



Canadian Friends
Service Committee
(QUAKERS)

CANADIAN FRIENDS AND BDS

Canadian Quakers have a long history of involvement in social justice issues. They are trusted for their steady hand, morals and commitment to human rights. Friends have played a role in many important historical and modern day human rights movements from the Underground Railroad to work in support of Indigenous rights. In recent years the lack of peace in Israel/Palestine has become an area of increasing discussion, concern and action within Canadian Yearly

Meeting. This paper aims to shed light on how Friends corporately became involved in aspects of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement and how the opinions of Friends have been affected by this involvement. A few words about the history and goals of BDS will also be provided so as to show how the movement has grown and what it entails. This will be useful when exploring why Quakers are involved and how they came to their present level of commitment.

"We are moved by the sufferings of the Palestinian and Israeli peoples. This suffering has gone on too long and must not be allowed to continue."

*- Canadian Yearly Meeting
minute on Israel/Palestine
2009*

Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS)

The BDS movement was established in 2005 by 170 Palestinian civil society organizations. The movement calls on people of conscience everywhere to take

actions which its architects feel will lead to improvements in Israel's treatment of Palestinians. The BDS movement encourages Palestinians and internationals to boycott products made in Israel, to divest from Israeli institutions including Israeli companies and foreign companies profiting from the illegal Israeli occupation, and calls for foreign government sanctions against Israel¹.

The BDS movement focuses on improving the lives of three groups: refugees, those under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, and Palestinian citizens of Israel. In trying to help these groups, the movement has three goals: end the Israeli occupation and dismantle the occupation wall, have Arab-Palestinians treated as fully equal citizens of Israel, and respect, protect and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland².

Ever since its creation in 2005, the BDS movement has been recognized and adopted by Palestinian political parties, organizations, trade unions and movements. It has also gained numerous international supporters from governments to social and religious groups. According to Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, more than 70 Canadian groups are supportive of some or all aspects of BDS³. BDS appears to have succeeded in attracting the attention of a diverse group of people. In support of a cultural boycott initiated by Palestinians in 2004, musicians, actors, and other artists have refused to perform in Israel while it engages in occupation⁴. Academic boycotts appear to be increasing in popularity worldwide as many

¹Introducing the BDS Movement. (n.d.). Retrieved August 6, 2015, from <http://www.bdsmovement.net/bdsintro>

²ibid.

³List of Canadian organizations applying economic pressure on Israel. Retrieved August 17, 2015 from http://cjpme.nationbuilder.com/list_of_canadian_organizations

⁴ Palestinian campaign for the academic and cultural boycott of Israel. Retrieved August 17, 2015 from <http://pachi.org/etemplate.php?id=868>

student unions and university administrations vote to support BDS. Universities in the UK, USA and other countries have divested from major corporations as part of the campaign. Governments have also been active in the movement; perhaps most notably, due to its history of apartheid and related systematic human rights violations, South Africa joined the BDS movement in February of 2014⁵.

The Toronto Star reports that following a study indicating the Israeli economy could stand to lose billions due to BDS, an increasingly strong counter-BDS movement is building, which aims to “draw in Jewish, Israeli-American and Christian Zionist students to do rhetorical battle” to “demonize the demonizers.”⁶ In the United States, wealthy donors have given tens of millions to this anti-BDS movement⁷.

BDS vs. Dialogue?

"People to people" dialogue initiatives have been attempted constantly and from the beginning of the Israel/Palestine situation. One example of many is Windows for Peace, an organization which brings Israeli and Palestinian youth and international volunteers together to participate in multi-day seminars and visits around the West Bank. Youth learn together about each others' religious and cultural histories, what the occupation is, and ways to challenge it. Given the way the West Bank is divided Jews taking part in Windows for Peace activities are not able to enter Area A to visit some of the places their Palestinian colleagues live.⁸ Other "people to people

⁵BDS Timeline. (2014). Retrieved August 6, 2015, from <http://www.bdsmovement.net/timeline>

⁶ Ward, O. (2015, July 20). Israel's other war: Boycotts emerge as big threat. Retrieved August 17, 2015 from <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2015/07/20/israels-other-war-why-boycotts-threaten-its-existence.html>

⁷ Vega, S. (2015, June 9). \$50M Committed to Adelson's Anti-BDS Campaign, As Jewish Groups Question Approach. Retrieved August 17, 2015 from <http://jpuupdates.com/2015/06/09/50m-committed-to-adelsons-anti-bds-campaign-as-jewish-groups-question-approach/>

⁸ Windows of Peace, August 2015 newsletter. For more see <http://www.win-peace.org/>

initiatives" have included camps in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere that bring together young Israelis and Palestinians in order to discuss the conflict and share their experiences to gain an understanding of each other's situation. Although positive and useful in encouraging one-on-one understanding, such initiatives are unlikely to have the far-reaching effects that are necessary for larger change⁹.

In addition to "people to people initiatives", the formal peace process has included many meetings between the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Israeli government, such as those in Madrid in 1991, eventually culminated in the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993. Both sides agreed that the right to self-determination for both parties was important and that it should be realized¹⁰. Expectations of both side were raised considerably by the Oslo Accords but in the end disappointed as the process was never truly engaged in¹¹.

By October 2000, the umbrella organization of Palestinian non-governmental organizations called for a temporary end to dialogue until conditions changed¹². An exception was made for forms of dialogue which also involved joint action for

⁹Seeds of Peace: Building Peace at Summer Camp Transcript. (2014). Retrieved August 13, 2015, from <http://www.buildingpeace.org/teach-visit-us-and-learn/exhibits/witnesses-transcripts/seeds-peace>

¹⁰Foundation for Global Community - The Israeli-Palestinian Initiative. (1991). Retrieved August 13, 2015 from <http://globalcommunity.org/ipi/>

¹¹Oslo explained. Al Jazeera America. (2013, September 13). Retrieved August 13, 2015 from <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/13/oslo-accords-explained.html>

¹²Scheidlin, D. (2014, October 2). Mediation Perspectives: Ending Dialogue to End the Israel-Palestine Conflict? « ISN Blog. Retrieved August 13, 2015 from <http://isnblog.ethz.ch/diplomacy/mediation-perspectives-dialogue-fatigue-in-the-israel-palestine-talks>

human rights or against the occupation (the strategy is called "co-resistance before co-existence")¹³.

Friends, who feel there is that of God in each of us, and that through community and interaction we may find our common humanity and allow the Light in us to overcome violence, might find such a call to limit dialogue distressing. However, from the perspective of many Palestinians, dialogue may in fact be contributing to their on-going oppression.

To understand why, it is necessary to first acknowledge the profound power imbalance between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people. This differential in levels of power and control is present in all aspects of life including social, economic, political and armed force, and plays an important role in the impact that dialogue and the peace process can have. By way of just one stark illustration, the State of Israel dropped \$370 million worth of ordinance during Operation Protective Edge in 2014¹⁴. At the same time it is estimated that Hamas indiscriminately fired roughly one 1000th of the weight of explosives, which were also far less sophisticated, at Israel¹⁵. While cities like Tel Aviv enjoy a high standard of living, the UN has warned since 2012 that Gaza will be completely unlivable by 2020¹⁶.

¹³ Kaufman-Lacusta, M. (2011). Refusing to be Enemies, Ithaca Press, pp 101, 135, 156, and 157.

¹⁴Haaretz (2014, August 14). <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2406551>. Retrieved August 13, 2015.

¹⁵ Humanitarian Bulletin Monthly Report, June-August 2014 (2014, September 30) United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs OCHA 30 September 2014. Retrieved August 17, 2015 from http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_the_humanitarian_monitor_2014_10_03_english.pdf

¹⁶ Gaza in 2020: A Liable Place? (2012, August). United Nations country team in the occupied Palestinian territory. Retrieved August 17, 2015 from <http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/file/publications/gaza/Gaza%20in%202020.pdf>

Given these major power imbalances and the urgency for change which most Palestinians feel, it is not surprising that many on the ground are disillusioned with dialogue. In fact, many feel that dialogue is simply used as an excuse by the State of Israel so that it may continue with the status quo - including the construction of new settlements, the demolition of Palestinian homes, the continued construction of separation walls, and the unequal treatment of Palestinian Israelis.

Called "normalization" by Palestinians, the belief is that dialogue is among the activities which permits the Government of Israel to tell the international community that it is working for peace while continuing the same practices that lead away from peace¹⁷. BDS, to many, therefore represents a viable direct set of actions that are still nonviolent. The goal, from the perspective of the campaign's designers, is not to end relationships with Israel, but rather to use nonviolent power to pressure Israel into making changes which might reopen possibilities like future dialogue.

It appears that Friends who support dialogue as part of our understanding of how a just and lasting peace is built, must continue to support those Israeli organizations and individuals willing to engage in nonviolent direct action together with dialogue.

Canadian Quakers' Position on BDS

Canadian Quakers are among the faith groups that have taken an interest in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction movement. Friends have not found unity to support a full boycott of Israel, but did adopt a boycott of the products of illegal Israeli settlements. In May, 2015 Canadian Friends Service Committee issued a

¹⁷Israel's Exceptionalism: Normalizing the Abnormal (2011). Retrieved August 13, 2015 from <http://www.pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=1749>.

Frequently Asked Questions document¹⁸ on this topic and a media release¹⁹ calling on the Government of Canada to support the right to nonviolent participation in boycotts.

How Quakers Reached Their Position

Canadian Friends engaged in a long period of worshipful discernment about the degree of involvedness they wished to take corporately in the BDS movement. The first stages of this discernment began in 2008, leading to a 2009 Canadian Yearly Meeting minute that promoted peace in Palestine/Israel. Additionally, CYM encouraged Friends to take part in nonviolent activities that would contribute to ending the occupation. BDS was not named in the original 2009 minute, however the following year Ramallah Monthly Meeting (in the Occupied West Bank) issued an epistle to Friends everywhere asking them to consider adoption of BDS. This led to a BDS related addendum to the 2009 minute being approved at CYM in session in 2014.

"BDS strengthened what I already knew."

"This [BDS] campaign is NOT based on hate. Conversely, it is based on genuine concern for justice and fairness in the difficult situation in Israel and Palestine. I would go further. Rather than being based on hate, this initiative is based on love. It is trying to provide a motivation for the peoples in the region to seriously address the issues between them in a peaceful manner."

"Boycotting is still a form of coercion as opposed to 'Friendly persuasion.' It is still a small power warring against a very big power."

¹⁸ See <http://www.quakerservice.ca/FAQ>

¹⁹ See <http://quakerservice.ca/news/canadian-quakers-call-on-government-to-recognize-right-to-nonviolent-protest/>

How has BDS affected Friends?

Since Canadian Yearly Meeting adopted its current level of support for BDS in 2013, how has Friends' involvement changed on this issue? How have their feelings changed towards BDS as a whole?

In order to find out how BDS has affected Friends a brief poll was circulated and received 70 responses. It should be noted that the results of this poll may reflect self-selection bias, where those with the strongest opinions or most interest in Israel/Palestine were most likely to respond. 62 out of 70 respondents indicated that CYM and BDS did not change their opinion of the conflict in Palestine/Israel, most of those commenting that they were already aware and engaged. As one Friend stated, "CYM and BDS strengthened what I already knew". The 8 individuals who responded that CYM's involvement did change or affect their opinion commented that this was because they were previously unaware or ill-informed about the issue and of the details surrounding Israel/Palestine.

When asked what degree of support they had for BDS, the opinions became far more divided. The poll asked Friends if they are supportive, unsupportive or unsure and the results are consistent with those that showed why Friends were unable to find unity on support for BDS for some time. 47 out of 70 Friends responded that they were supportive of BDS, 12 responded that they were unsupportive, and 11 were unsure.

Although there is a strong show of support for BDS within these poll responses, over one third are not completely supportive. Most agreed that they were comfortable with what CYM had committed to, boycott of and divestment from companies operating in illegal Israeli settlements, but that they would be unwilling to support a full boycott and divestment from all Israeli companies.

Friends who are unsupportive generally report that despite the nonviolent nature of BDS, it is still oppressive to those Israelis that have nothing to do with settlements or the Palestine/Israel issue as a whole. Multiple Friends insisted that despite the fact that we are not directly engaging in violence, BDS is not a nonviolent solution at all, "Boycotting is still a form of coercion as opposed to 'Friendly persuasion.' It is still a small power warring against a very big power." Multiple Friends expressed concerns related to the need to continue dialogue, which was touched on above.

Overall, opinions of BDS have not changed for Friends, but CYM has found a functional way to move its witness forward on Israel/Palestine concerns.

Conclusion

A characteristic of Friends is their persistence on issues. Friends spent more than 50 years using "quiet diplomacy" within the UN system on the issue of the right to conscientious objection until the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights finally issued *Conscientious Objection to Military Service* (2012). Few groups would work for such a length of time without any obvious advances on an issue. Palestine/Israel is a long standing issue that shows no signs of ending soon, but this does not discourage Friends from becoming involved. As history has shown, violence has not worked in the past and new approaches must be developed and attempted. BDS is one possible element of a solution, and one that Friends have taken an interest and small part in. Though Friends have chosen not to support the whole of BDS, the aspects that they do support aim to create the most positive result for all parties involved. Outside of the umbrella of CYM, Friends exercise a variety of opinions that range from completely supportive to completely unsupportive of BDS. It is this range of opinions that drives Friends to consider new ideas and work harder in the future toward a just peace for all.