns are rampant against nonviolent movements.

As a Palestinian rights activist, I have seen how these attacks work to silence marginalized people. When Palestinians in Gaza who are starving, have run out of clean drinking water, and are held captive under Israel's military control—nonviolently protested this illegal and inhumane situation in the “Great March of Return,” they were met with extreme violence by Israeli forces. Every Friday for over a year they marched toward the border that Israel has shut down—disallowing even basic supplies from entering. Every Friday they were shot at, medics and journalists were targeted, protesters were maimed and killed. International news, if they even covered the protest, recorded headlines like, “Palestinians die during clashes with Israeli Forces.” This served to

make passive the active violence against them, hiding their nonviolent conduct, and not naming the context in which they were protesting.

These news headlines, while misleading, are but the mildest misinformation about Palestinian nonviolence. It pales in comparison to the smear campaign against the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement for Freedom, Justice, and Equality (BDS).



The BDS Movement was started by a broad coalition of Palestinian unions, artists, and civil society organizations as a strategic alternative to violence. They had three demands: Freedom from the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; justice (based on international law) for Palestinian refugees displaced by Israel; and equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel. In short, they insist that Palestinians be treated with the same rights as everyone else.

The movement seeks to achieve these goals through classic nonviolent, noncooperation tactics. They asked people of conscience around the world to boycott products and institutions complicit with the Israeli government; to divest from companies profiting off the oppression of Palestinians and associated with the state of Israel; and to call on their governments to sanction Israel until the Israeli government met their demands of freedom, justice and equality. These tactics of economic noncooperation have been used in almost every successful nonviolent campaign: The Civil Rights movement boycotted buses; Gandhi boycotted salt; people in Syracuse boycotted Nazi products during WWII. Most notably the BDS movement draws its inspiration from the South African anti-Apartheid movement, which successfully used international divestment as well as economic, cultural,

and academic boycotts to fight the South African regime.

Though boycotts are a key tactic of nonviolence, they have detractors. Gandhi was accused of commiserating with Axis powers; Mandela was labeled a “terrorist,” and the Montgomery Bus boycotters were accused of being “communists.” Today the BDS Movement’s call for Palestinian equal rights has been framed as “antisemitism.”

This accusation of antisemitism is growing more potent as the number of hate crimes, including those targeting Jews, is growing. Using the legitimate fear of rising antisemitism, those opposed to Palestinian rights try to paint BDS as antisemitic by ignoring what the movement’s stated goals are, and instead implying that the movement has nefarious goals of unfairly targeting Israel as a way of harming Jews. This unfounded and racist idea is perpetuated by both cynical and well-meaning critics.

The BDS Movement (bdsmovement.org) has detailed criteria for determining boycott targets and has been unequivocal that as a human rights-based movement, it is “opposed on principle to all forms of discrimination, including anti-semitism and Islamophobia.” The leaders have consistently cut ties with or denounced outright those who use the campaign to target individuals, “based on their identity or opinion.”

Despite all this care, the stereotype of Palestinians being antisemitic has proven useful to forces of repression. These lies are working. Today 28 states (including New York) have anti-boycott laws passed to oppose BDS. These laws fly in the face of the first amendment and undermine hard fought legal victories over the right to boycott won by organizations like the NAACP.

BDS is a Palestinian-led, rights-based, nonviolent movement under attack. It needs all of our support both through participating in boycotts and by fighting misinformation and legal repression. ☮

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