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BDS in the Crosshairs

By Lawrence Davidson

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Most readers will know that the United States has served as the patron of Israel for decades. Why has it done so? The commonly given reasons are suspect. It is not because the two countries have overlapping interests. The U.S. seeks stability in the Middle East (mostly by supporting dictators) and Israel is constantly making things unstable (mostly by practicing ethnic cleansing against Palestinians, illegally colonizing conquered lands and launching massive assaults against its neighbors). Nor, as is often claimed, is the alliance based on “shared Western values.” The U.S. long ago outlawed racial, ethnic and religious discrimination in the public sphere. In Israel, religious-based discrimination is the law. The Zionist state’s values in this regard are the opposite of those of the United States.

So why is it that a project that seeks to pressure Israel to be more cognizant in foreign affairs of regional stability, and more democratic and egalitarian in domestic affairs, is now under fire by almost every presidential candidate standing for the 2016 election?

That project in dispute is BDS, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, promoted by civil society throughout the Western world. BDS is directed at Israel due to its illegal colonization of the Occupied Territories and its general apartheid-style discrimination against non-Jews in general and Palestinians in particular.

The Candidates and BDS

With but two exceptions, every presidential candidate in both parties is condemning the BDS Movement. Let’s start with the two exceptions. The first exception is the Green Party candidate Jill Stein, who has taken the accurate position that “the United States has encouraged the worst tendencies of the Israeli government.” She has pledged to use both diplomatic and economic means to change Israeli behavior, behavior which she rightly believes is in contravention of international law and violates human rights.

The second exception is the Republican candidate Donald Trump, who recently told a meeting of Jewish Republicans that he didn’t think Israel is serious about peace and that they would have to

make greater efforts to achieve it. When he was booed he just shrugged and told the crowd that he did not care if they supported him or not, "I don't want your money." Unfortunately, this appears to be the only policy area where Mr. Trump is reasonable.

Jill Stein gets absolutely no media coverage and Donald Trump gets too much. And neither is in the "mainstream" when it comes to American political reactions to BDS. However, the rest of the presidential candidates are. Here is what is coming out of the "mainstream":

Jeb Bush (Republican), 4 December 2015: "On day one I will work with the next attorney general to stop the BDS movement in the United States, to use whatever resources that exist" to do so.

Ted Cruz (Republican), 28 May 2015: "BDS is premised on a lie and it is anti-Semitism, plain and simple. And we need a president of the United States who will stand up and say if a university in this country boycotts the nation of Israel than that university will forfeit federal taxpayer dollars."

Marco Rubio (Republican), 3 December 2015: "This [BDS] coalition of the radical left thinks it has discovered a clever, politically correct way to advocate Israel's destruction. As president, I will call on university presidents, administrators, religious leaders, and professors to speak out with clarity and force on this issue. I will make clear that calling for the destruction of Israel is the same as calling for the death of Jews."

Hillary Clinton (Democrat), 2 July 2015: In a letter to Haim Saban, who is a staunch supporter of the Zionist state and also among the biggest donors to the Democratic Party, she said, "I know you agree that we need to make countering BDS a priority, I am seeking your advice on how we can work together – across party lines and with a diverse array of voices – to fight back against further attempts to isolate and delegitimize Israel."

Bernie Sanders (Democrat), 20 October 2015: "Sanders' fraught encounter with BDS supporters who challenged his defense of Israel at a town hall meeting in Cabot [Vermont] last year was captured on YouTube." Sanders told them to "shut up."

The Legitimacy of Boycott

This hostility to the tactic of boycott runs counter to both U.S. legal tradition and the country's broader historical tradition.

For instance, advocating and practicing BDS can be seen as a constitutionally protected right. It certainly is more obviously protected by the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech than is the use of money to buy elections. Thus, if Zionist lobbyists can use money to buy support for Israel, why can't anti-Zionists use their free speech rights to challenge that support? It should be noted that, in this regard, most Americans of voting age think it is the Zionists, and not the anti-Zionists, who have gone too far.

According to a December 2015 Brookings Institute poll, 49% of Democratic voters and 25% of Republican voters think that Israel has too much influence with U.S. politicians. Those supporting BDS in the United States might give some thought as to how to use these numbers to uphold their cause.

Then there is the fact of well-established historical tradition. The war for American Independence was built upon a framework of boycott. In November 1767, England introduced the Townshend Acts, requiring the colonists to pay a tax on a large number of items. The reply to this was both a boycott of British goods by many colonial consumers which was eventually followed by a boycott on the importation of such goods on the part of colonial merchants.

Subsequently, Americans have used the tactic of boycott against:

- (1930s) Goods produced by Nazi Germany
- (1960s and 1970s) California-grown grapes in support of the United Farm Workers
- (1970s and 1980s) All aspects of the economy and cultural output of South Africa
- (1980) The Moscow-hosted Olympics of 1980
- Myriad number of boycotts of various companies and products ranging from Nestle (baby formula) to Coca Cola. See the list given by the Ethical Consumer.

The reality is that the tactic of boycott has long been as American as the proverbial apple pie.

Apple pie notwithstanding, the legal and historical legitimacy of boycott no longer has much impact on the attitudes of presidential candidates or, for that matter, members of Congress. Nor does the fact that the changes the BDS movement seeks to make in Israeli behavior would be to the benefit of U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Instead what the positions of the candidates seem to indicate is that there will be an almost certain attack on the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, coming from the very highest levels of U.S. power, sometime soon after the 2016 elections.

How is it that such a contradiction between national interests and established tradition on the one hand, and imminent government policy on the other can exist? The answer is not difficult to come by. It is just a matter of fact that constitutional rights, historical tradition, and indeed the very interests of the nation, can be overridden by special interest demands. The demands of what George Washington once called “combinations and associations” of “corrupted citizens” who would “betray or sacrifice the interests of their own country” in favor of those of some other “favorite nation.” It is exactly such demands that are now given priority by the politicians in Washington.

This form of corruption will go on as long as the general public does not seem to care that it is happening. And it is sadly clear that the BDS activists alone cannot overcome this indifference. Thus, the politicians can dismiss the Brookings Poll numbers mentioned above. They can shrug and say, So what? As long as that majority does not express their opinion by actively demanding a change in the situation, as long as they are not successfully organized to do so, their opinion cannot compete with the millions of special interest dollars flowing into political campaigns.

In many ways our greatest enemy is our own indifference to the quiet erosion of important aspects of the democratic process. Allowing the attack on BDS only contributes to this disintegration of rights. A combination of localness and ignorance sets us up for this feeling of indifference. However, in the end, there can be no excuse for not paying attention. One morning you will wake up to find that valued rights and traditions are no longer there for you.

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