

Culturescapes Israel. A Showcase for Apartheid in Switzerland?

An Open Letter to the organizers and partners of the Festival *Culturescapes* (September–November 2011) and to all the artists and cultural stakeholders in Switzerland

This open letter of the BDS Campaign Switzerland, which supports the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel until it complies with international law and respects the human rights of the Palestinian people, is addressed to the organizers of the Festival *Culturescapes Israel*, as well as to the institutional partners of the *Culturescapes* Foundation throughout Switzerland.

The *Culturescapes* festival scheduled for autumn 2011 in Basel, Zurich, Bern, St. Gallen, Lucern, Winterthur, Geneva and Chur promises to be an ambitious operation promoting the flattering illusion that Israel is a country where creativity flourishes freely and artists are supported even when they criticize the government. The State of Israel invests heavily in the promotion of cultural production in order to distract the attention of the broad public from its oppressive policies against the Palestinian people. For example, after the deadly attack on the Gaza Strip in 2009, numerous initiatives were undertaken in the framework of the official “Rebranding Israel Campaign”, including meetings with intellectuals and writers, theatre tours and art exhibitions, with the declared aim to present a more “friendly image” of Israel, so that the country would be less associated with war (Aryeh Mekel, Director of the Arts and Science Department in the Israeli Foreign Ministry: *New York Times*, 18th March, 2009). More recently the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Avigdor Lieberman, has threatened to withdraw public grants for tours from certain Israeli artists unless they accept their assigned role more readily.

The organizers of the Festival *Culturescapes* must not pretend that they are unaware of this Israeli strategy. Yet, it did not stop them from accepting the invitation of the Israeli Embassy in Bern to participate in the promotion of “Brand Israel” (ynet.com-Yedioth Ahronoth-Sept. 27, 2010).

In light of the above, the BDS Campaign Switzerland is deeply dismayed to learn that the Foundation *Culturescapes*, a cultural institution funded by Pro Helvetia and by the cultural authorities in the cantons and in the Confederation, is participating in a campaign in which theatre, music, dance and song are being instrumentalized for the purpose of lending respectability to a powerful state in the Middle East and to its shockingly immoral and illegal practices.

The state of Israel, which *Culturescapes* presents as a benefactor of the arts, has devoted itself for many decades to the progressive destruction of the very foundations of Palestinian culture and society. In the name of a “Jewish state”, Palestinian refugees are denied the right of return. The Palestinians living in Israel are subjected to legal and cultural segregation and suffer from the pervading racism in Israeli society. (Let us not forget that Palestinians make up 20 % of the population of Israel.) The Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem continue to be subjected to an illegal regime of occupation characterized by the blockade, accelerating Jewish colonization and annexation. The legal rights of the local Palestinian population are progressively curtailed to the advantage of the illegal Jewish settlers. (In 1992 there were 241,000 settlers. In 2010 there are 490,000 in more than one hundred agglomerations.) Israel’s determination to permanently take hold of the occupied city of Jerusalem results in the ongoing forced displacement of its Palestinian inhabitants by means which include the continual confiscation of Palestinian residency permits there. (Approximately 5,000 Palestinians had their Jerusalem residency permits cancelled in 2009. Israel continues to build the illegal Separation Wall in the occupied West Bank in violation of the 2004 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Many renowned international personalities, such as the South African jurist John Dugard, the South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and the former president of the United States Jimmy Carter, have recognized in Israel’s policy towards the Palestinian people the traits of apartheid, a system considered to be a war crime and a crime against humanity by international law and the United

Nations. In 2009, Judge Richard Goldstone qualified as war crimes and crimes against humanity some of the actions carried out by the Israeli army that year against the occupied Palestinian population of Gaza which, cut off from the world since 2005, struggles for its survival. A United Nations Commission presided by the Judge Hudson-Philips moreover concluded that a series of humanitarian and human rights obligations were violated during Israel's attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla in May 2010, where 9 people were killed and several dozens wounded. Israel has yet to abide by the United Nations resolutions which require independent investigations of all of these incidents and prosecution of those responsible according to international standards.

In order to reverse the Israeli policy that systematically violates the human rights of the Palestinian people, more than 170 organizations representing a broad sector of Palestinian civil society launched a call in 2005 for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against the State of Israel. In 2010, the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territory Prof. Richard Falk noted positively the fact that citizens worldwide have adopted these non-violent means to isolate Israel in order to make its leaders abide by international law. The global mobilization of activists in the BDS campaign has already brought about many successes: sporting events, for example, have been cancelled; Israeli companies, such as Soda Club/Soda Stream and the Israeli fruit and vegetable exporter Agrexco, complain about damage caused by consumer boycotts and law suits; and, foreign business companies, such as Veolia, that profit from their complicity in Israel's colonial enterprise in the occupied West Bank including Jerusalem, have suffered financial losses and decided to withdraw from such illegal business.

As part of the BDS campaign, Palestinian intellectuals and artists implement the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) and invite cultural stakeholders throughout the world to end all cooperation with Israeli artistic, cinematographic and cultural institutions which have been complicit in, or silent about, the atrocities committed by successive Israeli governments. Many intellectuals and artists have already heeded PACBI's call in different ways. Among them are writers John Berger, Eduardo Galeano, Arundhati Roy, Henning Mankell; musicians Björk, U2, Massive Attack, Carlos Santana, Elvis Costello; and, film directors Nicolas Wadimoff, Mike Leigh and Ken Loach. Other well known personalities abroad who support the BDS campaign include the philosopher Judith Butler and the writer/journalist Naomi Klein.

The BDS campaign is supported by conscientious Israelis. The historian Ilan Pappé was one of the first to advocate a boycott; filmmakers Eyal Sivan and Udi Aloni, the philosopher Anat Matar and the linguist Rachel Giora are among the organizers of "Boycott from Within" that supports the Palestinian civil society-led BDS campaign. A growing number of Israeli artists and members of the academic community, sensitive to the deteriorating image of Israel abroad and heartened by the success of the international boycott, seem ready to boycott at least certain aspects of Israeli policy, such as the continuing colonization of the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

This open letter is a call on the artists and the cultural stakeholders in Switzerland to reach out to the conscience of the world, to reject Israel's policies of apartheid and colonization and to join the citizens' movement in the non-violent BDS campaign, in order to pressure Israel to abide by international law and respect the human rights of the Palestinian people.

Therefore, the BDS Campaign Switzerland calls upon:

the *Culturescapes* Foundation to abandon the 2011 edition of its festival dedicated to Israel;

the organizers and partners of the *Culturescapes* Foundation to refuse programming shows this year under the label of *Culturescapes*, and to refuse all collaboration with marketing of "Brand Israel" in Switzerland.

Having learned of the *Culturescapes* Foundation's intention to organize a Swiss Festival in Israel, the BDS Campaign Switzerland calls on all the artists and those who work in the cultural field to refuse to present their work in Israel and thus to refuse to lend their support to the Israeli regime of apartheid, colonialism and occupation which oppresses the Palestinian people.