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Osservatorio sociale

Towards a «Just and Comprehensive Peace in Palestine»: Interviewing Omar Barghouti

di Pina Sodano *

Omar Barghouti is an independent Palestinian researcher and human rights activist. He is a co-founder of the Palestinian civil society-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian rights. Currently, Barghouti is a research fellow at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. He holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in electrical engineering from Columbia University in New York and a master's degree in philosophy (ethics) from Tel Aviv University. He is the author of the book: *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (Haymarket Books, 2011). His opinions have appeared in *the New York Times*, *the Guardian* and on BBC, CNN, Bloomberg, among many others.

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Osservatorio sociale

1. Why are you in Italy and what are the aims of your visit here?

I was invited to Italy by civil society organizations and BDS Italia to participate in debates and meetings regarding the most effective ways in which Italy can contribute to achieving a just and comprehensive peace in Palestine and the region.

I hope to help in raising awareness about Israel's regime of occupation, colonialism and apartheid, and in mobilizing effective solidarity from the Italian people with the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality, particularly through the fast-growing, non-violent human rights-based Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. As in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, without isolating the oppressor regime, the oppressed cannot alone end oppression in today's world.

I also hope to make the connection between the struggle for Palestinian rights and the internal struggles in Italy for social and economic justice, for women's rights, for LGBT rights, for the environment and the struggle against all forms of racism, including Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Our struggles are connected because our oppressors are connected and because defeating injustice anywhere, as Martin Luther King Jr. once said, will contribute to defeating it everywhere.

2. What are the goals of the BDS movement?

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions ([BDS](#)) Call was issued in 2005 by the [largest coalition](#) of political parties, trade union federations and mass organizations in Palestinian society. The historic document, which



anno V, n. 2, 2015

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Osservatorio sociale

became the basis for the global BDS movement, calls for ending Israel's 1967 occupation, ending Israel's system of [institutionalized racial discrimination](#), which fits the [UN definition of apartheid](#), and upholding the right of Palestinian refugees to return to the homes and lands from which they were [uprooted and dispossessed](#) in 1948. BDS is anchored in international law and universal principles of human rights.

3. In an essay you said, that the BDS is based on a request for «full equality» what does that mean?

The late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said once said, «Equality or nothing». To the Palestinian people, as to all oppressed communities around the world, equality is the most basic demand of our struggle, to exercise the rights that we are entitled to under international law, just like every other people. We cannot compromise on this fundamental demand of equality, as it is the corner stone of all human rights, the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Equality means that Palestinian refugees are entitled to the rights that all refugees deserve: the right to return to the homes and lands from which they were expelled or had to leave.

Equality means abrogating Israel's 50 discriminatory laws that are the foundation of its regime of apartheid and that were criticized even by the US Department of State which [accused](#) Israel of «institutional, legal, and societal discrimination» against its Arab-Palestinian citizens.

Equality means not expecting the Palestinians to accept Israel's colonial slavery system as fate. We shall never do.



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

4. Why you are focusing in particularly on the Academic and Cultural boycott?

The BDS movement calls for a full institutional boycott of Israel's academic and cultural institutions because of their well-recorded complicity in Israel's regime of occupation, colonialism and apartheid.

Unlike the South African academic boycott against apartheid, which was a blanket boycott against individual academics as well as academic institutions, the Palestinian academic boycott is strictly institutional. It does not target individual academics and does not interfere with their teaching, writing, publishing, traveling, researching, etc. It only calls on all academics and academic institutions around the world to sever all links to Israeli universities because of their well-documented record of complicity in planning, implementing, justifying and whitewashing Israel's crimes and violations of human rights.

The academic boycott of Israel has been growing at a fast pace lately, especially in the U.S.

Similarly, in the cultural sphere, the BDS movement calls for a boycott of Israeli cultural institutions, including bands and orchestras, that are part of the propaganda system that Israel uses to whitewash its regime of apartheid and colonialism. Israel's regime uses culture as propaganda, as clear in the following official statements.

A former deputy director general of the Israeli foreign ministry, Nissim Ben-Sheetrit, explained upon launching the *Brand Israel* campaign in 2005: «We are seeing culture as a *hasbara* [propaganda] tool of the first rank, and I do not differentiate between *hasbara* and culture».



anno V, n. 2, 2015

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Osservatorio sociale

After the Israeli assault on the besieged Gaza Strip in 2009, Israel's image took a further steep dip, prompting the government to throw more money into the Brand Israel campaign. One of the main figures in the campaign, Arye Mekel, the deputy director general for cultural affairs in the Israeli foreign ministry, [told the *New York Times*](#): «We will send well-known novelists and writers overseas, theater companies, exhibits. This way you show Israel's prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war».

Inviting top artists to perform in Israel and offering them exuberant fees are also intended to contribute to this whitewashing effort, as an increasing number of prominent artists are realizing.

The famous Israeli writer Yitzhak Laor [exposed](#) in the Israeli daily Haaretz in 2008 a contract that Israeli artists, writers and academics, among others, must sign to receive funding from the Israeli government for their international engagements (tours, conferences, film screenings, etc.). This contract carries explicit propaganda obligations that the fund recipient is expected to fulfill:

The service provider undertakes to act faithfully, responsibly and tirelessly to provide the Ministry with the highest professional services. The service provider is aware that the purpose of ordering services from him is to promote the policy interests of the State of Israel via culture and art, including contributing to creating a positive image for Israel.

Immediately upon finding out about this contract, PACBI said that any Israeli artists, academics, poets, writers who agree to sign this contract are automatically forfeiting any claim to academic freedom or free-



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Osservatorio sociale

dom of expression because they are accepting to be cultural or academic ambassadors of the state to serve the propaganda policies of the state of Israel and we shall treat their activities as such, as propaganda activities of the state of Israel and we shall call for a boycott.

5. Since the 2005 launch of the BDS campaign, what are the achievements and what, if any, are the losses?

At the height of its military -- particularly nuclear -- and economic power, Israel is feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable; but this time the threat is ironically coming from the nonviolent BDS movement, which is anchored in international law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In June 2013, Netanyahu effectively declared the BDS movement a «strategic threat» to Israel's regime of [occupation, colonization and apartheid](#) by [deciding](#) to assign the overall responsibility for fighting BDS to the ministry of *strategic* affairs.

The [BBC Globescan](#) poll of international public opinion has consistently shown in the last few years Israel competing with North Korea in popularity around the world, including among Europe's largest nations.

Israel's standing in world public opinion has been eroding for quite some time now, due to two main factors: the moral power and effective campaigning of the global BDS movement, including its crucial anti-colonial [Israeli component](#), and Israel's political shift to the far right.

The fact the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu mentioned BDS 18 times in his 2014 speech before the Israel lobby in the U.S., AIPAC, reflects real panic in the Israeli establishment in the face of this



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

nonviolent, evidently effective human rights-based movement. Indeed, U.S. president Barack Obama has indirectly [conveyed](#) to Netanyahu that even the US will not be able to protect Israel from its intensifying isolation if it failed to reach a settlement with the Palestinians.

The most recent Gallup poll of US public opinion [shows](#) a substantial increase in the percentage of Americans who describe Israel's assault on the 1.8 million Palestinians in occupied Gaza as "unjustified", including 44% of women (against only 33% who see Israel's actions as justified) and 51% of Americans between 18 and 29 years of age, and 49% of non-white Americans (vs. 25%).

A [CNN poll](#) in January 2015 shows that two thirds of Americans today prefer neutrality towards the Palestinian-Israeli "conflict."

Weeks ago, almost [one thousand artists](#) in the U.K. signed a pledge to boycott Israel culturally.

In a referendum at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies ([SOAS](#)) that included faculty, staff and students, 73% voted for an academic boycott of Israel.

Student governments at Stanford, UCLA, Northwestern and other prestigious U.S. universities have voted for [divestment](#) from companies involved in Israel's occupation.

Heeding calls by the BDS movement to [block Israeli ship](#) operations at ports, dockworkers and community activists in Oakland, California succeeded in preventing an Israeli ship from offloading for several consecutive days.

A recent poll by an Israel lobby group in the US reveals that [15% of Jewish Americans support a boycott](#) against Israel.



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

In a first, 327 [Jewish Holocaust survivors](#) and descendants published a half-page ad in *the New York Times* under the slogan, «Never Again for Anyone!»,¹ condemning Israel's atrocities against the Palestinians and calling for «the full economic, cultural and academic boycott of Israel».

In 2014, BDS started reaching a tipping point. The Presbyterian Church USA, one of the most important protestant churches there, divested from three U.S. companies involved in the Israeli occupation—Caterpillar, HP and Motorola Solutions; the Gates Foundation divested its [entire stake](#) (more than \$180 million) in the world's largest security company, G4S, after an intense BDS campaign, while the pension fund of the United Methodist Church, the largest mainline protestant church in the US, [decided to sell off all its G4S stock](#). G4S is experiencing major symbolic defeats due to BDS activism in [Norway](#), [South Africa](#), the [European Parliament](#), several [British universities](#), and elsewhere as a result of its [involvement](#) in Israeli prisons, where Palestinian prisoners, including children, are tortured and in several projects that violate international law.

The George Soros Fund Management has [divested](#) in 2014 all its stock in SodaStream, an Israeli company that illegally produces in the OPT.

Also in 2014, the second largest (\$200 billion in global investments) Dutch pension management fund, PGGM, [divested](#) from the largest five Israeli banks over their illegal operations in the OPT; the [German government](#) decided to exclude Israeli entities operating in the OPT from research grants and scientific cooperation agreements with Israel; the largest Danish bank, [Danske](#), blacklisted Hapoalim bank, one of Israel's largest; and the Norwegian sovereign fund, the largest in the world, divested from two Israeli companies involved in settlement construction.



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

Over [1,200 Spanish university professors](#) and researchers have joined the academic boycott of Israel.

The [local Palestinian consumer boycott](#) of Israeli products has developed enormously over the last six months, leading to large losses by some of Israel's largest exporters to the captive Palestinian market under occupation.

Major filmmakers, writers, music bands and artists of the caliber of Hollywood star [Danny Glover](#) have endorsed BDS or at least [heeded the boycott call](#) and refused to participate in Israeli cultural events. More recently, [1,000 British artists](#) signed on the cultural boycott of Israel.

In 2013, the American Studies Association [adopted](#) the academic boycott of Israel with a stunning 2:1 support ratio in its general membership. In April, the Association for Asian-American Studies [became](#) the first academic body in the US to adopt the academic boycott of Israel. Around the same time, the Federation of French-Speaking Belgian Students (FEF), representing 100,000 members, [adopted](#) the boycott of Israeli academic institutions, and so [did](#) the Teachers' Union of Ireland. Two other US academic associations also adopted the academic boycott. In March 2011, the University of Johannesburg [severed](#) links with Ben Gurion University over human rights violations.

Support for BDS came from major international [trade union federations](#) with millions of members, in South Africa, Britain, Ireland, India, Brazil, Norway, Canada, Italy, France, Belgium, and Turkey, among others.

Veolia, a corporation complicit in Israel's occupation, has [lost](#) or had to withdraw bids for contracts worth more than \$26 billion, mainly in Sweden, the UK, Ireland, the US and Kuwait.



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

The British Co-op supermarket chain, the fifth largest in the UK, has [adopted](#) a policy of boycotting companies operating in the OPT.

The Dutch government has publicly "[discouraged](#)" Dutch companies from doing business with Israeli entities in the OPT, leading the largest Dutch construction company, Royal Haskoning DHV, to [withdraw](#) from a sewage treatment project with the Israeli municipality in occupied East Jerusalem. In the same context, the publicly-owned Dutch water company, Vitens, has also [terminated](#) a contract with the Israeli national water company Mekorot.

In the same vein, the British government has issued [guidance](#) on business involvement with illegal Israeli settlements. These steps follow the publication of EU [guidelines](#) against funding Israeli projects and entities in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Deutsche Bahn, a German government-controlled rail company, [pulled out](#) of an Israeli project encroaching on occupied Palestinian land, and German foreign ministry officials informed Palestinian civil society representatives that they have advised all German academic institutions to avoid dealing with Ariel, an Israeli colony-college in the West Bank.

Companies profiting from the Israeli occupation and human rights violations, like Veolia and G4S, have lost huge contracts as a result, making the impact of BDS not just moral or symbolic, but financial as well.

Most recently, 17 European governments have issued guidance to their citizens and businesses advising them against involvement in Israeli projects in the OPT, including East Jerusalem.



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

6. What do you think about the cancellation of some talks on Palestine by intellectuals in Italian universities?

Unfortunately, Italy systematically and shamelessly violates democratic principles of free speech and freedom of expression when it comes to criticizing Israel's regime of occupation and apartheid or acting to end Italian complicity in Israel's violations of human rights. This repression is most drastically felt in Italian universities, which, like French universities, lag well behind academic institutions in the U.S., Britain, Scandinavia, South Africa and elsewhere in protecting free speech and nurturing debate even on "inconvenient" or controversial issues.

Judging from a distance, and without any claim to being an expert on Italy, I feel that the Berlusconi dark ages seem to be lingering on, with an Italian version of McCarthyism still strongly felt in Italian society.

7. What do you think about the issue of the recognition of the State of Palestine in different European countries like Sweden, France and England?

As I have argued in the [*New York Times*](#), if this recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to statehood is the first step toward recognizing the irrefutable right of the Palestinian people to self determination, then it would be a positive contribution to establishing a just and sustainable peace in accordance with international law.

But, if it is, as implied, solely meant to resuscitate the comatose version of the "two state solution" which, as dictated by Israel, omits



anno V, n. 2, 2015

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Osservatorio sociale

basic Palestinian rights, then it would be yet another act of British complicity in bestowing legitimacy on Israel's [unjust order](#).

Israel's denial of Palestinian rights and ongoing colonization of the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, after all, will turn the putative two-state solution into a Palestinian [Bantustan](#) in an "[apartheid state](#)" of Israel, as even U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry has warned.

The Palestinian right to self determination, according to the [United Nations](#), includes, aside from national sovereignty, «the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property from which they have been displaced and uprooted».

The overwhelming majority of Palestinian civil society has stated in the historic 2005 call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions ([B.D.S.](#)) against Israel that exercising Palestinian self determination requires ending Israel's 1967 occupation and colonization, «recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality», and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and lands from which they were forcibly displaced in 1948.

Finally, European parliaments that wish to support the Palestinian struggle for self determination would do well to first "do no harm", by ending their deep complicity in sustaining Israel's occupation and oppression.

8. Today, what could be the role of Italy and of Europe in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Italy can significantly contribute to establishing a just and comprehensive peace in our region by fulfilling its obligations under interna-



anno V, n. 2, 2015

data di pubblicazione: 1° luglio 2015

Osservatorio sociale

tional law, especially the 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice against Israel's wall, which called for refraining from recognizing the illegal situation created by Israel in the OPT and ensuring Israel's compliance with international human rights law.

Italy can start by ending its military and security trade with Israel, including joint military research, as this is one of the worst forms of complicity in Israeli war crimes; banning companies producing in or sourcing from Israel's colonies; and working with its European partners to suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement until Israel fulfills the second clause regarding human rights. Also, Italian companies, like [Pizzarotti](#) and [CEIA Costruzioni Elettroniche Industriali Automatismi](#), that are involved in Israel's human rights abuses must be pressured to end their complicity.