

# The internationalisation of nonviolent resistance: the case of the BDS campaign

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## *Abstract*

*This paper seeks to identify some of the factors that can enhance the strength and influence of international civil society solidarity networks that mobilise around issues of concern. To this end, we focus on the Palestinian-inspired Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign and examine the significant differences that exist between it and the global anti-apartheid movement from which the Palestinian initiative derived much of its inspiration and strategic thinking.*

*Differences between the contemporary BDS campaign and the anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and '80s fall into three main categories: internal factors related to the organisational profile and membership of the anti-apartheid movement; ideational factors that influenced the level of legitimacy that movement enjoyed; and contextual factors particular to the socio-political and economic environment within which the anti-apartheid movement found itself operating.*

*We conclude by emphasising the importance of the dynamic relationship between 'internal' popular resistance and the global solidarity movement that the anti-apartheid sanctions inspired. If the BDS movement is to exercise comparable leverage, it is imperative that unarmed resistance against the ongoing Israeli occupation remains buoyant both at local and international levels.*

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## **Introduction**

We live at a time when the internationalisation of conflict situations has become particularly pronounced. Wherever conflicts take place in the world, they can impact directly on the lives of people outside these areas either through the ways they are disseminated via media sources or sometimes through direct violence against civilians. Yet while violence exerts its reach beyond borders, there has also been a growth in the internationalisation of nonviolent resistance thanks to the growth of transnational networks which mobilise civil society actors in order to affect the outcome of particular conflicts. Schock (2005:128) argues that these mechanisms are leveraged to ‘mobilize the withdrawal of support from opponents or invoke pressure against them through the networks upon which opponents depend for power.’

This paper seeks to identify some of the factors that can enhance the vitality, scale, and strength of international civil society solidarity networks which mobilise around issues of concern. To this end, we focus on the Palestinian-inspired Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign; in particular, we examine the significant differences that exist between that campaign and the global anti-apartheid movement from which the Palestinian initiative derived much of its inspiration and strategic thinking.<sup>3</sup> We begin by setting out the context for our interest in the BDS movement and in the internationalisation both of conflict and of networks of solidarity that form around movements dedicated to nonviolent resistance.

### **The unfulfilled potentialities of Palestinian popular resistance**

In 2015 we published the results of our study of unarmed Palestinian resistance to occupation. Our research project focused in particular on the dynamics of the popular and predominantly nonviolent struggle that had

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<sup>3</sup> It is not our intention in this paper to enter into the debate about the appropriateness of using the term ‘apartheid’ to characterise fundamental features of Israeli society and its associated institutions. This issue has already been addressed by a number of authors, in particular Richard Falk (2017) and others such as Clarno (2017), Pappé (2015), Hanfi (2009), Davis (2003) and Bishara (2001).

emerged in 2002 amidst the violence of the ‘second intifada’ in opposition to the construction of the Separation Wall (Darweish & Rigby 2015). This popular resistance had subsequently spread to challenge settlement expansion and land expropriation in other parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) (Pearlman 2003, 2014; Andoni et al. 2004; Broning 2011; Hallward & Norman 2012; Norman 2014). At the outset of our research in 2011, we were excited at the apparent promise of the burgeoning civil resistance movement within the OPT and we witnessed Palestinians engaging in unarmed modes of struggle in order to stay on their land and defend their ways of life and property against the violence of the Israeli occupation.<sup>4</sup> However, as our research proceeded, we began to uncover some unwelcome findings. Palestinian popular resistance actors had successfully coordinated demonstrations, protest actions, and legal work, imaginatively highlighting the barbarism of the ongoing Israeli occupation and its consequences, but we were concerned to note that they had failed to exercise any noticeable influence on Israeli opinion leaders or the Israeli public in general. It would appear that the bulk of Israel’s Jewish citizens continued to go about their daily lives apparently unaffected by what was happening a short distance away in the OPT.

We were advised by our Israeli informants that Palestinian protest actions received limited media coverage and that there was evidence to show that, whenever there was any extended television coverage of such protests, people tended to switch channels. Furthermore, when everyday Israeli citizens did see footage of Palestinian protest actions, they tended to understand the scenes they witnessed in terms of familiar stereotypes. Protestors were viewed through conventional frames as stone-slinging, keffiyah-clad Palestinian youths attacking ‘our boys’, the Israeli conscripts.<sup>5</sup> One of our informants offered a stark summary of the situation when he noted that ‘The Israeli public has no interest in ending the occupation. It has no direct effect on their lives. They are not occupied. The occupation is irrelevant to them.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Qumsiyeh (2006) for an example of the optimism that characterised much of the popular resistance during the first decade of this century.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews, Tel Aviv, 20 November, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Netanya, 22 November, 2013.

As engaged academics committed to nonviolence as a means of change we felt we could not conclude our study on such a pessimistic note. We were looking for some ground for hope, which we found when we turned our attention to the ways in which the conflict was being internationalised. Whilst Palestinian unarmed resistance had largely failed to touch the Israeli public and its decision-makers, over the past decade a burgeoning movement of international solidarity has emerged in favour of ending the occupation and associated abuses of Palestinian human rights and civil liberties.<sup>7</sup>

One of the prime drivers of this growth in international solidarity has been the lethal violence inflicted on the inhabitants of the Gaza Strip by Israel in a series of wars. For example, one interviewee told us that it was witnessing the horror of the Israeli *Operation Protective Edge* of July-August 2014 which led to her involvement in different forms of Palestinian solidarity work in the UK.<sup>8</sup> Of equal significance in the development of these international solidarity networks has been the advocacy work conducted by the thousands of concerned individuals and groups who have spent time in the OPT and witnessed first-hand the reality of the everyday violence and humiliation inflicted on Palestinians by Israeli soldiers and settlers (Clark 2009). One of our interviewees became active after a pilgrimage visit to holy sites during which her tour guide gave her an insight into the harshness of the occupation.<sup>9</sup> When witnesses like this share their stories with family, friends, and other networks, they play a vital part in internationalising the struggle for liberation from external occupation.

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<sup>7</sup> This paper is part of an ongoing research project which explores the challenges faced by activists in the UK when they engage in everyday acts of solidarity with Palestinians and Israelis seeking a just peace. We conducted 26 semi-structured interviews during 2016 and 2017 with activists that support or are sympathetic to the BDS movement in the OPT; with peace activists in Israel; and with activists in the Palestinian solidarity movement in the UK, including Jewish activists and the largest British organisation Jews for Justice for Palestinians (JfJP). We also built on the rich research interviews we conducted in 2011-2013 when we held 5 focus groups and interviewed over 100 activists at local and national levels as well as key political figures in Palestine and Israel.

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication, 15 July, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication, Birmingham, 6 June, 2017.

## **The importance of internationalising conflict**

In his study of the nonviolent liberation movement in West Papua, Jason MacLeod pointed to the fact that the continuing Indonesian occupation there was dependent less on the subservience of the West Papuan people than on external sources of power, including domestic support within Indonesia and the ongoing support offered by Indonesia's allies within the international system. MacLeod endorsed Donald Horowitz's observation that the outcomes of self-determination struggles are 'determined largely by international politics, by the balance of interests and forces that extend beyond the state' (Horowitz 2015: 230). MacLeod's insights into the significance of international solidarity networks in relation to struggles to resist occupation are directly relevant to the Palestinian case. He argues that

The capability of self-determination movements to create the conditions for change is more constrained and contingent on international solidarity networks than in anti-regime struggles. Such movements require more sophisticated transnational strategies and a dense network of ties between the resisting population and transnational allies ... The role of an extensive and persistent transnational solidarity network is to constrain and disrupt the external sources of power upon which the opponent state is indirectly dependent (MacLeod 2015: 196).

Barca and Zunes (2009: 166) arrived at a similar conclusion in their study of the struggle for self-determination by the people of Western Sahara. They noted that Morocco has been able to persist in its defiance of its legal international humanitarian obligation to the Sahrawis largely because of the support it receives from France and the United States. Barca and Zunes argue that, whilst it remains vital that a strong nonviolent movement persists amongst the Sahrawi people, the Sahrawi also need active support and solidarity from networks of citizens in France, the United States, and other countries if any sustainable challenge to Morocco's ongoing occupation is to be realised.

Like the West Papuans and the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara, Palestinians face a struggle which involves them seeking to liberate themselves from an occupation characterised by a huge asymmetry

of power. It is this stark imbalance of power that makes the role of international networks of solidarity so critical. Said (2000: 186) argued that if sufficient numbers of people around the world were to act together as 'communities of conscience' in relation to the Palestinian case, they could exercise sufficient leverage on their own political leaders and the policy-makers and communities within Israel to effect a change in the balance of power and hence in the trajectory of this ongoing conflict.

It follows from this analysis that the strategic challenge for Palestinians is how to widen and strengthen the web of external support and solidarity they generate to such an extent that Israeli decision-makers feel the pressure to address the core issues that drive this conflict. In order to achieve this outcome, it is important that activists on the ground understand a key dynamic in this internationalisation process, one that has been characterised by Keck and Sikkink as a 'boomerang pattern' (Keck and Sikkink 1999: 89-101).

### **Conflict internationalisation and the boomerang process**

The boomerang process refers to patterns that occur when local movements, such as the Palestinian popular resistance movement in the OPT, seek to enhance their leverage by trying to involve wider networks of external actors and agencies. In a process that is analogous to the flight of a boomerang, external sources of support are used to generate increasing international pressure on the Israeli public and its policymakers. As Keck and Sikkink (1999: 93) explain,

Where governments are unresponsive to groups whose claims may none the less resonate elsewhere, international contacts can 'amplify' the demands of domestic groups, pry open space for new issues, and then echo these demands back into the domestic arena.

Most boomerang-throwers operate on a model which tries to mobilise 'links in the chain of influence', and so their approach makes use of what Johan Galtung (1989: 19) referred to as 'the great chain of nonviolence': the message of nonviolent activists is communicated from group to group, layer to layer, until it reaches the nucleus of the political

structure that is being challenged. In the case of Palestinian popular resistance, the message is communicated beyond the borders of Israel/Palestine through local activists' contacts with networks of grassroots supporters in other countries to create transnational networks. These local activists are in the position to present authoritative eye-witness accounts of human rights violations and thus 'feed' their networks with the kind of stories and case material that can be used to move decision-makers higher up the vertical ladder of influence within their respective countries.

Typically, activists seek to frame the Palestinian issue in the language of universal human rights, and through such re-framing initiatives they can introduce people from key groups and constituencies to new ways of seeing the nature of the relationship between Israel and the Palestinians (Landy 2013: 424). Instead of being portrayed as a 'victim' threatened by 'Palestinian terror', Israel can be represented as an occupying power that routinely and mundanely abuses the basic rights of Palestinians who are subjected to the daily violence of occupation. When people are offered new lenses through which to view the conflict, old perceptions and customary wisdom which situate Israel as a victim defending itself from Palestinian and Arab terror can be broken down.

The force of the boomerang effect depends to a large extent on the range and authority of the actors it draws into a conflict's sphere of influence. Howard Clark (2009: 15) has noted that 'In its flight the boomerang might pass through NGOs and activist constituencies, media, government departments and intergovernmental institutions before returning to make a difference at the point from where it was thrown.' The significance of this kind of process was brought home to us by one Palestinian activist from Bethlehem who told us of his experience whilst on a speaking tour in Sweden: 'At one place a pro-Israeli member of the audience raised a point, and before I could answer, someone else in the audience rebutted him. Without the internationals we would be like one hand clapping – they are the other hand that we need.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Interview, Bethlehem, 12 November, 2013.

## **The BDS campaign: internationalising the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

The most significant boomerang-throwing exercise undertaken by Palestinian civil society in recent years emerged out of a meeting of Palestinian civil society organisations in July 2005 after which a call was issued for a worldwide boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. The campaign that has been waged since then is based on the simple premise that Israel must pay a price for its continued occupation, its disregard for international humanitarian law, and its refusal to implement UN resolutions. The BDS campaign has gone from strength to strength in the years since its launch. Its core demands include the end of Israel's occupation of Arab land, recognition of the rights of the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and acknowledgement of the right of the Palestinians to return according to UN resolution 194 (Bakan and Abu-Laban 2009).

One of the BDS campaign's founders has recalled how they drew inspiration from the example of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa:

It was one year after the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice regarding Israel's construction of the apartheid wall in the occupied West Bank. There was a lot of discussion among Palestinian civil society organizations and others in Palestinian society about how we can give the solidarity movement a solid tool with a clear vision based on a deep analysis of the conflict between Palestine and the Israelis. We found the experience of South Africa very inspiring. So there was the opinion of following that experience of the people of South Africa. Especially because the governments at that time were far away from putting any kind of pressure on Israel.<sup>11</sup>

The significance of the South African example was reflected in the

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<sup>11</sup> Adnan Ramadan, quoted in 'Boycott movement has empowered Palestinians, says co-founder', *The Electronic Intifada*, 20 March, 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/ycpxlx5g> (Accessed 5 September, 2017)



original appeal for people of conscience worldwide to ‘impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era’ (Bargouthi 2014). Furthermore, from the earliest days, BDS activists have presented their cause through the frame of an anti-apartheid struggle.<sup>12</sup> To quote one of their leading figures:

We are seeking to resemble the South African movement with mass support – the ‘South African moment’ is approaching but we are not there yet. Israel is increasingly isolated at the grass-roots level, not at the governmental level. Israel has dropped its thin mask of democracy and revealed itself as a regime of occupation, settler-colonialism and apartheid with its massive range of racist laws.<sup>13</sup>

The BDS campaign was inspired by and modelled on aspects of the worldwide anti-apartheid movement of the 1970s and ’80s, and it would seem that the success of the South African freedom struggle has also served as a source of hope for Palestinian activists and their international solidarity networks. It offers activists confidence in the possibility that global pressure can work effectively as it did in the case of the freedom struggle in South Africa, and it helps persuade them that the model employed there can be used to similar effect in the case of Palestine.

## **The transnational movement against apartheid**

In June 1959 a group of South African exiles in the UK and their British supporters launched an appeal for an international boycott of South African products. Calling themselves the Boycott Movement, they organised a boycott month in the UK in March 1960. Thousands of supporters distributed leaflets urging shoppers not to buy South African

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<sup>12</sup> In December 2009, the campaign received the endorsement of leading Palestinian Christians with the publication of the Kairos Palestine Document. Once again, much of the inspiration for this initiative came from the South African struggle. (Interview, Bethlehem, 3 December, 2016.)

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Ramallah, 30 November, 2016.

goods. According to some sources, this was the biggest anti-apartheid protest in the UK until the mass actions of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) of the 1980s.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, the AAM in the UK campaigned for broader sanctions against South Africa, extending their demands to encompass the country's isolation in sport, the arts, and academia. In June 1970, the first major success of this campaign was achieved with the cancellation of a planned South African cricket tour.

In the mid-1980s, the South African townships erupted, and this led to a new wave of intensive repression from the apartheid regime. Capitalising on growing international concern at the continuing clashes in South Africa, the AAM in the UK expanded into a broad coalition of students, trade unions, churches, political parties, and local groups and campaigns that demanded an end to British collaboration with apartheid. It was during this period also that concern started to grow amongst large sectors of the population in the US. Peter Schraeder (1994: 232) observed that

As the violence in South Africa continued to intensify, rising popular demands for the US government to 'do something' to stop the unfolding tragedy in South Africa galvanized the anti-apartheid activities of African-American lobbying groups, Republican splinter groups, and grassroots anti-apartheid organizations. These groups, in turn, placed pressure on vote conscious congress-persons that recognized the popular political backlash that would accompany defeat of some sort of sanctions package.

Much of the protest in the US was directed at President Reagan's administration which was pursuing what he termed a policy of 'constructive engagement' with Pretoria, a stance which others saw as appeasement. However, in response to public pressure, Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act (CAAA) in 1986. This marked a watershed in US-South African relations insofar as it instituted significant

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<sup>14</sup> Anti-Apartheid Movement, 'The Boycott movement', <http://aamarchives.org/history/boycott-movement.html> (Accessed 7 September, 2017).

economic sanctions designed to push the South African regime to dismantle its segregationist policies and practices.

This milestone piece of legislation contributed to the solidification of pressure on South Africa from the broader international community, as evidenced by the UN Security Council vote of 1987 which imposed international sanctions on the regime. All but the most intransigent advocates of apartheid now saw that the regime could not survive such sustained pressure without significant reform. It was this realisation that led to F. W. De Klerk replacing P. W. Botha as leader of South Africa's National Party after the September 1989 elections and promising to herald in an era of change and power-sharing between whites and blacks. A year later, Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were released. In 1992, De Klerk repealed the apartheid laws while multi-party talks continued, and international sanctions were lifted. In 1994, Nelson Mandela became president after the country's first democratic elections (Valley 2015).

## **Comparing the AAM and BDS**

The aim of this section of the paper is to examine the conditions that contributed to the growth of the transnational anti-apartheid movement. This exercise will help us identify some of the challenges and opportunities that the Palestinian BDS movement encounters in its efforts to achieve a similar level of influence in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The analysis here will, more generally, help to highlight those factors that impact on the growth and effectiveness of international civil society solidarity networks wherever in the world they operate.

The conditions and factors considered relevant here can be grouped into three categories:

- Internal – those factors relating to the organisational profile and membership of the anti-apartheid movement.
- Ideational – those factors that influenced the level of legitimacy enjoyed by the anti-apartheid movement and the frame within which its role and purpose were perceived by third parties and interested stake-holders.

- Contextual – those factors particular to the socio-political and economic environment within which the anti-apartheid movement found itself operating.

## Internal

The global anti-apartheid movement took its lead from the African National Congress (ANC) which was recognised as embodying the unified and legitimate leadership of the liberation struggle in South Africa. In the Palestinian case, the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Palestine National Council have exercised a leadership function, but since the Oslo Agreement and the establishment of the Palestine National Authority (PNA) there has been no effective leadership to provide direction and coherence to wider networks of support and solidarity. The ongoing division between Fatah and Hamas remains a significant handicap despite several attempts at ‘reconciliation’ over the past decade and talk of establishing a unity government. The lack of leadership has had a debilitating effect on international solidarity networks. This view was articulated very clearly in our interviews by a UK-based activist who was deeply involved in anti-apartheid campaigns and had more recently been involved in supporting Palestinian human rights:

One of the differences between the work for South Africa and for Palestine is that with South Africa there was a very clear focus. The ANC was the main movement directing the activists inside South Africa but also had a very clear message it was directing to its supporters in different parts of the world ... so we knew what we were being asked to do. That was very clear. The difference with Palestine is the fragmentation in everything.<sup>15</sup>

The existence of a unified leadership in the form of the ANC meant that the aim of the anti-apartheid movement was reasonably clear and unambiguous: it promised a free democratic political system that would lead to the end of white minority rule in South Africa. The absence of any such leadership within the Palestinian political domain has helped create a diverse range of opinions within and about the role of Palestinian

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, Coventry, 20 October, 2014.

solidarity networks around the world. The BDS movement in the OPT reflects the voice of the majority of civil society organisations and ‘left-ist’ political groupings, but the dominant political forces of Fatah and Hamas have both refrained from endorsing the movement. The PNA and Fatah have shown limited support for a boycott of settlement products (Kayali 2016: 182), but according to one of our interviewees – a Fatah activist from Bethlehem – there is only limited awareness of the BDS campaign amongst party activists. He told us that ‘at the Fatah conference this year, I wore a big BDS badge – and people from the conference were asking me, “What is BDS?”’<sup>16</sup>

One of the major consequences of the lack of unified leadership has been the absence of a clear vision for the future beyond ending the occupation, and this has undoubtedly weakened the international solidarity network. One interviewee, who had been active in the anti-apartheid movement in the UK, explained to us the dilemma he experienced in relation to the BDS call to boycott Israeli products:

Settlement goods is easy politics and no question that they should be banned as an economic means of undermining the settlements. But regarding boycotting Israel – Israel is a legitimate state by all the normal, accepted international criteria and therefore has the right to sell its own products. Moreover, it is not clear whether Palestinians are united in favour of such a boycott, in the way that the ANC was. There is no Palestinian equivalent of the ANC, and it is not clear what the stance is.<sup>17</sup>

In the AAM, the vision was ‘one person one vote’, a slogan that united activists inside and outside South Africa who envisaged a future society and state based on equal civil and political rights for all its citizens. By contrast, the BDS movement has failed to present an inclusive vision than can be shared by Israeli Jews. As early as 1930, the ANC ‘aimed to take over and transform the existing state rather than to create their own institutions and state structures’; the Palestine- Oslo agreement, which sought precisely to create its own structures and institutions, represented

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Bethlehem, 4 December, 2016

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Coventry, 13 March, 2017.

a complete contrast to this approach (Greenstein 2015: 38).

Even as informed and engaged an observer as the veteran Israeli 'peace-nik' Uri Avneri has expressed his confusion regarding the stance of the BDS leadership with regard to their vision of the type of peace settlement they support.

I believe in peace. Peace means agreement between two (or more) sides to live in peace. Israeli-Palestinian peace means that the State of Israel and the Palestinian national movement come to terms with each other. Peace between Israel and Palestine presupposes that the State of Israel does exist, side by side with the State of Palestine. I am not quite sure that this is the aim of the BDS movement. Much of what it does and says could lead to the conclusion that it wants a peace without Israel (Avneri 2017).<sup>18</sup>

## Ideational challenges

Throughout the period when the anti-apartheid movement was active, the protagonists on either side were involved in what can be characterised as a framing contest, each seeking to present their target in as unsavoury and damaging a light as possible (Caragee & Roefs 2006). The AAM emerged victorious in this contest, and a number of features of their framing appear to have been significant.

### **i. A clear morality tale was established**

The South African government tried to taint the ANC and its supporters as part of an international communist conspiracy that threatened the stability of the whole southern region of the African continent.<sup>19</sup> In its turn, the AAM portrayed the South African regime as a privileged white minority dominating and exploiting a black majority which was denied the most basic of human rights. Over time, the AAM's

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<sup>18</sup> U. Avneri, 'Despair of despair', 16 September, 2017, <http://tinyurl.com/ycf8p397> (Accessed 26 October, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> There were communists in key positions within the ANC, but all remained committed to the Freedom Charter that had been adopted in June 1955 and which remained the guiding document of the ANC and its supporters right up until the drawing up of the new constitution.

portrayal of the apartheid regime took on the character of a morality tale with clear distinctions between good versus evil actors, and this unambiguous narrative resonated strongly with wide swathes of people around the globe.

By contrast, and particularly for Europeans and people from European backgrounds, the target of the BDS movement appears to be a significant section of the Jewish people – those living in Israel – and the Jews historically have been a vulnerable and persecuted minority in relation to which Europe carries considerable historical guilt. As a consequence the transnational Palestine solidarity movement does not yet have recourse to a morality tale with the same kind of framing power as that presented and reproduced by the AAM in its efforts to mobilise support around the world.

## **ii. Resisting attempts to undermine the legitimacy of solidarity activists**

Part of the framing contest that was central to the political struggle over South Africa was the attempt by the South African regime to portray the ANC's members as violent extremists whose struggle for political power would be a prelude to a bloodbath with white South Africans as the victims. Whatever salience such a narrative might have had, it was eventually overwhelmed by a counter-narrative which suggested that the only way to avoid a bloodbath was through the holding of free non-racial elections that held the promise of ending rule by a racist minority regime. This counter-narrative prevailed partly because people of all political persuasions could show their commitment to human rights by supporting its call for free non-racial elections in South Africa; those who supported the regime's alternative narrative risked being castigated as racist.

Unfortunately, activists involved in the Palestinian international solidarity movement in general and the BDS campaign in particular remain vulnerable to 'demonising tactics' that can undermine the saliency of their campaign work (Khalidi 2017). One of the most powerful accusations aimed at them has been that of anti-Semitism, a charge that is used repeatedly to delegitimise criticisms of Israel from any quarter. The accusation acts as a particularly powerful deterrent in Europe and North America where it helps to keep people from openly

expressing their support for the Palestinians. As Norman Solomon (cited in Corrigan 2009) explains, ‘The failure to make a distinction between anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel routinely stifles public debate.’<sup>20</sup>

The efforts of the Israeli government and its supporters around the world to conflate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism has had some significant successes. In the US, some states have passed legislation that targets organisations that endorse the BDS campaign, and in the UK the government’s formal definition of anti-Semitism includes ‘the targeting of the state of Israel’ as one of its manifestations (Sedley 2017). The conflation of anti-Semitism and criticism of Israeli policy has not gone unquestioned. The influential gender and cultural studies critic Judith Butler – a member of the US-based Advisory Board of Jewish Voice for Peace – argues that ‘if the charge of anti-Semitism becomes a tactic to suppress open criticism and debate on the State of Israel, its practices of dispossession and occupation, its founding and the ongoing implications of that founding for Palestinians, then it will lose its claim of truth’ (Butler 2017: viii). Butler argues that the charge of anti-Semitism is used to censor or quell public debate and criticism of Israel in order to rule out certain unpalatable perspectives.

### **iii. Sporting boycott**

The sporting boycott was one AAM strategy that proved to be particularly prominent and effective in highlighting the essential racism that defined apartheid. South Africa was excluded from the 1964 and 1968 Olympics and expelled from the International Olympic Movement in 1972 following widely publicised protests in the UK against the tour of the all-white South African cricket team in 1970. This sporting isolation had a profound impact on white South Africans, forcing them to acknowledge the degree to which they were being portrayed as racist pariahs to significant sections of the world’s population.

Calls by BDS campaigners for a total boycott of Israel, including a cultural, sporting, and academic boycott have caused a quite different response, generating a degree of disquiet amongst many who would

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<sup>20</sup> Cited in Corrigan, E. 2009. ‘Is Anti-Zionism Anti-Semitic? Jewish Critics Speak.’ *Middle East Policy Journal* 16(4). Accessible at <http://www.mepc.org/anti-zionism-anti-semitic-jewish-critics-speak> (23 September 2017)



consider themselves advocates of a just peace between Israel and Palestine. More than one Israeli peace activist with whom we discussed the pros and cons of a total boycott of Israel expressed their reservations, and a close friend expressed the view that such a boycott would leave dissident Israelis like himself increasingly isolated and weak.<sup>21</sup> Another felt that a total boycott would be counter-productive as it would raise fears fed by Jewish collective memory of past boycotts driven by antisemitism rather than a commitment to basic human rights.<sup>22</sup>

Such reservations expressed by Israeli peace activists bear out research on the response of targeted states to the imposition of sanctions. One of the most significant findings to emerge is that the targeting of sanctions against a regime that enjoys a significant degree of legitimacy can be used by the ruling elite to rally domestic support for its policies in the face of what are presented as external threats emanating from a common enemy (Grauvogel & von Soest 2014, Lindsay 1986). In other words, sanctions – particularly when implemented by a source with which the targeted regime lacks deep relationships and which target a whole economy and/or population – can create a siege mentality and thereby trigger a ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effect (Allen 2005, Galtung 1967). This would seem to be the response of many Israelis towards the BDS campaign. As one of our sources explained:

We are driven by survival and suspicion of the rest of the world as being against us – so international pressure would be evidence that they are against us, they hate us. Not – they are trying to talk to us and we should listen. So – if you are seeking a political result, then it will not come from this kind of pressure.<sup>23</sup>

## Contextual factors

Determining the precise impact of international moves against apartheid is difficult, but perhaps the most significant effect was on the morale of black and white South Africans. Just as protest and struggle

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, Haifa, 2 December, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Tel Aviv, 29 November, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Tel Aviv, 5 December, 2016.

within South Africa energised external solidarity networks, so outside pressure encouraged internal opposition to apartheid, reassuring protestors that they were not alone. It also weakened the resolve of the white minority who, despite protestations to the contrary, had a deep fear of total international isolation and their abandonment by erstwhile friends such as the United States. As Alan Hirsch (1989: 75) insightfully observed, 'The power of the US was never its ability to talk to Pretoria, and always its ability to stop talking.'

One factor that contributed to Washington's eventual withdrawal of support from the apartheid regime was the realisation that South Africa's strategic role as a bulwark against communism sweeping through the African continent in the 1980s was no longer significant. The anti-apartheid movement benefitted from global political shifts that disempowered its opponents. International shifts of this kind have been much less favourable for the Palestinian solidarity movement. Islamic Jihadism has replaced communism in the view of the US and other states as the major threat to the status quo, and Israel has sought to portray itself as an important bulwark against this threat.

The AAM's ability to benefit from geopolitical shifts was, of course, accelerated by pressure from grassroots groups. Up until the 1980s, the USA lagged behind Europe in mobilising around apartheid, but during that decade pressure from below grew, driven by Black human rights groups, universities, churches, and trade unions campaigning for disinvestment, and these groups received sympathetic media coverage which reached its peak from 1984 to 1986. According to some analysts, one factor in this growth was the elevation into positions of influence of African-American politicians. Certainly, the parallels between the struggle for majority rule in South Africa and the Black civil rights movement in the USA were so clear that the campaign was able to draw on the language of the civil rights movement to mobilise people, reframing apartheid as a domestic civil rights issue (Solop 1990: 321). Palestinian solidarity activists have no comparable narrative resource upon which to draw. However, there have been attempts to make links and build alliances with other communities under oppression and facing similar marginalisation. For example, activists in the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign highlight similarities in the nature of the oppression and racism they face with

the experience of Palestinians living under occupation (Seidel 2016: 165; Bailey 2015).

Another factor that played a part in bringing South Africa to the negotiating table was the fact that the white minority in South Africa needed the Black majority as a workforce. Indeed, the Black trade unions under COSATU - Congress of South African Trade Unions – became a powerful instrument of resistance and a source of pressure that helped to dismantle apartheid from within (Greenstein 2015: 37). By contrast, the Israelis do not need the Palestinians as a workforce because they continue to import ‘guest workers’ from around the world as a ready replacement.

One of the most significant factors in the vulnerability of South Africa to external pressure was the economic and financial difficulties the state was facing before the international divestment campaign came to its peak in the mid-1980s. Calls for divestment had little impact during the years of South Africa’s economic growth through the 1960s and into the early 1970s but, by the mid-1970s, returns on investment had begun to fall. Consequently, decision-makers in key financial institutions were prepared to respond to the calls for divestment that grew during the 1980s. As Kenneth Grundy (1991: 60) observed

More than half the U.S. firms with direct investments in South Africa withdrew between 1984 and 1989. ... Although many European firms were also forced to divest (e.g., Barclays Bank) and to reconsider their involvement, the impact of the campaign to isolate South Africa was not nearly so compelling in Europe.

Pretoria was forced to rethink its policies. Prospects for economic growth were minimal and without growth there would be escalating protest and pressure from the townships with a consequent deepening of the socio-economic and political crisis. Rory Ewins argues that

In the end the informal sanctions implemented by the international private sector – prompted by events within South Africa, and by popular and government anti-apartheid moves in the West – probably had the greatest impact of all international moves directed against apartheid.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> R. Ewins, ‘International Moves Against Apartheid’, <http://tinyurl.com/>

Unlike South Africa in the 1980s, Israel in the current decade remains in reasonable economic and financial health. Moreover, there is no indication that its prime international sponsor in Washington is questioning its preparedness to continue bank-rolling right-wing Israeli governments that make little pretence of their lack of interest in pursuing what the majority of the world would consider to be a substantive peace process.<sup>25</sup>

## **Factors affecting the strength of transnational civil society solidarity networks**

Whilst the review presented above highlights the severity of the challenges faced by the Palestinian BDS movement in its efforts to emulate the AAM, the differences between these movements and their contexts provide useful insights into the general set of factors that affect the strength of transnational solidarity networks in support of nonviolent resistance movements. In this concluding section, we set out a number of hypotheses about the factors that affect their success:

*i. The vitality of related transnational solidarity networks will be enhanced in direct correlation with the extent to which a resistance movement has a united leadership that speaks with a clear voice and advocates a coherent strategy with a clear goal.*

The ANC existed as a united and legitimate leadership focused on achieving an end to white minority rule in South Africa. Within South Africa the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was the internal manifestation of the ANC and the trade union movement, was able to organise and coordinate internal protest and resistance. By contrast, there has been no equivalent locus of authority within the Palestinian political domain since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993.

*ii. Transnational solidarity networks will be energised by the internal resistance movement's vibrant and committed use of unarmed means of protest.*

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pj73wyj (Accessed 7 August, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> See P. Speakman, 'Netanyahu's party platform "flatly rejects" establishment of Palestinian state', Mondoweiss, 3 November, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/mxxtrwc> (Accessed 27 August, 2014).

In the South African struggle, a dynamic interplay developed between the ANC and the United Democratic Front (UDF), its partner movement within the country. Mass protests and strikes imposed a heavy economic and financial cost on the regime and helped to energise social movements in key countries, especially the US, which became key players. These movements actively encouraged people to support the economic and cultural boycott of South Africa, pressuring corporations and financial institutions to disinvest from South Africa and urging their governments to impose sanctions on the minority white regime. By contrast, popular resistance within the OPT has been episodic apart from during the period of the first intifada. The internal resistance movement has not therefore provided the consistent and ongoing stimuli that would drive and inspire international solidarity activist networks.

*iii. The strength of an international network depends on the extent to which a conflict can be framed as a simple, clear 'morality tale' that juxtaposes good and evil.*

The South African apartheid regime underpinned a manifestly unjust system that was contrary to most moral codes. As a consequence, one did not need a degree in history or specialist geo-political knowledge to grasp that the regime required a drastic overhaul. By contrast, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is difficult to explain to lay-people: advocates will need a map to identify the territories and the borders over which the conflict has been fought and must offer a historical overview of the origins of the conflict before attempting to present a range of possible peace scenarios. In other words, there is a geo-political, historical, and moral complexity to the conflict that can make it problematic for campaigners to adopt the cause even before they seek to sway and mobilise third parties.

*iv) The likelihood of appealing to potential constituencies of support and solidarity depends on a movement being able to establish itself as the morally superior underdog in an uneven power relationship.*

One of the recurring motifs that runs through the history of resistance movements is the story of David and Goliath, the tale of a courageous underdog who challenges a seemingly more powerful opponent and relies on the righteousness of their cause and their courage to prevail. Israel has been particularly adept at using this narrative device

from the Jewish tradition to mobilise its global network of supporters; it makes the case that it is a small democratic country surrounded by a host of despotic regimes that threaten its very existence. Palestinian solidarity activists seek to present their own version of the David-Goliath relationship whenever they highlight the asymmetry between the arsenal of resources that sustains and deepens the occupation and their own reliance on unarmed forms of popular resistance.<sup>26</sup>

*v) Unarmed forms of resistance have significantly more wide-ranging appeal to potential constituencies of support and solidarity than violent modes of struggle.*

Chenoweth and Stephan are amongst the contemporary authors to emphasise this point. As they note, 'a critical source of the success of nonviolent resistance is mass participation, which can erode or remove a regime's main sources of power when the participants represent diverse sectors of society' (Chenoweth & Stephan 2011: 30). Unarmed modes of resistance can highlight the morality tale of good versus evil and reinforce the David versus Goliath motif far more strongly than violent resistance. Unarmed resistance also creates fewer moral dilemmas for potential supporters who do not want to risk association with the human costs of injury and loss of life.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to identify those factors that can enhance the scope and leverage of international civil society networks mobilising in support of civil resistance movements struggling for human rights in different parts of the world. We approached this by means of a comparison between the global movement targeting apartheid in South Africa and the contemporary Palestinian BDS movement which has drawn inspiration from the anti-apartheid struggle.

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<sup>26</sup> The ubiquity of the David-Goliath motif can be illustrated by two brief examples. In 1987, Kent Robinson and W.I. Norsworthy entitled their study of the United States support of the Contras against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua *David against Goliath: Washington's war against Nicaragua* (London: Zed, 1987). In 2016, Paul Legg, writing in *The Guardian*, depicted the fight for self-determination by the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara as 'a classic David and Goliath struggle'. (*The Guardian*, 6 June, 2016)

Our focus on the significance of internationalising civil resistance struggles came about as a consequence of our growing awareness of the gross asymmetry in power-relations (Dudouet 2006, 2008; Nanetti 2017) between the core parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in other struggles for liberation in other parts of the world such as West Papua and the Western Sahara. Our analysis has been driven by our particular concern for the future of Palestinians and Israeli Jews whose lives continue to be brutalised by the ongoing occupation. As co-authors we share the conviction that an end to the occupation and a sustainable peace are necessary for the health and well-being of both peoples – the occupied and the occupiers. Just as the Palestinians cannot begin to fulfil their potential as human beings without being liberated from occupation, so the Israelis must be liberated from their role as occupiers and oppressors if they are to realise their true humanity.

Our paper also reflects our shared belief that to despair for the future of Palestinians and Israelis is to betray the future. We have an obligation to search for grounds for hope and to identify a vision for the future based on equality. We share with our interviewees a commitment to transform the oppressive and violent structures in Israel and to dissolve power relations (Vinthagen 2015: 205) that obstruct the building of an equal society. In this spirit, we have emphasised the significant role that can be played by third parties – civil society networks and states – in affecting the outcome of liberation struggles.

Like the founders of the BDS campaign, we have drawn inspiration from history. The impact of the global movement targeting apartheid in South Africa is a source of hope and validation for Palestinian nonviolent resistance activists. Yet, the example from South Africa bears a key lesson which must be borne in mind: at the heart of the struggle against the apartheid regime was the popular resistance campaign within South Africa which drove the global movement of solidarity and support. However pivotal a role might be played by transnational networks at the civil society and state levels in determining the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, their efforts can only be inspired and driven by the example of those Palestinians and Israelis who have the courage to commit themselves to the struggle for equal human rights for all those dwelling in the land between the river and the sea.

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