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- L'UJFP en action - Les plumes de l'UJFP -



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Good evening everyone.

I thank the Waltham Forest Palestine Solidarity Campaign for having invited me.

Just to introduce myself, I was born in 1946, I am retired, I come from a Jewish family which escaped the Nazi holocaust, and I had a Jewish education up until my Bar Mitzvah. I want to point out that, as a Jew, I had a normal childhood, because at that time the Jewish community did not have paranoid tendencies like today, and my parents did not spend their time nagging me to honour the memory of the holocaust. I am an activist in the BDS Campaign in France, and since 2003 I am a member of UJFP, the French Jewish Peace Union, which supports the rights of the Palestinian people and participates in the BDS Campaign.

So, I am going to speak to you about the French situation regarding the BDS movement, first about the French background, and then about the outlook for the future in France and in other countries concerned by BDS.

The French background is specific for several reasons.

First of all, BDS is a sensitive subject in France because France is the European country which has the largest Jewish population (about six hundred thousand, although the number is difficult to estimate) and also the largest Arab and Arab Muslim population (about 6 millions or more, but that is also difficult to estimate).

Now I am going to speak about, on the one hand, the weaknesses of BDS in France, and on the other hand the good potential that exists there for the movement.

First the weak points.

In France there is an aggressive Zionist lobby, which is attacking the BDS movement.

There is at the same time a difficult situation because of the general attacks on civil liberties, under the guise of fighting terrorism, combined with the so-called « state of emergency ».

The Zionist lobby is, on one side, composed of the body that calls itself the CRIF - whose acronym means The Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France - together with Zionist entities that bring legal charges against BDS activists, and on the other side we have the French government.

The government considers the CRIF as its official partner representing the Jewish community in France, whereas in fact this body, which represents only a small part of the Jewish community, is just a conveyor belt for Israeli policies.

The majority of the Jewish French population is certainly Zionist but there is a diversity of opinions within in it, just as there is within any other population. And the UJFP to which I belong represents a minority current of opinion but it is not a tiny one.

It is important to separate the CRIF and the government, because nothing forces the French government to develop a Zionist policy. To believe that the government is obliged to obey the CRIF would reinforce anti-Semitic conspiracy theories according to which the Jews try to dominate the world.

I want to underline the influence wielded in France by the LICRA (Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitisme), the International League against Racism and anti-Semitism. The LICRA is a so-called "anti-racist" NGO, but in reality it attacks BDS in the courts, and it will do so again in a trial to be held in the month of June in Toulouse. LICRA is the government's favourite partner on anti-racism issues.

Our government, run by the supposedly "socialist" party, and especially our Prime Minister Manuel Valls, conflates anti-Zionism and BDS with anti-Semitism, and it does not reject the conflation with terrorism that is made by the Israeli government.

Generally speaking, the nature of the attacks on BDS in France, which fully fits in with the attacks on civil liberties, is either to try to state that BDS is illegal, or to denounce BDS. BDS is presented as anti-Semitic and as an obstacle to a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

The aim of these attacks is to intimidate the BDS activists and to make the public believe that BDS is illegal. In some municipalities the goal is to forbid any municipal body to provide services, such as rooms for public meetings, that could be useful for the BDS campaign.

In February 2010 Mrs Alliot-Marie, the justice minister at the time, sent out a circular, called « the Alliot-Marie circular », to all the public prosecutors urging them to pursue activists who call for boycotting Israeli goods. But a circular is not a law, and most of the judges didn't implement this circular.

In October 2015, a ruling by the Court of Cassation, (the highest French court), confirmed a judgement that had condemned the boycott of Israeli goods. This ruling states that boycotting Israeli goods discriminates against the producers and suppliers belonging to a « nation », that is to say, the Israeli so-called « nation »

Last March, another ruling by the Court of Cassation confirmed the conviction of a different group of activists for this reason and also for "hindering the freedom to trade".

But these are only two rulings by the Court of Cassation. Previous rulings by this Court declared that the boycott is not illegal because it is a form of freedom of expression, and the majority of the trials resulted in acquittals.

In fact, there is no law in France against BDS: so, BDS is not illegal.

Another weak point in the French context is the negative evolution of the intellectual élite. Whereas, for a long time, the intellectual scene in France was marked by prominent anti-colonial figures, today that scene is dominated by Zionist or Islamophobic intellectuals who all speak with one voice. This phenomenon doesn't only concern views about Israel and Palestine, it is part of what can be called society's shift to the Right.

But the BDS Campaign in France isn't just about its weak points, it's also about its good potentiality.

This is what I'm going to bring up now.

The basic strong point is that, in the French population, there is a real empathy for the Palestinian people. One can say that the average French person is more sensitive to the Palestinian cause and to the dangerousness of the State of Israel than the average politician, who is much more timid.

When we carry out actions in open public spaces, a lot of people display their sympathy, they readily sign petitions of solidarity or petitions denouncing the policies of Israel and its allies, and they defend us if we're verbally attacked by Zionists. A poll showed that two-thirds of the French have a negative image of Israel, and when people are asked which States they consider to be the most dangerous in the world, the majority put Israel in the top group.

It's clear that there is real resistance to the repressive measures in France against BDS. Of the hundred complaints that were filed against activists, the majority were dismissed and no follow-up action was taken. And when cases did come to court, the majority have resulted in acquittals.

Following the ruling by the Court of Cassation, which upheld the conviction of activists in the Mulhouse region, BDS actions have nevertheless been able to continue. This would not have been possible if the majority of the French population supported Israel's policies.

In addition, the victories achieved by the BDS campaign in France are not to be underestimated. BDS France largely contributed to the collapse of the Israeli fruit and vegetable exporter Agrexco, and to the victories against Sodastream. Sodastream was barred from exhibiting at an ecological fair and it was recently removed from the list of sponsors of the International Comics Festival in Angoulême. We played a part in bringing to an end the agreement between the telephone company Orange and the Israeli company Partner Communications, and also in Veolia's total withdrawal from Israel.

Two companies have cancelled their participation in the funicular railway designed to link illegal colonies to Jerusalem, after being warned by the French ministries of finance and foreign affairs, as well as by the solidarity movement, about the legal problems and the risks involved.

We have also achieved victories on the cultural-boycott front.

In France there is a large potential for mobilising support, notably amongst young people with an immigrant background. For these young people, who often suffer from racist policies in the poor suburbs, the Palestinian people are a symbol and at the same time a true example of the oppressed. The Palestinians have for a long time been victims of a colonial policy, and the youth of immigrant origin often suffer the consequences of French colonial policy, past and present.

In the situation of distress and political confusion that exists in France today, many people who once belonged to a political party now prefer to engage primarily in the BDS campaign. I don't want to judge their behaviour, I'm just reporting on this situation. These activists say to us: "with BDS, at least I know what I'm fighting for".

In the same way, a lot of people who were not really involved in collective actions, or who jumped around between various humanitarian causes, are now taking the plunge and getting involved in the BDS movement. They tell us that this type of grassroots, anti-racist and non-violent movement suits them very well.

One important element is that BDS resonates with some major causes in France:

" Anti-racism: what is at stake, not only in Israel and Palestine but also in France, is the ability to live together in equality and justice, whatever our origins may be, and the rejection of the clash-of-civilisations ideology.

" Anti-colonialism: France has a long history of colonial policies - and anti-colonial movements - and the Israeli policy against the Palestinian people is the longest contemporary colonial war, which directly concerns the western world.

" The values of justice, freedom and equality, in general, symbolised by the Palestinian people, whether it be in the world of work or in society as a whole.

" The anti-war movement: because Israel is a danger to world peace and because in France we have to struggle against a very war-mongering government that is a friend of Israel.

All of this context makes BDS in France an engagement not only to support another people, but also a domestic engagement for French society.

It is up to us to put in place or to invent persuasive methods to develop this engagement, so that it takes root in the population.

I'm going to finish my talk by talking about the outlook for the BDS movement, both in France and in other countries where BDS is having an impact.

I spoke earlier about the different successes in France that the BDS movement participated in. But there have been many other big victories in other countries, like your own victory here against G4S, which is only a small company in France.

In its first ten years, the BDS movement has achieved more victories world-wide than those that were achieved during the first ten years of the boycott campaign against South Africa. And the impact of those victories is encouraging.

Israeli exports are starting to fall, whether we look at settlement products or even the arms industry (except in Europe where the Israeli export of arms is increasing). Foreign investment is dropping too: for example, in 2014, investments were 46 per cent lower than in 2013.

Even the Palestinians themselves in the occupied territories have diminished their imports from Israel, which were 24 per cent lower in 2015 than in 2014.

And the UN Human Rights Council, which condemns the colonisation, decided last month to draw up a black-list of companies operating in the occupied territories.

The success of the cultural, academic and trade-union boycotts worries Israel just as much as the economic boycott, because they undermine the State's credibility.

Of course, it's too soon to declare victory, because the Israeli economy is still strong. And so is Israel's capacity for aggression, along with that of its allies.

The Israeli economy is strong especially because of its sale of equipment used for repression, and Israel highlights the fact that this equipment has been tested on the Palestinians. Nevertheless, the international campaign for an embargo on the arms trade with Israel is making progress.

Netanyahu's government has created a structure that is in charge of actively fighting against BDS. It functions within the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, and is actually a department of that ministry. The staff who run it are either military personnel or former agents of the intelligence services.

Its mission is to gather any useful information on the ways in which BDS is carried out in the countries where the movement is active, to analyse its activities, to know who the principal activists are, and - above all - to draw up an "anti-boycott" strategy, with the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

People are being paid by Israel to monitor the social networks. And a team of speakers will be established to go around American university campuses, in order to praise the virtues of the so-called "only democracy in the Middle East".

Israel is trying desperately to get BDS banned in various countries, or to curtail it, not only in France but also in other countries, including your own, the United States and Canada. An international anti-BDS conference took place recently in Jerusalem.

A transatlantic trade treaty, known as the TTIP, is currently being negotiated between the European Union and the USA. And it has been proposed to include in that treaty a clause which would prohibit any economic negotiations between an American partner and a European partner that would "discriminate against Israel", or that would support or promote or participate in any initiative to boycott, divest in, or sanction Israel. In other words, a formal and explicit rejection of BDS would be an absolute condition for the signature of the treaty!

But we can see that, in spite of all these things, the progress of BDS is unstoppable, and that Israel's unpopularity continues to grow.

The accusations of anti-Semitism that are levelled at BDS activists don't work anymore, and international public opinion has now understood that this horrible accusation is only an attempt to distract attention from the crushing of the Palestinian people.

Israel cannot continue with its policies indefinitely: its economy is under pressure, its tourist industry is weakening in spite of all the publicity campaigns to promote it, its military expenses are colossal compared to the social needs of the country, migration balance is at zero level, and Israel's image is worse than ever, when it comes to global public opinion.

BDS is a powerful commitment to justice, freedom and equality, and it's a clear and necessary commitment in this worrying period linked to the consequences of international tension that we live in.

It's a moral and political duty.

And just like the apartheid that was brought to an end in South Africa, Israeli apartheid will also come to an end!