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## Why an Economic Boycott of Israel is Justified

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EDITORS' NOTE: In early January Kristin Halvorsen, current Norwegian Finance Minister and leader of the Left Socialist Party (a member of the current three-party governmental coalition), expressed her personal and party support for a Norwegian boycott of Israeli goods and services. Almost immediately the Israeli ambassador to Norway protested and Condoleezza Rice threatened Norway with "serious political consequences" if Halvorsen's statement represented the policy of the current government. Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre then dashed off a letter to Rice (addressed "Dear Condi"), assuring her that the Left Socialist Party's position on a economic boycott of Israel "has never been and will never be" the policy of the Norwegian government. For her part Halvorsen distanced herself from her previous statements, as top leaders of the foreign affairs department criticized her and drew parallels between a boycott of Israeli goods and the Nazi boycott of Jewish shops. Finklestein's piece was published in Norway's most influential newspaper Aftenposten this past week.

The recent proposal that Norway boycott Israeli goods has provoked passionate debate. In my view, a rational examination of this issue would pose two questions:

- 1) Do Israeli human rights violations warrant an economic boycott? and
- 2) Can such a boycott make a meaningful contribution toward ending these violations? I would argue that both



these questions should be answered in the affirmative.

Although the subject of many reports by human rights organizations, Israel's real human rights record in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is generally not well known abroad. This is primarily due to the formidable public relations industry of Israel's defenders as well as the effectiveness of their tactics of intimidation, such as labeling critics of Israeli policy anti-Semitic.

Yet, it is an incontestable fact that Israel has committed a broad range of human rights violations, many rising to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity. These include:

#### Illegal Killings.

Whereas Palestinian suicide attacks targeting Israeli civilians have garnered much media attention, Israel's quantitatively worse record of killing non-combatants is less well known. According to the most recent figures of the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem), 3,386 Palestinians have been killed since September 2000, of whom 1,008 were identified as combatants, as opposed to 992 Israelis killed, of whom 309 were combatants. This means that three times more Palestinians than Israelis have been killed and up to three times more Palestinian civilians than Israeli civilians. Israel's defenders maintain that there's a difference between targeting civilians and inadvertently killing them. B'Tselem disputes this:

"[W]hen so many civilians have been killed and wounded, the lack of intent makes no difference. Israel remains responsible." Furthermore, Amnesty International reports that "many" Palestinians have not been accidentally killed but "deliberately targeted," while the award-winning New York Times journalist Chris Hedges reports that Israeli soldiers "entice children like mice into a trap and murder them for sport."



## Torture.

“From 1967,” Amnesty reports, “the Israeli security services have routinely tortured Palestinian political suspects in the Occupied Territories.” B’Tselem found that eighty-five percent of Palestinians interrogated by Israeli security services were subjected to “methods constituting torture,” while already a decade ago Human Rights Watch estimated that “the number of Palestinians tortured or severely ill-treated” was “in the tens of thousands a number that becomes especially significant when it is remembered that the universe of adult and adolescent male Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza is under three-quarters of one million.” In 1987 Israel became “the only country in the world to have effectively legalized torture” (Amnesty). Although the Israeli Supreme Court seemed to ban torture in a 1999 decision, the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel reported in 2003 that Israeli security forces continued to apply torture in a “methodical and routine” fashion. A 2001 B’Tselem study documented that Israeli security forces often applied “severe torture” to “Palestinian minors.”

## House demolitions.

“Israel has implemented a policy of mass demolition of Palestinian houses in the Occupied Territories,” B’Tselem reports, and since September 2000 “has destroyed some 4,170 Palestinian homes.” Until just recently Israel routinely resorted to house demolitions as a form of collective punishment. According to Middle East Watch, apart from Israel, the only other country in the world that used such a draconian punishment was Iraq under Saddam Hussein. In addition, Israel has demolished thousands of “illegal” homes that Palestinians built because of Israel’s refusal to provide building permits. The motive behind destroying these homes, according to Amnesty, has been to maximize the area available for Jewish settlers: “Palestinians are targeted for no other reason than they are Palestinians.” Finally, Israel has destroyed hundred of homes on security pretexts, yet a Human Rights Watch report on Gaza found that “the pattern of destruction strongly suggests that Israeli forces demolished homes wholesale, regardless of whether they posed a specific threat.” Amnesty likewise found that



“Israel’s extensive destruction of homes and properties throughout the West Bank and Gazais not justified by military necessity,” and that “Some of these acts of destruction amount to grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention and are war crimes.”

Apart from the sheer magnitude of its human rights violations, the uniqueness of Israeli policies merits notice. “Israel has created in the Occupied Territories a regime of separation based on discrimination, applying two separate systems of law in the same area and basing the rights of individuals on their nationality,” B’Tselem has concluded. “This regime is the only one of its kind in the world, and is reminiscent of distasteful regimes from the past, such as the apartheid regime in South Africa.” If singling out South Africa for an international economic boycott was defensible, it would seem equally defensible to single out Israel’s occupation, which uniquely resembles the apartheid regime.

Although an economic boycott can be justified on moral grounds, the question remains whether diplomacy might be more effectively employed instead. The documentary record in this regard, however, is not encouraging. The basic terms for resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict are embodied in U.N. resolution 242 and subsequent U.N. resolutions, which call for a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza and the establishment of a Palestinian state in these areas in exchange for recognition of Israel’s right to live in peace and security with its neighbors. Each year the overwhelming majority of member States of the United Nations vote in favor of this two-state settlement, and each year Israel and the United States (and a few South Pacific islands) oppose it. Similarly, in March 2002 all twenty-two member States of the Arab League proposed this two-state settlement as well as “normal relations with Israel.” Israel ignored the proposal.

Not only has Israel stubbornly rejected this two-state settlement, but the policies it is currently pursuing will abort any possibility of a viable Palestinian state. While world attention has been riveted by Israel’s redeployment from Gaza, Sara Roy of Harvard University observes that the



“Gaza Disengagement Plan is, at heart, an instrument for Israel’s continued annexation of West Bank land and the physical integration of that land into Israel.” In particular Israel has been constructing a wall deep inside the West Bank that will annex the most productive land and water resources as well as East Jerusalem, the center of Palestinian life. It will also effectively sever the West Bank in two. Although Israel initially claimed that it was building the wall to fight terrorism, the consensus among human rights organizations is that it is really a land grab to annex illegal Jewish settlements into Israel. Recently Israel’s Justice Minister frankly acknowledged that the wall will serve as “the future border of the state of Israel.”

The current policies of the Israeli government will lead either to endless bloodshed or the dismemberment of Palestine. “It remains virtually impossible to conceive of a Palestinian state without its capital in Jerusalem,” the respected Crisis Group recently concluded, and accordingly Israeli policies in the West Bank “are at war with any viable two-state solution and will not bolster Israel’s security; in fact, they will undermine it, weakening Palestinian pragmatists and sowing the seeds of growing radicalization.”

Recalling the U.N. Charter principle that it is inadmissible to acquire territory by war, the International Court of Justice declared in a landmark 2004 opinion that Israel’s settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the wall being built to annex them to Israel were illegal under international law. It called on Israel to cease construction of the wall, dismantle those parts already completed and compensate Palestinians for damages. Crucially, it also stressed the legal responsibilities of the international community:

all States are under an obligation not to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem. They are also under an obligation not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by such construction. It is also for all States, while respecting the United



Nations Charter and international law, to see to it that any impediment, resulting from the construction of the wall, to the exercise by the Palestinian people of its right to self-determination is brought to an end.

A subsequent U.N. General Assembly resolution supporting the World Court opinion passed overwhelmingly. However, the Israeli government ignored the Court's opinion, continuing construction at a rapid pace, while Israel's Supreme Court ruled that the wall was legal.

Due to the obstructionist tactics of the United States, the United Nations has not been able to effectively confront Israel's illegal practices. Indeed, although it is true that the U.N. keeps Israel to a double standard, it's exactly the reverse of the one Israel's defenders allege: Israel is held not to a higher but lower standard than other member States. A study by Marc Weller of Cambridge University comparing Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory with comparable situations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, East Timor, occupied Kuwait and Iraq, and Rwanda found that Israel has enjoyed "virtual immunity" from enforcement measures such as an arms embargo and economic sanctions typically adopted by the U.N. against member States condemned for identical violations of international law.

Due in part to an aggressive campaign accusing Europe of a "new anti-Semitism," the European Union has also failed in its legal obligation to enforce international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Although the claim of a "new anti-Semitism" has no basis in fact (all the evidence points to a lessening of anti-Semitism in Europe), the EU has reacted by appeasing Israel. It has even suppressed publication of one of its own reports, because the authors - like the Crisis Group and many others - concluded that due to Israeli policies the "prospects for a two-state solution with east Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine are receding."

The moral burden to avert the impending catastrophe must now be borne by individual states that are prepared to respect their obligations under international law and by individual men and women of conscience. In a courageous



initiative American-based Human Rights Watch recently called on the U.S. government to reduce significantly its financial aid to Israel until Israel terminates its illegal policies in the West Bank. An economic boycott would seem to be an equally judicious undertaking. A nonviolent tactic the purpose of which is to achieve a just and lasting settlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict cannot legitimately be called anti-Semitic. Indeed, the real enemies of Jews are those who debase the memory of Jewish suffering by equating principled opposition to Israel's illegal and immoral policies with anti-Semitism.

NORMAN FINKELSTEIN's most recent book is [Beyond Chutzpah: On the misuse of anti-Semitism and the abuse of history](#) (University of California Press). His web site is [www.NormanFinkelstein.com](http://www.NormanFinkelstein.com).

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