

Dare to defy apartheid

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Categories: Eurovision, Kultureller Boykott

Open Letter to the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR)

Geneva, Lausanne, Bern, Basel, Zurich, and Lugano, November 20th, 2018

Dear members of the management of SRG SSR,

The process of selecting the Swiss song for the Eurovision Song Contest is underway, and soon a jury will choose the song that will represent Switzerland at the finals, which are due to take place in Israel in May 2019. Some of you may be called upon to be part of the delegation that will go to Tel Aviv to accompany the chosen Swiss artists. It is important to us that you know where you will be going.

In the space of one month, more than 1,000 Swiss citizens have already signed the petition "[No Song for Apartheid](#)," launched by some 100 artists and musicians, to ask the head of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) to refrain from participating in this event. Among the first signers of this petition were Evelinn Trouble, Jean-Alexandre Blanchet, Jeans for Jesus, Gisèle Sallin, Heidi Happy, Jonas, La Gale, Marco Zappa, Michel Bühler, Robin Girod, Rootwords, Sarclo, Tamara Bacci, Thierry Meury, Vanni Bianconi, Véronique Mermoud, Vincent Bertholet, Yves Cerf, Yves Massy, and Zoltan Horvath, as well as the Musikzentrum Sedel in Lucern and the Geneva cultural centre L'Usine.

Artists and cultural actors from all over Switzerland are calling for a boycott of Eurovision in Israel. Why? Because after 70 years of ethnic cleansing, colonization, and permanent oppression of the Palestinian people, the State of Israel has finally established an apartheid regime, something we had hoped never to see in the 21st century. In the mirror of apartheid, Eurovision and its glittering, fairytale images have a sad reflection.

Apartheid is a system of racist oppression condemned by the United Nations, and considered a crime against humanity by international law. It is characterized by a system of discriminations meant to subjugate one population for the benefit of another in the same territory. The construction of the Wall of Separation and the Israeli colonization of the West Bank, the progressive dismemberment of the Palestinian territories, the transformation of the Gaza strip into a walled ghetto the size of the canton of Geneva, the continual harassment of the Palestinian population in the city of Jerusalem, and the humiliation and dehumanization of Palestinians by the Israeli army are all cogs in a machine meant to erase the Palestinian people from their own land.

The space of this letter is not enough to list all the manifestations of apartheid that have taken place in 2018, both before and after Netta Barzilai's Eurovision victory last May.

In Gaza, since this past March, Israeli army snipers have fired live bullets at Palestinian demonstrators armed with little more than slings, who were gathered 100 metres behind the military barrier that keeps almost 2 million people confined to a ghetto. These demonstrations, in which Palestinians demanded their legitimate right to return to the homes from which they had been expelled, commemorated the 70th anniversary of the Nakba – the human catastrophe that the Israelis celebrate as the founding act of their state. As of October 2018, [217 were killed](#) and more than 6,000 injured by bullets.

Each month the United Nations reports on the demolition of Palestinian buildings and homes in the West Bank and in Jerusalem, which leads to the forced displacement of their inhabitants. In the month of September alone, [29 Palestinian constructions](#) were demolished and 51 persons were displaced. In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the Israeli army protects the Israeli settlers by making [nocturnal raids](#) – often bloody – and taking adults and children to Israeli prisons, maintaining a climate of fear and anxiety for families. This brutality has become routine.

At the constitutional level, on July 19th, 2018, the Israeli parliament adopted a new Basic Law: “Israel, National State of the Jewish People.” This racist law marks a turning point in the consolidation of apartheid. It institutionalizes ethnic Jewish predominance over all other nationalities and religions represented in the State: the Arabic language will now have only a “special status,” yet to be defined, and the advancement of Jewish colonization is erected as a national value. Those Palestinians who hold an Israeli identity card (20% of the population) are now officially considered as [second-class citizens](#). Leaders of the Catholic Churches in the Holy Land have recently demanded the [complete abrogation](#) of this law, “which gives a constitutional and legal basis to discrimination between Israeli citizens, clearly stating the principles according to which Jewish citizens must be privileged relative to other citizens”. Almost as a corollary, the law on [cultural loyalty](#)”, which authorizes the denial of funding for artistic creations daring to present Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning, passed a first legislative hurdle in the Israeli parliament on October 21st, 2018.

The Israeli government is counting on Eurovision not to hide this state of affairs, but to normalize it in the eyes of the world. Following Netta Barzilai's victory at the Eurovision finals in May, the Israeli authorities were clear about their ambition to turn Eurovision into a political opportunity. Netta herself [stated](#) that she was delighted that her song was helping to “change Israel's image”. Subsequently, the Israeli Prime Minister named her the “best ambassador of Israel” (source: Times of Israel, May 13th 2018). Since then, practically all of Netta's performances abroad have been sponsored [by Israeli embassies](#). However, the Netta phenomenon was short-lived. The [cancellation of Netta's concert in Zurich](#) on November 13th shows the public's growing distrust of the buzz generated to whitewash the Israeli regime.

The Swiss artists are not alone in calling for the boycott of Eurovision in Israel. Following the publication of a first appeal in [The Guardian](#), converging mobilizations have emerged in the United Kingdom, in Iceland, in Ireland, in Australia, and in Spain. The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement has recently launched an international petition, which accumulated more than 15,000 signatures within a few days.

Switzerland, which in the past was accused of indulgence – if not complicity – with regard to the oppressive regime in South Africa, should not take this criticism lightly. One does not compromise oneself with apartheid twice. The management and the operational staff of Swiss public radio and television should be aware of this, and should draw the necessary ethical if not political conclusions. No one who takes part in the Eurovision Finals in Tel Aviv can claim to be unaware that they are contributing to the whitewashing of Israel's inhuman policies.

Along with those who have signed the petition “No Song for Apartheid,” we call on the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) to withdraw from participation in the Eurovision Finals taking place in Israel next May. We also ask that the SRG SSR and its business units respect the right of its employees to conscientious objection in refusing to go to Israel, and that employees who do refuse receive no sanctions because of their choice. Faced with an apartheid regime that the whole world sees and recognizes, the least the SRG SSR could do would be to not force employees who would prefer not to compromise themselves.

Take the sequins from your eyes! Dare to defy apartheid!

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement in Switzerland

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FAQ

What is BDS?

In 2005, Palestinian civil society – the main political parties, trade union federations, associations for the rights of refugees, academic trade unions, farmers’ organizations, networks of NGOs, women’s trade unions, youth movements, and others – launched a call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions against the State of Israel ([the BDS call](#)) until it complies with international law and respects the rights of Palestinians. The signatory organizations to the 2005 call represent Palestinians living under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Palestinians living in exile (predominantly refugees). The BDS call is the most supported document in the last few decades of Palestinian history.

What does BDS Switzerland do?

The BDS movement has been active in Switzerland since 2005. BDS Switzerland ([BDS CH](#)) has led campaigns for a [military boycott](#), a [consumer and services boycott](#), and [cultural boycotts](#), amongst others. In 2015, BDS CH opposed the “Carte Blanche” given to Israel by [the Locarno Film Festival](#).

Has the boycott tactic been used elsewhere?

The word “boycott” was used for the first time in 1880 when the Irish Land league led a social banning campaign against Captain Charles Boycott, an agent for an English landowner. Different forms of boycott have been used to bring an end to oppression in different countries and periods. Some of them are celebrated today, although at the time they were condemned by the great powers. These include Mahatma Gandhi’s Salt March, the Afro-Americans’ bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in their fight for civil rights, and the international boycott that helped bring an end to apartheid in South Africa. The Palestinians have used the boycott for decades in their struggle for freedom, equality, and justice. The BDS call draws inspiration from this rich tradition.

Many countries violate human rights, so why boycott Israel and not the others?

The boycott of Israel is a response to a call for solidarity from Palestinians. It is an effective non-violent tactic and a form of pressure that Palestinians have chosen, not an attempt on our part to express our moral purity. The BDS movement is a movement led by Palestinians. The boycott of apartheid South Africa was not called into question because human rights abuses were being committed at the same time in Argentina. It was a response to a call for solidarity by the South African resistance. There is a reason why “others do the same or worse things” is not an acceptable criminal defence. If it were, all demands for justice would have to be deferred until every offense had been ranked and all offenses considered worse had been dealt with first. Who would benefit from that except those who already benefit from impunity?

Doesn't the cultural boycott punish Israeli and foreign artists as well as people who love culture? Doesn't art transcend politics?

The BDS movement does not target artists as individuals. BDS targets institutions that are complicit with the Israeli government's human rights violations. The state of Israel is deliberately using culture to turn attention away from its crimes. After the lethal campaign of bombing in Gaza in 2009, an Israeli official announced the government's intention to send well-known authors, theatre troupes, and exhibitions abroad in order “[to show a nicer image of Israel](#).” This is all part of the “Brand Israel” project launched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2005 in response to the boycott. It is within this framework that Israeli artists who receive government funding to perform abroad must sign a contract in which they promise to promote the political interests of the State of Israel. Thus, these performances become propaganda activities for whitewashing Israeli apartheid. The promotion of the singer Netta Barzilai, winner of the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest, is part of this campaign of whitewashing Israel's image abroad. When artists from abroad violate the boycott and perform in Israel, they are taking part in the normalization of Israeli crimes.

How much even the BDS movement does not boycott artists but institutions financed by the regime, it would be misleading to present the artistic scene in Israel as inherently progressive and as an ally of the Palestinian demand for justice. In fact, only a handful of Israeli artists take an unambiguous stand against the state's incessant violence and in favour of equality.

On the Palestinian side, the actor Mohammad Bakri has been harassed for years in Israel because he produced a film on the Jenin massacre. The poet [Dareen Tatour](#) was condemned to 5 months in prison for having praised the Palestinian resistance. In East Jerusalem and the West Bank, cultural centres are regularly attacked and searched by the Israeli occupation forces, and artists are prevented from travelling abroad. In August 2018, the [Said-al-Mishal](#) cultural centre was bombed and its 5-story building was reduced to dust.

I don't like Eurovision, so why should I sign the call for the boycott of the 2019 Israeli edition?

One doesn't have to be a Eurovision fan to join the boycott! We aren't calling for a boycott of the Eurovision Song Contest as such. We are calling for a boycott of Eurovision Israel because the Israeli government is using this event to whitewash its image and because [the Palestinians have asked us to do so](#).

Isn't a call to boycott Israel a form of antisemitism?

The BDS movement in Switzerland and elsewhere has always been firmly opposed to all forms of discrimination and racism, including islamophobia and antisemitism. Israel is a state, not a person. Each person has the right to criticize the unjust actions and policies of a state. A growing number of Jewish students, academics, intellectuals, LGTBQ activists and others, as well as Israeli citizens who are Jewish, support and promote the BDS call. As [Jewish Voice for Peace](#) in the USA explains, Israel pretends to act

in the name of all Jewish people, but a growing number of Jews are making it known that they oppose Israel's policies.