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## From Palestine to Baltimore, Veolia Targeted By Human Rights Activists

### Issue:

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On November 15th, 2011, six Palestinian activists in the Occupied West Bank boarded a bus for Jerusalem. The bus was designated only for Israeli settlers, not Palestinians. Israeli border police stopped the bus at a checkpoint leading into Jerusalem and arrested the six activists.

They modeled this action on the US Freedom Rides of the 1960s, when civil rights activists rode buses through the South to confront and challenge racial segregation. The Palestinian activists, however, did not demand legal equality with the Israeli bus riders, or the right to ride settler buses. "The presence of these colonizers and the infrastructure that serves them," they wrote in a press release, "is illegal and must be dismantled. As part of their struggle for freedom, justice and dignity, Palestinians demand the ability to be able to travel freely on their own roads, on their own land, including the right to travel to Jerusalem."<sup>1</sup>

Israel maintains separate systems of law and infrastructure in the Occupied West Bank for Palestinian residents and Israeli settlers. Palestinians and Israelis drive on separate roads, attend separate schools, and go to separate courts. Access to resources is segregated too, favoring Israelis. For example, the Israeli government builds major settlement blocks on top of aquifers, guaranteeing Israeli settlers access to plentiful, affordable water. The majority of water from the

West Bank is moved out of the area and used by Israelis. Palestinians living in areas under Israeli control are barred from tapping into the water system, often aren't allowed to dig wells, and rely on expensive private water sellers for this basic necessity.

The Israeli word for this system of control, *hafrada*, means "separation." Palestinians have another word for it: "apartheid." Like *hafrada*, apartheid literally means separation, but it is a term with implications under international law. In 2002, the International Criminal Court defined apartheid as human rights abuses "committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime."<sup>2</sup> Palestinians and their allies hold that Israel maintains such a system, both in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and within Israel's 1948 borders.

The Palestinian freedom riders targeted two bus companies in their November action. One, Egged, is an Israeli government-subsidized company that provides most of the country's public transport. The other, Veolia, is a huge French corporation that runs transportation, energy, water, and waste management services throughout the world. Veolia runs a bus service on the 443 road, a highway that snakes in and out of the Occupied West Bank and serves Israeli settlements there. Since Palestinians can't enter settlements without security checks and the highway doesn't stop in Palestinian villages or cities, they can't use it. Palestinians call it the "Apartheid Road."

Both companies are the targets of an international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) campaign led by Palestinian rights activists around the world. What most residents of Baltimore do not know is that Veolia is the company responsible for running the city's new Charm City Circulator. For this reason, it has attracted attention from local Palestinian rights activists, who seek to raise awareness inside the US about one of the most distorted and misunderstood international conflicts.

## **THE ISRAELI/PALESTINIAN CONFLICT, BEHIND THE LIES**

Many people in the United States have misconceptions about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Israel is often portrayed as the primary, or sole, victim of the conflict, with the Palestinians as the main aggressor. Palestinians are portrayed as terrorists and anti-Semites, while Israelis are portrayed as people fighting for their very existence. The conflict is also understood by many as the modern manifestation of an ancient religious conflict between Muslims, Jews, and Christians for dominance of the "Holy Land."

The myths surrounding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict help to obscure what is actually happening on the ground. The conflict is about, among other things, self-determination, freedom of movement, religious freedom, and access to resources, such as water, land, and airspace. Israelis have these things, while most Palestinians do not. There is a vast power differential; Israel has a tremendous advantage in military, political, and economic terms. Far from being the main victim of the conflict, Israel is more accurately understood as the player holding all the aces, the party whose continual commitment to expansion and settlement has shut the door on negotiation.

In 1967, Israel began a military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, asserting control over a population of about a million Palestinians. Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip has devastated the Palestinians who live there, as well as refugees around the world. Israel has used its military to maintain control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in various ways

throughout the past 45 years, crushing resistance movements and attacking civilians. A key part of Israel's strategy, particularly in the West Bank, is to facilitate Israeli citizens moving into the Occupied Territories and establishing colonies. Called settlements, these projects are illegal under international law, which outlaws one country from sending its civilian population into another country that it is occupying militarily. Around 520,000 Israelis live in settlements in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and over 20,000 live in settlements in the Golan Heights.

## **VEOLIA TARGETED BY BDS ACTIVISTS**

The goal of the Palestinian freedom riders, who boarded the bus on November 15th, was to point out that Veolia and Egged are actively and knowingly complicit in the development and maintenance of Israel's settlement enterprise. Beyond running a bus service on Apartheid Road, Veolia has other projects in the Occupied West Bank. Its transportation division helped develop a light rail that connects downtown Jerusalem to settlements in East Jerusalem. It also operates a landfill that serves settlements, Israeli military bases, and Israeli customers from outside the West Bank. While Palestinians are technically allowed to use the landfill, the reality is that most cannot afford to, despite the fact that it is on their land. By facilitating the movement of Israelis into the West Bank, Veolia aids Israel in violating Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from transferring part of its population into occupied territory.

For these reasons, Palestinians and Palestinian solidarity activists have targeted Veolia. In countries from Australia to Sweden, organizers have mobilized to demand that their communities not work with Veolia. Cities like Stockholm and Melbourne have shut Veolia out of huge rail projects, and others, including Dublin, have explicitly committed not to contract with Veolia because of its involvement with the Israeli occupation of Palestine. After South London activists mobilized a year-long campaign called "Bin Veolia," their city denied Veolia a waste treatment contract worth one billion pounds. Overall, since 2005, Veolia has lost contracts worth at least \$14 billion dollars, as a direct result of these actions.

Last December, Veolia responded to unprecedented losses with the announcement of a major restructuring scheme. It is planning to pull out of approximately half of the countries in which it currently operates, and might entirely exit the transportation sector. So far, Veolia has not announced whether it will leave Israel/Palestine, but there are indications it will. Veolia is selling its shares in the light rail, and selling its bus service to Egged.

These activist campaigns are part of a broader BDS strategy targeting companies and institutions that profit from the occupation of Palestine. In 2005, Palestinian civil society launched the BDS strategy to hold Israel accountable to international law. The movement makes three specific demands. First, Israel must end its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands occupied in June 1967, and dismantle the separation barrier, or "apartheid wall." Second, it must recognize the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full legal equality. Third, it must respect, protect, and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties, as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

BDS tactics provoke controversy. Its Zionist critics fear it as a strategy to delegitimize the state of Israel, challenging its existence. The Israeli government has outlawed BDS campaigns, making it illegal for Israelis to even state their support for them. These reactions suggest that BDS deeply threatens people and institutions intent on maintaining the status quo in Israel/Palestine.

## **FROM PALESTINE TO BALTIMORE, VEOLIA TARGETED BY HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS**

BDS is an effective nonviolent strategy for liberation in an often bloody conflict. This may be a reason it worries Israel. Ultimately, they can deal with a few rockets and mortars fired at them by crushing the resistance and civilian population with brutal force. But a peaceful international movement, which targets the institutions that profit from the suffering of Palestinians, might just be an unstoppable force that can lead to a just and lasting peace in Palestine/Israel.

Residents in Baltimore have an opportunity to join the BDS campaign and oppose a company profiting not only from the maintenance of Israeli's settlement enterprise, but also from servicing a small segment of Baltimore's population, while neglecting the needs of the majority.

### **VEOLIA IN BALTIMORE**

Baltimore residents may be familiar with Veolia through the presence of the Charm City Circulator on the wealthier, more tourist- and business-oriented streets of the city. The Charm City Circulator is a Veolia-run free bus service that began operation in 2010. Although for many, the Circulator offers a convenient service and seems free since it charges no fare to board, it is actually a very expensive program for the city, benefiting only a small portion of the community. The system will cost Baltimore \$40 million over five years, including the purchase price for the 21 buses from Veolia. Because Veolia financed half of that bus purchase, the city is effectively in debt to Veolia. Despite all of these costs, the buses run very short routes, which are designed to serve tourists, wealthier and whiter neighborhoods, and the Johns Hopkins Medical Campus.

The Charm City Circulator is only one of the many projects Veolia operates in Baltimore. Veolia Water owns, operates, and directs all marketing activities for the Baltimore City Composting Facility, which processes 45 dry-tons of biosolids each day and sells sludge to public and private users. Veolia Energy's District Energy owns and operates energy networks that provide heating and cooling services to many buildings in Baltimore, including state and city government facilities, public housing complexes, universities, healthcare facilities, Harbor Place, Harbor East, the Legg Mason building, downtown hotels, and many upscale office buildings. In addition to the Charm City Circulator, Veolia Transportation also runs the MTA's Paratransit service and the Super Shuttle, along with several other services and businesses.

Veolia Transport's first purchase in the US was Baltimore's Yellow Cab company in 2001. Yellow Cab's owner, Mark Joseph, immediately became the CEO and Vice Chair of Veolia Transportation in North America. He had prepared the state for this process by serving on the Maryland Governor's Advisory Council on Privatization, which planned out how to transform the state's services and infrastructure into profit sources for private businesses.

Since 2001, Veolia has grown into a major force in the operation of American cities. By winning contracts in smaller cities, Veolia has played a crucial role in the privatization of public services and projects throughout the country. It is the leading water services provider in the US, managing over 600 communities, including the entire city of Indianapolis. It is also the largest private sector operator of transit in North America, with over 200 contracts in cities, transit authorities and airports. Although only serving ten US cities, including Baltimore, Veolia is the largest operator of district energy systems in the country.

From Baltimore, a crucial source of Veolia's power, activists can build a strong voice in the global

BDS movement, and at the same time demand that our city reset its priorities. Municipal services should serve residents, not multinational corporations. We can object to the buses Veolia operates in the West Bank, linking Israel's illegal settlements, as we also object to the Charm City Circulator's neglect of Baltimore's poor neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color. We can publicize Veolia's abuse of Palestinian workers, as we struggle to reinstate Baltimore's outsourced Veolia jobs as municipal positions, with the living wages and benefits city workers earn. The BDS movement opens up opportunities for political economic analysis, direct challenges to local injustices, and global solidarity in support of human rights and self-determination.

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1 <http://electronicintifada.net/blog/linah-alsaafin/palestinians-clarify-g...> [4]

2 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime\\_of\\_apartheid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crime_of_apartheid) [5]

## Washington and the Occupation

Crucially, Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands is only possible due to the bulwark support—military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological—of the United States. The US helps Israel through massive military aid. In 2009, Obama approved spending \$30 billion in military aid for Israel over ten years.<sup>1</sup> Seventy-five percent of that money must be used to buy weapons and technology from US military contractors. Israeli military aid, therefore, subsidizes the military-industrial complex of the US. Thus, Israel has vastly superior firepower than Palestinians, and the US has a guaranteed customer for helicopters, fighter jets, artillery, tear gas, and other weapons. For this reason and others, the US has a vested interest in seeing the violence in the Middle East continue.

The US helps Israel in other ways. One way is by giving it diplomatic cover in the UN. Whenever the UN Security Council moves to criticize Israel, the US exercises its veto power, blocking such resolutions. The US also aids Israel by encouraging divisions within Palestinian politics. For example, the US gives aid and training to Fatah, the party which lost the last Palestinian elections in 2006, while isolating and delegitimizing Hamas, the party which won.

While members of the Obama administration have criticized Israel's settlement policies, they've never gone so far as to threaten cutting off aid to Israel. If Israel's military, diplomatic, and political aid from the US were diminished, it is doubtful that it would be able to continue its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and its further expansion of settlements. Thus, activists in the US can have a role in bringing peace and justice to Palestine by challenging local institutions that profit from Israeli apartheid, such as Veolia.

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1 <http://news.antiwar.com/2009/12/18/obama-approves-30-billion-in-military...> [6]

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