

PAPERS FROM THE CONFERENCE HELD AT SOAS

Resisting Israeli Apartheid: Strategies and Principles

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Stand Up and Be Counted

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Why Boycott Israel?

Much energy is spent unnecessarily, comparing the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and the State of Israel, in order to equate the two, and make a *boycott* acceptable. In my view there is no need for this comparison as, apart from some superficial features, such as the start date of both political ventures, they are very different, as pointed out clearly by the late Edward Said. Israel is different –definitely no better, maybe somewhat worse than Apartheid. One regime was based on exploitation of the labour force of the indigenous population, the other their expulsion.

Instead of those comparisons, let us concentrate on the one similarity which counts: in both cases the struggle could not be won from within, just by the internal forces – in both cases the forces that will determine the end of oppression must be assisted from the outside, by progressive people and organisation everywhere. Both liberation struggles, of the black people of South Africa, and of the Palestinians, have become iconic and symbolic –they represent that energy of the oppressed on their way to freedom. They represent those without means and power, fighting some of the most powerful people on this planet.

That Israel will not change its position just by internal persuasion is now universally clear –the very meagre forces within Israeli society, which have been fighting somewhat half-heartedly against the continued iniquity of the illegal and immoral occupation, are now spent, as a result of confusion and lack of courage, losing ground to Ariel Sharon and his henchmen. Sharon does not represent anything new, but the very old and assured tendency within Zionism: the one which advocates a gradual and forced evacuation of Palestine of its indigenous population, a ‘transfer’ as Theodor Herzl called it, or ‘ethnic cleansing’ in the newspeak of the 1990s. This tendency is as old as political Zionism, and has, until now, produced the goods. Over a century of action, the control over Palestine has passed from its indigenous population to the colonial settler community, with the blunt support of Western

powers. If Palestinians have lost 55 percent of their country in the 1947 UN resolution, they then lost 78 percent of it to Israel in 1948, and then lost every inch of it, again, in 1967. Since then, despite numerous UN resolutions, Israel is allowed to reign over the Palestinians without any serious intervention. If Saddam Hussein or Slobodan Milosevic were apprehended almost immediately after Kuwait and Kosovo were seized, then the UN or the West has not shown the same resolve in the case of Palestine. Palestinians have now endured a whole century of suffering and loss, with the last 37 years being unbelievably painful, and with no end in sight.

Since 1967, Israel has shown the international community that it can do what it wishes, with total immunity. Not only were all the UN resolutions without effect, but also Israel continued to occupy other countries –the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 is the most horrific example –and get away Scot-free. The Israelis developed nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction, as a way of terrorising the Arab states around them into submission, without any of the international agencies starting even the slightest campaign against this rogue and brutal state. The Apartheid Wall is being completed despite the International Court of Justice and forums clearly stating the illegal nature of the undertaking. The life of ordinary Palestinians has become a living hell, in which young people are prepared to kill themselves if they can harm some Israelis, a frightening and destructive development, understandable at it is.

Israel is out of control, and the political will to force it back into the international community is not there, definitely not in the twin powers occupying Iraq illegally in a mad war of their own, a war waged by proxy against Arabs and Islam. The script for this terrible development was written in Jerusalem, by non other than Sharon, who, some years back, outlined the plan: The West needs to take on Iraq, Syria, Iran and Pakistan. Well, the plan is being carried out in stages, as we all know. Instead of Israel being forced to carry out UN resolutions and to operate within international law, the opposite has taken place – it is Israel which has dragged the main powers into illegal and irresponsible destabilisation of world order, which has written an agenda of terror against terror, which has shown the big boys how to terrorise the little ones, without any qualms, without moral or legal limitations, without any future but war, destruction and conflict. By connecting the *boycott* to the Anti-War Movement and activities, we will make sure that the connection between those two occupations, both illegal and immoral, is exposed and condemned.

Israeli Academia and 37 Years of Brutal Occupation

In boycotting Israel, we will not only act against the continued brutal occupation of Palestine, and against the refusal of Israel to agree to withdraw from the occupied territories, and allow Palestinians a mere 22 percent of their own country to live in. We will also strike a blow against those international forces that are hell-bent on wreaking havoc in the Arab and Islamic world, on fighting the terror of Usama Bin Laden with a terror which is much worse. Israel has for many years initiated and supported the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis, well before it became an item of religious belief in Washington –Israel’s policies and actions were directed and focussed around this very understanding of international relations as a series of conflicts, dictated by ethnicity and cultural difference.

Academically, a number of Israelis and Zionists have played an important role in arguing the positions, with Raphael Patai and Bernard Lewis being the best-known ones. Israeli academia has, on the whole, managed to disregard the rights of the Palestinians, even when every University and College in Palestine were not able to operate, and when staff and students were not only stopped from studying, but were brutally attacked. At the height of the second *Intifada*, no more than few dozen Israeli academics were prepared to support the civil rights of the Palestinians by demonstrating or signing petitions, by assisting their colleagues with material means, or even by personally telling them they support their struggle. In doing that, most Israeli academics have combined forces with the rest of the Israeli state, with the machinery which oppresses and kills Palestinians. They have proven that they are not apart from the machinery of oppression, but part of it –many serve as reserve officers in the IDF, and partake actively in the continued repression in the occupied territories. Indeed, many of the most senior managers of Israeli universities are high-ranking army officers, and it is quite normal as a second career for IDF officers to join a university in some senior management role, as President, Rector, or Dean.

That so few academics see the occupation as the central problem of the Israeli society is sad and disappointing, but to be expected, when one considers the backlash faced by them. Such individuals, outstandingly courageous, who have continued to struggle actively against the occupation and repression in their respective institution and beyond, are known to all of us, and are a badge of honour to progressive people everywhere. That they use their scholarly authority to voice their views on what is a disastrous situation promulgated by a government with purports to represent them, is what gives the rest of us a measure of what can and should be done. Those professors and lecturers within Israeli academia, who are prepared to speak loudly and clearly against the occupation and for just peace in the Middle East, are a beacon of rationality for all of us, and have the admiration and support of their Palestinian colleagues. We should take a leaf out of their book, and follow their example: By taking a personal and group action against the occupation regime, against the repression, against ethnic cleansing, against the Apartheid Wall which is designed to separate communities, we are partaking not just in assisting our Palestinian academic colleagues, who need our assistance badly, but also supporting a different kind of world order, one of peace and reconciliation, and not one of conflict unto death and destruction.

It is Possible to Win this Difficult Struggle?

If one thinks about racist South Africa, then we know what part we all played in its defeat, in its moral, financial, political and legal isolation, which has led to the end of Apartheid. We should take heart from this example of international solidarity, and operate in ways which were successfully shaped during the international struggle against Apartheid. Winning the end of the occupation and oppression of Palestinians is also the beginning of a new order in the Middle East, which will be founded on the communal interests of all who live there, rather than the interests of the colonial and imperial powers, now rekindled and re-energised in Iraq, with an estimate of 100,000 dead, killed by the terror states of US and UK, partners in illegal shame. We know that so many died, thanks to few courageous academics who have run the survey putting their own life in danger, and publishing the details in one of the most respected journals of the scientific community. The two governments are scathing

about the survey, but have nothing to counter it with – they refuse to tally the dead, pretending they never existed. Where did they pick up this practice of killing civilians and pretending not to see them? Well, no prizes for working this one out.

An academic and cultural *boycott* of Israeli institutions will bring home to Israeli academics the strength of international feelings about the oppressive practices of their own army, society and state. Some may listen to us, and join the struggle from within, against the continued oppression, once they have something to lose. Others will not, and this cannot be helped. Israel is a very large receptor of research funds – every year some billions of dollars go into Israeli research, mostly coming from western governments. Much of this feeds the military-industrial complex within Israel, the fourth-largest in the world, a crucial source of income now that more peaceful industries such as tourism have greatly depleted; this production and trading of death and destruction has become second nature to the Israeli society, and tells us something about its priorities, and the real value it places on peace.

Israel has many leading scientists in many areas. If they face problems in their applications abroad, they may start paying more attention to what their government is doing in their name; they may even start paying some attention to Palestinian academics, and work with them for a just society in the Middle East. Britain and Europe are contributing much towards Israeli academia, and little to nothing towards Palestinian academia. Knowledge is power, as we all know, and with such power comes responsibility. We must start to express pressure on the national and international bodies that are responsible for this one-sided support for Israeli policies and practices, responsible as they are for so much suffering in Palestine. The Blair government continuously argues that it has a mellowing effect on the Bush regime, but the opposite seems to be true –it is the Bush agenda which now dictates British moves, or more precisely, the lack of any effective action to bring about just peace. The support of Bush is, by definition, also the support of Sharon: The British government has joined the group of international bullies, with power beyond the dreams of local Third World governments, and partakes in spreading terror, death and destruction in the Arab and Muslim east; such respect that British policies may have once had in the Arab world is now all but gone, as Arabs everywhere realise that Tony Blair is but the more friendly face of the Bush war machine, a fig-leaf which no longer covers their pudenda.

The *boycott* call is also a call for British academics to act and become politically responsible, in a situation which gets worse with every passing week. In this schools, once set up to arrange the controlling of vast countries under colonial and imperial rule, we are right in questioning the wisdom of such outdated policies, of such twaddle from the 19th century poisoning the new millennium. Britain, whose policies in the first half of the 20th century are the source of the Palestine problem, refuses to own up to its historical responsibilities, and continues to fan the flames which British Foreign Secretary and Christian Zionist Arthur Balfour started in 1917.

If knowledge is power, let us demonstrate our wise use of such power, and join forces to try and shape a future, in which academics, as well as the rest of society, can work without shame.