

Why BDS is antisemitic – David Hirsh

June 1, 2016 — David Hirsh

1. BDS is a global campaign against Israel and only Israel. It seeks to foment sufficient emotional anger with Israel, and with only Israel, so that people around the world will want to punish Israel, and only Israel.
2. We are free to criticize whoever we want to criticize and people attracted by BDS are critical about other human rights abuses too; but this specific punishment, exclusion from the global community, is proposed only against Israel. BDS cannot be defended as free speech; it goes beyond speech into action. [See this debate for more on the issues of singling out](#) Israel; [the debate continues here](#).
3. BDS says that it seeks to punish only Israeli institutions and not to silence or exclude Israeli individuals. This is not true. Israeli individuals, academics, athletes, artists, actors, film-makers, work inside Israeli institutions; where else could they work? If BDS demands that Israelis should not be part of institutions then it puts an eccentric demand on Israelis. [Follow this link for what happened when the BDS movement tried to disrupt a Hebrew production of Merchant of Venice in London](#).
4. The BDS demand that for Israelis to be accepted in the global community they have to emigrate, and so not be part of Israeli institutions, is a claim about the essential illegitimacy of the Israeli state. See '[The Myth of the Institutional Boycott](#)' for more on this.
5. Sometimes BDS argues that there should be a political test rather than an institutional test. For example Israelis have been challenged to criticize Israeli 'apartheid' – and if they fail to do so in the terms required of them then they are excluded. But proponents of BDS never explain what kind of machinery would be set up in a university in Britain, say, or America, to test the political cleanliness of an Israeli. And they never explain why such a McCarthyite blacklist would only be set up for Israelis. [For more on McCarthyism and BDS, see Steve Cohen here](#).
6. BDS is careful to remain ambiguous on the question of Israel's legitimacy. It says that it is appropriate for people who oppose only the post 1967 occupation but it also refuses to make a distinction between Israeli institutions within Israel and within the West Bank. BDS refuses clarity on what it means by the Palestinian 'right of return' and it thinks about the creation of the state of Israel itself as the root of the problem.
7. BDS talks about Israel as a colonial settler state or an apartheid state but it allows no conception of Israel as a life-raft state, a haven for the un-dead of Europe, a home for Jews ethnically cleansed from the great cities of the Middle East, or as an asylum for the Jews who limped away from the carcass of the Soviet Union. [For more on the progressive case for Israel, see this link](#).
8. BDS constructs Israelis as white foreigners, who came from outside to settle the land and it constructs Palestinians as indigenous, who have a natural right to the land. In truth many Jews and Arabs have always lived in Palestine; and both Jews and Arabs moved into the area as it became more developed in the late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. There is a historical connection between Jews and the land of Israel. In any case, the splitting of peoples into 'foreigners' and 'indigenous', the notion that some people have a natural right to land while others are impostors, is profoundly reactionary. Moreover the idea, put about by BDS that Israelis are 'white' is also highly misleading. About half of Israelis are descended from people who came from the Middle East; the other Israelis are descended from people who were defined and treated as a racial infection in white Europe.

9. BDS remains unimpressed about Israel's role as a potential haven for Jews around the world, if that should become necessary.
10. BDS says that Israel is an apartheid state. This analogy mis-states the key problem, which is a conflict between two peoples, not a racist state which seeks to exploit the black majority. This analogy again refuses to make a distinction between Israel itself, which is fundamentally a multi-ethnic democracy in which everyone is equal before the law; and the occupied territories, in which there are two different legal systems. Israelis and Palestinians need to find a peace agreement; we need to support those in both nations who recognise the independence of the other. The apartheid analogy is weaponized by BDS as a thought-free short-cut to the conclusion of boycott. [See this piece by Alan Johnson on the apartheid analogy.](#)
11. BDS does not impact much against Israel; it impacts hard against Jews around the world where BDS takes a hold. BDS constructs friends and enemies of the Palestinians in such a way that the overwhelming majority of democratic and antiracist Jews cannot be recognised as friends of the Palestinians. BDS sets up an assumption against Jews, on campus, amongst progressives and in the Labour movement, that they are enemies of Palestinians and therefore enemies of those who want to support the Palestinians. BDS sets itself up in opposition to the overwhelming majority of Jews. [See this debate with Claire Potter on the question of antisemitism.](#)
12. BDS situates itself in the tradition of the boycott of apartheid South Africa but it always remains silent about the other traditions in which it follows. The boycott of Israel organised by the Arab Nationalist States was formally established in 1945, within a year of the gas chambers in Europe going cold. Boycotts of Jews from universities and campaigns to 'not buy from the Jews' have been integral to antisemitic movements for centuries.
13. To teach people to relate to the overwhelming majority of Jews, that is Jews do not agree with BDS, as apologists for apartheid, Nazism or colonialism is to teach people to relate to those Jews in an antisemitic way. If BDS says that Israel is apartheid and that anybody who does not agree with boycotting Israel is a supporter of apartheid, then it is setting up a framework for Jew-baiting. If antizionists say that Israel is genocidal, is like the Nazis, that Zionism is similar to Nazism, then they are inciting people to treat Jews as though they were Nazis.
14. BDS operates as though there was no threat to the State of Israel. Yet in 1948, 1967 and 1973 there were military attempts by Israel's neighbouring states to wipe it off the map. The Iranian state continues to argue for and to work for the elimination of Israel and it finances and arms Hamas and Hezbollah in their campaigns against Israeli civilians. Israel may be strong compared to the Palestinians, but in the world as a whole it is a small state surrounded by states and political movements which want it eliminated.
15. BDS is a campaign to make people angry with Israel and with Israelis and with those people around the world who are suspected of supporting Israel. It would be extraordinary if such a campaign did not sometimes bring with it antisemitic emotions and if it did not sometimes draw upon antisemitic tropes. Experience tells us that BDS does precisely that. Israel is portrayed as a blood-thirsty child-murdering state; it is said that it is racist because the Torah, with its talk of 'chosen people' is racist; it is said that Jews were behind the slave trade; it is said that the Rothschilds financed the state of Israel by stealing diamonds from South Africa; it is said that Israel steals and trades in body parts; it is said that Israel is genocidal like the Nazis; it is said that Israel controls politics and the media around the world. In these ways old antisemitic tropes, including blood libel and conspiracy, have a tendency to emerge, recycled, out of the BDS movement.

16. BDS is only thinkable for people who have no fear of antisemitism. But if we look at the political movements and the states and the militias which seek the destruction of Israel and if we look at the culture which BDS always brings with it into a social space, then having no fear of antisemitism is eccentric indeed. See [this critique of Naomi Klein's argument](#) for more on this .
17. BDSers sometimes say that there is nothing to fear from debate. This is not always the case. Sometimes there is much to fear from debate. Some debating questions are racist questions. For example we would fear a debate on whether the Holocaust really happened; we would fear a debate on whether women should remain in the kitchen; we would fear a debate on whether black people are more aggressive than white people. In the same way, I fear a debate on whether Israelis, and only Israelis, should be excluded from the global academic, sporting, artistic and economic community. Antisemitism and racism never opens debate, it always closes off free speech.
18. It is sometimes said that the claim that BDS is antisemitic is *an ad hominem* argument, aimed at smearing those activists who are in favour of it. The truth is the opposite. The truth is that antisemitism is not a characteristic of people who push BDS, but it is a characteristic of the movement itself. Antisemitism is not only a hatred of Jews; it is also norms, practices and discourses which discriminate against Jews.
19. The claim that Jews raise the issue of antisemitism as a dirty trick to silence the BDS movement is itself an antisemitic claim. It teaches people to recognize someone who raises the issue of antisemitism as being part of a Jewish conspiracy to play the antisemitism card or to mobilize the power of Holocaust victimhood in a disgraceful way. Usually when people say they have experienced racism or sexism or bigotry, we take that seriously. But BDS trains activists not to take that seriously when it comes out of the mouths of Jews or Jewish communities. BDS trains activists to assume that Jews lie. BDS refuses to teach activists about the history and tropes of antisemitism. BDS is happy to be in a global coalition with antisemitic movements which hate Israel, such as Hamas and Hezbollah. BDS treats people who worry about antisemitism as being more of a threat than people who are antisemitic. Follow [this link more on the Livingstone Formulation](#), the counter-charge that somebody who says they experiences antisemitism is really lying for Israel.
20. It is understandable when Jews have a special connection to Israel. Sometimes this is manifested in a special horror or even shame concerning the crimes of Israel, both real and imagined. This becomes problematic when Jews export their own specifically Jewish obsession with what Israel does wrong into civil society, campus debate and the Labour movement. It becomes more problematic still when they offer guarantees to non-Jewish institutions and individuals that a focused hostility to Israel, and only to Israel, is not antisemitic. It is problematic when Jews educate non-Jews to think in antisemitic ways and to support antisemitic movements. [Read more on antizionism, and particularly Jewish antizionism here.](#)
21. Antizionism forms the intellectual and the emotional underpinnings of the culture in which antisemitic speech and actions are tolerated. Antizionism is not simply criticism of this or that policy or characteristic of Israel. It is a political movement which takes hostility to one particular state and it makes it into an '-ism', a worldview; one which has a tendency to position the Jewish state as being central to all that is wrong with the world. Everything bad that happens in Israel is constructed, within this ideology, as the necessary result of the supposedly racist essence of Zionism. The aspiration to dismantle the state of Israel, against the will of its citizens, leaving them defenceless against military and political forces which threaten their lives, is part of the antisemitism problem.
22. Antisemitisms have always constructed 'the Jews' as being at the centre of all that is wrong in the world. BDS mirrors this characteristic of antisemitism by putting Israel as the very centre of the political activity of

'good people' all round the world. It trains people to think of Israel as the key question of emancipation in our age. But Israel isn't key. It is just one rather small, rather unremarkable local conflict. It is far from being the most important and it is far from being the most urgent and it is far from being the greatest injustice.