

The Growth and Impact of the BDS Movement: Linking Local to Global Context

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Abstract

Beginning in 2005, 170 Palestinian civil society groups launched the Boycott, Divestments, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against the Israeli government (Morrison, 2015, p. 245). The objective of this movement was to compel Israel to comply with the mandates that were specified to them from the International Court of Justice. This was specifically in regards to the building of illegal settlements on Palestinian land and neglecting the right of return for Palestinian refugees (Barghouti, 2011, p. 215). Under the initiative of Omar Barghouti, Palestinian civil society groups worldwide have opted to launch this non-violent boycott to place economic and socio-cultural forms of global pressure as an attempt to compel Israel to comply with international law (Barghouti, 2011, p. 50). The aim of this paper is to explain the expansion and growth of the BDS movement by using political process theories and theories of contentious politics to explain degradation of Israel's legitimacy as a democratic and Jewish state (Barghouti, 2011, p. 10).

Introduction

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement that began in July 2005, was the result of an alternate solution to push the state of Israel to comply with international law after backlash from the international community at the conclusion of the Second Intifada, or the second Palestinian uprising. The work of this movement includes over 170 Palestinian civil society groups worldwide in order to bring attention the "collective responsibility of the international community" (Barghouti, 2011, p. 5) to

fight injustice, similar to movements of the indigenous people of South Africa during the apartheid era. This coalition of civil society groups has compiled a list of corporations and products that either provide funding to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) or contributed to the normalization of settlements, that are illegal according to international law, in the West Bank.

The aim of this paper is to explain how the BDS movement occurred as well as the factors that contribute to its current rate of success through the use of Political Process Theory and Contentious Politics Theory . By using these theories developed by Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam, is to use a historical and political outlook to explain the factors that has led to the current leadership and political opportunities of the BDS movement. This includes framing the Israeli occupation of Palestine as an issue that continues to affect the lives of Palestinians, whether they are residing in the Occupied Territories, refugee camps in neighbouring states, or in the West. Moreover, this movement has the potential to provide Palestinians, in addition to human rights groups, a platform to educate and raise awareness for an occupation that continues to have an effect.

Theoretical Framework

Political Process Theory:

Political process theory began in the mid-1970s. It acted as a critique of previous social movements theories and as a new theoretical framework for exploring the reasons behind social movements (Meyer & Lupo, 2010, p. 112). Political process theory was initially used to “emphasize the role of political opportunity structure in the growth of

domestic movements” (Bob, 2002, p. 397). Likewise, political process theory focuses on collective actors as the subject of the growth of social movements.

Political process theory was influenced by Max Weber’s focus on the role of beliefs and ideas in shaping interests and facilitating mobilization (Meyer & Lupo, 2010, p. 113), while also taking into account the state’s role as the highest and most important source of authority (Meyer et al., 2010, p. 121). In assuming that the highest authority belongs to the state, political process theory then focuses on groups that are marginalized from mainstream society. Along with this assumption, political process theory also looks at the overall structures of the political institutions and the historical development of the social movement.

In relation to the BDS movement, social movement theories, such as Political Process Theory, are used to explain how the lead up to the movement occurred. This theory provides a framework that places the Palestinians as the targeted group and Israel as the aggressor, who holds the highest concentration of power. Since this is the case, the Palestinians, through a coalition of Human Rights groups, activists, and global civil society groups, are able to increase their ability to raise awareness of the effects of occupation (Buecheler, 2012, p. 277).

Contentious Politics Theory:

Contentious politics theory was devised by the same theorists who developed political process theory in an attempt to expand beyond “the classic social movement agenda” (Smith & Fetner, 2010, p. 15). The inspiration behind the development of this theory is the Marxist thought on class conflict (Tarrow, 2011, p. 17). While it is considered an extension of political process theory, contentious politics consider “the

episodes of contention” which are the mechanisms that lead to build-up of the social movement (Buecheler, 2012, p. 422). In other words, the focus in contentious politics is the preceding events that led to the political opportunity for mobilization, rather than the political opportunity itself (Smith & Fetner, 2010, p. 19). Furthermore, contentious politics theory “emerges in response to changes in political opportunities and threats when participants perceive and respond to incentives” (Tarrow, 2011, p. 16).

The various types of mechanisms that can be used in contentious politics include brokerage mechanisms, which are used to bring disconnected “social sites or groups” together (Buecheler, 2012, p. 423) to bring the issues of the conflict to the forefront of human rights issues. Furthermore, identity is used as a mechanism to recognize the targeted or disenfranchised groups and those in power who also create these inequalities of power (Tarrow, 2011, p. 20). In the case of identity, social class is seen as a root cause for collective action. Which is an integral part of the formation of the social movement in Political Process Theory. Whereas, in contentious politics, identity is used to distinguish the actors in the movement from whom the actors are communicating their grievances towards. Often it is not one group that is part of the movement, rather, it is collection of different groups, which has the possibility to extend internationally.

Likewise, another difference between contentious politics theory and political process theory is the use of discourse in contentious politics . Discourse analysis is a tool in contentious politics which reviews the trajectory of social movements. This requires examination of the historical background to understand what could have caused the social movement (Smith & Fetner, 2010, p. 25). Due to the cyclical nature of history, understanding the discourse of a social movement provides the potential to predict the outcomes of social movements (Tarrow, 2011, p. 23). These two social

movement theories will be used to explain the BDS movement and its global appeal. The following section will analyse the political opportunity of the BDS movement, its historical context, and its mobilizing structures amongst other aspects.

Case Study: Boycott Divestment and Sanctions

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement formally began in 2005 at the conclusion of the Second Palestinian Uprising (Morrison, 2015, p. 233). This was prior to the global call to boycott Israel and debunk the Zionist myth of “a land without a people, a people without a land” (Barghouti, 2011, p. 4). As Suzanne Morrison notes, civil society groups have been at the forefront of this movement as well as the global appeal in supporting BDS. Likewise, support has been growing steadily within the field of academia (Barghouti, 2011, p. 35). Academics and intellectuals from a variety of different backgrounds have signed what came to be known as the “Declaration of Independence from Fascism” in response to the Israeli government’s passing of the amendment to the Citizenship Act (Barghouti, 2011, p. 12). The amendment to the act requires non-Jews wishing to apply for Israeli citizenship to sign a “loyalty pledge,” that accepts Israel as a Jewish democratic state (Barghouti, 2011, p. 12). This petition, circulated by global civil society groups, shows that there has been diffusion within the global community. In addition to this, crimes that Israel has committed includes, but are not limited to, the incarceration of children under military law instead of civil law, the continued expansion of illegal settlements, and the separation wall in the West Bank, despite condemnation from the International Court of Justice (Barghouti, 2011, p. 65).

The Point of Contention for the Rise of the BDS Movement

The BDS movement can be summarized as “a historic moment of collective consciousness” and the release of information from “almost a century of struggle against Zionist settler colonialism” (Barghouti, 2011, p. 5). The movement was inspired by the boycotts against the apartheid system in South Africa and these similarities were first brought to light in 2006 in an article published in *The Guardian* (Barghouti, 2011, p. 64). The article compared Israeli policies to those of South Africa during apartheid, and how the idea of comparing the two states is disconcerting towards Israel as a state and its citizens, because they see it “as a step closer” to being compared to Nazi Germany in relation to their Nuremburg laws (Barghouti, 2011, p. 63). In making these comparisons, the article shows that the BDS movement is partly following the discourse set out by the African National Congress (ANC), while at the same time it is creating new forms of discourse globally.

When the movement was first launched on July 9th, 2005, the response was polarizing (Hallward, 2013, p. 1). On one hand, it gave a non-violent solution near the end of the Second Intifada. However, because Palestinians were dispersed between the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the pre-1948 borders, there was a sense of distrust and “disparate aims” (Hallward, 2013, p. 2). This lack of unity and cooperation was part of the reason why it has taken a long time for the movement to gain global support. Another reason for the delay in the boycott was the United States (U.S.) granting support to the Israeli state, especially during the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973. However, in response to the bombing campaign towards Gaza in 2008 and 2009, relations between Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and U.S. president, Barack Obama, became strained (Morrison, 2015, p. 4). This has given the BDS

National Committee (BNC) the political opportunity to expand their networks and further their call for the BDS movement.

Point of Contention

There has been a cycle of contention for the BDS movement. The first point of contention dates back to the end of the first Palestinian uprisings with the Oslo Accords signed in 1994. The Accords outline the details of a Palestine-Israel peace agreement, and for the Palestinian Authority to recognize Israel as a state in exchange for further discussion of the possibility of an independent Palestinian state (Morrison, 2015, p. 245). In the period following the Accords, Palestinians grew frustrated from the lack of leadership from their government, and the continued ill treatment from the Israeli government and forces.

Therefore, frustrations led up to the Second Intifada, which had occurred as a response to the lack of political responsibility of the Palestinian Authority and the continuation of the status quo prior to the First Intifada. During the Second Intifada, there were divestment campaigns that began in the U.S. from student groups, which were targeted as a response to what was considered the most violent Intifada (Hallward, 2013, p. 27). This later grew and was organized into the “Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel” by academic scholars to boycott Israeli academic and cultural institutions in response to Israel’s illegal occupation and colonization of the Palestinian territories (Hallward, 2013, p. 28).

The official call for BDS, however, came one year after the International Court of Justice ruled that the separation wall to be built between Israel and Palestine was illegal (Hallward, 2013, p. 28). The beginning of the BDS campaign began with calling Israel to

halt the building of the wall and later its mandate expanded to include the illegal building of settlements, and the right of return for Palestinian refugees (Hallward, 2013, p. 34). However, a point of contention in expanding the BDS movement in the U.S. was whether protesting against Israel's policies would be considered anti-Semitic (Hallward, 2013, p. 34). However, this internal debate derails from the greater issue of unequal distribution of power and oppression towards the Palestinians.

The Political Opportunity for Boycott

Even though the call for a cultural and intellectual boycott began during the Second Intifada, the political opportunity to expand the BDS movement began when relations between the U.S. and Israel began to strain under the Obama-administration (Barghouti, 2011, p. 4). During this time, the U.S. began to see the state of Israel as more of a burden, rather than an ally (Barghouti, 2011, p. 4). The first reason for this was from the coverage surrounding the attacks and subsequent blockade on Gaza in 2008-2009, which shows the different levels of Israel's oppression towards the Palestinian population (Barghouti, 2011, p. 206). The report from the United Nations Human Rights Council showcased that the blockade and siege imposed on the Gaza Strip was pre-meditated, calculated and executed without error (Barghouti, 2011, p. 38). This brought up serious concerns about Israel's human rights abuses to the forefront, and has led many scholars, including Richard Falk, an expert on human rights issues, to support BDS. The siege against Gaza renewed the global call for a cultural, economic, and academic boycott against Israel.

The Role of Global Civil Society

Global civil society groups have been at the forefront of promoting the grievances of Palestinians and calling on multinational corporations to change the location of their operations if goods were being produced in illegal settlements, rather than being produced within the borders of Israel proper. Global civil society groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, provided reports and condemned the state of Israel through naming and shaming campaigns. Furthermore, global civil society groups, in partnership with Palestinian civil society, have created a network that has expanded the scope of the movement from local to global. This was done through committed research on multinational corporations that operate in illegal settlements in the West Bank and then placing pressure on these same corporations, in an attempt to change their practises.

Conclusion

Although the BDS movement began with one set of actors, it grew to encompass other actors and civil society groups, which were able to put pressure on states to address the human rights abuses in Israel. With the help of global civil society groups, Palestinian civil society groups are able to expand their networks, their message, and call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions to Israel. At this time, the movement has successfully been growing steadily, with Ireland passing a bill in 2019 to ban Israeli settlement goods (Middle East Monitor, 2019). These victories, although they may seem minor, are accomplishments that have the potential to persuade other states to answer the call for boycott. Inspired by the boycott movements in South Africa, the hope of the

BDS movement is to address the apartheid conditions that Palestinians are living in, and to put an end to these conditions.

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