



The 6th Palestinian BDS Campaign Conference, Held in al-Bireh: The decisions and their significance

April 7, 2019

Overview

The Palestinian BDS National Committee (BNC) held its sixth conference in al-Bireh (Ramallah) on March 16, 2019.¹ Present were Palestinian BDS campaign activists; representatives from the PLO, Fatah and the National Initiative Movement (a leftist Palestinian organization headed by Mustafa Barghouti), and other representatives. Workshops were held at the conference dealing with various aspects of the BDS campaign. Workshop participants presented their recommendations to the conference plenary session. The conference organizers hoped for 1,000 participants (Conference Facebook page), but apparently fewer people attended. In addition, it is not clear if BDS representatives came from abroad. The conference was covered by the Arab and local Palestinian media, but apparently was not widely covered by the Western media.

► The BNC was established in 2007 and **has been headed ever since by Omar Barghouti**, a glib anti-Israeli Palestinian propagandist, who also chaired the conference (for a profile see **Appendix A**). While the Palestinian BDS website claims many achievements, **the Palestinian BDS activists have no significant influence on internal Palestinian politics**. They are in contact with activists in the various foreign countries who are involved in the BDS campaign, **but the influence of the local Palestinian activists in Western countries seems relatively limited**.

¹ The first BNC conference was held in Ramallah in November 2007.



**Omar Barghouti at the Sixth BNC Conference
(YouTube, March 16, 2019).**

► The discussions at the Sixth BNC conference **focused on the Palestinian arena**. They dealt with strengthening the boycott of Israel and stopping all forms of normalization. Omar Barghouti gave a speech at the conference., in which he called for pressure to be exerted, along with the PLO, on the Palestinian Authority (PA) and various other sectors of Palestinian society **to influence them to end all forms of normalization with Israel. He called for an end to security coordination, economic cooperation and what he called "cultural normalization," "tourism normalization" and "media normalization."** Workshops were held to discuss spreading the boycott and ending various types of normalization with Israel.

On the sidelines of the conference, **Mustafa Barghouti, secretary general of the National Initiative Movement**, claimed **the BDS movement was effective and influential for three reasons**: it costs Israel billions of dollars in lost commercial activity; it damages Israel's image by designating it as a racist, apartheid entity; it turns global and Arab solidarity into a genuinely effective force for harming Israel. Mustafa Barghouti said **they were now seeking to turn the BDS into a "national culture."** That would be done through activities in schools and universities, with Palestinian youth and by entering every Palestinian home. He claimed that would happen when every Palestinian believed it was a national duty and part of the "popular resistance" against the occupation, i.e., Israel.

► In ITIC assessment, claims made at the conference of the BDS campaign's huge "successes" and the heavy damages it allegedly causes Israel are **greatly exaggerated and reflect mainly wishful thinking and the desire to promote the BDS campaign**. Internationally the BDS campaign has had only minor political, economic, cultural and academic success, which BDS activists customarily extol and magnify. However, an overview of the results of the

campaign over the years indicates that **its efforts to isolate Israel politically and boycott its institutions, economy, culture and leadership have not succeeded.**

► **As to the Palestinian arena, the PA and Fatah are not active participants in the BDS campaign because the PA's policies are determined by its own security and economic interests,** and not by the declarations or demands of the Palestinian BDS activists (see Appendix B). **However, the PA and Fatah view the BDS campaign as an effective way to exert pressure on Israel, and therefore representatives from Fatah and the PLO participated in the conference.** In addition, **the PA allows Palestinian BDS activities to take place in Ramallah.** It regards the BDS campaign as an important component in its "popular resistance" strategy against Israel, and sometimes uses it for the needs of its political, media and legal campaigns against Israel.

Statements made by Omar Barghouti at the conference

► **Omar Barghouti, a BDS movement cofounder,** participated in a workshop for finding methods to oppose Palestinian normalization with Israel. He referred to criteria for normalization and to exceptions to those criteria. His main points were the following (al-Hadath, March 17, 2019):

- ◆ **Formal Palestinian normalization: Expressed through security coordination with Israel, it is the worst form of normalization.** Barghouti called for pressure to be exerted to put an end to the PA's formal normalization, which he called a bridge to official Arab normalization. He also called for **pressure to be exerted on the PLO** and the PA to stop all forms of normalization.
- ◆ **Economic normalization:** There are Palestinian companies that agree to cooperate with the [so-called] Israeli economic peace plan, and there are even those that invest in the settlements.
- ◆ **Cultural normalization:** Barghouti referred to normalization with Israeli academic, sport and cultural institutions. He said the BDS campaign would not serve as a fig leaf for anyone who violated the criteria of the boycott. As an example, he gave internationally-known artists who appeared in Tel Aviv, and after pressure had been exerted on them they decided to appear in Bethlehem or Ramallah. He said sports events with Israelis were also a form of normalization.
- ◆ **Tourism normalization:** Barghouti called on all tourists to oppose the use of Israel companies, hotels and buses, and instead to encourage the Palestinian economy.

◆ **Media normalization:** According to Barghouti, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate and the BDS movement decided on criteria including opposition to the appearance of "members of the Zionist media" on Arab media, and opposition to the participation of Palestinians in programs where Israelis also appeared.

► **Barghouti noted exceptions which he did not consider normalization**, for example, Arab or Palestinian participation in international forums where Israel also participated. He said it was permitted to participate in such forums, with one reservation: sitting on the same stage should be avoided. **At such international conferences the Arab or Palestinian side does not have to leave, but rather to struggle to have Israel expelled from the conference.** An "international debate at Harvard," for example, where Israeli and Palestinian representatives participate, is not considered normalization but rather a kind of "intellectual struggle." On the other hand, debate at Arab forums is considered as normalization. Official and unofficial cooperation with Israel in fighting epidemics and life-threatening situations caused by natural occurrences, such as earthquakes, are also not considered normalization because saving life is more important than political criteria.

► Barghouti summed up by proposing a new criterion for opposing normalization: **to settle accounts with anyone proven to have normalized relations with Israel through boycotting his work or products until he repents both in practical terms and by publicly stating his commitment to the criteria of the boycott.**

Speeches by representatives of the PLO, Fatah and the National Initiative Movement

► **The opening speech of the conference was given by Wasel Abu Yusuf, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee.** He praised the BDS activists, who, he claimed, had many successes, and **called for the spread of the "boycott culture" and to oppose any possibility of normalization with Israel.** He claimed **the BDS was an important factor in the "popular resistance" carried out on the ground.** He also said the PLO had made a series of decisions (which had not yet been implemented), **such as reneging on security, economic and political agreements with Israel ("the occupation") and revoking its recognition of Israel.** That was because Israel did not recognize all the "rights of the Palestinians." He said the Palestinians needed policies that would oppose the "arrogance" of Israel, which imposed a siege on the Palestinians, tried to dictate to them, and used

extortion, such as deducting revenue funds on the excuse that the money was transferred to the families of shaheeds and prisoners.

► **Azzam al-Ahmed, a member of Fatah's Central Committee**, said that first of all they had to concentrate on all forms of boycotts within Palestinian society, especially the economic boycott against Israel. He added that only in the future should they coordinate steps with the BDS movement abroad (Khabar, March 17, 2019; al-Najah News website, March 19, 2019).

► **Muhammad al-Aboushi, senior figure in the National Initiative Movement**, said the BDS movement, based on the universal declaration of human rights, opposed all forms of racism, including racism against Jews. He said the National Initiative Movement distinguished between Judaism and Zionism.

► A recorded speech was shown, given by **Baleka Mbete, speaker of the lower house of South Africa's National Assembly**. She said that South Africa stood in solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and supported the BDS movement (Wafa, March 16, 2019).



Right: PLO representative Wasel Abu Yusuf gives a speech. Left: The conference participants, among them Azzam al-Ahmed, member of Fatah's Central Committee; Mustafa Barghouti, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee; and Wasel Abu Yusuf (Wafa Facebook page, March 16, 2019).

Workshops held at the conference

- The workshops held during the conference made recommendations to the plenary session:
- ◆ **Haitham 'Arar, a member of Fatah's Revolutionary Council**, read the recommendations from the "**policy workshop**." They included increasing the local "boycott culture" by using [local] forces, organizations and students; adopting a **special model for a boycott in Jerusalem**, since it is an "occupied" city; **cooperating with the EU** to settle accounts with the settlers; **exposing companies involved in normalization**; **taking action against the Facebook page of the Israeli Coordinator**

of Government Activities in the Territories; and changing terminology, for example replacing the word "settlements" with "colonies," and **not using the term [Palestinian] "Authority"** because of its connection to the Oslo Accords.

◆ **Hanin Mar'i** read the recommendations from the "workers' unions' workshop," which included **focusing on the agricultural sector at the next BNC conference; spreading the culture of the boycott and opposition to normalization at the universities, institutes and schools;** determining clear measures to take against normalization at the university level.

◆ **Nada Maghamis** read the recommendations from the workshop that dealt with "criteria of normalization," which included settling accounts with anyone who participated in normalization. A debate held with Israeli participation was not considered normalization, except if an important Israeli figure was involved (al-Quds, March 16, 2019; al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 16, 2019).



Right: Sign for the workshop on "social sectors." Left: Majda al-Masri² speaks at one of the workshops held at the BNC conference (Majda al-Masri's Facebook page, March 17, 2019)

² **Majda al-Masri** is a member of the political bureau of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) in Nablus. She was referred to as the coordinator of the women's committee in the BDS movement, She posts notices on her Facebook page about the "women's campaign to boycott Israeli goods" (Khabar, March 17, 2019; Majda al-Masri's Facebook page).

Profile of Omar Barghouti, BDS cofounder and leader³



Omar Barghouti
(al-Taliya, Kuwait, October 30, 2013)

- ▶ **Omar Barghouti** is a Palestinian activist from Ramallah, a cofounder and prominent figure in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction (BDS) campaign against Israel. He is also prominent in **the international campaign to delegitimize the existence of Israel, of which the BDS campaign is a part.**
- ▶ Omar Barghouti was born in Qatar in 1964. He lived in Egypt as a child and in the United States for 11 years, where his son was born. From the United States he moved to **Ramallah where he works intensively to promote the BDS campaign in the West and in the Arab world.** He is related to Marwan Barghouti from Fatah (who is serving consecutive life terms in an Israeli jail for terrorist activities during the second intifada) and to Mustafa Barghouti (an activist from the Palestinian left who heads the National Initiative Movement and is also active in the BDS campaign).
- ▶ Omar Barghouti has a BA and an MA in electrical engineering from Columbia University. He is well-involved in American academic affairs and in events in human rights and social organizations in the United States. **His intense activity to boycott Israel, including the campaign to impose a boycott on its academic institutions, did not keep him from studying at Tel Aviv University.** According to his biography (which appears in his most

³ For further information, see the April 7, 2014 bulletin, "The Anti-Israeli BDS campaign: an argument in the New York Times following an article by Omar Barghouti, a Palestinian activist, one of the leading personalities of the BDS campaign. The argument exposes the BDS' genuine objectives, as well as the limitations of its real influence."

recent book) he **has an MA in philosophy from Tel Aviv University** and in 2009 began studies for a PhD. He has written a book and participated in the writing of articles about the BDS and what he calls "Israeli apartheid."

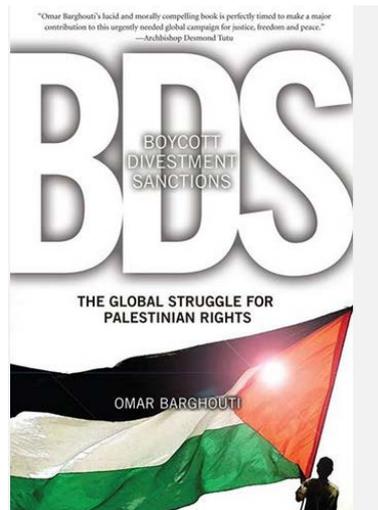


**Omar Barghouti at a book signing event in London
(inminds.com)**

► **Omar Barghouti plays an important role in directing the Palestinian BDS campaign.** He was at the center of a group of Palestinian academics in Ramallah (PACBI) which was established in 2004. Its objective was to join international activity to impose an economic, cultural and academic boycott on Israel. The group joined the BDS campaign in 2005. In November 2007 Omar Barghouti was the moving spirit behind the establishment of the **Palestinian BDS national committee (BNC) in Ramallah which plays an important role in the global BDS campaign.**

► **Omar Barghouti often visits Arab and Western countries** (especially the United States) to promote BDS activities. **He makes extensive use of the media in general and the Internet in particular** to spread toxic anti-Israel propaganda in the guise of activism for "equality and human rights."

Omar Barghouti's worldview



BDS posters
(Omar Barghouti's Facebook page).

- ▶ **Omar Barghouti favors the establishment of one democratic Palestinian state instead of the State of Israel. He is strongly opposed to a solution to the conflict based on "two states for two peoples" and rejects the existence of a Jewish nation state.** He wants the future Palestinian state to provide the [so-called] "right of return" to the Palestinian refugees who fled in 1948, and the restoration of their lands and houses. **He regards realizing the "right of return" for the Palestinian refugees and giving them political rights as the core of the solution for the "problem of Palestine" and the achievement of "the Palestinians' rights."**
- ▶ He is a prominent Palestinian figure of the campaign to delegitimize the State of Israel. **He customarily brands Israel as an "apartheid state," accusing it of the "ethnic cleansing" of the Palestinian population. When speaking to Western audiences his often uses slogans like "democracy," "justice" and "restoring the rights of the Palestinians." However he is vague about the true objectives of the BDS campaign, which is the eradication of the State of Israel as a Jewish state.**
- ▶ **Omar Barghouti supports the Palestinian armed struggle against Israel,** although he does not often admit it in public. During an interview he was asked if he supported the cessation of the armed Palestinian resistance. He answered, "**No, we most definitely have a moral and legal right to an armed resistance against the military occupation of our land, even according to international law, as long as we attack legitimate targets, that is, the occupation, settlers [i.e., Israeli civilians] and people who are armed. We don't attack**

anyone who doesn't fight indiscriminately...the resistance is not an ideology or dogma. We cannot be neutral, but have to think about ways to resist that are suitable for our situation and goals, at every stage [of the struggle against Israel]..." (al-Adab, a Palestinian literary magazine, the November-December 2010 issue).

The Palestinian 6th National Conference of the BDS Movement

► The Palestinian National Committee of the BDS campaign (BNC) was established in Ramallah in 2007. Omar Barghouti has been at its center since the beginning, and plays a key role in directing the Palestinian campaign to boycott Israel. Initially the national committee was meant to be an umbrella organization coordinating the activities of all the Palestinian organizations and networks participating in the campaign to boycott Israel.

► **The objectives of the BNC** (according to the BDS website) are to strengthen and spread the "boycott culture" against the occupation [i.e., Israel] and "Israeli apartheid;" to hold international conferences to coordinate the campaigns to boycott Israel; to coordinate campaigns to oppose normalization with "the Israeli apartheid regime;" to coordinate efforts to boycott Israel in various foreign locations; to train local activists and networks around the globe to boycott Israel; and to use the media to spread awareness about boycotting Israel. BDS activists and the Palestinian campaign for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel (PACBI) are also integrated in BDS activities.

► **Is the BNC in Ramallah in fact the coordinator of BDS global activity, as it claims?** The BNC is a main actor in the campaign. It has an important role in initiating campaigns, promoting the BDS in the media, cooperating with social groups in Western countries and lobbying in Western countries (especially Europe) and at the UN. However, **it is doubtful whether the BNC really and effectively coordinates and controls the vast networks** (which have no hierarchy) of the various BDS activists and NGOs throughout the world. The BNC's main importance is its function as the allegedly authentic "Palestinian face" of the campaign, which **gives Palestinian legitimacy to a global campaign whose focus is on undermining, weakening and eliminating the State of Israel.**

The Palestinian Authority (PA) position on the BDS campaign

► **The PA is not directly integrated into the BDS campaign and does not directly cooperate with it internationally. However, it does allow the BNC's extensive activities to be held in Ramallah.** The PA encourages a boycott of goods manufactured in the settlements but **at the same time does not participate in BDS calls in general.**

The difference, in principle, between the position of the PA and the position of the BDS campaign was exposed during Mahmoud Abbas' visit to South Africa for the funeral of Nelson Mandela in December 2013. He held a press conference where he called for the boycott of goods manufactured in the settlements because "the settlements are on our territory." However, he added that **"we aren't asking anyone to boycott Israel itself. We have relations with Israel. We have mutual recognition"** (The Star, South Africa, December 11, 2013).

► Mahmoud Abbas' remarks infuriated Omar Barghouti. In response he strongly criticized Mahmoud Abbas, claiming that what he said conflicted with the Palestinian national consensus, which had firmly supported the BDS against Israel since 2005. Omar Barghouti added (The Electronic Intifada):

"There is no Palestinian political party, trade union, NGO [nongovernmental organization] network or mass organization that does not strongly support BDS. Any Palestinian official who lacks a democratic mandate and any real public support, therefore, **cannot claim to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people when comes to deciding our strategies of resistance to Israel's regime of occupation, colonization and apartheid.**"

"Any Palestinian official who today explicitly speaks against boycotting Israel- particularly in a country like South Africa, where the ruling party, leading trade unions, churches and other civil society groups have warmly endorsed BDS- **only shows how aloof he is from his own people's aspirations for freedom, justice and equality, and how oblivious he is to our struggle for their inalienable rights.**"