

UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL MEETING ON THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

*African solidarity with the Palestinian people for the achievement of its inalienable rights,
including the sovereignty and independence of the State of Palestine*

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PLENARY III

**International efforts at achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace -
Africa's support for Palestinian sovereignty and independence**

*Civil society initiatives for a comprehensive, just and lasting solution
of the question of Palestine*

Paper presented by

Mr. Naeem Jeenah
Executive Director
Afro-Middle East Centre
Johannesburg

Good afternoon, Excellencies, members of the committee for the protection of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and staff of the Division for Palestinian rights, ladies and gentlemen.

On 9 July 2005, Palestinian civil society and political organisations – about 200 in total – issued a call to the people of the world to implement boycotts, divestment and sanctions on Israel, in what is now famously known as the BDS call.

Four days later, on 13 July 2005, the Call received its first global endorsement when the UN International Conference of Civil Society in Support of Middle East Peace, held in Paris, endorsed the call in its civil society ‘Action Plan 2005’. (‘We recognize that, as an international network, our strength lies in our ability to work collectively in unified campaigns and actions. To that end, we urge international, national and regional social movements, organizations and coalitions to support the unified call of Palestinian civil society for a global campaign of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) to pressure Israel to end the occupation and fully comply with international law and all relevant United Nations resolutions... We call on our partner organizations to intensify all our activities, focusing on the BDS campaign so that together we will end the Occupation.’)

Since then, the BDS Call has become the touchstone, reference point, uniting symbol and tactical (even strategic for some) programme for civil society globally.

And so, in talking about civil society initiatives for a comprehensive, just and lasting solution of the question of Palestine, we must necessarily focus on the global BDS movement.

The Call has three basic demands on Israel:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall;
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

All three demands are, of course, based on international law and UN resolutions.

Let me deviate slightly for just a moment to refer to the strategy for overcoming apartheid in South Africa, in order to make a point later.

In South Africa, we refer to the ‘four pillars of struggle’ that formed the basis of the struggle against apartheid. These were:

1. The armed struggle;
2. The internal underground;
3. International solidarity and, through it, international isolation of the South African state; and
4. Mass mobilisation within the country.

While we South Africans like to think that other people can learn from our experiences – both good and bad, we, together with the rest of civil society, acknowledge that our activism on Palestine must respond to what Palestinians request of us.

Currently, that request is, in the main, to support and participate in the non-violent campaign of BDS. For South Africans, this was our third pillar. (Let me note here that we acknowledge that, in South Africa, the third and fourth pillars – international solidarity and mass mobilisation – were the most effective ones.)

From the Israeli perspective, of course, BDS is referred to as the main leg of a ‘delegitimisation campaign’. (For Ilan Baruch, let me say here, as he requested, that ‘what bars us from engaging normally with Israel is not you, Israeli people, but the policies of your successive governments, their violations of international law and human rights.’ And, to add, firstly, we in global civil society have no problem engaging with Israelis who support justice for Palestinians, international law and UN resolutions as they relate to Israel. And, when Israel complies with all international laws and UN resolutions we will be ready to end the isolation of Israel.)

Over the past almost eight years, the Palestinian BDS campaign has achieved more successes in various parts of the world than South Africa’s campaign had in about twenty years.

For South Africa, we had painstakingly begun with building a cultural and sports boycott, academic boycott, then a consumer boycott, followed by campaigns for divestment, sanctions and diplomatic isolation. These were long and hard campaigns, developed both within and without South Africa. And it took decades before we made any gains. By the time our liberation movements were unbanned, numerous western countries, in particular, were still staunchly refusing to entertain the notion of sanctions.

Like in the Palestinian case now, ours was a campaign of delegitimisation and of isolation of the apartheid state. Allow me to say at this point that for those who seek a just peace, there can be nothing wrong with delegitimising or isolating an occupying, colonial or apartheid state. Indeed, when that state was as strong (militarily, economically and diplomatically) as apartheid South Africa was or as Israel is, then such strategies are often the best strategies for foreign solidarity movements. (And, for Ilan Baruch, let me say here, as he requested, that ‘what bars us from engaging normally with Israel is not you, Israeli people, but the policies of your successive governments, their violations of international law and human rights.’ And, to add, firstly, that we in global civil society have no problem engaging with Israelis who support justice – for Palestinians and themselves, international law and UN resolutions as they relate to Israel. And, when Israel complies with all international laws and UN resolutions we will be ready to end the isolation of Israel.)

The BDS campaign focuses its attention on the Israeli state, institutions and companies linked to settlement activity and to the state, as well as, for various reasons, on academic institutions.

In the past eight years, then, the Palestinian campaign has seen victories.

At the consumer level – resulting, for example, in Israeli company Agrexco filing for liquidation in 2011 and Ahava closing its main London store and being boycotted by retailers in UK, Norway, Japan, Canada and South Africa.

At the academic level – the most recent being the decision by the Association for Asian American Studies to endorse the academic boycott, and, two years ago, the University of Johannesburg in South Africa deciding not to enter into any institutional relations with Israeli institutions.

At the cultural and sports level – with an increasing number of artists and writers refusing to perform in Israel and issuing statements or having performances in support of the Palestinian people and the BDS campaign. Bono, Snoop Dogg, Jean Luc Godard, Elvis Costello, Gil Scott Heron, Carlos Santana, Devendra Banhart, Faithless, the Pixies, Cassandra Wilson, Cat Power, Zakir Hussain, Roger Waters, Alice Walker, Naomi Klein, John Berger, Judith Butler, Etienne Balibar, Ken Loach, Arundhati Roy, Angela Davis, Sarah Schulman, Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

At the commercial level there have been some successes with companies like G4S (the European parliament decided not to renew a contract with G4S because of protests) and Veolia and greater gains in, for example, South Africa where a company producing dates bowed to pressure and severed its relationship with Israeli company Hadiklaim.

Divestment decisions by churches and other civil society groups as well as, for example, the Norwegian finance ministry deciding to exclude Israeli company Elbit from the investment portfolio of the Government Pension Fund Global. Several European banks have also divested from Alstom, one of Veolia's partners in the Jerusalem Light Rail project.

At governmental level in the case of South Africa and some European countries poised to pass legislation to label settlement products.

In addition, there has also been an increase in attention given to the Jewish National Fund in some countries – such as the United States, South Africa, Scotland and other countries. In South Africa, for example, a group of South African Jews have set up an organisation called Stop the JNF to convince Jews in South Africa not to support the JNF because of the use of its funds to effect theft of Palestinian land, building of settlements, etc. One of the painful aspects of JNF activity for many South Africans is that the destroyed village of Luby, in the north of Israel, most of whose residents have been internally displaced, has been covered by the JNF, using South African funds, with what is called the South Africa Forest – under the guise of an environmental project.

The JNF, along with other arms of the Israeli state, have, however, been working with determination in various parts of Africa. In South Africa, for example, the JNF has an environmental project in a poor township called Mamelodi. There are also Israeli agricultural projects in South Africa and other parts of Africa. This makes tackling the JNF more difficult. Indeed, the penetration of the Israeli state in Africa – particularly through various African governments – is disturbing and poses a serious challenge to civil society organisations. Not only is this a concern from the perspective of Palestinian solidarity but, in some cases, it is also a concern for the sovereignty of these countries themselves and for the rights of their citizens. When private security services supported by a foreign state begin replacing policing, for example, this is a concerning trend that poses risks for the country concerned.

Speaking about Palestinian solidarity in Africa, it must be noted that while numerous countries in Africa have Palestinian solidarity organisations, they have, however, failed thus far to develop a continent-wide solidarity network that could make all their activities more effective. This remains an urgent task for these organisations.

The role that global society can and should be playing, then, in attempting to work towards a just peace and the liberation of Palestinians and Israeli Jews, is to broaden and deepen the BDS campaign. African civil society has been somewhat lacking in this regard and it is about time civil society groups on this continent responded vociferously to the BDS Call. The Call places on African and global civil society groups an immense task and responsibility to push forward the isolation of the Israeli state until it abides by international law and UN resolutions.