

Which Strategy to Heal the Middle East?

Several weeks ago, a national progressive newspaper called *In These Times* invited me to take part in a conversation with Naomi Klein, a well-known progressive political analyst and writer, with the intention of transcribing it and publishing an edited version approved by both of us. The occasion was that Klein, in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Gaza, had for the first time joined the campaign for a "BDS strategy" ("Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions") directed at Israel. I assume ITT asked me because they knew I supported a very different strategy for bringing peace to the Middle East. I agreed, and this edited version of our conversation has now been published by them. I have added a few additional comments of my own after the conversation.

Shalom, salaam, peace -- *Rabbi Arthur Waskow*, Director,
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In These Times: Naomi, won't your BDS proposal strategy simply strengthen the position of Israeli nationalists, who will then be able to turn to moderates and say, "We are under attack?"

Naomi Klein: The hard right seems to be strengthening all on its own, if we judge by the results of the recent Israeli elections. But I've noticed a change within Israel. I got quite a few e-mails from Israelis saying, "I've always opposed this, but I feel that it is the only option left." I think that's a reflection of the feeling of desperation among progressive Israelis who are watching their country move hard right and seeing the level of violence increase exponentially.

ITT: Arthur, you were an anti-Apartheid activist who supported a BDS approach to South Africa. Are there similarities between the Occupied Territories and the Bantustans, the small areas of South Africa that were under "independent" black rule.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow: There are similarities, but the BDS approach is not the way to bring about the change that is absolutely necessary.

The most important, and probably the only effective, change that can be brought about is a serious change in the behavior of the U.S. government. That means we need to engage in serious organizing within the United States..

Naomi has written about the failure of carrots in changing the way Israel has behaved so far, and I agree. One carrot the Israeli government has essentially ignored, with the help of the Bush administration, is the offer of the Arab League, led by a surprisingly creative King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. It outlines a general peace treaty between Israel and all the Arab states, on the condition of a peace treaty being negotiated between Israel and a viable, sensible Palestinian state with perhaps some variations on the 1967 boundaries.

But the Israeli government of the last 10 years has been totally uninterested because it thought it could get away with de facto annexing more and more land of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

If the U.S. government had said, "Here's the deal: the Arab League proposal is what we are after, and we will offer carrots and we will offer sticks, whatever is necessary to bring this about." Then there would be very serious change, both within the Palestinian territories and Israel..

Real political change within the United States could come through an Abrahamic Alliance, an alliance between big chunks—though of course not all—of the Jewish community, the Muslim community, and the Christians.

Boycotts and divestment are not going to do it. I understand that they express a kind of personal purity—"not with my money you don't"—but they won't change U.S. policy, which is exactly what needs to be changed.

NK: It is not a question of personal purity. It's a question of basic solidarity. A call for this tactic has come from coalitions of Palestinian groups representing a very wide spectrum of political parties, labor unions and community groups. Interestingly, the country which has responded the most seriously to the BDS movement is South Africa, precisely because the parallels are seen most clearly in South Africa.

A lot of this criticism of the BDS movement has been—why Israel? Why not Sri Lanka? And the point is that, according to basic left principles of solidarity, the tactics should be chosen by the oppressed community themselves.

In terms of the ultimate solution and what that should be, BDS and Arthur's calls for an Abrahamic alliance are not incompatible goals. I think that really what we're talking about is how you build pressure towards a resolution.

AW: But Naomi, something different is going on inside Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian society than what was going on within white South Africa. Leaving aside the fact that in Israel about a fifth of the population with some voting power is Israeli Palestinians, within Jewish Israel there is a real internal split. Even though during the last election Israelis moved to the hard right, a serious body of people are still working for a two-state solution. And the only force in the world that can deliver that is the United States government.

You're right that many Palestinians have called for divestment, etc., but I disagree that the oppressed automatically get to decide their own tactics. For example, Hamas made a terrible ethical and

practical political mistake by responding to the embargo and blockade on Gaza with rocket attacks on civilians in Israel. I recognize that there had to be resistance.

But there were nonviolent alternatives. There were beginning to be “ship-ins,” in the model of sit-ins. Small boats that had been certified as not carrying any weapons, began to cross the Mediterranean carrying medicine and food, especially baby food, to civilians in Gaza. The first couple got through, but then beginning with the massive attack on Gaza, the Israeli navy forced others back.

NK: They shot at one, and rammed another.

AW: Yes. Now, the question is, what would have happened if the Palestinian leadership, including Hamas, had said to Europeans and to Americans, we welcome this vigorous, assertive, nonviolent resistance to the blockade. We beg for doctors and peaceniks and academics and everybody under the sun to start joining in and bringing these boats, and we appeal for pastors and priests and rabbis and imams to start coming in these boats. In fact there was a mass public welcome of the first boats that got through. But Hamas did not choose that response. Rather they shot rockets into civilian neighborhoods, which is both ineffective and unethical.

NK: Let me clarify. I don't believe any oppressed community deserves blind support for its tactics. But it's precisely because there has been so much blanket criticism of any Palestinian armed resistance that I think there is a responsibility to respect calls for nonviolent solidarity actions like BDS, which are the most effective tactics in the nonviolent arsenal.

AW: But the question is, “What will work.” And when you say what the tactics could be, I agree that sanctions are a thousand times better than shooting rockets at civilian neighborhoods, but

they don't work. The nonviolent tactic of the ship-ins was direct, visible, and could've become a massive event. It would've been as direct a challenge to the blockade as the sit-ins in the restaurants were to American segregation.

The sit-ins in the American South were extraordinary because people didn't say, "Pass a new law to end segregation." They said, "We ourselves are going to end segregation." We imagine the future without segregation, we're going to do it, and then you all are going to have to decide what to do with us. Kill us or change the law." So that was extraordinary effective. For me, the question is, "How do you create that kind of change?"

The Presbyterians and a few other Protestant groups broached the question of the divestment from Caterpillar, which was producing the bulldozers that were knocking down Palestinian houses. I told the Presbyterians, "This is a waste of time. What would work would be if you all decided that every Presbyterian Church in American was going to bring an Israeli and a Palestinian at the same time to lay out the Geneva Initiative for a two-state peace treaty and the Presbyterian Church was going to commit itself to lobbying for that with the Congress and the president." That would've been incredibly effective, and still would be, if the churches and some Jews and some Muslims got together on this.

NK: I think those are wonderfully complementary strategies. We're going to have to throw everything at this problem. And that's why I'm so resistant to taking such powerful tactics as BDS out of the game at such a crucial moment. I support the BDS strategy because it will work, and it will work because it cuts to the heart of something that is so important to so many Israelis. And that is the idea of normalcy, of Israel really being a part of Western civilization, even though they are in the Middle East.

It is possible to lead a very comfortable, very peaceful, secure life in most parts of Israel—not all, but most—despite the fact that

Israel is at war with neighbors. I don't think Israel has a right to simultaneously rain bombs and missiles on Gaza, to attack Lebanon in 2006, and also have this state of normalcy, peace, cosmopolitanism.

There should be a price for that. And I think that when Israelis do start feeling that, they may well start putting pressure on their political leaders for change. So I don't buy the argument that they'll just feel isolated and become more right wing.

ITT: Naomi, Helen Suzman, a white South African who was a leader of the anti-Apartheid movement, who died this past January, argued that economic sanctions against South Africa during Apartheid had hurt the entire population, particularly the poor. Would not the same thing happen in the occupied territories?

NK: It is true that in South Africa it did hurt the entire population. And the call for sanctions was consciously made despite that fact. And that is why it is so extraordinary, that there has been such a widespread call from Palestinians despite the fact that they will also suffer under it.

But we can't compare the kind of suffering Gazans are facing under the Israeli blockade and embargo to what Israelis would suffer if a BDS campaign were to get off the ground. Were talking about people in Gaza lacking life-saving medicine, cooking oil and food, versus Israel losing some foreign investment, and not having concerts and some academic conferences. These are not in the same league.

AW: Naomi, you said you see them as complementary strategies, but in the real world, people have to decide what to put their energies into. Do we think that if the Presbyterian church is trying to put its energies into boycotts this time, not just of Caterpillar but of all Israeli society, that that's going to be workable alongside of

and at the same time as mobilizing Israeli and Palestinian voices simultaneously in those churches, and then those churches lobbying Congress on these solutions? I don't believe it.

NK: That is what happened with South Africa. The BDS strategy personalizes the dispute. You follow the money at your own school, your own shopping habits, you own government, and extraordinary lively debates ensue that are not just about the boycott strategy but are about why the boycott is happening. That's happening right now at Hampshire College. The boycott starts the debate, it brings teeth to it so you're not just signing yet another statement that can be ignored.

And that's the dynamic that BDS promises. Just as in South Africa, where you had a lot of industry saying to the Apartheid regime, "We can't live with this any longer," we would have that dynamic within Israel.

AW: But there is a huge difference between South Africa and Israel. In South Africa, the U.S. government was not pouring billions of dollars into the country. Whereas, in the case of Israel, the U.S. government is. That support seems to me to be far more the point. The likelihood of Israelis saying, "Wait a minute, this is a serious problem," is going to be much greater if the Obama administration says: "Here's the deal. There's going to be an emergency peace conference in the Middle East. It's going to come out with a Palestinian state that's really independent, not chopped up in little bits, and there will be a peace treaty with all the Arab states." I can see the possibility of a whole new American outlook making peace in the Middle East.

NK: I agree, but the question is how do we get to the point where the Obama administration feels the need to say, "Here's the deal." I don't see that happening any time soon. I'm arguing that BDS is a fantastic movement-building tool in the United States. I don't see people marching against the occupation just like that. BDS is a

conversation starter, it makes it personal in the same way as the amazing grassroots movement we had in the '80s against South Africa in the United States.

AW: Yes, there needs to be a real life, day-by-day connection to making change happen. But from my point of view, if you could bring Muslims and Jews and Christians together, meeting each other, talking to each other, getting past the fear and stereotypes about each other, if you could get that happening, that would be a piece of the future the way the sit-ins were a piece of the future.

The way to build the movement in the United States is for the people who are here to build a movement among themselves. A big hunk of the unrepresented Jewish population in the United States—somewhere between half and two-thirds of it—agree that there needs to be a two-state solution. Their institutions either don't agree or won't do much about it..

ITT: Arthur, during the war on Gaza, J-Street, which is a new “pro-peace, pro-Israel” group, posted an editorial on its web site stating, “We recognize that neither Israelis nor Palestinians have a monopoly on right or wrong.” In response, Noah Pollack, blogging for *Commentary* magazine, wrote, “It is time that thinking people start calling J-Street what it actually is: an anti-Israeli group.” What is it about Israeli politics that makes it so difficult to discuss.

AW: Well of course *Commentary* would say that. But it's not difficult to discuss. In fact, J-Street has gone right on and continued speaking out. Much more to the point and much more upsetting, was that Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, wrote an op-ed in the *Forward* condemning J Street, saying that J Street's “words are deeply distressing because they are morally deficient, profoundly out of touch with Jewish sentiment and also appallingly naïve.” He represents, in theory, a million Jews. But it didn't kill J Street.

You can't do now what was done in the '70s to the first American Jewish organization to talk about a two-state solution, Breira, which got killed by attacks from the center as well as the right wing of Jewish institutional life. That's not working this time.

NK: While I understand that the Jewish community is finding voices that are more diverse, we have to be clear that this is not just a Jewish issue. And maybe it shouldn't even be Jews who lead this issue. In Europe, it isn't just Jews who are leading this issue.

AW: Well, the other difference between Europe and the United States is that in Europe, the Jewish community, for reasons of history 75 years ago, doesn't have much political clout. In the United States, the Jewish community does. So changing the Jewish community, building progressive organizations is both possible and necessary in the American Jewish community.

I don't attack BDS as unethical. I'm saying it won't work.. But there is one major ethical defect to it, I think, which is that it doesn't embody the future in the present. The future it does not embody is the one most precious and most legitimate for Israel: peace with all the Arab states. I agree that a policy of all carrots for Israel and all sticks for the Palestinians is both an ethical and practical disaster. But sticks-only for Israel won't and shouldn't work, and that's what the BDS approach feels like. Sometimes that works anyway—it did in South Africa. But it hasn't worked (and shouldn't) when used against Palestine – what stronger BDS could there be than the one against Gaza? -- and it hasn't worked (and shouldn't) against Cuba. In the United States around civil rights, it was embodying the future in the present that worked. What will and should work now is that One Big Carrot of peace, with sticks right behind it if an Israeli government rejects the carrot.

NK: I think BDS does embody the future, because it says that Palestinian lives matter deeply. The asymmetry of so much of the discussion, the uproar about Israeli universities facing a boycott

and the outrage of what that would mean in terms of freedom at the same time as Palestinian schools and universities are being bombed. When we reject that double standard, we are embodying the future we want. We are embodying it with measures that are indeed punitive.

AW: But what would have happened if Hampshire College had twinned itself with the university in Gaza and a university in Ramallah and had done its best to make real-life connections??

NK: Frankly, not as much as what is going to come of this. At Hampshire College there have been absolutely fantastic exchange and dialogue of all kinds, and I don't think that it has changed the economic and political dynamics, which are what need changing.

AW: I agree that that is what needs changing, but I don't think this is the way to do it. I don't think we're going to agree on which set of tactics are best, but I guess people are going to have to make up their own minds. I do think the goal has to be nothing is going to happen unless the policy of the United States changes.

NK: I agree with that. We just have a disagreement about how we get there. I think BDS changes the dynamic, because it inserts multiple other economic powers into the equation. It would put grassroots pressure on the Obama administration that could become hard to ignore. And also pressure within Israel. I certainly agree that it will piss off Israelis, but I also think we need to acknowledge that ignoring the call is an active position towards Palestinians, it's not a passive one.

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That's the end of the conversation as published in ITT. Some additional thoughts:

1. Several weeks before this conversation, I had received a message about a Jewishly defined demonstration calling for "No Israeli attacks on Gaza, no airborne assassinations of Palestinian

leaders, no blockade / embargo of Gaza." I wrote back asking, "Can't there be just one more sign --- 'No rocket attacks on Israeli civilians' "? I got back a response that the oppressed are entitled to choose their own tactics of resistance, and no one can legitimately criticize whatever they choose. To which I erupted with a mixture of disgust and rage, saying that even though the rockets murder far fewer Israeli civilians than the bombs on Gaza murder Palestinian civilians, the rockets are still murderous and "the oppressed" don't get a free pass; condoning murder at retail is not acceptable just as condoning murder at wholesale is not. (I was accused of being rude. It's true.) I am happy to point out that Naomi Klein did NOT adopt this stance of supporting whatever the oppressed choose to do. There is both an honorable, menshlich Left and a dishonorable, un-menschlich one.

2. I do not think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can any longer be solved in a bubble of its own. I think the pursuit of peace in the broader Middle East, including peace treaties among Israel, Palestine, all Arab states, and Iran, will be necessary in order to bring about peace even between Israel and Palestine, and that Israeli-Palestinian peace is also necessary (though insufficient) if there is to be peace between the United States and the Arab and Muslim worlds. BDS aimed only at Israel cannot achieve that end. The determined application of non-military US influence and power to that end probably can. But not the US conquest and occupation of Arab and Muslim countries.

3. As I said, and as Naomi Klein agreed, the crucial question is whether the US government commits itself to a peace policy. In my view, the crucial strategy to achieve that is to focus precisely on that result – a likelier way to get there than BDS. When push comes to shove, if the US gets clear that region-wide peace is firm, **active**, and immovable US policy, that is both a promise and a warning to Israel. In support of that promise and warning, there will undoubtedly need to be pressure as well as help. Many sorts of diplomatic and economic pressures are available to any great

power. For example, cutting aid by as many dollars as the Israeli government uses to demolish Palestinian homes and build new settler homes on the West Bank would be a start.

4. To give any US administration the political support for walking that path, the only effective grass-roots base I can see is a determined Abrahamic Alliance of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, committed to seeing this peace making as an intrinsic part of our religious lives, woven not as vague generalization but as specific commitments into our prayers, festivals, life-cycle ceremonies, and public advocacy.

Shalom, salaam, peace -- *Arthur*

Editor's Note: The foregoing does not necessarily represent the positions of the Jewish Alliance for Change and is presented here to contribute to the debate over US policy in the Middle East.