

Anti-Israel Group a Threat to Liberal Democracy

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JERUSALEM—On June 15, Members of Knesset Dr. Anat Berko and Dr. Michael Oren hosted a forum—attended by fellow Knesset members, staffers, scholars, and NGO representatives—on the struggle against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (BDS).

Israel has an obvious interest in fighting BDS, which promotes an international campaign to delegitimize the Jewish state. But so do liberal democracies everywhere, whether they realize it or not. Purporting to operate in the name of social justice, BDS employs a style of politics that exploits ignorance and trades in slanders, fostering habits that are inimical to public discourse.

Founded in 2005 by Palestinian political parties and other organizations, the movement purports to seek an end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank. But the real aim of BDS, which describes itself on its [website](#) as a “truly global movement,” is to demonize Israel.

The BDS manifesto is rife with outrageous accusations: that the state of Israel was built on land “ethnically cleansed” of Palestinians; that Israel maintains an “entrenched system of racial discrimination against its own Arab-Palestinian citizens;” and that the fight against Israel’s “colonial and discriminatory policies” is akin to the fight against apartheid in South Africa.

Were BDS in pursuit of a just settlement between Israel and Palestinians, the movement would not warp facts and invent Israeli crimes. Israel is not built on ethnic cleansing. In the spring of 1948, when five Arab armies descended on the newly declared Jewish state, most Arabs who left their homes in Israel did so to avoid the fighting or at the urging of the invading Arab states which promised Israel’s swift destruction.

Israel does not systematically discriminate against Arab citizens. The Middle East’s sole liberal democracy grants all citizens full political rights regardless of race, religion, or sex, even as, like every other liberal democracy, Israel has serious work to do to create the conditions that enable its minorities to exercise their rights to the fullest.

And Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank is nothing like apartheid in South Africa. It is not a theory of racial supremacy or ethnic supremacy but rather national security imperatives— Hamas, which rules Gaza, is pledged to Israel’s

destruction—that compel Israel to aggressively control its borders with Gaza and impose on it a naval quarantine as well as to maintain a military presence in the West Bank, where Hamas commands substantial support.

The BDS manifesto is as insidious in its demands as it is in its allegations. Its insistence on “respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties” employs high-minded language to malign purpose. In a cynical departure from the practice in regard to all other peoples, Palestinians have asserted—and international law appears to ratify—the power to pass on refugee status to descendants. Consequently, the BDS manifesto effectively ascribes to some 5 million Palestinian descendants of the approximately 700,000 or so Arab refugees of 1948 a dubious right, the exercise of which would effectively abolish the Jewish state.

BDS enjoys expanding influence. It claims, for example, to have compelled the French corporation Veolia to have reduced its business operations in Israel; to have pushed the Brazilian government to distance itself from International Security and Defense Systems, an Israeli company that was in the running to provide security for the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics; and to have convinced the British bank Barclays to sell its holdings in Elbit Systems, an Israeli weapons manufacturer.

Little evidence exists that BDS has to this point caused significant damage to the Israeli economy. But pressure is building. Stephane Richard, the head of the international telecommunications giant Orange, suggested recently in Cairo that his company would terminate relationships with its Israeli affiliate because it does business in the West Bank. He quickly backtracked, but this was an ominous sign.

More ominous still is BDS’s growing power on college campuses, where it has become a signature progressive cause. American students and faculty who know little about the Israel-Palestinian conflict agitate to prevent pro-Israeli voices from being heard. In keeping with the pernicious tendency in universities to politicize intellectual life, they seek not only to block commercial relations with Israel but also to deny participation in academic proceedings to Israeli scholars.

Something other than Palestinian suffering seems to motivate progressive proponents of BDS. Few campus activists bother to learn that Israel is the largest provider of employment to West Bank Palestinians and that Arab citizens hold 16 of Israel’s 120 Knesset seats. Unheard among campus leftists is criticism of Lebanon’s exclusion of its 455,000 Palestinians from most professions, including medicine; Syria’s withholding of full rights to its more than 500,000 Palestinians and their suffering as a result of the country’s civil war; and Jordan’s barring of its more than 2 million Palestinians from holding most government jobs.

While BDS's economic impact on Israel thus far has been limited, the danger is that its ideological campaign against Israel on campuses will reach a tipping point that legitimates the economic war.

Israeli lawmakers are wise to place BDS on their agenda. In this week's Knesset forum Gerald Steinberg, president of NGO Monitor and professor of political science at Bar Ilan University, observed that BDS has a sinister history, which includes the infamous 1975 U.N. General Assembly resolution that equated Zionism with racism and the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, which singled out Israel among the nations of the world for special opprobrium.

Dr. Qanta Ahmed, an associate professor of medicine at the State University of New York, also spoke. Her words were particularly stirring, as they came from a Pakistani-born and British-trained physician who is a practicing Muslim.

An eloquent critic of the boycott movement, Dr. Ahmed related that last summer she co-authored a letter of protest to the world's preeminent medical journal, The Lancet. In the midst of the Israel-Hamas hostilities, The Lancet had published an "An Open Letter for the People in Gaza," which accused Israel of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The letter insinuated that the 95 percent of Israeli academics who had not signed an appeal to the government to cease military operations were "complicit in the massacre and destruction of Gaza."

In reply, Ahmed and colleagues wrote that they "find abhorrent that academic authors would, without evidence or data, accuse an entire academic community of crimes against humanity by association of national identity or professional affiliation, an accusation that is not only a rank dehumanization of an entire state, but explicitly seditious in propagating virulent anti-Semitic sentiments to the detriment of whole academies."

BDS, Ahmed told the Knesset forum, "must be taken as seriously as any missile," and academics around the world worthy of their profession should contribute to the construction of an equivalent to an "Iron Dome [an Israeli mobile air defense system] against the BDS movement."

BDS represents not only a menace of growing proportions to Israel but also, in its campus instantiation, a dangerous assault on the principles of liberal democracy. Promulgating falsehoods, preaching hatred, and ex-communicating professors—all this strikes at the conditions under which freedom flourishes. Israel's struggle against BDS has become inseparable from the defense of the principles for which all liberal democracies should stand.

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