

**For boycott to be effective, an international coalition is indispensable**

**By Ramzy Baroud**

South Africa's Minister of Intelligence Ronnie Kasrils whispered to me just as I sat down following a most enthusiastic speech at a recent conference in Cape Town: "If you want the world to heed your call for boycotting Israel, the call has to originate from the Palestinian leadership itself."

Kasrils is obviously right. The call for boycotting the racist apartheid government was an exclusive South Africa endeavour, made resonantly and repeatedly by the African National Congress (ANC) and backed by the various liberation movements in the country and in exile. It took years for the dedicated campaign to be effective. The message communicated to the international community was clear, simple and persuasive: an end to apartheid.

It was but only one facet of various methods of struggle, aside the armed struggle, that spread to Namibia, Angola and other African countries. It was, however, a decided and consequential strategy.

One of the architects of the banking boycott campaign presented me with an elaborate plan to involve civil societies in holding to account banks that facilitate and make the Israeli occupation less taxing and possible. It was composed of a clear purpose, a straightforward plan of action and non-negotiable demands.

Is a similar campaign possible in the Palestinian case? Many people seem to think it is. In fact, calls for boycotting Israel have dotted the political landscape of the Arab-Israeli and later Palestinian-Israeli conflict for years. The main hurdle facing civil societies' efforts to compel Israel to end its brutal policies against the Palestinians is the fact that such efforts are neither centralised nor emanate from a well-regarded Palestinian source of authority and leadership. They remain well-intended, yet scattered, reflecting a strong feeling of solidarity with the Palestinians, but never orchestrated or streamlined to achieve a clear set of objectives.

A young Indian activist who spent many days urging shoppers at Britain's Marks and Spencer to boycott the store for contributing to the Israeli occupation tells me that it was utterly frustrating that many of the store's customers were Arabs from the Gulf. While nothing beats a good deal, indeed, she never understood why a wealthy Arab would find it morally permissible to benefit a company that benefits the occupation. The same scenario is repeated at many Starbucks branches, despite the top management's unabashed support for Israel.

I called Ahmed Yousef, the chief political adviser to Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, of the Palestinian Authority's unity government to consult with him on whether such a call for boycott would be possible before the June 9 mass rally in London – and many other major cities – to commemorate the 40-year anniversary of the Israeli occupation. Yousef was distressed; the infighting between Palestinians has taken its toll on his often optimistic attitude. How can one expect a unified

leadership position on boycott while Palestinians are fighting on two fronts: against one another and against Israel?

I am certain that uncountable numbers of conscientious people around the world refuse to place Israeli products in their shopping carts, precisely because of what Israel has done to maintain its illegal occupation of Palestinian land. But how can one be sure without a centralised campaign that supplies figures and numbers which can be utilised politically to pressure other companies that either operate from or do business in Israel and its settlements?

But must one wait for the Palestinian leaderships, one that is in the process of complete capitulation and another that is struggling for mere survival armed with an exclusivist political programme, to quit their infighting, unify their ranks, rehabilitate their political institutions and then make a collective and sustainable call for boycott? The wait might be too long.

One of the main objectives of my many travels has been to build bridges between the various struggle groups around the world and that in Palestine, and further link the various grassroots and civil society activists. In some ways, these efforts have been successful. I believe that by creating a wider and well-coordinated platform for struggle against injustice, with Palestine being one of several focuses, civil society can be both effective and relevant. To achieve this, one must not dwell on specifics (in Palestine, the debate of one vs. two states, armed struggle vs. passive resistance, Hamas vs. Fateh, are cases in point) but search for unifying themes, leaving the details for the Palestinians to wrangle over.

The conflict in Palestine is at a very critical juncture. Israel, blatantly aided by the two remaining imperialist forces, the US and the UK, is in the final stages of crafting its Bantustanisation of the disconnected pockets that remain of historic Palestine.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." An Israeli victory against the Palestinian people is indeed a defeat of every struggle for justice, rights and equality everywhere.

It simply must not be allowed. But how to do so is a debate that should immediately commence without reverting to dogmatic approaches and language, political or religious sensitivities and, most importantly, without any sense of ownership over the discourse, which is sadly creeping up in Palestine circles everywhere.

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