

Outsized Outrage: American Anthropologists and the Gifts of BDS



In 1947, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) presented its Statement on Human Rights to the United Nations, a document widely viewed as [an embarrassment](#) over the nearly seven succeeding decades.^[1] AAA members should consider this history when they vote, beginning this week, on a resolution urging that a boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) be directed at Israel. Non-anthropologists should also take note, since numerous other scholarly organizations and universities in the United States and elsewhere are debating BDS measures.

In 1947, the AAA argued that it was important to defend cultural particularities that conflicted with universal human rights norms. While one paragraph in [the Statement](#) obliquely condemned “political systems... that... seek to conquer weaker peoples,” the document was basically an unabashed apology for an extreme version of cultural relativism.^[2] It largely failed to anticipate critics who would point out, for example, that patriarchal cultural practices might be bad for women or that notions of cultural specificity might fuel racism.^[3] The rights enumerated in the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted in 1948, apply to all people everywhere and indicate that a single human rights standard should be applied to all states. Further, no state or other entity — be it a transnational corporation or local police force — should be exempt from scrutiny.^[4]

If in the 1940s the AAA advocated a relativist morality, the pro-BDS resolution embraces a universalist morality but intends to apply it selectively. It thus appeals to a different principle of anti-universalism than the 1947 Statement, but is similar inasmuch as it accords a particular entity consideration not accorded to others of the same class. Concretely, it singles out a specific and undoubtedly notorious violator of human rights (Israel) for special treatment.

For the past five years I have been involved in research at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.^[5] There I have seen eloquent human rights defenders and courageous victims of human rights violations gain international attention. I have also experienced despair and disgust when diplomats from violator states hold forth self-righteously about human rights while brazenly lying to justify their governments’ atrocities. For me, this exposure to the full horror of numerous well-known and obscure situations in which states and non-state actors trample on human rights — civil and political, as well as economic, social and cultural — inevitably raises the

question of “Why Israel?”

Without doubt the state of Israel is responsible for egregious and ongoing violations of human rights that should be denounced internationally, as the AAA Task Force documents in abundant detail.[\[6\]](#) But in the spectrum of violator states worldwide, Israel only attains middling status. Even the most stalwart proponents of BDS would be hard pressed to claim otherwise and indeed few really have, preferring to argue instead that Israel is some sort of particular, special case.

Some BDS proponents who have addressed the singling out issue indicate that Israel is a special case because it receives such massive U.S. arms aid. Indeed, on a per capita basis, U.S. military assistance to Israel far exceeds that to any other country. But other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are also among the greatest beneficiaries of Washington’s military largesse (and others, rather than aid recipients, are major arms customers. [Saudi Arabia, for instance, uses U.S. bombs to wreak havoc in Yemen](#)).[\[7\]](#)

Just as “many Israelis are unfamiliar with even the word ‘Nakba,’”[\[8\]](#) the Arabic term for the Palestinians’ 1948 catastrophe, many BDS proponents with whom I have spoken seem strikingly uninformed or — worse still — singularly unconcerned about the human rights records of other recipients of U.S. military aid and hardware. BDS proponents have expressed little or no outrage about today’s Egypt, where Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized power in a military coup and launched court-martials that [sentenced hundreds to death in single one-hour show trials](#).[\[9\]](#)

The Sisi government also clamped down on the residents of Gaza, flooding the tunnels that bring in contraband food, fuel, and other necessities and ruining the livelihood of thousands of Palestinians. Prior to the flooding, according to *The New York Times*, Egypt “dropped dynamite and floated poison gas into [the tunnels]. It filled them with [sewage](#). Last year, it took the extraordinary step of razing more than 3,000 homes on its side of the border to create a buffer zone that would seal off access to the tunnels, creating a [humanitarian catastrophe](#) in the process.”[\[10\]](#) If the AAA were consistent, it would have to suggest that U.S. academics boycott the American University of Cairo, because the Egyptian government is oppressing Palestinians and its own people, detaining tens of thousands without charges and destroying thousands of homes.

The longest separation wall in the MENA region was built by Morocco. Illegally occupying Western Sahara since 1975, the Moroccan government brutally oppressed the Sahrawi people and waged war against the Polisario Front, which it terms a terrorist organization, until a fragile ceasefire took hold in 1991. The Moroccans built a heavily mined, 1,600-mile-long berm or wall to force Polisario fighters and their sympathizers into the desert, where they have tried to survive ever since. Many live in squalid refugee settlements, some of which the Moroccan military attacked again in 2010. Most of the Sahrawi population has lived in exile for decades, in dismal camps in Algeria, with few possibilities of returning. In 2015 Polisario’s foreign minister indicated that the Front might have to [return to armed struggle because of international inaction](#) on Western Sahara and Morocco’s ongoing contempt for international law.[\[11\]](#) Morocco [kicked out the UN’s Western Sahara mission](#) (MINURSO) in March of this year, allegedly because UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon used the term “occupation” when he visited the region.[\[12\]](#)

Morocco’s barrier is almost four times the length of Israel’s wall, yet the tragedy of the Sahrawis is little known and often forgotten. Morocco continues to be a destination of choice for established and early-career foreign

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anthropologists, just as it has been since 1975.[\[13\]](#)

What about Turkey, which [destroyed some 4,000 Kurdish villages](#) by 2003 and many more since then?[\[14\]](#) The numbers of displaced in our NATO ally's war with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which began in the mid-1980s, were three or four times the number of Palestinians expelled in the 1948 Nakba.[\[15\]](#) Turkey, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian and violent rule, is again engaging in a scorched earth campaign against the Kurds. Foreign academics have, to their credit, spoken out against the government's persecution of Turkish colleagues, but they have not suggested boycotting Turkish universities.

Item from the Associated Press (AP) from October 21, 2015:

A Saudi activist has been sentenced to 10 years in prison and barred from travel abroad for another decade, a human rights lawyer said Tuesday. The activist, Abdel-Karim al-Khadar, a professor of Islamic studies from conservative Qassim Province, has been under arrest since April 2013. He was considered among the most vocal critics of religious extremism and militancy. He had posted videos online giving religious lectures in support of women's rights and coexistence. The rights lawyer, who spoke anonymously for fear of reprisal, said Professor Khadar had been sentenced Monday by Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court on [charges including disobeying the ruler, founding a human rights organization and supporting protests](#). He is the third rights activist to be sentenced to prison in the past week.[\[16\]](#)

In this case, the charges included "founding a human rights organization." Yet we do not support boycotting Saudi universities.

The point of these examples is not to minimize Israel's human rights abuses in the occupied territories, the racism within its borders, its continuing expansionism, or its disdain for international law and public opinion. Nothing can justify this, though it is historically relevant to recall that Israel's peculiar type of settler-colonialism, now virulent, originated in the desperation and national aspirations of an oppressed, decimated and despised people, and was a project of escape, backed initially by a significant international consensus.

The point, rather, is to have one standard for judging human rights violations.[\[17\]](#) BDS proponents sometimes dismiss such concerns as "the 'Whataboutery' argument," the Pol Pot or Idi Amin argument,[\[18\]](#) or even, as some colleagues put it, "the North Korea argument." But Pol Pot's Cambodia, Idi Amin's Uganda, and North Korea are complete outliers when it comes to extreme repression and are thus straw persons. It is simply not true that western governments have "condemned as barbarous and inhuman"[\[19\]](#) the run-of-the-mill repressive regimes that dot the planet or that Israel is the only repressive state that western governments praise as a democracy.[\[20\]](#) What is more notable in the cases I have mentioned above — Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia — is western governments' silence, not their condemnation. In some other cases — Honduras, for example — lauding the democratic virtues of the post-coup regime has raised official U.S. hypocrisy to new levels.[\[21\]](#)

What is most germane here is the list of middle-range to severe human rights violators that do not quite sink to the level of North Korea, but that get a free pass when the focus shifts mainly to one and only one of them. Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in a recent address to the General Assembly, called attention to [problematic situations](#) in Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, the

Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Eritrea, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Nepal, Niger, Nigeria, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen.[22] In the context of this list, it is difficult to see why Israel receives so much more systematic and persistent attention than any number of other violator states.

The other argument that recurs against anyone who asks “What about...?” is that a boycott of Israel, as opposed to one against some other rights violator, would be uniquely effective, though even longtime, unforgiving critics of Israel, such as Noam Chomsky, have persuasively debunked this claim.[23]

What about the cultural and political “work” that the singling out of Israel accomplishes? In 2001, following the Durban World Conference against Racism, anthropologist Charles Keil authored a brief column on [what the focus on Israel achieved](#) there.[24] At Durban, he said, “global anti-Semitism is now like a giant Melanesian kula ring of reciprocal gifts... where the major horrors inside dozens of nation states can be covered over and forgotten while we roll all blames into one and pin them on everyone's favorite scapegoat—Israel.”[25]

This is not to suggest that criticism of Israel is ipso facto anti-Semitic, as many Zionists frequently and fallaciously argue, or that all BDS advocates are blinded by what the German Marxists used to call “the socialism of fools” (some may be, though, and that cannot help but be a concern).[26] Keil's point instead is that singling out one rights violator for particular treatment gives a free pass to so many others:

What a gift to the USA to have the biggest gulag in the world go uninspected.... What a gift to India to have the thriving caste system and the daily sufferings of a hundred million dark untouchables taken off the agenda.... What a gift to Sudan where a corrupt Muslim elite has murdered or starved to death well over a million black pagans and Christians the past twenty years while a few missionaries, anthropologists, and relief workers were wringing their hands, shouting, getting no response.... What a gift to Indonesia that no one wants to talk about that huge massacre of Chinese in the 1960s, or the more recent massacres (Aceh, Moluccas, Borneo) and the elimination of about one quarter of the East Timorese population.... What a gift to the seven African countries with armies in the Congo doing murder and mayhem. News broadcasters say a million civilians dead here but they must be exaggerating or surely this would be at the top of the agenda...

[27]

American anthropologists, in considering how to vote on the BDS resolution, need to consider whether we want to give those gifts. And if giving those gifts might in the future constitute another appalling anthropological embarrassment.[28]

One final point, because it almost always comes up. Do my views on this have to do with my Jewishness? Yes, but not in a reductive way. My universalism comes from [a particular strand of Jewish identity](#), now sadly almost extinct but that once pervaded New York neighborhoods such as the Upper West Side and Greenwich Village, where I grew up.[29] In an [autobiographical essay](#) published twenty years ago I described myself as “a descendant of one branch of that great schism between religious and revolutionary millenarians in turn-of-the-century Eastern European Judaism.”[30] I have never believed in religious states or institutionalized ethnic hierarchies or chosen peoples, and I am thoroughly revolted by the rampant racism, growing intolerance and expansionist ideology in Israel. What we need to think about, however, are consistency and efficacy — and whether to vote for a resolution that in ten or more years might be almost as embarrassing as our Association's

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earlier failure to endorse universal human rights standards.

Notes