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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Campaigning for peace and justice for the Palestinian people

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The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement

It is an honor to be here to discuss the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement from my vantage point as National Organizer for the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, a coalition of more than 400 organizations working to end all U.S. institutional complicity with Israel's occupation and apartheid policies. I wish to start with a disclaimer that much of my talk will focus on BDS in the U.S. context as an example, simply because that is my area of expertise, not because I believe that work there is more important or advanced than elsewhere. On the contrary, I believe we in the U.S. have much to learn from the effectiveness of European and other campaigns, which is one reason why I'm so excited to be with you here today.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the BDS call to our efforts in the United States. BDS has utterly transformed the solidarity movement, putting agency back into the hands of everyday people, with the Palestinians themselves as our center of accountability. BDS has shifted power away from an impotent so-called "peace process" dominated by political elites to a mass movement of ordinary people of conscience around the world.

Last year, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2014 the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. At the time, the GA could not have predicted what a ground-breaking year 2014 would turn out to be, both in terms of Israel's escalating violence against Palestinians and the mounting global pressure on Israel from international civil society. Israel's monstrous attacks on Gaza this summer, leaving more than 2,100 men, women, and children dead -- most of them civilians -- and its ongoing, relentless, violent colonization of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) leave no doubt: We cannot wait for Israel to change its ways or for its sponsor, the United States, to come to its senses.

Israel has continued its destructive course precisely because it has no incentive to change. The status quo -- unconditional U.S. support and an ultimately passive international, diplomatic community -- is entirely in Israel's favor. BDS aims to create such an incentive by imposing a heavy penalty to the status quo. The United Nations was created to affirm the dignity and rights of all human beings. 2014 is a year for those seeking a lasting change to come together around these noble goals and take back the reigns.

Accountability to Palestinians

It is easy to make declarations about solidarity, but what does solidarity look like in practice? To me, *the* fundamental characteristic of solidarity is the recognition that the oppressed are the leaders of their own struggle. It is the task of the rest of us, in solidarity, to understand what they are fighting for and to respect the role they ask us to play.

The 2005 call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) -- with its clear rights-based focus, its nuanced and context-specific breadth of tactics, and its broad base of Palestinian civil society support -- answers critical questions about what it means to be accountable to the Palestinian people.

People around the world who care about Palestinian rights can now look to the BDS National Committee as Palestinian leaders that transcend political factions and take their cues from civil society in their own struggle for freedom and self-determination. Thus, one of the most important successes of BDS has been to clearly center Palestinian voices as our point of accountability.

From Sympathy to Action -- Reclaiming our Power

BDS does not ask of us something heroic. It presents us with a basic moral obligation to end our own complicity with Israeli oppression -- to do no wrong. While the opposition characterizes BDS as nefarious and scary, we know that BDS is a nonviolent tool to address the extreme violence of Israel's occupation and apartheid policies. BDS utilizes well-tested, time-honored tactics in the legacy of the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement and other anti-colonial, anti-racist, freedom struggles.

At its most basic level, BDS has moved people from pretty words and sympathy for Palestinians to tangible action in the form of campaigns. It puts the impetus back on us to end the ways in which we ourselves are implicated in Israeli aggression. This is most striking in our context in the United States, given the billions we provide annually to Israel in the form of military aid to enable Israeli crimes. By demanding that we each pursue campaigns to end our individual and institutional participation, BDS does two things: For one, it holds us accountable. But more importantly, it gives us back our power. We are no longer waiting for President Obama or the U.S. Congress or the Israeli government to make change; we are forcing that change, with leadership from the Palestinian people. And it's working; for the first time in decades, in the U.S., the opposition is being forced to respond to us. We are on the offensive and Israel's traditional gatekeepers are on the defense.

Changing the Discourse

Increasingly, our movement is defining the terms of the discussion. BDS campaigns playing out in mainstream religious institutions, trade unions, shopping centers, university campuses, and city councils have fundamentally shifted the question from whether or not Israel is committing crimes to what we, as civil society, are going to do about it; or, what is the best tactic to address those crimes?

As BDS resolutions come up for votes in municipalities, church assemblies, and student governments -- and as the media elevates those votes in the public eye -- BDS is challenging the masses that could once ignore Israeli aggression to finally take a side. We are putting Israel, its colonization, and third-party participation on trial. Remaining neutral is no longer an option. Those implicated by their own tax, tuition, or consumer dollars must figure out where they stand.

BDS is, without question, the most effective educational tool we have found in the U.S. context. This is because BDS takes something international and localizes it for people no matter where they live. The siege of Gaza is not just something that relates to Palestinians and Israelis; its infrastructure is administered by the same company, say, from which you bought your computer (like Hewlett Packard). Home demolitions and torture in Israeli prisons are not just happening at the hands of Israel; your church or university is yielding dividends from that destruction and abuse through investments in companies like Caterpillar and G4S. Settlements are not something happening in a faraway land; they are the origin of products in our stores and shopping malls that we have a choice to buy or not (like SodaStream). They are being funded by tax dollars at a time when leaders claim we

don't have enough money for schools, adequate health care, and other crucial programs. Suddenly, the occupation is everyone's problem; it is something with which we all engage daily. That has always been the case, but BDS has brought it to light in the most brilliant way.

The Backlash

By putting the occupation on trial, we are mainstreaming the Palestinian cause and building our movement and our power. But this increasing power has not gone unnoticed. In 2006, the Israeli government launched a multimillion-dollar "Brand Israel" initiative, created to "improve the country's image abroad by downplaying religion and avoiding any discussion of the conflict with the Palestinians." Rather than defending the occupation, the campaign aims instead to change the conversation, shifting the focus toward Israel's scientific and cultural achievements, cynically using academia and art to whitewash Israeli war crimes. In late 2010, the Jewish Federations of North America announced that it would fund a multimillion-dollar "Israel Action Network" for the primary purpose of countering BDS campaigns. Earlier that year, the Reut Institute, an influential Israeli think tank, called on the Israeli government to direct considerable resources to "attack" and possibly engage in "sabotage" of the BDS movement and related campaigns. In the U.S., Israeli apologists have employed countless intimidation tactics on campuses and in churches to stifle divestment campaigns. The Israeli Knesset passed an anti-boycott law seeking harsh fines on Israeli citizens who call for academic or economic boycott in response to the occupation. Israel's efforts to fight BDS have also been militarized by the Israeli army, which operates an open signal intelligence unit to monitor BDS activity on social networks.

The lengths to which the Israeli government and its proxies are going to counter BDS demonstrate just how powerful this rights-based, global movement has become. Projects to re-brand Israel and deflect attention away from politics are necessary precisely because Israel's former image as a peace-seeking, victimized country is no longer sustainable.

Rather than cave to the opposition's nasty tactics, activists for Palestinian rights have become all the more creative and ambitious.

BDS Victories

In less than 10 years since the BDS call's inception, the BDS movement has truly established itself as a force to be reckoned with. We have achieved milestones once unimaginable. The list is long and growing by the day, so I will name just a few recent ones. In the faith-based realm, this summer, shortly before Israel's monstrous attacks on Gaza, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) voted to divest from U.S. corporations involved in the Israeli occupation, becoming the first U.S. mainline Protestant denomination to do so. Around the same time, the world United Methodist Church divested from private security company G4S as a result of its involvement in Israeli prisons. U.S. Quaker and Mennonite institutions also divested years ago, while many other denominations are gearing up to pass boycott and divestment resolutions this coming year.

Perhaps no campaign illustrates the growing strength of the BDS movement as well as the campaign to boycott SodaStream, a homemade seltzer maker manufactured in an illegal Israeli settlement. One year ago, activists were gearing up for days of action spanning dozens of cities

worldwide to boycott SodaStream during the holiday season. When SodaStream announced Hollywood actor and Oxfam Global Ambassador Scarlett Johansson as SodaStream's Brand Ambassador this past January, activists worldwide mobilized, pointing out the contradiction that one cannot champion human rights and occupation at the same time. Following a petition, actions, countless letters, and social media tactics reaching millions, Johansson stepped down from her role at Oxfam -- a ground-breaking BDS victory that spawned unprecedented media attention and embarrassment to the company. Soon after, Earth Day Network -- which mobilizes the environmental movement in 192 countries -- cut ties with the company. By May, SodaStream's CEO announced that profits were plummeting, having dropped nearly 85%. This summer, billionaire investor George Soros divested his entire stake in the company, citing EU guidelines related to settlement products. Finally, just a few weeks ago, SodaStream announced its intention to relocate its West Bank factory. If SodaStream relocates to land taken from Palestinian Bedouins in the Negev, the boycott will continue. The move presents us with an opportunity to ensure that our movement is morally consistent in opposing all forms of corporate colonization. And the move represents an extraordinary retreat following sustained BDS efforts over the years.

Local communities are also successfully challenging municipal contracts with occupation profiteers. A landmark campaign in St. Louis, Missouri brought together Palestinian rights advocates, environmental activists, workers, anti-privatization groups, and others in a fight to prevent a city water contract with Veolia, a French multinational infamous for environmental destruction, labor abuses, and servicing Israeli settlements. The corporation eventually announced its withdrawal from consideration in response to popular pressure. After losing more than \$16 billion worldwide in contracts following such campaigns, Veolia sold off all its bus lines in Israel/Palestine and recently announced plans to end all work with Israel.

Local and international campaigns have likewise targeted G4S, a UK-based private security company that helps run Israeli prisons. Following sustained global pressure and a decision by Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation this summer to divest its holdings entirely, G4S announced its plans to pull out of Israel. Far beyond symbolic victories, these recent breakthroughs illustrate that BDS campaigns are exerting tangible, economic consequences on Israel and complicit institutions, demonstrating that participation in Israeli oppression is unsustainable and comes at a dear cost. There can be no more business as usual with Israeli apartheid.

Along the U.S. West Coast, activists in cities like Oakland, California have successfully blocked the unloading of Israeli cargo. There is also a new landscape in the academic and cultural world. In a full rejection of Israel's desperate re-branding efforts, a growing number of academic associations have endorsed the academic boycott of Israel, while more and more artists and actors are cancelling appearances in Israel and endorsing cultural boycott as a form of resistance to "normalization" with a rogue state.

Also in the academic arena, five years ago, Hampshire College became the first U.S. college to divest from Israeli occupation -- notable in part because it was also the first college to divest from Apartheid South Africa. Now, in 2014, it is impossible to even keep up with the number of U.S. campuses passing various divestment resolutions. It seems like every week there is a new victory.

Connecting Struggles

One of the reasons U.S. student groups have been so successful is because they consistently place their work for justice in Palestine into the larger context of fighting global racism and colonialism. I arrived yesterday directly from my hometown of St. Louis and nearby Ferguson, Missouri, which have become flashpoints in the U.S. movement challenging police brutality since the August police killing of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed black man. We see in the U.S. what amounts to a “racial caste system” that, in the words of Palestinian American professor Steve Tamari, “criminalizes the movement and actions of African-Americans... and perpetuates the isolation and marginalization of black American communities.” U.S. police are killing people of color for literally walking down the street, as in Brown’s case. U.S. incarceration rates of black men exceed those of South Africa during Apartheid. It is well-established that Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian people meets -- indeed, exceeds -- the U.N. definition of the Crime of Apartheid. Recently, former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay also likened the violence in Ferguson to what she experienced growing up in South Africa, saying, “there are many parts of the United States where apartheid is flourishing.”

Brown’s parents and a delegation from St. Louis recently testified to the 53rd Session of the United Nations Committee Against Torture regarding Brown’s murder and the ensuing police brutality against protesters. I brought copies of their report today. U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called on law enforcement to protect the rights of people in Ferguson and elsewhere to demonstrate peacefully. Yet, just this past week, our community has witnessed renewed escalation of police repression with mace, pepper spray, tear gas, rubber bullets, batons and mass arrests following the announcement that Brown’s killer, Darren Wilson, will not be brought to justice.

People in Ferguson are calling this their Intifada. The same tear gas used against Palestinians struggling for freedom is being used against people fighting for their rights in the U.S. and beyond. A predominantly white police force has erected checkpoints, roadblocks, and walls of different forms in black communities across the St. Louis area and beyond. Law student Dayo Olopade writes that the situation in Ferguson is in essence an occupation: “When officers have the right to control your motions, actions and fate, there is no other word... When on top of that, the occupiers look nothing like you and do not share a community with you, it is far worse.” People are drawing the connections between Israeli violence against Palestinians and the global phenomenon of militarized policing of communities of color.

Connecting these struggles -- in Palestine, Ferguson, and elsewhere worldwide -- is a matter of principle and of strategy. We must oppose racism in all its forms, no matter where it occurs, because it is the right thing to do, and because working together we are stronger. BDS offers tremendous opportunities for connecting our work. Corporations like G4S profit from the prison industrial complex worldwide and can be challenged by marginalized communities across multiple continents and contexts. Together, we can take them on. To quote Ferguson protesters and many before them: “United we stand, divided we fall.” Black community members in St. Louis and Ferguson have supported Palestinian-led BDS campaigns for many years, including the fight against Veolia. Without them, we could not have succeeded. What a powerful statement it would make for the U.N. Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, and this conference as a body, to issue a statement of solidarity with the Ferguson protesters and a statement against racial profiling and police

brutality. This request comes directly from the people of St. Louis and Ferguson who, like the Palestinians, are at this very moment struggling for their basic human rights and dignity to be respected.

Conclusion - A Call to Action

In conclusion, 2014 is a year to unite all just struggles for freedom and equality, to affirm the dignity and rights of all people, as the United Nations was set up to do. BDS offers an effective model for global pressure on Israel to end its violations of Palestinian rights and international law. We surely have a long way to go, but already Israeli politicians, top business leaders, and mainstream journalists, are lamenting that the only way to stop BDS and to avoid growing Israeli isolation is to restore Palestinian rights. In other words, BDS is working.

There is no more excuse. It's time to move from proclamations and diplomatic lip service to action. The United Nations declared 2014 the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. But to use the word solidarity without adhering to a basic request coming from the oppressed themselves, to end our own complicity, is irresponsible -- and patronizing. It's time for every entity that voted for the year of solidarity -- and those that didn't, too -- to manifest their solidarity with action like BDS. Noncooperation with rogue states should not be seen as a choice but rather a self-executing obligation of local and municipal governments, as inscribed in international law. Ending U.N. contracts with G4S could be a first step.

Let us each answer the call however we can -- in city halls and parliamentary buildings, on university campuses, in faith communities, through the legal arena, in the corporate world, and beyond. We can choose campaigns that bring home the story of Palestine, that help us build effective coalitions, and that are winnable. There are countless tactics to choose from -- from flash mobs to mock trials, from referendums to hip hop, from mock walls to demonstrations to conferences like this one. Consider your own context and take the next step. There is no time to waste. Let us join together in this growing, effective, Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice, and equality today. Thank you.
