

THE ORIGINS OF BDS AGAINST ISRAEL

Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions

The story of The Jewish Committee on the Middle East (JCOME)

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INTRODUCTION

The movement now simply known as BDS throughout the world began with that name in occupied Palestine in July 2005. After so many years of Israeli occupation, settlements, and provocations, plus the repeatedly failed *ad nauseum* "peace plans", Palestinian academics and activists called on people throughout the world to join in their struggle to oppose Israeli military occupation by engaging in "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions" against Israel.

BDS was a very long in coming to be. Israel was created and Palestine erased from the map of the Middle East in 1948; and Israel then considerably expanded in 1967 and even today militarily occupies the largely still Palestinian areas known as the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and greater Jerusalem populated by about 4 million. One "peace plan" after another -- sometimes international but since the 1970s usually U.S. sponsored and controlled by Washington where the Israeli/Jewish Lobby's influence is strongest -- had been tried and failed. Indeed the aftermath of each "peace plan" actually left the Palestinians weaker, more divided, more dispossessed, more occupied, and more confused than previously.

Gradually, starting in the late 19th century and continuing throughout the 20th into the 21st, the area known to the world as Palestine had been turned not only into a Jewish State. The entire area is in fact now controlled by a highly sophisticated country with an army and weapons far superior than that of all of the Arab States combined. Israel is today a kind of Jewish Empire backed, armed, and financed by the U.S. and European countries with the "native inhabitants" increasingly reduced to living a kind of subservient, menial, segregated, despondent, and in recent years worse-than-apartheid, existence.

It was in November 2004 that the founder of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the man known throughout the world as "Mr. Palestine", Yasser Arafat, was finally dead from some kind of mysterious unknown illness so it was said, but actually because of stealth assassination by Israel with U.S. concurrence. True, the actual proof was masked under layers of deception and intrigue, but with the person who had symbolized the Palestinian quest for independence and dignity now gone, and with the

very idea of a true Palestinian State of whatever kind fading from expectations and even hopes, there was now prevalent a new even darker climate of thought and emotions. With the death/killing/assassination of Arafat the hopes and dreams of the Palestinian people for some kind of resurgence, even if just in a small mini, Israel-surrounded, quasi State of their own, seemed to have hit a historic brick wall.

Into this political and psychological void came the call from within the highly educated and historically-aware circles of Palestinian society, most of whom were then living in Ramallah, itself a kind of oasis Potemkin-village everywhere surrounded by the Israeli army, to bypass the politicians, including their own now largely discredited "Palestinian Authority". The BDS movement was from the start an appeal to activists, intellectuals, church leaders, students and concerned citizens worldwide to step forward and try to at least embarrass, maybe at most isolate in some circles, the Israelis.

The BDS aspiration, but not really the expectation, was that just maybe somehow such a movement could eventually have some kind of impact sooner or later. Moreover what else could these Palestinians do? Anyone among them who seriously tried to stand up to the Israelis, as during the uprisings against the occupation known as the Intifadas, has been subverted, jailed or killed. Now even Arafat had been done in! Foremost among the Palestinians languishing in Israeli prisons was (and still is) the secular leader Marwan Barghouti along with many of the leaders of Hamas, which the next year in fact, because of this collectively despairing mood, was to win the Palestinian legislative elections for the first time. Indeed, even though most of the BDS leaders were secular and in the past associated with Arafat's Fatah party, even so they were all aware that last year as well Arafat, the revered founder/leader of Hamas, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, had also been assassinated by the Israelis, though much more blatantly.

Moreover, with the death of Arafat there was a void of Palestinian leadership and the credibility of those in what was called the "Palestinian Authority", as well as the now dysfunctional PLO, had sunk to new lows. No one there in occupied Palestine could freely talk about it, even in hushed whispers, but there was suspicion that Palestinian society and the PA itself were so infiltrated by the Israelis and their American agents that there was likely collaboration involved in the killing of Arafat and the historic cover-up of his death that followed. And so thoughts and energies had to be turned elsewhere.

BDS thus really started as a movement of despair, an attempt to try to twist and turn against the occupation and all the failed and disingenuous "peace plans" now already fading into historic memory. There was no other way left short of going back to trying to take up arms and being accused of "terrorism", even though it was the Israelis themselves who were the masters of real terrorism as well as international propaganda justifying claiming to justify their making Palestine into Israel and the "occupied territories". Even that term "occupied territories" the Israelis were trying to twist into something new..."contested territories". And overall they had a slang term for their largely successful propaganda efforts in U.S. and European political and media circles, "hasbara".

But the long road to BDS had actually been begun many years before by American Jewish academics and intellectual activists back in the critical years 1987 through 1994. This book is the story of The Jewish Committee on the Middle East, why and how it got started, what were its goals, what it did at the time, and the legacy it left when it went inactive and ended its activities.

The road to JCOME was itself a long time in coming. What for years was known as the Arab-Israeli conflict had dominated international attention and threatened world peace. There was no other conflict which has taken the time and energies of more American Presidents and Secretaries of State – not to mention the United Nations -- than that involving Israel and the Palestinians, and by extension Israel and the Arab and Muslim worlds. More than once this seemingly ageless and never-ending conflict had threatened to spread to world conflagration. More than once there has been an unprecedented international event attempting to resolve the conflict, though each time the result actually enhanced,

deepened, and spread it instead.

Not only was there the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the Paris Conference begun the next year (nicknamed "The Peace to end all Peace"), the King-Crane Commission published 1922, the London Peace Conference in 1939, the U.N. Partition Plan itself in 1947 followed by the assassination of the first U.N. Negotiator plus the bombing of the King David Hotel, both by Jewish fighters, and arguably the beginning of the age of Middle East "terrorism".

The creation of "The Jewish State" of Israel in 1948 then led to the 1956 war, the Rogers Peace Plan, the 1967 war, the 1973 war and the "nuclear alert", the fruitless Geneva Peace Conferences, the rise of the PLO and the start of a new chapter in the age of "terrorism", the Ford-Kissinger "reassessment", Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's trip to Israel and the Camp David Agreement, and the Lebanon invasion and occupation which was itself followed by the Reagan Peace Plan.

As the region itself began to boil over with spasms of revolution and warfare, all impacted by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there was the Iranian revolution, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, the first Gulf War then followed by the Madrid Peace Conference, and in 1993 the historic White House lawn peace signing ceremony with Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, PLO Chairman Arafat, and of course the American President Bill Clinton.

But what happened back then, in Oslo in 1992, and in Washington at the White House with that most public and quite unprecedented ceremony, was to lead to the end of JCOME and so needs to be left to the last Chapter of this book.

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the time of JCOME's birth and activities, out of all the international diplomacy and outbreaks of war came the so much talked about ever since "Two-State Solution". It's an idea that actually goes back to the 1940s and the original U.N. Partition Plan, but which was reborn in the wake of the 1967 War and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem areas. The story of the life and death of the Two-State Solution is an extremely important one. It is not just history because for many, including major world leaders and the United Nations, this remains the preferred solution still being continually discussed and promoted. But that important story is one for another another day and a very different forthcoming book already scheduled for our new MiddleEast.Org Press.

This book about JCOME however overlaps with the earlier period in history when the Two-State Solution was being extremely actively pursued and very much believed in by countries and movements throughout the U.S. and Europe, as well as in the Middle East. At the time it was thought to be potentially conflict ending. At the time the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was considered too dangerous to let continue and ripe by necessity for a serious resolution.

BDS however came into being with that name more than a decade later when hopes for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the form of a Two-State Solution, or any solution for that matter, had substantially faded.

BDS like JCOME was begun by intellectual activists and academics, but they were Palestinians Arabs, Muslim and Christians, rather than American Jews, and they, of course to their great credit, had an important symbolic message they wanted to spread. Moreover they were right to realize that their timing was propitious. There was a very receptive worldwide audience desperate for something to pursue and cling on to. Those who began BDS of course have spoken for themselves about their motives and goals, but probably they did not imagine BDS would catch on so fast and become so widespread in just a few years. Since they also overlapped with the age of globalization and the internet, and in recent years social media's expansion to an ever-present reality on smartphones, tablets, and computers worldwide, there

were able to disseminate their ideas rapidly and at little financial cost.

JCOME however came into being, and also folded leaving behind the legacy that is now detailed in this book, before this age of the internet, social media, and instant practically free worldwide communications. It was a time when new independent, ground-breaking, and controversial organizations raised money in small amounts to take out magazine and newspaper advertisements, when they made documentaries for cable and what was known as Public Access television, and when rather than blogs and tweets people went on speaking tours, as well as talk radio programs, trying to reach small numbers of people directly and at considerable cost in time and effort.

The reasons JCOME discontinued are more than that however, involving the failures of its leadership, and that new atmosphere created by the euphoria surrounding the White House Peace Signing ceremony in September 1993 and what became known as the Oslo Peace Process. It was in that falsely optimistic atmosphere that even the original signers of the JCOME Statement of Principles saw what was happening in very different ways, and the few persons providing just a couple of thousand dollars monthly that kept JCOME going, decided to support the false Peace Process” now symbolized by Clinton and Rabin and Arafat despite the protestations of JCOME's most important and energetic founder, myself, Mark Bruzonsky.