

Why Solidarity Between the Movement for Black Lives and Palestine Makes Sense

Human rights, not a common identity or history, are at the intersection of the Movements for Black Lives and Palestine.

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The recent release of a policy platform by the Movement for Black Lives has drawn both expressions of solidarity, as well as disavowals and strident criticism. The policy statement is a remarkable document, as it not only continues the spirit of the 2015 statement signed by over a thousand Black activists, intellectuals and cultural workers after Israel's 2014 attacks on Gaza but also proposes for the first time a comprehensive set of policies backed by clearly spelled-out rationales. The 2015 statement read in part:

On the anniversary of last summer's Gaza massacre, in the 48th year of Israeli occupation, the 67th year of Palestinians' ongoing Nakba (the Arabic word for Israel's ethnic cleansing) — and in the fourth century of Black oppression in the present-day United States — we, the undersigned Black activists, artists, scholars, writers, and political prisoners offer this letter of reaffirmed solidarity with the Palestinian struggle and commitment to the liberation of Palestine's land and people.

The list of signatories then included scholar-activists Angela Davis and Cornel West, political prisoners Mumia Abu-Jamal and Sundiata Acoli, rappers Talib Kweli, Boots Riley and Jasiri X and Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors. Organizational signers included the Florida-based Dream Defenders and St. Louis-based Hands Up United and Tribe X, which were founded after the killings of Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, respectively, as well as the 35-year-old Organization for Black Struggle in St. Louis.

Now, in the Movement for Black Lives platform we see the same spirit, this time forming the foundation of what will be one of the most important political documents of the 21st century: “In response to the sustained and increasingly visible violence against Black communities in the U.S. and globally, a collective of more than 50 organizations representing thousands of Black people from across the country have come together with renewed energy and purpose to articulate a common vision and agenda. We are a collective that centers and is rooted in Black communities, but we recognize we have a

shared struggle with all oppressed people; collective liberation will be a product of all of our work.”

Crucially, the platform’s support of Palestinian rights, its endorsement of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and its condemnation of anti-boycott repression is directly linked to the larger issue of US foreign policy — especially its military budget. The platform describes these things as increasing and facilitating oppression and injustice both abroad and domestically, as much-needed resources are siphoned out of Black and poor communities:

Resources and funds needed for reparations and for building a just and equitable society domestically are instead used to wage war against a majority of the world’s communities.... The results of this policy are twofold: it not only diverts much needed funding from domestic education and social programs, but it makes US citizens complicit in the abuses committed by the Israeli government. Israel is an apartheid state with over 50 laws on the books that sanction discrimination against the Palestinian people.

The blowback for making such statements has been vociferous and pointed. As detailed by AlterNet, Mondoweiss, The Electronic Intifada and others, the Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) of Boston and others have issued statements of condemnation. What is common to much of the criticism of the policy platform are the charges that it tries to liken persecution of Black Americans to the situation of Palestinians. For instance, the JCRC says: “We are deeply dismayed by elements of this platform, specifically the co-opting and manipulation of a movement addressing concerns about racial disparities in criminal justice in the United States in order to advance a biased and false narrative about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. To conflate the experiences of

African-Americans and Palestinians oversimplifies complex matters and advances false equivalencies that diminish the unique nature of each.”

In other words, the Council decries the very spirit of solidarity that the Movement for Black Lives platform takes as essential.

This line of defense is not at all new. In 2013, Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat asserted, “The problem is, and this is for Hispanic and Asian Americans and African Americans, they see themselves as minorities. If you look at polling on attitudes of African Americans, there is a much higher percentage of sympathy with Palestinians.” He warned of the danger that US minorities might regard Palestinians as being similarly disadvantaged and said the Jewish community needs to “make it clear, this is not a civil rights issue. It’s rather a very different conflict in which violence is being used and Israel’s right to be a state is questioned.”

And as recently as January 2016, David Bernstein, president and CEO of the Jewish Council of Public Affairs, wrote:

The BDS movement has successfully injected the anti-Israel cause into these intersecting forms of oppression and itself into the interlocking communities of people who hold by them. So it’s increasingly likely that if a group sees itself as oppressed, it will see Israel as part of the dominant power structure doing the oppressing and Palestinians as fellow victims. That oppressed group will be susceptible to joining forces with the BDS movement.... Indeed, the growing acceptance of intersectionality arguably poses the most significant community relations challenge of our time.

And yet when Rachel Gilmer, the author of much of the portion of the platform that deals with Israel-Palestine visited the area, she was convinced of the “intersection.” Haaretz reports Gilmer’s reaction to her trip:

Going this past May was so transformative. Seeing all the parallels between black and Palestinian struggles.... Gentrification [in the United States] parallels home demolition [in Israel and the West Bank]. Going to the apartheid wall and seeing how it broke up communities... it’s the same systems of patriarchy, imperialism and colonialism that we’re up against.

Why is the claim that the common causes of Black Americans and Palestinians are centered on rights, and that the broader view that social justice issues for people of color in the US “intersect” with those of the Palestinians such an important one for critics of the platform and others to disarm? In addition to attempting to break up acts of solidarity between a growing and increasingly vocal set of minority populations in the United States and the Palestinians, those who are making the claim that “this is not a civil rights issue” are trying to cut away the core of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, which declares its rootedness in human rights and sees its cause as anti-racist: “Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, the BDS call urges action to pressure Israel to comply with international law.” Seeing how BDS has from its inception been influenced by struggles for Black liberation introduces a much needed historical depth to this topic and allows us to see that calls for solidarity are not merely the upshot of contemporary political fashions.

The conjunction of Black activist, Jewish and Palestinian struggle has a long and critical history, as documented thoroughly in Keith Feldman’s essential book, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America*. Feldman notes that between roughly 1960 and 1985: “Struggles over hegemony in the United States became entangled with

transformed relations of rule in Israel and Palestine, that is, when US civil rights and antiwar struggles, Zionist settler colonization and Israeli military and administrative occupation, and Palestinian narratives of dispossession, dispersion, and resistance were forged, felt, and thought together.”

As we follow the developments of these debates over the flexibility, or rigidity of language and consequently solidarity, we should be mindful of this legacy.

A critical point of convergence is not just how these projects overlap conceptually, but also legally, in terms of international human rights discourse. Their common complaints are indeed legible in the language of human rights and thus, have a legitimate ground for world attention. The appeal to rights — civil, political and human — clearly links the Black and Palestinian causes today under the umbrella of international human rights, as found, for example, in the United Nations “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” which begins in Article 1: “All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” Thus, the issue of Black and Palestinian rights are in fact firmly established within rights discourse.

Yet, when this issue of common rights and common appeals to rights is raised, critics of the notion that Black and Palestinian rights can be taken together, often insist on some notion of “equivalence.” When they do so, critics of this form of solidarity miss how concepts like apartheid are not meant to apply only when there is perfect equivalence between each supposed case of apartheid but when two cases share common features that are parts of the declared definition of apartheid. For example, in its criticism of the platform, J Street writes: “The characterization of Israel as an “apartheid state” is also misleading and unhelpful. The best way to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the occupation is to address the unique and specific circumstances and conditions underlying

them, without insistence on fitting them within the ill-fitting framework of a different conflict from a different time and place.”

What J Street wishes to do is to dismiss out of hand a “framework” that sets up the definition of apartheid in the first place. Once one does that, the term itself disappears. The Movement for Black Lives and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement instead insist that looking at the definition of “apartheid” one finds it an appropriate label for both what went on during apartheid in South Africa and what is going on now in Palestine. In short, the frame is not “ill-fitting” at all. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court states clearly: “The crime of apartheid means inhumane acts... committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime.”

The issue is not to argue whether or not racist and exclusionary practices in US or Israel-Palestine are exactly the same in all ways as those found in apartheid South Africa — it is whether or not in those countries we find “an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups,” and there clearly is a case to be made that we do. But J Street and others wish to preemptively take that word off the table altogether, and by so doing remove a powerful and legitimate critique based again on rights and international law.

The issue becomes more complex and more heated when the term “genocide” is used. In its statement on the Movement for Black Lives, T’ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights declared:

While we agree with many of the policy recommendations, we are extremely dismayed at the decision to refer to the Israeli occupation as genocide. We are committed to ending the occupation, which leads to

daily human rights violations against Palestinians, and also compromises the safety of Israelis....

However, the military occupation does not rise to the level of genocide — a term defined as “the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group.” While we agree that the occupation violates the human rights of Palestinians, and has caused too many deaths, the Israeli government is not carrying out a plan intended to wipe out the Palestinians.

In response, Rabbi Brant Rosen notes:

The claim that Israel is committing “genocide” against the Palestinians undeniably pushes all kinds of buttons for many Jews. But there are also Jews and Israelis who feel it is not an inappropriate word to use, particularly in regard to Israel’s regular military assaults against Gaza. Likewise, while the BDS call is extraordinarily controversial for many Jews, there are also Jews who respect it as a legitimate call for nonviolent resistance from over 150 Palestinian civil society organizations. And it is simply not true to claim, as T’ruah does, that “the BDS movement (rejects) Israel’s right to exist.” On the contrary, the goal of the BDS call is equal rights for Palestinians *as well as Jews*.

Rosen said he also wonders why T’ruah did not engage the Movement for Black Lives in discussion: “If they were to be true to their own articulated values, T’ruah should have reached out to them, engaged with them and tried to understand where they were coming from, thus opening a real dialogue.” However, according to Rachel Gilmer, the Black activist cited above who wrote this portion of the Movement for Black Lives platform:, “Using the word genocide wasn’t a haphazard piece of work.... It was a yearlong process

of bringing together 60 organizations about our vision for the world as black people. We've been in community with Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now and individual Jewish people who are against the occupation.”

The issue of nomenclature is thus key to this discussion — it may, in fact, not be a matter of legal definition so much as worldview and the capacity to forge solidarity based on the latter.

Finally, in its reference to “false equivalencies,” the JCRC distorts the entire nature of the political work at hand. In fact, as the Dream Defenders’ “Statement on the Condemnation of M4BL Platform by Some Pro-Israel Groups” asserts:

...the basic understanding that the state violence we experience is directly tied to the violence facing Black and Brown communities in Palestine and around the world. While our struggles are not identical, we recognize that we are up against the same systems.... The Dream Defenders remain committed to a world in which ALL people are free. As Black people fighting for our freedom, we are not thugs and our Palestinian brothers and sisters are not terrorists. For the children who are met with tear gas and rubber bullets as they walk home from school, for the families of those we have lost to police violence, for the communities devastated by economic violence and apartheid walls, we fight. To all those who believe in a world in which all people are free, join us. For those who no longer stand with Black people because of this belief, goodbye. We do not need nor want you in our movement.

In response to the Movement for Black Lives policy platform, the BDS movement declared, “We pledge to firmly and consistently stand in solidarity with our black sisters and brothers in the United States and around the world by supporting the

demands and policy proposals in this platform,” adding that “the BDS movement is deeply inspired by the US Civil Rights Movement and the many struggles by Blacks and other people of color for racial and economic justice.”

One cannot place too much emphasis on this fact: Solidarity is not based on identity or any demand that each struggle have exactly the same root and set of goals. It is not premised on exact equivalences and historical sameness. How could anything be premised on that without being solipsistic, and entirely self-interested?

What we are witnessing, with the release of this brilliant and inspiring document, is a recognition of the need to form lines of solidarity.

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