

A Morally Right Decision: Support the BDS Movement, Do Not Allow Israelis to Enter Malaysia for Sport Event

By [Dr. Chandra Muzaffar](#)

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The decision of the Malaysian government not to allow Israelis to enter the country to participate in the World Para Swimming Championships in Sarawak in July-August 2019 is both politically correct and morally right. Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad's firm stand on this issue has been endorsed by PKR president, Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Deputy Sports Minister, SimHee Kyung. A coalition of 29 NGOs has also voiced support for the decision.

That Malaysia has no diplomatic relations with Israel provides the political rationale for our stand. What this means in concrete terms is that Israelis cannot visit Malaysia just as Malaysians cannot visit Israel. This is an important dimension of our foreign policy. As a national policy it supersedes internal arrangements on the immigration rights of a state within the Malaysian Federation.

If our decision on Israeli swimmers is politically viable it is because it is anchored in a powerful moral ethos. In international law, Israel is an occupier that has annexed and usurped not only Palestinian land but also Syrian and Lebanese territories. If Malaysia recognised Israel, we would be bestowing legitimacy upon Israeli occupation and oppression.

Israeli occupation has become much more severe since 1948 as reflected in its seizure of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967; its tightening grip over East Jerusalem; and the construction of a wall that divides the West Bank and marginalises the Palestinian population. Even more tragic is the continuous massacre of Palestinians and other Arabs in the course of the last 70 years through wars and brutal assaults. If they are not killed or executed, the victims of Israeli aggression are subjected to imprisonment and torture or simply humiliated through body searches at numerous check-points. Indeed, what Israel has established in the West Bank and even within Israel itself is an 'Apartheid State' that denies Palestinians their basic human dignity.

It is against this backdrop that one should view the Malaysian decision to bar Israelis from entering our country. There are thousands of individuals and organisations all over the world that are opposed to Israel's intransigent arrogance. By boycotting Israel, many of them are hoping to compel Israel to obey international law. This is the aim of the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement which has grown and expanded over the last 15 years or so. Through boycott of Israeli sporting activities, musical concerts, academic programmes and Israeli goods produced especially in the West Bank, the BDS movement aims to isolate Israel and as a result create awareness among the Israeli people of the imperative importance of forcing the Israeli government to recognise the legitimate rights of

the Palestinian people. It is significant that the BDS movement is totally committed to peaceful protest.

Academic organisations such as the American Studies Association (ASA) have joined the movement as have churches in the United States like the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church that have divested their investments in Israel. The Dutch pension fund, PGGM is another entity that has divested its shares in companies operating in the country. There are also big European companies such as Veolia, Orange and CRH that have exited the Israeli market. As a result of all this, there was a 46% drop in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Israel in 2014 compared to 2013.

It is not just Churches and companies. There are even cities such as Dublin in Ireland and Leicester in Britain that are part of the BDS movement. Among prominent individuals associated with BDS is the indefatigable Desmond Tutu who sees parallels between what is happening in Israel-Palestine today and Apartheid South Africa in the past.

It is within the context of the BDS movement that we should view our own boycott of Israeli swimmers. We are strengthening the most promising movement alive today for the liberation of the Palestinian people. It is a movement that has drawn people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds into a common commitment to a common cause — a cause which Nelson Mandela once described as the greatest moral issue of our time.

By saying ‘no’ to Israeli swimmers — as others have said ‘no’ to other Israeli athletes in other fields — we are continuing to champion a struggle that we have been devoted to for such a long while. Criticisms from various quarters, even economic and political moves against Malaysia as a nation, should not deter us from continuing with our struggle. Let us remind ourselves that we are not alone in this noble quest for justice.

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Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST). He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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