

The selling of BDS

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According to the mythology of the anti- Israel boycotts, divestment and sanctions campaign, 2015 marks its 10th anniversary. For example, in the Globe and Mail, Patrick Martin wrote: “Ten years ago, a group of some 170 Palestinian activists and other organizations launched a call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel.”

In fact, BDS began in 2001, during a UN preparatory meeting in Tehran that set the stage for the notorious (and anti-Semitic) UN anti-racism conference in Durban, South Africa. At the NGO Forum, officials from 1,500 groups, including Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, adopted a plan for “the complete international isolation of Israel.” The rhetoric and the tactics were lifted directly from the South African anti-apartheid campaign.

These same groups began implementation immediately. The first boycott effort was started in 2003 in British universities, using the justification of an Israeli “massacre” in Jenin. The false allegations were part of the propaganda war against Israel, using the façade of human rights and erasing the context of mass terror and Palestinian suicide bombing. This academic boycott had limited impact, but became the foundation on which additional campaigns were built. Shortly afterward, the NGO network succeeded in persuading church groups in the United Kingdom, such as the Anglicans, to add divestment to their agendas, and isolated economic boycotts of Israeli products in Scandinavia began.

It was only three years later, in 2005, that the “170 Palestinian activists and other organizations” referred to by Martin, among others, jumped on the bandwagon and claimed credit. Marwan Barghouti is the Palestinian face of the BDS movement, and he is often quoted and cited as “the founder,” but if

he were to suddenly retire, this would have very little impact on this form of political and economic warfare. BDS is firmly entrenched, particularly among anti-Israel groups in Europe and, to a growing extent, in North America.

Another pervasive myth is that the goal of BDS is limited to “ending the Israeli occupation” and promoting peace based on a “two-state” formula – Israel for Jews, and Palestine for Arabs. Journalists who repeat this image generally provide quotes from Barghouti as evidence. But they avoid contradictions, such as the official BDS website, which features rhetoric and maps that reflect a 1948 agenda (elimination of Israel) rather a post-1967 agenda focusing on compromise. Similarly, the core demands of BDS include the so-called right of return for refugees from 1948, which is equivalent to ending the existence of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish People. If a peace agreement were reached tomorrow, many of the NGOs that promote BDS would continue their campaigns.

Armed with these distortions, the well-financed promoters of BDS present the discrimination and double standards targeting Israel, including subsections such as product labelling, as virtuous, “non- violent resistance.” The campaign reinforces the images of Palestinian victimization and Israeli aggression, exploiting the language of morality, human rights and international law.

Although little of substance has been accomplished by BDS and the Israeli economy is flourishing, the movement has continued to make inroads. And suddenly, in Israel and among Jewish groups around the world, this campaign is causing concern.

The main reason is that BDS is a form of bullying that singles out Israel and Israelis, promoting the initial Durban goal of “complete isolation.” The tactics of intimidation are used to disrupt performances of Israeli artists and events staged by groups such as the Jewish National Fund; to attack performers who schedule trips to Israel; and to threaten business executives who sign agreements with Israeli firms. For many, the stress is enough to force a cancellation.

To defeat BDS, it is necessary to focus attention on the strategy of bullying that is at the core of this 21st-century form of anti-Israeli warfare. Anti-BDS “boycotts,” which encourage people to demonstrably purchase Israeli products under attack, do help, but to be successful in the long term, the myths and immorality of BDS must be exposed.