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The Troubling Implications of Hillary's Anti-BDS Letter

Presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton's position on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank does not bode well for her future foreign policy.

On July 2, former secretary of state and frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination Hillary Clinton wrote [a letter](#) to Israeli-American billionaire Haim Saban, a strong supporter of the right-wing Netanyahu government, denouncing human rights activists who support boycott/divestment/sanctions (BDS) against the Israeli occupation.

In the letter, made public a few days later, Clinton made a number of statements which are not only demonstrably false but raise serious concerns regarding what kind of policies she would pursue as president.

She claimed that the BDS movement was working to “malign and undermine Israel and the Jewish people.” Though some BDS activists target Israel as a whole, most efforts on college campuses and elsewhere focus solely on the Israeli occupation, particularly companies that profit from that occupation and support illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. In any case, the BDS campaign does not “malign and undermine” Jews. This cynical effort to depict the movement as anti-Semitic could be an indication of the kind of rhetoric she would use as president to discredit human rights activists who challenge her policies elsewhere.

Clinton claims in the letter that initiatives through the United Nations critical of Israeli violations of international humanitarian law are inherently “anti-Israel,” thereby implying that those who raise concerns about a given country’s human rights record do so not because of a desire to uphold universally recognized ethical and legal principles, but because of an ideological bias against a particular country. Although some UN agencies have disproportionately targeted Israel for criticism, the vast majority of such reports and resolutions have been consistent with findings and concerns raised by reputable international human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) and Israeli groups (such as the B’tselem human rights group and the veterans’ organization Breaking the Silence.)

Clinton further argues that it is illegitimate to use sanctions to “dictate” that an occupying power should end its illegal colonization of occupied territory and withdraw to within its internationally recognized boundaries in accordance with UN resolutions and international law. Indeed, she rejects any kind of “outside or unilateral actions” against such flagrant violations of international legal norms. Instead, she insists that resolution to such conflicts be based solely on negotiations between an occupying power and those under occupation regardless of the gross asymmetry in power between the two parties and a series of UN Security Council resolutions, rulings of the International Court of Justice, and longstanding international legal principles that recognize the illegitimacy of any country expanding its borders by force and moving settlers into occupied territory.

Clinton’s lack of concern for international law is also evidenced in her reference to the predominantly Palestinian Old City of Jerusalem as being part of Israel, even though it was seized by Israeli forces in the 1967 war and is recognized by the UN and the international community as being under foreign belligerent occupation.

She also proudly references her condemnation of the 2009 report by the UN Human Rights Council—headed by the distinguished South African jurist Richard Goldstone (a Zionist Jew)—which documented war crimes by both Israel and Hamas. In the letter, she implies that the report denied Israel’s right to self-defense, when it in fact explicitly recognized Israel’s right to do so. The report’s only objections to Israeli conduct were in regard to attacks on civilian targets, not its military actions against extremist militias lobbing rockets into Israel. The implication, therefore, is that Hillary Clinton believes killing civilians can constitute legitimate self-defense.

Her reference to Israel as “a vibrant democracy in a region dominated by autocracy”—while certainly true on a number of levels—ignores Israel’s denial of democratic rights to Palestinians under occupation. Furthermore, it ignores her history as a senator and secretary of state of backing Arab dictatorships in the face of pro-democracy struggles by their own peoples, which has contributed to the predominance of autocratic rule in the Middle East.

In the letter, she also reiterates the romantic Western myth that Israel is “a vibrant bloom in the middle of the desert.” Although Israelis are certainly responsible for impressive advances in irrigation technology in the Negev region and elsewhere, it ignores centuries of agriculture and urban settlement in what is now Palestine, Lebanon, and the western parts of Jordan and Syria, long known as the “Fertile Crescent.” Indeed, Israel originally seized much of its fertile lands by force from Palestinian farmers.

There are other troubling aspects of the two-page letter as well: She boasts about her efforts to block UN recognition of Palestinian statehood. She pledges to work with Republicans to fight BDS activists, who are mostly registered Democrats. She links anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism and the terrorist attacks against Jews in France. In addition, by denouncing BDS because it “singles out Israel,” she is implying that any human rights group that focuses on one country (i.e., Tibet, Burma, Western Sahara, Syria, or Iran) is thereby illegitimate.

Finally, her pledge to “defend Israel at every turn” and that as president she will “always stand up for Israel” is particularly troubling, given her propensity to equate “Israel” with the policies of its right-wing government.

Taken altogether, this letter raises very troubling questions regarding the kind of president Hillary Clinton would be, not just in regard to Israel and Palestine, but in relation to human rights and international law overall and her reaction to those who support such principles.