Talking BDS with Chris Hedges

By the Palestine Center Interns

The Jerusalem Fund

<http://www.thejerusalemfund.org/5714/talking-bds-chris-hedges>

Last week, the Palestine Center hosted its first speaker of the fall, author and Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Chris Hedges. In a lecture entitled “Building the BDS Movement for Justice in Palestine,” Hedges asserted that the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement is the only remaining avenue by which activists can effectively advocate for the rights of Palestinians. Likening Israel to apartheid South Africa, he argues that only by crippling Israel economically can activists bring the state to the negotiating table. Prior to the lecture, the Palestine Center interns sat down with Hedges to gain some insight on the reasons for which he supports the BDS movement. The following is an edited transcript of the interview.

Will pressure on corporations and simple shifts in consumer culture be enough to disrupt the functions of a political entity such as the state of Israel? Do political institutions need to endorse BDS in order for the movement to be successful?

Chris Hedges: No, not unless there is an arms embargo as well. Boycott, divestment, and sanctions includes weapons; that is key.

So will it be necessary that political institutions support an arms embargo?

Hedges: The problem is [that] political institutions won’t get behind it. We have to build a mass movement that demands it because political institutions are hostage to corporate power and corporate profit. General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon are essentially running foreign policy; they want endless war because that means endless profit. We just saw Jeremy Corbyn become the head of the Labour Party: he doesn’t officially support BDS, but he supports almost everything that BDS stands for, including a two-way arms embargo (meaning we won’t buy from Israel, and we won’t sell to Israel). That is the only hope we have left because within the system, money has replaced the vote. Between the Israel lobby and the war industry, elected officials have just been bought up. You saw it in the middle of the bombing of Gaza a year ago: 100 senators [voted to support the bombing] like it was like the old Soviet Union. You are telling me that not one senator disagrees with what is patently a war crime: the bombing of a civilian population that is defenseless, with no army, no mechanized units, no artillery, no navy, and no command in control.

[BDS is] all we have left, and that is why Israel is quite frightened. They are trying to pass laws in states making it illegal. They understand it is a long process, but just as the apartheid regime in South Africa was discredited and sanctions brought them down, I think that Israel is fearful [of the same fate]. This movement has a lot more support in Europe than in the United States, but it is growing. When you have institutions calling for divestment, it is moving. It is the biggest threat to Israel.

There are some well known academics, such as Norman Finkelstein, who have criticized BDS and have subsequently been denounced by Palestinian solidarity circles. What do you think of these BDS criticisms?

Hedges: First of all, [Finkelstein] is a friend and someone I admire very much. He has paid a horrific price for his integrity and courage. As I understand it, his criticism of BDS [refers to] the intent behind it: he believes that its intent is to destroy the Jewish State. But I don’t know what other mechanism we have at this point. Politically, the Israeli government does whatever it wants. It ignores Washington: it is no secret that the White House detests Bibi Netanyahu and the [Likud] government, but they are almost powerless, given the strength of the Israel lobby, to carry out any kind of restraint. They humiliate the Secretary of State, John Kerry, when he visits; they just don’t care. And the Congress is bought and paid for, as we saw with the [2014] vote in which 100 senators, like wind-up AIPAC dolls, trotted out to cheerlead not an act of war, but an act of mass murder [in Gaza]. I don’t think there is any other mechanism we have. We have to make [BDS] work.

The expansion of BDS to the global scale is an effective method of advocacy for the Palestinian diaspora. But how will it affect those on the ground in Palestine who are in need of the assistance of USAID and other organizations?

Hedges: Well, USAID is a weapon used against Hamas. Let’s be clear: it’s a counter-insurgency weapon. Money gets funneled to the Palestinian Authority because it is pliable and malleable to U.S. and Israeli interests, so the idea that USAID is providing significant resources to Palestinians is just incorrect. The only group that is doing that is the UN. At this point, the level of human suffering in Gaza is so egregious, and there is so little help from the international community, that I think it has become imperative for us to build some kind of resistance. Things in Gaza have really deteriorated in terms of daily life. It has become horrific; I don’t see how BDS is going to make anything worse. Israel controls everything that goes in and out.

Do you think the BDS movement would be more effective if it endorsed a political solution: either one-state, two-state, or something else?

Hedges: No. I think the power of the BDS movement is in bringing Israel to the [negotiating] table and in punishing Israel enough that they stop the slow motion genocide that they’ve put in place. They have already taken so much land: 40 percent of the West Bank and all the aquifers, including [those] in Gaza. It’s going to be really hard to roll back, but it can be rolled back if Israel is punished the way South Africa was punished. They are already an international pariah. I don’t think people recognize that on the world stage, Israel is a pariah. The linchpin is the United States. Without U.S. support, Israel can’t do what it does. That is why it is vitally important that the BDS movement gains support in the States: if we can get enough traction behind it, and once Israel is not propped up by the U.S. empire, it’s finished. I mean, it has to change.

Another criticism of BDS is that people often see it as the end and not the means; however, BDS is just one tool in a toolbox of a variety of tactics for Palestinian advocacy. How can organizations continue to work on BDS campaigns without losing sight of the main goal?

Hedges: What would be the other tactics at this point?

Well, there is always protesting, lobbying…

Hedges: Lobbying is a waste of time. It is an utter waste of money and time. Under international law, Hamas has a right to defend itself; that’s just a fact which most people don’t want to ingest. According to international law, if a subject population is attacked and appeals to the international community for help, and there is no help forthcoming, they have a right to resist. So Hamas has every right to resist. The Qassam rockets, I think, are more of a psychological weapon; that’s another issue. Hamas has every right to do what is does. I would argue that the Qassam rockets are a war crime because they are indiscriminate, but they don’t compare to the war crimes committed by the Israeli government because the size of disparity is so vast. And [look at the] numbers: you had over 2,000 dead, 500 [of whom were] children, while almost every Israeli killed was a soldier. For those of us on the outside, BDS is the tactic, whether there is a one-state solution or a two-state solution. At this point, we have to force Israel to begin to recognize the rights of Palestinians—they don’t even do that—and then whatever is negotiated is negotiated. Israel has to be crippled. That is the only way Israel is going to bend.

So we are not even necessarily talking about fully scaling back but rather about bringing Israel to the negotiation table.

Hedges: Well, [we will bring Israel to the negotiation table] the same way that South Africa was brought to the negotiation table. South Africa didn’t have a choice. It’s not like they developed some sort of sensitivity to racial justice; it’s because they were pressured. We have to build the same kind of pressure on Israel if we are to successfully defend the interests of the Palestinians.

The views expressed by speakers, writers, and others do not necessarily reflect those of the Palestine Center or The Jerusalem Fund.

The Palestine Center is a non-political, educational forum and does not take positions on issues.