

# The Guardian

## BDS: how a controversial non-violent movement has transformed the Israeli-Palestinian debate

Israel sees the international boycott campaign as an existential threat to the Jewish state. Palestinians regard it as their last resort.

By Nathan Thrall

Main image: Bethlehem, June 2015. Photograph: Thomas Coex/AFP/Getty Images

Tue 14 Aug 2018 06.00 BST

**T**he movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel – known as BDS – has been driving the world a little bit mad. Since its founding 13 years ago, it has acquired nearly as many enemies as the Israelis and Palestinians combined. It has hindered the efforts of Arab states to fully break their own decades-old boycott in pursuit of increasingly overt cooperation with Israel. It has shamed the Palestinian Authority government in Ramallah by denouncing its security and economic collaboration with Israel's army and military administration. It has annoyed the Palestine Liberation Organization by encroaching on its position as the internationally recognised advocate and representative of Palestinians worldwide.

It has infuriated the Israeli government by trying to turn it into a leper among liberals and progressives. It has exasperated what is left of the Israeli peace camp by nudging the Palestinians away from an anti-occupation settlement and towards an anti-apartheid one. It has induced such an anti-democratic counter-campaign by the Israeli government that it has made Israeli liberals fear for the future of their country. And it has caused major headaches for the Palestinians' donor governments in Europe, which are pressured by Israel not to work with BDS-supporting organisations in the Palestinian territories, an impossible request given that nearly all major civil society groups in Gaza and the West Bank support the movement.

In an era of corporate social responsibility, BDS has given bad publicity to major businesses tied up in Israel's occupation (Airbnb, Re/Max, HP) and helped push other large firms out of the West Bank. It has disrupted film festivals, concerts and exhibitions around the world. It has riled academic and sports organisations by politicising them, demanding that they take a stand on the highly divisive conflict. It has angered Palestinian performers and artists who work with Israeli institutions, accusing them of giving Palestinian cover for Israel's human rights violations.

In the UK, BDS has brought turmoil to courts and local councils, embroiling them in disputes over the legality of local boycotts of settlement goods. In the US, BDS has caused two dozen states to pass bills or issue orders inhibiting or penalising those boycotting Israel or its settlements, pitting Israel's allies against free speech advocates such as the American Civil Liberties Union. It has ignited debates in Protestant churches in the US, some of the largest of

which have divested from companies that profit from Israel's occupation. It has become the bane of college administrators, forced to adjudicate complaints from BDS-supporting professors and students that their free speech has been stifled, and claims by Zionist faculty, donors and undergraduates that their campuses have become "unsafe" spaces. It has pulled liberals toward greater support for the Palestinians, making Israel an increasingly partisan issue in the US, associated less with Democrats and progressives than with Trump, evangelicals and the far right.

In the Jewish diaspora, BDS has created new schisms on the centre-left, which has been forced into a vice by the rightwing and pro-settlement Israeli government on one hand, and the non-Zionist left on the other. It has prompted liberal Zionists to grapple with why they sometimes accept the boycott of products from settlements but not the boycott of the state that creates and sustains them. It has compelled Israel's more critical supporters to justify their opposition to non-violent forms of pressure on Israel, when the absence of real pressure has done nothing to bring occupation or settlement expansion to an end. It has put the onus on liberal Zionists to defend their support not for the abstract ideal of what they hope Israel might one day become, but for the actual, longstanding practices of the state, including expropriations of Palestinian land for Jewish settlement; detention of hundreds of Palestinians without trial or charge; collective punishment of two million Gazans living under a more than decade-long blockade; and institutionalised inequality between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel. BDS has deprived Israel's liberal supporters of the excuse that an aberrant occupation or rightwing governments are mainly to blame for the state's undemocratic practices.

Perhaps most significantly, BDS has challenged the two-state consensus of the international community. In so doing it has upset the entire industry of Middle East peace process nonprofit organisations, diplomatic missions and think tanks by undermining their central premise: that the conflict can be resolved simply by ending Israel's occupation of Gaza, East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, leaving the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel and refugees unaddressed.

For many diaspora Jews, BDS has become a symbol of evil and repository of dread, a nefarious force transforming the Israel-Palestine debate from a negotiation over the end of the occupation and the division of territory into an argument about the conflict's older and deeper roots: the original displacement of most of the Palestinians, and, on the ruins of their conquered villages, the establishment of a Jewish state. The emergence of the BDS movement has revived old questions about the legitimacy of Zionism, how to justify the privileging of Jewish over non-Jewish rights, and why refugees can return to their homes in other conflicts but not in this one. Above all, it has underscored an awkward issue that cannot be indefinitely neglected: whether Israel, even if it were to cease its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, can be both a democracy and a Jewish state.

**I**n the Old City of Bethlehem, down an arched pathway near the souk and Manger Square, there stands a centuries-old limestone building that now serves as the headquarters of Holy Land Trust, a Palestinian organisation devoted to nonviolent resistance to Israeli rule. Sami Awad, the non-profit's founder, has an office on the top floor; lining his shelves are books by leading theorists and practitioners of protest and civil disobedience: Gene Sharp, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr, all of whom figure prominently in his teaching, writing and even casual speech.

Awad meets often with delegations of Israeli and American Jews; unlike many Palestinian activists, he does not shy from discussing the Jewish connection to this land: "I can deny it till kingdom come. But it's very deep and very emotional." At the same time, he speaks candidly of occupation and racism, and he insists that Israel will not give Palestinians freedom unless

forced to. “No oppressor group ever decides on their own just to be morally correct and change their behaviour,” he told me. “Something needs to happen: activism, resistance, boycott.”

Jews and Arabs have been boycotting one another since the early days of Zionism. In the decades before Israel’s founding, the mainstream Zionist movement waged campaigns to boycott Arab workers, reject Arab produce, exclude Arabs from Jewish-only residential communities and forbid Arab purchase of Jewish-owned land. The fifth Palestine Arab Congress called for a boycott of Jewish goods in 1922. After Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Palestinian lawyers boycotted Israeli courts, and teachers went on strike under the slogan, “no education under occupation”. Israel responded to these and other acts of civil disobedience with arrests, fines, travel restrictions, shop closures, curfews and deportations of teachers, lawyers, mayors and university presidents.

Sami’s uncle, Mubarak Awad, was a pioneer of Palestinian nonviolent resistance in the 1980s: Mubarak encouraged Palestinians to send back bills written solely in Hebrew, to refuse court summonses and to fly the Palestinian flag, which was cause for arrest. Inspired by Gandhi’s boycott of British cloth, he urged the replacement of Israeli products with Palestinian ones.

But it wasn’t until the first intifada, the popular uprising against occupation that began in 1987, that the programme Mubarak and others advocated found its chance for full expression. Tactics he had championed in small classrooms and academic journals were now put into widespread use by a popular movement backed by major political parties: consumers boycotted Israeli goods and services, labourers in Israeli industries refused to work, shops closed down in unison, customers withdrew funds from Israeli banks, residents refused to pay taxes and most of the Palestinian tax collectors and police resigned. The Bank of Israel reported that the Palestinian boycott had cost Israel \$650m (\$1.4bn today) during the first year of the uprising alone. Mubarak was charged with “fomenting a rebellion against the state”; like dozens of others, he was deported by Israel during the first year of the intifada.

Sami Awad was sent by his parents to Kansas in order to continue his studies. When he returned to Bethlehem in 1996, it had been transformed by the Oslo peace process. Tens of thousands of PLO officials and fighters had moved from exile in the Arab world to the West Bank and Gaza, and were now functionaries in the newly established Palestinian administration. A culture of resistance had been replaced by one of coexistence. A peace industry now flourished, as foreign funds flowed in to finance dialogue groups, NGOs and people-to-people initiatives. Awad, like most Palestinians, was optimistic that peace was on the horizon.

Within two years, his optimism faded. The nascent Palestinian administration established following the 1993 Oslo accord seemed less a burgeoning democracy that would lead to an independent country in the West Bank and Gaza than a growing police state. He heard no end of talk of peace and coexistence, but what he saw on the ground was increased segregation and limitations on his freedom. The Palestinian autonomous areas in the West Bank were small, disconnected islands, 165 of them, each surrounded by a sea of territory under Israeli control. Within that sea - the 60% of the West Bank that is off limits to the Palestinian government - Israel confiscated land for settlement, demolished Palestinian buildings and provided financial incentives for the settler population to grow. If Oslo was the road to a two-state solution, Awad was beginning to wonder if the destination was one he wanted to reach.

When the second intifada erupted, in September 2000, with Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli invasions and missile attacks, the dialogue and peacemaking activities of groups such as Holy Land Trust came to a halt. For Awad, the focus was now on nonviolent resistance, which was then neither popular nor simple. It was the bloodiest period of Israeli-Palestinian fighting

since the 1948 war. More than 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis were killed. The militarisation of the intifada had made it dangerous to confront Israel in any manner, including peacefully.

Yet Awad and other activists still managed to carve out a small space for nonviolent resistance. He demonstrated against land confiscation in the West Bank and, after 2002, the building of what Israelis refer to as a security fence and Palestinians came to call the apartheid wall. The barrier - a mix of eight-metre-high concrete slabs, fences and barbed wire - cut through the West Bank and Jerusalem, dividing Palestinians from one another and villagers from their land. The barrier effectively annexed nearly 10% of the West Bank to Israel. In occupied East Jerusalem, up to a third of the Palestinian residents were walled off from their schools, health clinics and workplaces. Dense crowds of Jerusalemites and West Bankers could be seen at 4 and 5am, packed like cattle as they inched through caged checkpoints to get to the other side of the wall.



Anti-Israel protests in Cape Town, South Africa in May.  
Photograph: Nic Bothma/EPA

As the violence of the second intifada escalated, a campaign of international solidarity with Palestinians grew. In the first months of the uprising, students at the University of California in Berkeley erected mock checkpoints and brandished banners calling to “Divest from Israeli Apartheid”. Harvard faculty signed a divestment petition in 2002. In Durban, South Africa, alongside a contentious UN-sponsored World Conference Against Racism, representatives of some 3,000 NGOs called on “the international community to impose a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state”. Boycott and divestment campaigns spread across US, UK and European campuses, gaining the support of several Israeli academics and large numbers of Palestinians.

In the West Bank and Gaza, international and Israeli activists streamed in to offer their support. Their presence tended to make the Israeli army act more cautiously, which provided a measure of protection to Palestinian demonstrators. Awad still worked with Israelis, but now insisted that any cooperation be premised not on coexistence but co-resistance, with Palestinians in the lead. He was tear-gassed, beaten and detained alongside members of direct action groups such as the International Solidarity Movement, Christian Peacemaker Teams and the Israeli-led Anarchists Against the Wall.

After a week or more among Palestinian villagers, the foreign activists would return to their campuses, church groups and labour unions, explaining that there was a little-noticed Palestinian nonviolent resistance movement - and that it could be supported through divestment and boycott. The first divestment by a US institution of higher education, Hampshire College - also the first US school to have divested from South Africa - was spearheaded by an Israeli undergraduate named Matan Cohen, who at 17 had been shot in the eye by Israeli forces during a demonstration against the separation barrier. The nonviolent

activism of the second intifada was a prelude to what would become a worldwide boycott campaign.

**T**he Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement was founded with a statement of principles, known as the BDS call, on 9 July 2005. It represented something of a last resort. The Palestinians had been crushed by the military defeat of the second intifada. The living embodiment of the Palestinian national movement, Yasser Arafat, was dead. His newly installed replacement, Mahmoud Abbas, was identified more than any other Palestinian with the Oslo peace process. Though Abbas's leadership seemed to offer a respite from the violence, it also promised a return to a strategy of diplomacy and cooperation that had done little to bring occupation to an end. If there was going to be pressure on Israel to give Palestinians freedom, it was going to have to come from the grassroots and the outside.

The BDS call was made on the one-year anniversary of a historic advisory opinion by the international court of justice. The court ruled that Israel's separation barrier was illegal, that Israel had to dismantle it "forthwith" and offer reparations to those it had harmed, and that every signatory to the fourth Geneva convention - meaning nearly every state in the world - was under an obligation to ensure Israel complied with international humanitarian law. But Israel ignored the ruling, and neither the PLO nor the international community made a real attempt to enforce the court's findings. "If there had been action on the part of the international community to implement the ICJ ruling," Ingrid Jaradat, a founding member of the BDS campaign, told me, "there wouldn't have been a BDS call."

More than 170 Palestinian organisations from the occupied territories, Israel and the diaspora endorsed the BDS call. They spanned the political spectrum - leftists and Islamists, supporters of two states and of one. They included the Palestinian National and Islamic Forces - the coordinating body for every significant political party - as well as major trade unions, refugee camp committees, prisoners' societies, artistic and cultural centres and nonviolent resistance groups, among them Sami Awad's Holy Land Trust. Twenty-nine of these entities now form the BDS National Committee, or BNC, a leadership council.

The chief innovation of the BDS call was not in the tactics that it advocated: boycott and divestment campaigns were already pervasive in 2005, and even sanctions and arms embargoes had been proposed previously, including by the UN general assembly. What was new about BDS was that it took disparate campaigns to pressure Israel and united them around three clear demands, with one for each major component of the Palestinian people. First, freedom for the residents of the occupied territories; second, equality for the Palestinian citizens of Israel; and third, justice for Palestinian refugees in the diaspora - the largest group - including the right to return to their homes.

The BDS call was a challenge not simply to Israel but to the Palestinian leadership. It represented a conceptual reframing of the national struggle, more in line with the original positions of the PLO - before it had been forced by military defeat, international pressure and political pragmatism to abandon the goal of a single democratic state, acquiescing to a two-state compromise instead. The world powers had presented a two-state solution as a gift to Palestinians. But for Palestinians, the gift was clearly to Israel, for they saw it as the indigenous people relinquishing 78% of their land. Arabs had made up more than 90% of the population at the dawn of Zionism, in the late 19th century, and over two-thirds of it in 1948, prior to Israel's war of independence. That year, the territory of what would become Israel was emptied of 80% of its Palestinian inhabitants, who were then prevented from returning to their homes. The PLO was founded some 16 years later, in 1964, before there was any Israeli occupation of the

West Bank and Gaza. It was the liberation of the entire homeland and the return of its original inhabitants that had been the core objective of the Palestinian cause.

By the first intifada and the 1993 Oslo accord that brought it to an end, however, many Palestinians were ready to accept the two-state formula, not because it was seen as fair, but because it was the most they could then hope to get. As the details of various peace proposals emerged, though, the deal sounded more and more rotten. The Palestinians would have to relinquish not just 78% of their homeland, but also the land taken up by major Israeli settlements within the occupied territories. They would have to give up sovereignty in large parts of occupied East Jerusalem, their future capital, and of the Old City that falls entirely within it. They would have to agree that any peace treaty would not allow the return of most refugees to their homes, unlike almost any other peace accord signed since Israelis and Palestinians first negotiated a draft final agreement in 1995. They would have to renounce all claims on Israel - including any demand for equal rights for its Palestinian citizens, who were more than one-fifth of the population. And in exchange they would get a West Bank-Gaza state that Israeli prime ministers, from Yitzhak Rabin to Benjamin Netanyahu, described as a “state-minus” or “an entity which is less than a state”.

During negotiations with Israel, the PLO had agreed to each of these concessions, though few if any of them were supported by international law. When even these accommodations eventually proved insufficient to obtain an end to the occupation, growing numbers of Palestinians started to sour on the idea of two states. It wasn't simply that the original two-state compromise had been eroded to the point of unrecognisability. It was that even the whittled-down version now seemed like a mirage.

At the time of the BDS call, Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was nearly four decades old, and showed no signs of disappearing. The number of settlers had nearly doubled since Oslo, reaching almost half a million in 2005. Many of them resided not in hilltop caravans, but in cities with shopping malls, parks, public pools and multi-lane highways connecting them seamlessly to Israel. The idea of removing even a third of this steadily growing population had come to sound implausible. The US and other powers did little more than wag their fingers. They promised the Palestinians that the situation would soon end with the founding of an independent state.

Over time, the two-state solution became a slogan emptied of meaning. The less plausible it seemed, the louder it was proclaimed. But so long as it could still be imagined, the major world powers refused to demand that Israel grant the Palestinians citizenship and equal rights. The two-state concept was thus transformed from a possible solution to Israeli occupation to the primary pretext for depriving Palestinians of equality. It was also the main excuse for keeping the majority of Palestinians in exile: in order to preserve Israel's Jewish majority, the refugees would have to languish in camps outside Israel's borders until there was a Palestinian state that could absorb them.

The BDS movement offered an alternative. It rejected talk of fictive solutions, whether of two states or one. The most fundamental problem, in its view, was not in deciding what sort of arrangement should replace the current system; the problem was forcing Israel to change it at all. Debating two states versus one amounted to counting angels on the point of a pin, so long as Israel was comfortable enough in perpetual occupation to prefer it to either one.

Israel's response to BDS was slow in coming, but forceful once it arrived. Yossi Kuperwasser, who goes by the nickname Kuper, led the Israeli government's efforts against the BDS movement until 2014. He now works for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, a conservative thinktank run by Dore Gold, a former Israeli ambassador to the UN and a longtime confidante

**I** of the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu. Kuperwasser, who has a grown-out buzz cut, a gruff voice and the Israeli habit of filling pauses with a grumbling “ehh”, is an engaging and emphatic interlocutor. He has good Arabic, as does his wife, Tsionit (“Zionist” in Hebrew), who was born in Israel to Iraqi Jewish parents. Kuper headed the prestigious research division of military intelligence during the second intifada, and was appointed director general of the Ministry of Strategic Affairs in 2009.

It was Kuperwasser who turned the ministry into Israel’s command centre for what he calls the battle against BDS. He began the job just after the 2008-2009 Gaza war, which had killed 13 Israelis and around 1,400 Palestinians, lifting BDS activity to new heights. In September 2009, Israel’s international standing was dealt a heavy blow by the UN’s report on the war, written by a fact-finding mission headed by the eminent South African jurist Richard Goldstone. It found that Israel and Palestinian armed groups had committed war crimes, and that Israel had conducted “deliberate attacks on civilians” with “the intention of spreading terror”. It also determined that the ongoing blockade of Gaza - “the series of acts that deprive Palestinians ... of their means of subsistence, employment, housing and water, that deny their freedom of movement and their right to leave and enter their own country” - constituted a possible crime against humanity.

Kuperwasser said it was the Goldstone report that first alerted Israel to the grave nature of the threat posed by what it calls “delegitimation”. In late 2009, Netanyahu identified delegitimation as one of three critical threats to Israel, alongside Iran’s nuclear programme and the proliferation of rockets and missiles in Gaza and Lebanon. Since then, it has become common to hear senior Israeli politicians describe BDS and delegitimation as an “existential” or “strategic” threat.

Some of Israel’s centre-left commentators, all of whom oppose BDS, have nevertheless taken a rather cynical view of the government’s international campaign against BDS. They believe it is driven primarily by domestic politics. They point out that since the founding of BDS 13 years ago, Israel’s trade with the outside world has actually increased, and its diplomatic ties with India, China, African states and even the Arab world have grown. Many mainstream Israeli commentators see the BDS movement and Israeli politicians of the left and right working in symbiosis: the Israeli left threatens that BDS and delegitimation will create an international “diplomatic tsunami” against Israel; the Israeli right does its usual scaremongering about external threats in order to drum up support at home and abroad. The BDS movement, meanwhile, eagerly points to every hyperbolic Israeli statement as evidence of its own success.

Kuperwasser, however, says the threat BDS poses is very real, and that ignoring it or treating it as a nuisance will fail: “Until 2010, we tried this policy, and the results were not good.” More important, he said, measuring the impact of BDS in terms of Israel’s trade was fundamentally mistaken. “The core issue is not whether they are going to boycott us or not boycott us,” Kuperwasser said. “The core issue is whether they are going to be successful in implanting in the international discourse that Israel is illegitimate as a Jewish state.”

**M**ore than 20% of Israel’s 8.8 million citizens are Palestinian. They are the remaining survivors and descendants of the minority who stayed within Israel’s borders during the 1948 war. Haneen Zoabi, a 49-year-old Palestinian citizen of Israel, from Nazareth, has been a member of Israel’s parliament, the Knesset, since 2009, and is a vocal supporter of BDS. She is Israel’s fiercest critic in the Knesset, where she regularly denounces Israeli policies toward the Palestinians and accuses Israel of being an apartheid state. YouTube is filled with videos of her standing calmly at the dais, attempting to speak as she is interrupted and heckled by enraged Israeli parliamentarians, some of whom have screamed out epithets such as “traitor!”



or “Go to Gaza!” A leading Likud MK, Miri Regev, called for her to be deported. Zoabi has been subjected to a criminal investigation for incitement and suspended from the Knesset several times, most recently in March, for referring to the killing of Palestinians by the Israeli army as murder.

While Israel allows Palestinian citizens like Zoabi to vote and hold office, the state has always treated land ownership by its Palestinian citizens as a threat, and has implemented official government plans to “Judaize” Arab areas and dilute the Palestinian presence. After the 1948 war, only 20% of the Palestinians in the territory that would become Israel remained, and a quarter of those were internally displaced. Israel put its Palestinian citizens under the curfews and restrictions of military government until 1966, confiscated roughly half their land, and passed laws that have prevented them from reclaiming it to this day.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians reside in villages that predate the existence of Israel but are considered “unrecognised” by the state, facing demolitions and forcible evictions while receiving few to no basic services, including water and electricity. With the state limiting the development and expansion of Arab towns, Palestinian citizens have been forced to bid on properties in Jewish communities. But they have been repeatedly blocked. Hundreds of Jewish-only communities in Israel have admissions committees that are legally permitted to reject applicants on the basis of “social suitability”, providing cover for excluding non-Jews. “What we Palestinians in Israel face is apartheid, not discrimination,” Zoabi said. “Israel tries to say, ‘We are good Israel that has to do bad things in the West Bank and Gaza.’ No, look at how Israel treats its own citizens who don’t throw a stone!”

Israel’s longstanding policies of inequality were given additional backing in the form of a July 2018 “basic law” - Israel’s version of constitutional laws - that downgrades the status of the Arabic language, states that only Jews have a right to self-determination in Israel, and declares: “The state views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value and will act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation.”



The Israel-West Bank separation barrier in 2007. Photograph: REX/Sipa Press

Zoabi said the PLO had forsaken its responsibilities to the Palestinian people. After formally committing to two separate states in 1988, she said, “the PLO effectively conceded Israel as a Jewish state”, with inequality between Jews and non-Jews enshrined in its laws. It was now mainly the Palestinian citizens of Israel who really challenged Zionism itself, she said, by insisting that the state could not truly be both democratic and Jewish. As a result, Palestinian citizens of Israel had become a “much bigger threat to Israel than the PLO”. She continued: “The PLO defined our struggle” - the struggle of Palestinian citizens for equality - “as an internal Israeli issue. They abandoned us!”



Zoabi harshly criticized the Palestinian leadership for its role in prolonging the occupation. She blamed Mahmoud Abbas, the PLO chairman and PA president also known as Abu Mazen, for the fact that the US president Donald Trump had decided to break with decades of US policy and recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital last December. "Trump made a calculation," she told me. "What will be the reaction to my move? All of Israel and the US said to him, correctly, that Abu Mazen will not change the rules of the game, will not end security cooperation with Israel, and will not stop Oslo. So what price will Israel or the US pay?" Zoabi said that when she travelled abroad, to countries such as Ireland, Germany and the US, "officials there told me: 'The PLO ambassador is against your position on BDS. So who am I supposed to believe?'"

Like the PLO, Zoabi is highly critical of Israel's occupation, but she believes the real roots of the conflict are in Israel's historic treatment of Palestinians. "The problem is not the occupation, the problem is the Zionist project," she said. "Israel fears that if people had open minds and saw what Israel was doing to the Palestinians, it would be the end. The minute you say that Israel is not a normal state - that it is not a democratic state that makes some mistakes, but an abnormal state, acting against human rights - then you are breaking its image as liberal, humane, [with] the most moral army in the world. BDS is eroding Israel's standing."

**D**espite their totally opposing goals, the Israeli right and the leaders of the BDS movement agree on quite a lot. Both assert that at its heart the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is over Zionism and the forced exile of the majority of Palestinians in 1948, not Israel's 1967 conquest of Gaza, East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank. Both contend that the settlements should not be treated differently from the government that created them. Both believe that the demands of Palestinian citizens of Israel for equality and of refugees for return are central issues of dispute, which were given insufficient attention by past peacemakers. Both say that Israel's battle against BDS is not primarily an economic struggle. Both view the BDS movement as representative of mainstream Palestinian demands, despite acknowledging that the movement cannot mobilise large crowds and its main activists are not important figures in Palestinian politics. And both believe that the BDS movement will expose the true nature of the conflict to the world.

But whereas the BDS movement is betting that this exposure will lead people to conclude that Zionism is fundamentally racist and should be rejected, Kuperwasser, for one, is convinced it is the Palestinians who will be unmasked. "The Palestinians are taking a very big risk," he said. "Because, in my mind, there is a good chance that the world will deny their conceptual framework. People will say: 'This is what the Palestinians want?! We are totally against it ... They are crazy; they want Israel to disappear.'" If that happens, he added, the Palestinians won't even get a West Bank-Gaza state, which he believes the PLO still sees as merely the first stage toward liberating all of Palestine.

In Kuperwasser's view, the BDS movement and the Palestinian leadership share the same goals; the differences between them are merely a matter of tactics. "Abu Mazen understands more than the BDS movement that you have to be subtle," he said. The PLO's acceptance of a two-state solution, its vows to take into account Israel's demographic concerns, its silence on the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel - all of these, Kuperwasser added, were merely a subterfuge designed to obtain a West Bank-Gaza state, which would then serve as a launching pad for continued struggle. "The Palestinian idea of struggle is so deeply embedded in their mind that they cannot actually think about the possibility of giving up the struggle in order to make peace. I cannot tell you how many Palestinians I told, 'Listen, with this struggle, you are paying the price much more than we do. We are flourishing. Even if we pay a price, we are flourishing.'"

The key for Israel, he said, was winning the hearts and minds of centrist liberals and progressives abroad, not people who are already in the Zionist or anti-Zionist camps. What had made it more difficult, he said, was that some Israelis and Jews were guilty of “negligence and intentional giving up of the battlefield” - not the radical left, but centrists who had naively adopted the language of the enemy. Kuperwasser singled out the former Labor party prime minister Ehud Barak, who had repeatedly warned that Israel is “on a slippery slope toward apartheid” - a warning that has also been made by the former foreign minister Tzipi Livni and the former prime ministers Ehud Olmert and Yitzhak Rabin. For Kuperwasser, these statements, intended to convince Israelis to make territorial concessions for peace, were above all a gift to its enemies.

**F**or the BDS movement, the charge of apartheid, which became prominent after the start of the second intifada in 2000, was not merely a provocative analogy to South Africa but a legal claim, based on the crime of apartheid as defined in international conventions and the founding statute of the international criminal court: “an institutionalised regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime”.

The concept of apartheid became central to the BDS movement’s framing of the conflict. Whereas the Palestinian Authority sought to accentuate its autonomy and state-like characteristics, the BDS movement underlined the PA’s subservience to Israel. For proponents of the two-state model, the PA was a nationalist project working toward eventual independence, while in the apartheid framework it was merely an Israeli satrap. BDS leaders emphasised the de facto “one-state reality” of Israel-Palestine - which had become a common trope even among Israel’s supporters, many of whom were dismayed at the possibility that the country could eventually be forced to enfranchise the Palestinians living under occupation and thereby cease to be a Jewish state.

Increasingly among both Israel’s centre-left friends and its enemies, the idea of a single state was not a plan for the future - to be sought or averted - but an accurate description of the reality on the ground, which was becoming more and more difficult to disentangle. Jews were already a minority in the territory under the control of Israel, which regulated the Palestinians’ borders, exports and imports, customs revenues and permits for travel and work. Legally, commercially and administratively, the Jewish and Palestinian populations were interlaced.

The more deeply entrenched this one-state reality became, the more resonant the charge of apartheid, and the more difficult to imagine undoing it through partition into two states. A battle against occupation could be concluded with a simple military withdrawal, but a struggle against apartheid could be won only with the end of state policies that discriminated against non-Jews. In the case of Israel, these could be found not just in the occupied territories, but everywhere Palestinians came into contact with the state. In the West Bank, Palestinians were denied the right to vote for the government controlling their lives, deprived of free assembly and movement, forbidden from equal access to roads, resources and territory, and imprisoned indefinitely without charge. In Gaza, they could not exit, enter, import, export or even approach their borders without the permission of Israel or its ally, Egypt. In Jerusalem, they were segregated from one another and encircled by checkpoints and walls. In Israel, they were evicted from their lands, prevented from reclaiming their expropriated homes, and blocked from residing in communities inhabited exclusively by Jews. In the diaspora, they were prevented from reunifying with their families in Israel-Palestine or returning to their homes, solely because they were not Jews.

Though in public, world leaders spoke endlessly of a two-state solution, privately many doubted it was still possible. They regularly condemned settlements (since these, unlike occupation, were illegal), but they did nothing to reverse settlement growth. They called for Palestinians to have freedom, but not through equal rights and citizenship in one state - because, among other reasons, international law forbids Israel from annexing territory acquired by force. They saw Israel was subverting a two-state solution and taking measures to deprive Palestinians of rights. But they wouldn't exert any real pressure on Israel so long as it mouthed an intention to one day grant Palestinians some limited form of independence. Israel was thereby allowed to hold all the land while excluding the majority of its indigenous people, just as South Africa had aspired to do. In redefining the conflict as a case of apartheid, BDS activists saw a way out of this trap. The apartheid rubric could also undo the Palestinians' greatest weakness - fragmentation - by uniting them in a common struggle against a single, discriminatory regime.

In Gaza this January, I met Haidar Eid, a professor of literature at Al-Azhar University and a co-founder of the BDS movement in Gaza. He is in his mid-50s, compact, with a scruffy grey beard and short curly hair, and a fondness for knitted turtlenecks. Eid said that he had never seen such strain on the people of Gaza. It was weeks before Gazans would launch the Great March of Return, the weekly protests along the Gaza border fence in which Israeli snipers killed more than 100 unarmed demonstrators and wounded several thousand more.

Along with tens of thousands of other public employees, Eid's salary at the university had been cut by more than half, and he was looking for a second job. Over 40% of Gazans, including most young people, were unemployed. Eid scheduled much of his life around when the elevator for his 10th-floor apartment would be working, since Gaza had only six to eight hours of electricity per day. Scarce power prevented the full treatment of sewage, tens of millions of litres of which were dumped each day, raw, into fetid ponds and the sea.

Like more than two-thirds of Gaza's population, Eid and his family are refugees from a village in present-day Israel. He opposed the Oslo agreement because it ignored Palestinian refugees. "Oslo," he said, "reduced the Palestinian people to residents of the West Bank and Gaza." But it was refugees who founded the Palestinian national movement, and who accounted for the majority of Palestinians worldwide. He said, "The Palestinian issue is one thing: the right of return."



A BDS march in Los Angeles in 2016. Photograph: Robyn Beck/AFP/Getty Images

Eid's village, Zarnuqa, was purged of its Palestinian inhabitants and no longer stands. Throughout Israel the land of refugees remains largely empty or sparsely populated, such that prominent researchers, such as the Palestinian historian Salman Abu Sitta, estimate that most could return without displacing Israelis. Eid noted that a two-state solution meant precluding most refugees from returning, since Israel refuses any possible threat to its Jewish

demographic majority. (There is a myth propagated by some of Israel's supporters that Palestinians are the only people who pass on refugee status to their children. On this basis, the Trump administration and its allies in Congress have sought to cut UN assistance to millions of Palestinian refugees born after the 1948 war. In fact, granting refugee status to stateless descendants is standard practice throughout the world. The majority of registered Afghan refugees, for example, are second- and third-generation, born outside the country, as are most who have returned to Afghanistan in recent years.)

Eid spent six years in Johannesburg, where he obtained his doctorate, and his English has traces of a South African accent. He compared Gaza and the Palestinian refugee camps outside Israel's borders to the Bantustans in which black South Africans were confined under apartheid; it was his view that a two-state solution would not end apartheid but rather consolidate it, creating an enfeebled, discontinuous West Bank-Gaza state that would have a dubious claim to independence.

To Eid, the two-state solution was an essentially racist proposal, because it was designed to preserve a Jewish ethnic majority, with legally sanctioned discrimination against non-Jews. He preferred a single, democratic, non-racial, non-religious state, which he said was a "huge compromise for Palestinians", because it would give "citizenship and forgiveness to settlers and occupiers". Eid objected to the PLO's insincere threats to seek such an outcome, which he wrote off as a misguided attempt to scare the Israelis into accepting ethnic partition: "I mean, equality is not scary! If you are against equality and justice, you are against human rights."

Relying on states to behave morally was a lost cause, he argued; they needed to be pressured by their own people from below, through BDS activism by civil society. He recalled that it had taken more than 30 years for the international community to heed the calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions against apartheid South Africa, whose violent overreaction to indigenous resistance had been a prime driver of international solidarity. Just as the boycotts against South Africa had been stoked by the apartheid regime's killings of protesters, Eid said, "the growth of BDS has been paved in Gaza's blood. Every massacre we have in Gaza convinces me more that the only hope we have is popular resistance and BDS."

**T**hough BDS has not had a major economic impact on Israel so far, compared to the decades-long campaign in South Africa, its ascent has been rather steep. Institutional investors such as the Dutch pension fund PGGM and the United Methodist Church have withdrawn from Israeli banks. The Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, and Norway's largest private pension fund have divested from companies profiting from Israel's occupation. And major firms such as Veolia, Orange, G4S and CRH have fully or mostly pulled out of Israel following boycott campaigns. Dozens of student governments and numerous academic associations have endorsed boycott and divestment initiatives. And many musicians and artists have cancelled shows or pledged to boycott the country.

No less important, the BDS movement has effectively won the argument inside Palestine: whereas Abu Mazen had stated, in 2013, that while the PLO supports settlement boycotts, "we do not support the boycott of Israel" because "we have relations with Israel, we have mutual recognition of Israel", by 2018 the PLO had at least rhetorically adopted BDS. International organisations, too, have been influenced by the BDS movement to move slowly from ineffectual condemnations to calls for practical measures that have some teeth. Last summer, Amnesty International called for a worldwide ban on settlement products and an arms embargo on Israel and Palestinian armed groups. Human Rights Watch called on institutional investors in Israeli banks to ensure that they are not contributing to or benefiting from settlements and other violations of international law. And the UN human rights office has

compiled a list of over 200 companies - the majority based in Israel or the occupied territories, 22 based in the US - that are linked to the establishment, expansion or maintenance of Israeli settlements. In what is expected to be the most significant development in the 13-year-old BDS campaign, the UN human rights office plans to publish the names of these companies later this year.

Nearly all of the corporate and student-led divestments have been selective: they have not targeted Israel as a whole, but only settlements and occupation. A number of them had little to do with the BDS movement itself. But both the Israeli government and the BDS movement have tended to obscure this fact. Doing so has helped the BDS movement appear to rack up victories, and it has helped the Israeli government to discredit cautious bureaucratic initiatives to adhere to international law, casting them instead as unhinged, demonising efforts by BDS radicals.

Conflating boycotts of the settlements with opposition to Israel's existence has been a central element of the government's policy, reflecting a desire not just to protect settlements but to stem the tide of selective boycotts that could spread to Israel as a whole. "We are saying there is no difference between a settlement boycott and a boycott of Israel," Yossi Kuperwasser said. "If you want to promote the boycotting of Israel, any part of Israel, you are not a friend of Israel. You are actually an enemy of Israel. So we have to deal with you."

The government has passed a law that bars entry to foreigners who have publicly supported a boycott of Israel "or an area under its control". Its minister of strategic affairs has called for imposing financial penalties on Israeli organisations, companies and in some cases individuals who advocate boycotts of either Israel or the settlements. After Hagai El-Ad, the head of the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, addressed the UN security council and called on it to take action against Israel's occupation, the chairman of the governing coalition called to revoke his citizenship and to create a bill that would do the same to any Israeli who calls on international bodies to take action against Israel.

Israel and its allies have pursued the same strategy abroad. In 2014, Netanyahu convened a meeting of top Israeli ministers to discuss possible counter-BDS measures, including, according to the Israeli daily Haaretz, "legal suits in European and North American courts against [BDS] organisations", "legal action against financial institutions that boycott settlements", and "whether to activate the pro-Israel lobby in the US, specifically Aipac, in order to promote legislation in Congress". Since then, major banks around the world have shut down the accounts of pro-BDS groups. In 24 US states, bills and orders that stifle free speech by discouraging, penalising or restricting support for boycotts of Israel or of settlements have been passed, and have been challenged in two states so far by the ACLU. Following Hurricane Harvey, last summer, the city of Dickinson, Texas required residents who wanted relief to certify that they do not and will not boycott Israel, a demand the ACLU's Texas legal director called "an egregious violation of the first amendment, reminiscent of McCarthy-era loyalty oaths". A federal anti-boycott bill supported by Aipac has also met with opposition by the ACLU, which argues that "political boycotts are fully protected by the first amendment", regardless of whether the boycott is of Israel or the settlements.

This deliberate elision of Israel and the settlements has caused no small amount of consternation among the state's more liberal supporters in the American Jewish community. For years they have sought to protect Israel itself from sanction, by arguing that only boycotts of settlements are legitimate. Now they feel themselves under attack not just from BDS, on the left, but the Israeli government, on the right, both of which disdain the centre-left notion of being "pro-Israel and anti-occupation", and both of which reject the position that wine produced in West Bank settlements should be boycotted while the government that created, financed and maintained the settlements should not.

Israel's strategy has been to force a choice on companies subjected to pressure to withdraw or divest: stay in Israeli-controlled territory and ignore the boycott campaign, or accede to its demands and face potential lawsuits and losses in much bigger markets in Europe and the US. Given that choice, Kuperwasser said, most companies would be very reluctant to withdraw from Israel or the settlements: "But if it's going to happen, there are going to be more laws around the world that are going to make these companies suffer. We can retaliate and come up with a response."

The Ministry of Strategic Affairs has outsourced much of its anti-BDS activity in foreign countries, helping to establish and finance front groups and partner organisations, in an attempt to minimise the appearance of Israeli interference in the domestic politics of its allies in Europe and the US. Kuper said that anti-BDS groups were now "sprouting like mushrooms after the rain". He and a number of other former intelligence and security officials are members of one of them, Kella Shlomo, described as a "PR commando unit" that will work with and receive tens of millions of dollars from the Ministry of Strategic Affairs. In 2016, Israel's embassy in London sent a cable to Jerusalem complaining that the strategic affairs ministry was endangering British Jewish organisations, most of which are registered as charities and forbidden from political activity: "'operating' Jewish organisations directly from Jerusalem ... is liable to be dangerous" and "could encounter opposition from the organisations themselves, given their legal status; Britain isn't the US!" Last year, al-Jazeera aired undercover recordings of an Israeli official working out of the London embassy, who described being asked by the Ministry of Strategic Affairs to help establish a "private company" in the UK that would work for the Israeli government and in liaison with pro-Israel groups like Aipac.

To Israeli liberals, the gravest threat from BDS is that it has induced in their government a reaction so reckless and overreaching that it resembles a sort of auto-immune disease, in which the battle against BDS also damages the rights of ordinary citizens and the organs of democracy. Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs has utilised the intelligence services to surveil and attack delegitimisers of Israel. It called to establish a blacklist of Israeli organisations and citizens who support the nonviolent boycott campaign, created a "tarnishing unit" to besmirch the reputations of boycott supporters, and placed paid articles in the Israeli press. Leftwing Israeli Jews have been summoned for interrogation or stopped at the border by agents of the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency, who described themselves as officers working against delegitimation. Israel has banned 20 organisations from entry for their political opinions, including the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker group that won a Nobel peace prize for helping Holocaust refugees and that now supports self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians while also endorsing BDS.

Last year, the Israeli intelligence minister, Yisrael Katz, called publicly for "targeted civil assassinations" of activists such as the BDS co-founder Omar Barghouti, a permanent resident of Israel. Barghouti was also threatened by Israel's minister of public security and strategic affairs: "Soon any activist who uses their influence to delegitimise the only Jewish state in the world will know they will pay a price for it ... We will soon be hearing more of our friend Barghouti." Not long after, Barghouti was prevented from exiting the country, and last year Israeli authorities searched his home and arrested him for tax evasion.

**P**erhaps Israel's most powerful tool in the campaign against delegitimation has been to accuse the country's critics of antisemitism. Doing so required changing official definitions of the term. This effort began during the final years of the second intifada, in 2003 and 2004, as pre-BDS calls to boycott and divest from Israel were gaining steam. At that time, a group of institutes and experts, including Dina Porat - a Tel Aviv University scholar who had been a member of the Israeli foreign ministry's delegation to the 2001 UN world conference against racism in



Durban, South Africa - proposed creating a new definition of antisemitism that would equate criticisms of Israel with hatred of Jews.

These experts and institutions, working with the American Jewish Committee and other Israel advocacy groups, formulated a new “working definition” of antisemitism, including a list of examples, that was published in 2005 (and later discarded) by an EU body for combating racism. This working definition was adapted in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), and has been used, endorsed or recommended, with some small modifications, by a number of other organisations - including the US Department of State, which, since 2008, has defined antisemitism to include any of three categories of criticism of Israel, known as the “three Ds”: delegitimisation of Israel, demonisation of Israel and double standards for Israel. (More recently, the IHRA working definition has been at the centre of the antisemitism controversy in the Labour party, which adopted a modified version of the examples accompanying the definition.)

By the state department’s definition, delegitimisation includes “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, and denying Israel the right to exist”. Thus anti-Zionism - including the view that Israel should be a state of all its citizens, with equal rights for Jews and non-Jews - is a form of delegitimisation and therefore antisemitic. According to this definition, virtually all Palestinians (and a large proportion of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel, who oppose Zionism for religious reasons) are guilty of antisemitism because they want Jews and Palestinians to continue living in Palestine but not within a Jewish state. Kuperwasser, for one, stands by the charge: “Anti-Zionism and antisemitism are the same lady in a different cloak.”

The second D, demonisation, includes “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis” - as the Israeli army’s deputy chief of staff did during a Holocaust remembrance day speech in 2016, likening the “revolting trends” in Europe and Germany in the 1930s and 40s to tendencies visible in Israel today. The last of the three Ds, applying double standards, holds that singling Israel out for criticism is “the new antisemitism”. Yet practically every earlier divestment and boycott initiative around the world could be accused of double standards, including the campaign against apartheid South Africa, most of whose proponents ignored graver transgressions elsewhere, such as the concurrent genocides in Cambodia, Iraqi Kurdistan and East Timor.



An anti-Israel poster campaign in London in 2017. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

The new definition of antisemitism has been frequently deployed against Israel’s critics in the US, especially on university campuses. Israel advocacy groups have urged several universities to adopt the state department definition. At Northeastern University in Boston and the University of Toledo in Ohio, pro-Israel students and advocacy groups attempted to thwart even discussing boycott and divestment, arguing that it would create an antisemitic climate on campus. The California legislature passed a resolution in 2012 to regulate speech on California

campuses; it cited examples of antisemitism that included not just delegitimisation and demonisation of Israel but also “student- and faculty-sponsored boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns against Israel”.

In 2015, an anonymous website, Canary Mission, began publishing lists of pro-Palestinian students who support divestment, often accusing them of antisemitism; the Israeli government has used Canary Mission profiles to interrogate and deny entry to pro-BDS US citizens. On several campuses, pro-Israel groups have intimidated pro-Palestinian students and faculty by placing names from the Canary Mission website on posters that state: “The following students and faculty ... have allied themselves with Palestinian terrorists to perpetrate BDS and Jew Hatred on this campus.”

Kuperwasser was unapologetic about the perceived excesses of Israel’s anti-BDS campaign at home and abroad. He was confident that Israel was taking the right approach and would succeed, as it had against past assaults: “We won the war on the conventional battlefield. To start with, our chances were very slim. We won the war on terror. Again, it wasn’t easy. I remember when we went to the big battle - the second intifada - and many generals around the world were telling me, ‘Listen, Kuper, you’re wasting your time: nobody ever won a war against terrorism,’ citing Vietnam and other cases. And I said: ‘No, we shall win this war as well. We are innovative and determined enough. And unlike many other battles, we don’t have a second option, an alternative. We have to win.’ The same goes here. We shall win.”

**F**or Jewish Zionists in the diaspora, whether their support for Israel is critical or unwavering, the demands of the BDS movement are a non-starter. Most would say that it is tragic that 80% of the Palestinian residents within what would become the boundaries of Israel were forced into exile during the 1948 war, but the lesson of the Holocaust is that Jews must have their own state, full stop. They support the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the state of Palestine, not to Israel. This is among the primary reasons that they are so troubled by the prospect that there will never be a West Bank-Gaza state: few dispute that refugees have a right to return to their homeland - this is, after all, the founding idea of Zionism - but with no Palestinian state there is no good liberal answer to where Palestinians should return to.

Because the BDS movement opposes a state with legally sanctioned discrimination against non-Jews and therefore rejects the idea of a Jewish state, many diaspora Jews view the threat it poses as existential. Thanks in no small part to the BDS movement, the Israel-Palestine debate is transforming from a question of how to end Israel’s occupation, which most liberal Jews do not support, to a referendum on the legitimacy of Israel, which they consider a settled fact that they shouldn’t have to defend.

Beneath this principled opposition, there are also more visceral misgivings. One of the primary apprehensions of liberal Zionists about the BDS movement is what they consider to be its strident tone and uncompromising positions. Rabbi Jill Jacobs, the head of T’ruah, a rabbinic human rights organisation that works in both Israel and the US, said that she “straddles the line between progressive groups where Zionist is a bad word and pro-Israel groups where occupation is a bad word”. She said she felt alienated by the hostility of the BDS movement, which at times seemed to her downright gleeful as it publicised Israel’s misdeeds. “BDS is triggering 2,000 years of Jewish trauma and 70 years of post-Holocaust trauma,” she said. David Shulman, a renowned Indologist, Hebrew University professor, and activist with Ta’ayush (“co-existence”), a leftwing Israeli-Palestinian group that protects Palestinians from Israeli settler attacks, said that his biggest problem with BDS was “the virulent tonality” of it: “I understand it is a heterogeneous movement. But so much of it is based on hatred, which is a terrible basis for political action.”

Many liberal Zionists recoil not just at the vehemence of some BDS activists, but also at their occasional conflation of Israel and the Jewish people, which they feel smacks of antisemitism. Simone Zimmerman, a co-founder of the American Jewish anti-occupation group IfNotNow, said she found the Israeli government no less guilty of the charge: “Bibi Netanyahu goes around the world saying, ‘I am here to represent the Jewish people, and the IDF is doing what it’s doing on behalf of all the Jewish people in the world.’ And the American Jewish Committee and Aipac say we’re doing what we’re doing to keep the Jews safe. I find it hard to make the case that our critics should be more nuanced than we are ourselves.”

In the US and Europe, liberal Jews feel as alienated by the anti-Zionist BDS movement as by the illiberal supporters of Israeli policies they deplore. Last fall, the rightwing Zionist Organization of America feted Steve Bannon, the former Trump adviser whose ex-wife, in a sworn court declaration, recalled his complaint that their daughters’ school had too many Jews. Bannon had proclaimed himself a “Christian Zionist”. The “alt-right” leader Richard Spencer, an organiser of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, at which white supremacists had chanted “Jews will not replace us”, had also declared himself a sort of Zionist, inspired by Israel’s example as an exclusionary ethnic state. Last year he said to an Israeli television interviewer: “You could say I’m a white Zionist in the sense that I care about my people. I want us to have a secure homeland for us and ourselves, just like you want a secure homeland in Israel.”

The alliance between Israel’s allies and ultra-nationalists in Europe and the US has become a central theme of the BDS campaign’s messages. In this respect, the Trump era has been good for the movement. So has the Netanyahu government, whose attacks on BDS have been among the greatest drivers of publicity and recruitment for the campaign.

Jacobs said that it had become harder and harder to be pro-Israel and anti-occupation in progressive spaces. “On the left, support for BDS is a litmus test: either you support it or you have no place.” To progressives, centre-left pro-Israel groups are increasingly viewed as Aipac-lite, supporting two states in name while in practice protecting Israel from any sort of pressure that might induce it to end a very comfortable occupation.

Sharon Brous, a leading progressive rabbi in the US, told me, “I am not supportive of BDS, but I think we haven’t treated it correctly. Boycott is a tool that we in the Jewish community use often. It is nonviolent.” American progressives have advocated a number of domestic boycotts in recent years - including one against the state of North Carolina, over a controversial anti-LGBT law. Mouin Rabbani, a senior fellow with the Institute for Palestine Studies who is not active in the BDS movement, told me, “All these years we heard Israel and its supporters ask, ‘Where is the Palestinian Gandhi?’ And then when faced with a totally nonviolent Palestinian boycott campaign, they say they can’t support it.”

Simone Zimmerman, the IfNotNow co-founder, said: “If you ask a random American Jew on the street, ‘Do you believe that people in their society shouldn’t discriminate based on ethnic heritage, and all people should have access to all the basic rights that you care about in America?’, they’d probably say yes. And then it comes to Israel, and they say: ‘Equality for all people? You’re trying to wipe Israel off the face of the map!’”

**I**n Jaffa one Saturday afternoon, I met Kobi Snitz, a mathematician who works at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot and is a member of Boycott from Within, a group of pro-BDS Israelis, most of whom are Jews. Snitz is a veteran activist who has been participating in West Bank demonstrations with Palestinians since the second intifada. He has been arrested numerous times and spent many years protesting alongside the family of Ahed Tamimi, who has become a symbol of Palestinian

unarmed resistance, following her arrest last December, at age 16, for slapping Israeli soldiers who entered her property shortly after the army shot her 15-year-old cousin in the head at close range. Kobi said that the protests he had joined in Tamimi's village, Nabi Saleh, had dwindled over the years, as had non-violent resistance in the West Bank more generally. "It's amazing that it lasted as long as it did," he said. "Four died in Nabi Saleh, hundreds were injured, and roughly a third of the village was detained or jailed. For a village of 500 people to put up that kind of resistance on its own for that long is extraordinary. But, yes, eventually it dies down and dwindles. Oppression works. Terror works."

Snitz drove me, in a beat-up old sedan, to a lunch of Sudanese lentils in Neve Sha'anana, the poor south Tel Aviv neighbourhood that is home to many African asylum seekers. We were the only non-Africans in the restaurant or on the street. At bottom, he explained, boycott was a peaceful tactic of resisting immoral repression; the refusal to cooperate with gross injustice, he argued, was the minimum required of a person of conscience. As we drove back to Jaffa, passing a prison in which Snitz had been detained, he paraphrased words he had heard from the BDS co-founder, Omar Barghouti. "Omar said: 'Look, I don't want the west to come and save us. I'm not asking for the west to come invade Israel. I'm just asking it to stop supporting our oppression.'" Snitz added: "It's true that this conflict is not special in how bad the violations are. What is special is how much the liberal west actively supports them."

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