



JUST AS BOYCOTT
BROUGHT ABOUT
A FAIRER SOUTH
AFRICA, SO WE HOPE
THAT BOYCOTT WILL
TRANSFORM HISTORIC
PALESTINE

FOR
Reem Kelani

As a Palestinian and a campaigner for human rights, I support the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and

Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and its call for the breaking of ties with Israeli institutions, and I call on other artists and people of conscience to join us.

The injustice suffered by the Palestinian people at the hands of Israel, both historical and current, needs no documenting here. Over the past seven decades, Israel has sought to clear the indigenous inhabitants from the land of Palestine, to give it to colonial settlers who use a sacred book to justify their claim. If anyone else invaded another's land because 'God gave it to them,' we'd rule them out of court as fundamentalists. What makes this wrong unique is that it has been committed with the approval, or at least acquiescence of, the international community, including successive British governments. In consequence, Palestinians have been denied a platform even to cry hurt, for that would be to acknowledge the 'original sin' of Israel's creation on stolen land. It's OK to

acknowledge the awful wrongs suffered variously by Armenians, Jews and Tibetans, but woe betide anyone who criticises Israel.

Our boycott is not a principle but a tactic. It is the resort of ordinary people of conscience, when we feel that we have no choice but to make our own peaceful stand. It is a citizen-wide call for justice and a plea for help by Palestinians across the world. Just as boycott brought about a fairer South Africa, so we hope that boycott will transform historic Palestine into a country that respects the rights of the indigenous people, and where Palestinians (Muslim and Christian) can live equally with Jews in one secular state.

When a Western artist is invited to perform in Israel, he should spare a thought for the Palestinian whose very life is controlled at a whim by his oppressor. He might care to find out what happens if he travels hoping to perform at a Palestinian festival. The American concert violinist Tom Suarez published one account recently on the *Mondoweiss* website (*The Palestine National Orchestra: a view from the violin section*). There are many examples of Israel intervening to prevent any display of support

for Palestinians, however peaceful.

Israel's ability to shape the way in which the Palestinian cause is perceived extends beyond the purely political narrative. All too often in the UK, festivals and mainstream media shy away from bringing forward a Palestinian artist, and when they do, the Palestinian is neutralised by an Israeli counterpart. Alas, the reverse is not true.

The campaign group Bricup (British Committee for the Universities of Palestine) has re-published reports from the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* about Israel's use of its musicians and writers as contracted propagandists in its state-directed campaign or '*hasbara*,' to put across favourable political messages through international cultural forums. By contrast, Habima, Israel's National Theatre, is invited to the Globe and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra (IPO) is welcomed at the Albert Hall.

Sometimes I marvel at the luxury enjoyed by Western singers with their 'protest songs.' For a Palestinian artist, it can be a victory just to secure a platform, let alone to sing 'We Shall Overcome.' Worse, in parts of the UK music scene there seems to be a preference shown to Palestinian and Arab

artists willing to accept normalisation with Israel and to suppress the Palestinian narrative. On one occasion, when I refused to allow a song of mine to be included in a compilation of UK-based artists alongside an Israeli song, the organiser blurted that I was a "disappointing contrast" to another singer who had previously shared a platform with an Israeli. Yet artists from South Africa, ex-soldiers from Sudan and Touareg 'soldier musicians,' are welcomed within 'world music,' their struggles justified, their causes accepted.

I am no militant, yet my narrative is portrayed as subversive. The fact that I exist, as a Palestinian with a cultural narrative spanning centuries, is too much for apologists for Israel.

To those who say we should not mix music with politics: reflect upon George Orwell's dictum: '*The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.*'

.....
REEM KELANI is a Palestinian musician and broadcaster, born in the UK, brought up in Kuwait and living in London. She is working on an album on the Egyptian composer Sayyid Darwish

BOYCOTT OR NOT?

The recent protests against Israel's Habima Theatre coming to London and the letter of complaint in response to our Backpage from Israel show it's impossible to avoid controversy when writing about Israel. The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement have called for a cultural and academic boycott of Israel. Here two musicians, **Reem Kelani** and **Koby Israelite**, give their reasons for and against

AGAINST
Koby Israelite

As an Israeli living in the UK, I sometimes think Israel should indeed be boycotted for its treatment of the Palestinians and the illegal settlements. Just as I sometimes think we should boycott Russia, Turkey, the US, UK and all the Middle Eastern countries. Oh yes, including Palestine. If you want to, you can find a reason to boycott almost anywhere. But nobody talks about boycotting Saudi oil, in spite of the country's appalling human rights record, or boycotting British artists for the illegal invasion of Iraq. I prefer to keep out of politics and away from politicians.

Do boycotts work, or do they cause more damage than good? Paul Simon was breaking a boycott when he went to South Africa and recorded *Graceland*. But he only worked with black musicians and made an album that introduced many to the glories of black South African music. I don't see anything wrong in that. The music is what's important.

If boycotts are at all ethical, then we should boycott all Israeli products, including the technology in our desktops and mobile phones, not just art, music and ideas. Yet the BDS movement has failed in

this regard; Israeli trade with the UK increased by 34% in the last year. The recent *New Statesman* article by BDS supporter Ben White admitted that the '*boycott is a strategy not a principle*.' This is exactly my problem with the BDS. It is not principled. We don't want to ban the Israeli algorithm used in Google, so let's boycott artists and academics. How convenient. Is that going to change Israeli policies?

At least Israel is a democracy, in a region where democratic freedoms are a rarity. A recent survey shows that over 50% of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem would rather live in Israel, if and when Israel reaches a peace agreement. Hanin Zoabi, a Palestinian Arab woman, is a member of the Israeli parliament. She has strong anti Zionist views, which she is not afraid to share within the Israeli parliament and the Israeli media. And she is free to do it. Apart from Turkey, there are no other Middle Eastern countries where this could happen.

There are many people like Zoabi in Israel – Arabs and Jews, people within the arts and academia, pro and anti Zionists – who are trying to find solutions through dialogue, through music, through theatre. Where are we if these voices are silenced?

Under a boycott, it's often the people who are most

liberal-thinking, humanistic and creative who suffer. These are the people most likely to support a Palestinian state.

My friend Dubi Lenz is artistic director of the Red Sea Jazz Festival in Eilat. He respects people who don't want to come and perform, but condemns those, like Cassandra Wilson who cancelled her concert at two days notice after getting her fee in advance: "I am against those artists who are confirming their attendance in Israeli concerts and as 'people of the world' know nothing about the situation in the Middle East till somebody opens a Facebook site starting to pressure them not to go to this horrible place called Israel. Why not to go to Israel and express there your opinions in front of the public and the media?"

When Pink Floyd's Roger Waters performed in Israel in 2006, he called for the breaking down of the wall erected between Israel and the Palestinian territories. Some of the crowd cheered and some didn't, but everybody stayed to the end of the concert. Now he's a supporter of the boycott, which means he won't be singing in Israel against the wall. For me that's not a positive outcome.

I'm a musician, not a writer nor a political person.

But I wanted to take up the challenge of writing this because this boycott affects me and artists of a similar background. My only humble political involvement is my 'Boycott Israelite' song on YouTube [bit.ly/kobyisraelite] – a satirical response to the issue. Part of the song says: '*I'm using a political situation for a pure purpose of self-promotion, therefore I think I'm not a hero and the view count underneath should remain a zero.*'

I work with artists from many backgrounds including Muslims, Arabs and Palestinians. I believe when people are communicating, especially through art and music, a solution gets closer. A boycott creates nothing but antagonism.

As a final proof of the absurdity of it all, Omar Barghouti, one of the founding members of PACBI has been studying in Tel Aviv University since 2009. Despite protests and calls for his expulsion, the university stands by its belief in academic freedom. So one of the leading boycott campaigners is studying in Tel Aviv. I rest my case.

.....
KOBY ISRAELITE is an Israeli-born composer, producer and multi-instrumentalist, currently resident in the UK



NOBODY TALKS
ABOUT **BOYCOTTING**
SAUDI OIL, IN SPITE
OF THE COUNTRY'S
APPALLING HUMAN
RIGHTS RECORD