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Harmful rhetoric can break the momentum of boycott efforts

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Harmful rhetoric can break the momentum of boycott efforts

[Hussein Ibish](#)[2]

February 8, 2014

The recent SodaStream controversy has illustrated both the power and shortcomings of the various pro-Palestinian boycott movements. The falling out between actress Scarlett Johansson and her long-term former partners at Oxfam – who support settlement boycotts, but not boycotts against Israel – over her advertising for the company based in an Israeli settlement dovetails with many other European moves to draw the line with Israel.

The European Union recently insisted on excluding settlement-based institutions from its new research funding arrangement with Israel, and Germany is pushing to extend these restrictions to bilateral agreements that also involve the private sector.

Many Israelis, particularly those directly involved in business and finance, including finance minister Yair Lapid and over 100 Israeli CEOs, have expressed deep concern about Israel's growing isolation over settlements. Israelis who are ideologically committed to a "greater Israel" naturally dismiss the emerging boycott trend as irrelevant bluster.

In fact, the growing mood in Europe that has lost patience with Israel's ongoing settlement activities, which are universally acknowledged to be a flagrant violation of black letter international human rights law – and therefore declines to subsidise it with a single further euro – does pose a significant danger to Israel of political, diplomatic and even to some extent economic, isolation. But it's important to note that these European boycotts are targeted directly against the settlements and the occupation, and not at Israel itself.

Here is where the most strident rhetorical "BDS movement" is, in many ways, not only failing to seize an opportunity, but it also does harm to this important campaign.

The European and other successful boycotts are aimed squarely at the occupation and are pushed by those who are determined to achieve a two-state solution. They are absolutely consistent with international law, and based on the fact that settlement activity by an occupying power is absolutely prohibited by the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 49, Paragraph 6, because it is a major human rights violation.

Unfortunately, many self-appointed leaders of the "BDS movement" – whose efforts have had virtually nothing to do with the growing mood in Europe to cease subsidising settlement activity – instead advocate boycotting Israel across the board. The logical conclusion of their approach, and the clear subtext of most of their rhetoric, is a one-state solution in which Israel is replaced by a different state for everyone currently living in former mandatory Palestine as well as all Palestinian refugees.

This creates a series of grave complications for what is an otherwise heartening trend of increasing European refusal to subsidise or tolerate settlement activities any longer.

First, such rhetoric allows supporters of the occupation to conflate boycotts against settlements with boycotts against Israel. There is a large and expanding global constituency, based on the virtually unanimous international consensus in favour of a two-state solution, that correctly identifies Israeli settlements as the unique threat to peace and acts accordingly. But because of the rhetoric of some BDS activists, it's possible for supporters of the occupation and others to dismiss pro-peace settlement boycotts as "boycotts of Israel". And there is no real international constituency for either a generalised boycott of Israel or for a one-state solution.

Second, European refusal to cooperate with settlement activity divides Israelis. It says to them that while Israel is a legitimate member state of the United Nations, settlements are illegitimate and their products therefore also illegitimate. BDS rhetoric that urges a total boycott of Israel, on the contrary, unites Israelis around the occupation, allowing the settlers to argue that the future of far-flung settlements deep in the West Bank is "the same as the future of Tel Aviv".

Rather than being able to claim credit for the increasing movement in Europe and elsewhere to boycott settlements and the occupation, some of the most vocal pro-Palestinian "BDS advocates" actually undermine them by confusing the purpose of such boycotts and allowing Israelis to both argue and, perhaps, believe, that this is a generalised attack against the legitimacy of their state rather than the illegitimacy of the occupation.

The greatest challenge facing the Palestinian national movement, particularly after the last Israeli election in which the existence of the occupation was blithely ignored, is how to bring home the reality of the conflict to Israel's mainstream majority that lives far from the occupied territories. The developing anti-settlement, but not anti-Israel, boycott movement is one of the first glimmers of real hope about how this can be done in a cost-effective, nonviolent and non-counterproductive manner.

There is no question that Palestinians are onto a very good thing here, if they handle it right. And the Israelis clearly have a problem, as acknowledged by all of their sensible leaders. But, ironically, the biggest threat to this sudden and significant piece of leverage is the strident BDS rhetoric that makes pro-peace actions against settlements that are based squarely in international law look like anti-Israel initiatives that don't square with the goals of either peace or a two-state solution.

If the rhetoric of strident BDS activists can be brought into line with the reality of anti-settlement boycotts, Palestinians could well acquire a significant and desperately needed new tool of leverage with Israel. If not, while demagogues may not be able to stop the growing international anti-settlement sentiment, they can certainly continue to provide apologists for the occupation with vital rhetorical ammunition for counterattack, and space for conflation and confusion, that they would and should otherwise be denied.

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