

Boycotting the boycott: The problem with the BDS movement

by [David Heim](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue



Militarized Caterpillar D9 by the West Bank barrier. Photo by [joeskillet](#) via [Creative Commons license](#).

A Muslim organization in Chicago recently invited Israel’s consul general to participate in a “Friends in Faith” series—and then rescinded the invitation. The Niagara Foundation denied that it had succumbed to pressure from Palestinian groups, but it was hard to draw any other conclusion.

The silencing of conversation is one of the most disturbing aspects of the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement against Israel, which is designed to end Israel’s occupation of the West Bank. The United Church of Christ recently jumped into this movement, voting overwhelmingly at its General Synod in June to divest from corporations involved in the business of occupation. The financial impact of the UCC’s action on Caterpillar or Hewlett Packard may be negligible, but the symbolic impact remains.

The deep message of BDS is that interaction with Israel is tantamount to collaboration with the oppressor. Though this approach has mostly symbolic meaning in the West, it has tangible effects in Israel-Palestine, where it discourages Palestinians from everyday cooperation with Israelis on education, commerce, political administration, and the management of natural resources. The movement posits that a just future for Palestinians lies first of all in disengagement from and resistance to Israel.

But does it? The BDS movement operates with a fundamental assumption: those with power never give it up voluntarily. Because Israel can be expected to change its policies of occupation only under pressure, pressure must be applied. And because Palestinians have little leverage on the ground, pressure on Israel must come from the international community and the court of public opinion.

This argument is reasonable on the surface, and it fits both Christian liberationist and Christian realist analyses of politics. There's no question that Palestinians living under Israeli occupation endure daily restrictions on travel, political activity, and economic opportunity. Whereas Jewish settlers on the West Bank are Israeli citizens and benefit from Israeli tax dollars and the Israeli military, Palestinians in the territory are stateless, and subject ultimately to Israeli policy and control.

In the context of Israel-Palestine, Israelis appear to be the Goliath while the Palestinians are the David. Israelis have a vaunted military and one of the most technologically advanced economies in the world, and they are backed by the United States, the world's only superpower. The Palestinians, on the other hand, seem only to have rocks (and, in Gaza, Katyusha rockets) to fling at the oppressor. There is a natural urge, given this account, to sympathize with the David figure.

But Israelis, even those who sympathize with the average Palestinian, view the situation differently, and for some very good reasons. In fact, Israelis see themselves as being in the position of David, surrounded by a Goliath of nations and terrorist groups that have made no secret of their wish to see Israel destroyed and have acted on that wish many times before.

The rising power of Iran, whose leaders talk openly of destroying Israel, heightens the concern. Iran's influence, direct or by proxy, now reaches into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and Iran has renewed ties with Hamas in Gaza. Meanwhile, extremist ISIS forces have established their own beachheads throughout the region, including in Egypt's Sinai, on Israel's southern border. While so far ISIS has focused on attacking fellow Muslims whom it regards as apostate, it also targets Christians and Jews. ISIS is also threatening Jordan and therefore Israel's eastern border.

Given these realities, it's myopic to view the Israel-Palestinian conflict simply in terms of oppressor and oppressed. The "oppressor" in this case also has sensible reasons to feel oppressed and vulnerable.

The most promising solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict is of course the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank that peacefully coexists with Israel. The sticking points in negotiating such a state—the location of borders, the governance of Jerusalem, the right of return for refugees—are well known, but the basic outline is clear: the Israelis give up land for peace.

Polls consistently show that most Israelis are willing to do just that. These same polls also show, however, that most Israelis don't think that such a swap is possible under current conditions. Israelis are not willing to give up the land in exchange for no peace. They worry, and with good reason, that a Palestinian state on its doorstep would turn out to be either a state like Gaza, ruled by Hamas and explicitly devoted to Israel's destruction, or a failed state, unable or unwilling to control terrorists who would use the territory to strike at Israel.

Boycotts appear in the West to be a normal political tool. They've been used on behalf of farmworkers in California and blacks in South Africa, so why not use them on behalf of beleaguered Palestinians?

Here's why not: first, boycotts have enormous resonance for Israelis. The Nazis started turning Jews into pariahs by boycotting Jewish businesses. The historical reference is not misplaced: the aim of BDS is to make Israelis pariahs on the international scene.

Second, the boycott movement could indeed turn out to have real economic consequences for Israel. One can imagine corporations eventually deciding that doing business with Israel is more trouble than it's worth. A contract that would have gone to an Israeli firm goes instead to a European one. Top researchers decide to live and work elsewhere. The economic viability of Israel, which depends on high-tech skills in a global market, would be undermined. All this, of course, is what the BDS movement devoutly hopes will happen, thereby pushing Israel at last to make concessions to Palestinians.

But this BDS scenario contains two miscalculations. First, Israelis are not likely to be coerced into relinquishing fundamental security concerns. The effect of the boycott would likely be to make Israelis more isolated and fearful—and less likely to compromise or take risks for peace.

Second, and most decisively, such a result would be entirely unfair. It would punish Israel for seeking, as any nation would under similar circumstances, to protect its

citizens and preserve its viability as a state.

Mainline Protestants are understandably frustrated by the lack of progress toward a Palestinian state. But Palestinians as well as Israelis bear responsibility for that lack of progress; Israel is not the only actor in the region.

The BDS movement is overly simple and not realist enough in its analysis. And by implicitly or explicitly encouraging disengagement from Israel, it precludes the work that many Israelis and Palestinians are doing on the ground to build trust and foster cooperation—work that provides some real basis for hope that their people can live and prosper side by side.