

From South Africa to Palestine, Lessons for the New Anti-Apartheid Movement

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There were moments in modern history when particular struggles galvanized millions around the world to act in solidarity. This occurred during the Spanish Civil War, the struggle of the Vietnamese against US imperialism, and the liberation struggles of Southern Africa. There were moments in modern history when particular struggles galvanized millions around the world to act in solidarity. This occurred during the Spanish Civil War, the struggle of the Vietnamese against US imperialism, and the liberation struggles of Southern Africa.

The time has now come for progressive humanity to cut through the obfuscations, canards, and calumnies and meaningfully support the resistance of the Palestinian people. For sixty years Palestinians have alerted us to one outrage after another, injustices piled upon injustices without the commensurate scale of global solidarity required to make a significant difference to their lives. It is now in our hands to change this unconscionable situation. Not by appealing to the ruling classes of the world and their institutions who remain-in the face of abundant evidence-unmoved, callous, and hypocritical. They in fact sustain and provide succor to Israeli apartheid and terror.

Solidarity

It is rather by applying the most potent weapon we have learnt to rely on, forged and steeled through the tried and tested struggles of workers and oppressed people spanning time and space: solidarity. International solidarity in the words of the late Mozambican revolutionary, Samora Machel, is "not an act of charity but an act of unity between allies fighting on different terrains toward the same objectives."

The Palestinian struggle does not only exert a visceral tug on many around the world. A reading of imperialism shows that Apartheid Israel is needed as a fundamentalist and militarized warrior state both to quell the undefeated and unbowed Palestinians and also as a rapid response fount of reaction in concert with despotic Arab regimes to do the Empire's bidding in the Middle East and beyond.

Over the years the latter included support for the mass terror waged against the people of Central and South America and facilitating the evasion of international sanctions against South Africa. Besides providing a ready supply of mercenaries to terrorize a populace-whether in Guatemala, Iraq, or New Orleans-Israel also lends its expertise of collective punishment and mass terror. We have to recognize that the foundation of the Israeli economy is founded on the special, political, and military role which Zionism fulfils for Western imperialism. While playing its role to ensure that the region is safe for oil companies it has also carved out a niche market producing high-tech security essential for the day-to-day functioning of the New Imperialism.

Unrestrained hand

The unrestrained hand of US imperialism and its support for barbarism whether in Iraq or Palestine should hasten our actions. In Gaza, eighty percent of the population lives in poverty and close to a million people have no access to fresh water, electricity, and other essential services. Close to 70,000 workers have lost their jobs in the eight months of the siege of Gaza. The killing of Palestinians continues on a ferocious basis-daily missiles are launched from American-made helicopters and fighter jets. These cowardly war crimes are carried out with impunity-no longer even meriting a mention in the mainstream press.

On February 16, eight members of the Al Fayeq family in Bureij Refugee Camp were martyred by missiles. Forty others, mostly women and children, were injured, some critically. Ten days before this atrocity the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) killed seven Palestinians. The targets included an agricultural school in Beit Hanoun where a teacher, Hani Shabaan Naim, was killed and many of his students seriously injured. In the space of scarcely a month and a half, one hundred and eight Palestinians, largely civilians, have been martyred.

In light of these killings and the slow starvation of the inhabitants of Gaza as well as the frequent "incursions" into the West Bank, the obsequiousness of the Abbas regime becomes all the more abject. The fanfare and din surrounding the Annapolis "breakthrough" is one more hoax designed to assuage the conscience and lull the "international community" to slumber.

Karma Nabulsi wrote at the time of this spectacle: "The tarnished trickery of those tired catchphrases 'last chance for peace,' 'painful compromises,' 'moderates against extremists' is now worn so thin a child would not be deceived. It is a meeting to legitimize the status quo. There is an intense defeatism pervading the mainstream media and tired politicians without valor everywhere. But there is a hopeful reality: many ordinary citizens all over the world have not given up and the Palestinians have not given up on themselves."

BDS

Palestinians remain steadfast and courageous. Despite the complexities of the Palestinian resistance and the conflict between Fatah and Hamas and without discouraging criticism, we outside the Israeli dungeons and the rubble of the Israeli war machine have a responsibility to support the Palestinian struggle. This can be accomplished through the boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign (BDS) proposed by a wide array of Palestinian unions, academic, student and political organizations representing the vast majority of Palestinians.

Other writings have justified the need for this strategy so it will suffice here to quote Virginia Tilley, a woman from the US who in the aftermath of Israel's cluster bombing of Lebanon wrote: "It is finally time. After years of internal arguments, confusion, and dithering, the time has come for a full-fledged international boycott of Israel. Good cause for a boycott has, of course, been in place for decades, as a raft of initiatives already attests. But Israel's war crimes are now so shocking, its extremism so clear, the suffering so great, the UN so helpless, and the international community's need to contain Israel's behavior so urgent and compelling, that the time for global action has matured. A coordinated movement of divestment, sanctions, and boycotts against Israel must convene to contain not only Israel's aggressive acts and crimes against humanitarian law but also, as in South Africa, its founding racist logics that inspired and still drive the entire Palestinian problem."

South African lessons

It will be helpful to draw activists' attention to some of the egregious lessons from the campaign to isolate Apartheid South Africa bearing in mind Amilcar Cabral's "tell no lies, claim no easy victories" advice to revolutionaries. Firstly, it took a few decades of hard work before the boycott campaign made an impact. Despite the impression given by many governments, unions, and faith-based groups that they supported the isolation of the apartheid state from the outset. This is just not true. Dick Cheney, as a senator during the South African anti-apartheid struggle, called for the continued incarceration of Nelson Mandela because he was a "terrorist." Both Reagan and Thatcher gave support to Apartheid South Africa. Multilateral organizations and unions were hesitant for many years to fully support the anti-apartheid campaign.

The anti-apartheid movement was formed in 1959 and the first significant breakthrough came in 1963 when Danish dock workers refused to off-load South African goods. The rise of the anti-apartheid movement must be seen in the general effervescence of liberation struggles and social movements in the turbulent 1960's/early 1970's and in the context where there was-whatever our opinion was of the USSR and its motivation-a counterweight to US hegemony. This together with the viciousness of the pro-Israeli lobby, its opportunistic reference to the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, and the post 9/11 climate of fear, silencing dissent, and Islamophobia makes the task of isolating apartheid Israel more difficult. Despite these seemingly daunting obstacles the movement for BDS against Israel is gaining momentum and has already made some significant gains-gains which would've been difficult to imagine just a few years ago.

Name and shame

Secondly, arguments opposed to the boycott of South Africa claiming it would harm black South Africans and highlighting the need for dialogue and "constructive engagement" were easily rebuffed by lucid and knowledgeable counter-arguments. The South African regime, like the Israeli regime today, used homeland leaders and an assortment of collaborators to argue this case for them. But careful research played an important role in exposing the economic, cultural, and armaments trade links with South Africa to make our actions more effective as well as to "name and shame" those who benefited from the apartheid regime.

Thirdly, sectarianism is a danger that we must be vigilant about and principled unity must be our lodestar. Some in the anti-apartheid movement favored supporting only one liberation movement as the authentic voice of the oppressed in South Africa. They also aspired to work largely with "respectable" organizations, governments, and multilateral organizations and shunned the much harder and patient linking of struggles with grassroots organizations.

Palestinian struggle

The healthy linking of the Palestinian struggle with struggles against racism and in support of the indigenous people and workers in North America that I have witnessed must be lauded. For example, at the Six Nations reclamation site in Canada the Palestinian flag flew alongside the Six Nations flag because Palestinian activists made sure to be there to support this key indigenous rights struggle. Similarly, connections have been made between the right of return of refugees from New Orleans and Palestine. Finally, the sanctions campaign in South Africa did produce gatekeepers, sectarians, and commissars but they were also challenged.

Writing in support of the academic boycott a colleague, Shireen Hassim, does not gloss over the problems:

"Some academics who actively opposed apartheid had invitations to international conferences withdrawn; it was not always possible to target the supporters of the apartheid regime; and South African academics' understanding of global issues was certainly weakened. It is in the nature of such weapons that they are double-edged. But, as part of a battery of sanctions, the academic boycott undoubtedly had an impact on both the apartheid state and on white academics and university administrations. The [academic] boycott, together with the more successful sports boycott and economic divestment campaigns, helped to strengthen the struggle of black people for justice. ...University administrations could no longer hide behind an excuse of neutrality but had to issue statements on their opposition to apartheid and introduce programs of redress... Universities became sites of intense debate, and, indeed, intellectuals became critically involved in debates about the nature of current and future South African societies. In the wake of the boycott, there was not a curtailing of academic freedom, then, but a flourishing of intellectual thought that was rich, varied, and exciting."

Apartheid and neoliberalism

The campaign for BDS must be in concert with supporting grassroots organizations in Palestine and in the Palestinian diaspora. This can take many forms and shapes including "twinning" or "sister city" arrangements, speaking tours, targeted actions in support of specific struggles, and concrete support. Initially, in South Africa the dominant liberation movement and their allies did not support the independent trade union movement which later played a pivotal role in bringing down the apartheid regime. Today, thirteen years after the first democratic elections, the present neoliberal government is privatizing municipal services. The poor who cannot pay their rent are being evicted and failure to pay water and electricity bills means frequent disconnections. The government often calls the inability to pay user fees the "culture of non-payment and entitlement."

A few years back we were horrified to see officials from the municipality of Cape Town present to a visiting Palestinian delegation, including a proud Saeb Erakat, prepaid water meters. This is not and should not be the solidarity we are talking about! Resistance to neoliberalism in South Africa is growing thirteen years after apartheid.

For Palestinians it is happening even before "liberation." Amira Hass' February 6 article in *Ha'aretz* about the workers' strike in the West Bank captures this resistance to neo-liberalism:

"The workers have three main demands: adjusting wages to match the steep increase in the cost of living; a realistic addition to the 'travel expenses' component of salaries; and overturning a new regulation that demands every resident procure a certificate of honesty based on 'confirmation of debt payment.' ...Government spokesmen, headed by Fayyad, have often spoken against a 'culture of non-payment of bills,' thus portraying the general Palestinian public as prone to being debt offenders. ...The strike, and all the public and internal discussions accompanying it, is a fascinating lesson of how Palestinians still acknowledge the power of the collective; how they oppose a liberal economic

policy under occupation and colonization, and nurture a democratic suspicion as to the motives of the leading class."

Creative energies

Acts of defiance and determination against overwhelming odds continue to drive the will of Palestinians. The latest act to capture our imagination was the tide of humanity that resolutely breached and trampled upon the wall separating Palestine from Egypt. In the space of a few days almost half of the 1.5 million people in Gaza crossed the border. Global solidarity activists need to be inspired and strengthened by this unleashing of creative energies; the fact that obstacles can be surmounted and the debilitating wastefulness of internecine and sectarian conflicts exposed.

Salim Vally is a visiting scholar at York University [as of April 2008]. He returns to South Africa in August where he holds the post of Senior Researcher/Lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand. He was an executive member of the black consciousness South African Students Movement until it was banned in 1977 after the murder of Steve Biko. He was a founding member Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and is a member of various social movements including the Anti-Privatization Forum, the Palestine Solidarity Committee and the Anti-War Coalition.

[Photo omitted]

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