

Opinion

# Palestinian territories - Why I believe the BDS movement has never been more important than now

Tuesday 17 October 2023, by [BARGHOUTI Omar](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2023).

## **The most profound ethical obligation in this time of carnage is to act to end complicity**

At times of carnage, herd-like agitation and tribal polarization, many may dismiss ethical principles as a nuisance or an intellectual luxury. I cannot and shall not. I desire nothing more than seeing an end to all violence in Palestine and everywhere else, and this is precisely why I am committed to struggling against the root causes of violence: oppression and injustice.

I have dear friends and colleagues in the Gaza “[prison camp](#)”, as former British Prime Minister David Cameron once called it, a [modern-day ghetto](#) whose 2.3 million residents are predominantly refugees descending from communities that faced [massacres](#) and planned [ethnic cleansing](#) during the 1948 [Nakba](#). Israel’s illegal 16-year blockade, aided by the US, Europe and the Egyptian regime, has turned Gaza into an “[unliveable](#)” zone, according to the United Nations, where the healthcare system is near collapse; almost all the water is undrinkable; around 60% of children are anaemic; and many children suffer from stunted growth due to malnutrition. The heart-wrenching stories of death, destruction, and displacement that my friends are currently sharing with me make me simultaneously sad and indignant. But above all they motivate me to contribute even more to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions ([BDS](#)) movement, that I co-founded in 2005, as my modest contribution to our liberation struggle.

The [anti-racist](#), nonviolent BDS movement, supported by labor and farmers unions, as well as racial, social, gender and climate justice movements that collectively represent tens of millions worldwide, is inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle and the US civil rights movement. But it is rooted in a century-old, often unacknowledged heritage of indigenous Palestinian popular resistance to [settler colonialism](#) and [apartheid](#). This nonviolent resistance has taken many forms, from mass workers’ strikes, to women-led marches, to public diplomacy, to [building universities](#), to literature and art.

Supported by Palestinian grassroots movements, unions and political parties that represent the absolute majority of Palestinians in historic Palestine and exile, BDS calls for ending international state, corporate and institutional complicity in Israel’s regime of oppression so that the Palestinians can enjoy our UN-stipulated rights. This includes an end to military occupation and [apartheid](#), as well as respecting the internationally-recognized [right of Palestinian refugees to return home](#).

An important yet often missed line in the short [BDS Call](#) appealed to people of conscience worldwide “to pressure your respective states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel,” and invited “conscientious Israelis to support this Call, for the sake of justice and genuine peace.” Indeed, a

small but [significant number of Jewish Israelis](#) has joined the movement and played a significant role in our campaigns that have resulted in major [investment funds](#), [churches](#), [corporations](#), [academic associations](#), sports teams, [artists](#), among others, ending complicity, or refusing to be implicated, in Israel's human rights violations.

This time, though, many western governments and media outlets are parroting pernicious [disinformation](#) while claiming that the latest crisis began on 7 October with an "[unprovoked](#)" attack on Israel. Calling the Palestinian groups' incursion unprovoked is not only unethical, it is also a typical anti-Palestinian racist trope that views us as [relative humans](#) who do not deserve full human rights. Why else would the relentless, slow death and structural violence resulting from Israel's ongoing 75-year-old regime of injustice against us be deemed invisible or unworthy of condemnation and accountability?

I am inspired by the words of the Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Freire, who [wrote](#): "With the establishment of a relationship of oppression, violence has already begun. Never in history has violence been initiated by the oppressed ... Violence is initiated by those who oppress, who exploit, who fail to recognize others as persons - not by those who are oppressed, exploited, and unrecognized." The reaction of the oppressed, whether or not one considers it legally or ethically justifiable, is always just that, a reaction to the *initial* violence of the oppressor.

In harmony with international law, the BDS movement has consistently defended the *right* of the Palestinian people to resist Israel's military occupation and colonization "by all available means, including armed resistance," as mandated by numerous UN resolutions, including [UNGA Res. 37/43](#)) and [UNGA Res. 45/130](#), with strict adherence to the prohibition against "targeting non-combatants". Harming civilians is prohibited, whether by the oppressor or the oppressed - despite the massive power imbalance and the just as immense moral asymmetry between the two.

Even before October 7, Israel's unmasked far-right government, its most [racist, fundamentalist, and sexist ever](#), had been escalating its ruthless attacks on the lives and livelihoods of millions of Palestinians, with total impunity. The fact that the occupied West Bank is under the partial control of the Palestinian Authority, which is implicated in "security coordination" with the Israeli occupation, has not saved Palestinians there from an ongoing Nakba of pogroms, extrajudicial killings, dispossession, annexation, illegal settlement construction, daily humiliation and denial of basic rights.

Understanding the context and causes of resistance does not imply accepting its tactics of targeting civilians, and the context here is shocking. Palestinians in Gaza are facing an unprecedented wave of [indiscriminate Israeli bombing](#), including white phosphorus munitions, that has targeted schools, [universities](#), entire residential neighborhoods, telecommunications networks, markets, mosques, as well as [ICRC health workers](#), UN staff and ambulances killing over 1,030 children.

Aggravating this horror, the Israeli military has [completely cut off](#) the supply of water, food, medicine and electricity to Gaza, implementing its [Dahiya Doctrine](#). Developed in 2008 in partnership with Tel Aviv University, this doctrine calls for targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure with "disproportionate force" to inflict devastating destruction, a [war crime](#). On Tuesday, an Israeli army spokesperson [admitted](#), "In the strikes [in Gaza] the emphasis is on damage, not precision." Trying to justify his decision to impose a "complete siege" on millions of Palestinians, Israeli war minister Yoav Gallant [said](#):, "We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly." Mourning the loss of civilian lives on both sides without both-sidesing or ignoring the decades old oppression, [Jewish Voice for Peace](#) in the US condemned Gallant's racism saying, "As Jews, we know what happens when people are called animals. We can and we must stop this. Never again means never again - for anyone."

Indeed, a few months ago, genocide scholar Michael Barnett [posed](#) the question: “Is Israel on the precipice of genocide?” Given Israel’s utter impunity, emboldened by entrenched US and European complicity, and in an atmosphere of prevailing dehumanization, Israeli scholar of genocide Raz Segal believes that its attack on Gaza is “[a textbook case of genocide](#).” In such a situation of horrific violence, moral consistency is indispensable. Those who have failed to condemn the original and ongoing violence of oppression have no moral standing to condemn illegal or immoral acts of violence committed by the oppressed.

Most importantly, the most profound ethical obligation in these times is to *act* to end complicity. Only thus can we truly hope to end oppression and violence. Like many others, Palestinians love, and we care. We fear, and we dare. We hope, and we sometimes despair. But above all, we aspire to live in a more just world, with no ranking of suffering, no hierarchy of human worth, and where everyone’s rights and human dignity are cherished and upheld.

**Omar Barghouti**

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## **P.S.**

- The Guardian. Mon 16 Oct 2023 21.47 CEST:  
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- Omar Barghouti is a founder of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.
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