What happened?

On August 27, 2010, dozens of Israeli actors, directors, and playwrights made the decision not to perform in Ariel, one of the largest of the West Bank settlements, which by all standards of international law are clearly illegal. They sent a letter to the boards of Israel’s repertory theaters stating:

“We wish to express our disgust with the theater’s board’s plans to perform in the new auditorium in Ariel. The actors among us hereby declare that we will refuse to perform in Ariel, as well as in any other settlement. We urge the boards to hold their activity within the sovereign borders of the State of Israel within the Green Line.”

Where is Ariel and what is the issue?

Ariel is an Israeli settlement located in the heart of the West Bank, located about 25 miles from Tel Aviv and about 18 miles from the Jordanian border. Ariel’s location blocks Palestinian contiguity between Palestinian cities and villages in the West Bank.

The settlement of Ariel was established in 1978 on land that was seized under the false pretext of imperative military needs and on land that was declared state land, including cultivated farmland of villages in the district and on rocky land the villagers used for grazing their flocks.

The government of Israel has invested heavily in Ariel. And now it is trying to “normalize” the settlement, among others, by giving it the municipal status of a city, by building a university there, and now a cultural center. According to Dror Etkes, an investigator with the Israeli NGO Yesh Din, an expert on settlement construction: “An Israeli can drive to Ariel without even noticing they are in the West Bank.”

And what is wrong with the establishment of settlements?

The establishment of settlements in the West Bank violates international law, which establishes principles that apply during war and occupation. Moreover, the settlements lead to the infringement of international human rights law. The Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits an occupying power from transferring citizens from its own territory to the occupied territory (Article 49).

The Hague Regulations prohibit an occupying power from undertaking permanent changes in the occupied area unless these are due to military needs in the narrow sense of the term, or unless they are undertaken for the benefit of the local population.

The International Court of Justice ratified these views, in ruling, “the Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (including East Jerusalem) have been established in breach of international law.”

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4 Ariel receives higher per capita financial support than any other Israeli authority: 7.9 times higher than the average per capita allocation for municipalities in Israel. (Ariel settlement fact sheet. B’tselem, Aug 30, 2010.)
Why are Israeli artists speaking out now?

A Center for the Performing Arts being built in the West Bank settlement of Ariel is nearing completion. The Center is set to open its doors with eight plays scheduled, to be performed by four Israeli theater companies starting in November. This would be the first time such productions take place in the occupied West Bank.

The establishment of a cultural center in the West Bank is clearly a violation of international law and furthers the process of Israel annexing Ariel permanently, despite its location deep inside the West Bank.

Who signed the letter in Israel?

The list of signers includes Israel Prize laureate Renee Yerushalmi, actors Yossi Pollack and Itay Tiran, director Ofira Henig, playwright Joshua Sobol and Savyon Liebrecht, as well as Prof. Gad Kinar (the head of the theater department in Tel Aviv University) and many others.

Is this the beginning of something new in Israel?

Shortly after the artists' declaration, 150 Israeli academics from around the country have vowed not to lecture in the settlements. They wrote: “We will not take part in any kind of cultural activity beyond the Green Line, take part in discussions and seminars, or lecture in any kind of academic setting in these settlements.” 9

Writers David Grossman, A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, and others have expressed their support for the artists as well. Haaretz journalist Esther Zandberg has called on Israeli architects and planners “to wake up and announce publicly that they will not continue planning new buildings in the settlements.” 10

What is at stake for the Israelis who are speaking up?

Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz said the government should withdraw funding from theaters which refuse to perform in Ariel: “The State of Israel invests a lot of money in theaters. The taxes helping those theaters exist are paid by Ariel’s residents as well, and those who are sabotaging this should not be employed in Israel.” 11

The position of the Israeli artists has become front-page news in Israel and the attacks from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Culture minister Limor Livnat, and others have been fast and furious. It’s the first time so many mainstream Israeli figures have spoken out in such a clear way about the settlements, and Israeli activists tell us, “Everyone is going crazy.”

Under the intense pressure handful of artists rescinded their signatures. 12

Of course, the pressure against Palestinians who speak up in favor of similar measures is much more heavy-handed. For example, Palestinian activist Mohammad Othman was detained for months in an apparent reprisal for his ongoing advocacy against the Israeli Separation Wall and the occupation. His detention began when he was traveling back home from a trip to Norway. There, he had spoken about Israeli human rights violations and had welcomed the decision of Norway’s national Pension Fund to divest from Elbit, an Israeli company profiting from the confiscation of Palestinian land by providing surveillance equipment that is mounted on the Separation Wall. 13

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www.jewishvoiceforpeace.org • info@jewishvoiceforpeace.org
What has been the reaction in the United States?

Inspired by their courage, and responding to a call for international support, Jewish Voice for Peace has developed a statement that has been signed by over 150 theater and film professionals representing some of the most respected and renowned artists in theater, film and television – including Four Pulitzer Prize winners, several recipients of Guggenheim Fellowships, a MacArthur Fellowship, a National Medal of Honor, and scores of recipients of the highest U.S. acting honors, including Tony Awards, Academy Awards, Emmy Awards, Grammy Awards, Obie Awards, and Drama Desk Awards.


The list is growing rapidly. You can find a full and updated list of names here: http://www.jvp.org/campaigns/making-history-support-israeli-artists-who-say-no-normalizing-settlements-4.

Here’s the full text of their statement:

“Last week, dozens of Israeli actors, directors, and playwrights made the brave decision not to perform in Ariel, one of the largest of the West Bank settlements, which by all standards of international law are clearly illegal. As American actors, directors, critics and playwrights, we salute our Israeli counterparts for their courageous decision.

Most of us are involved in daily compromises with wrongful acts. When a group of people suddenly have the clarity of mind to see that the next compromise looming up before them is an unbearable one -- and when they somehow find the strength to refuse to cross that line -- we can’t help but be overjoyed and inspired and grateful.

It’s thrilling to think that these Israeli theatre artists have refused to allow their work to be used to normalize a cruel occupation which they know to be wrong, which violates international law and which is impeding the hope for a just and lasting peace for Israelis and Palestinians alike. They’ve made a wonderful decision, and they deserve the respect of people everywhere who dream of justice. We stand with them.”

Who initiated this statement?

The statement is organized by Jewish Voice for Peace, a national membership organization, inspired by Jewish tradition to build a movement for a just peace based on human rights, equality, and international law for all the peoples of Israel and Palestine.

What is JVP’s position on boycotts?

Jewish Voice for Peace supports divestment from and boycotts of companies that profit from Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. This includes companies operating in or from occupied Palestinian territory, exploiting Palestinian labor and scarce environmental resources, providing materials or labor for settlements, or producing military or other equipment or materials used to violate human rights or to profit from the Occupation.

Like JVP’s position, the Israeli artists and their American supporters are focused specifically on the Occupation.

The boycott/divestment/sanctions movement (BDS) encompasses a variety of tactics and targets. JVP rejects the assertion that BDS is inherently anti-Semitic, and we encourage discussion both within our own community and outside of it of the growing BDS movement. JVP defends activists’ right to use the full range of BDS tactics without being persecuted or demonized.

To learn more about the BDS movement, please see our fact sheet on BDS.14

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Is the international artists’ statement a call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel?

No. The call itself is restricted to the statement signed by the artists. It offers support to the Israeli artists who have pledged not to perform beyond the Green Line separating Israel from the Occupied Palestinian West Bank.

But why should the population of Ariel be deprived of theater and other cultural activities?

They are not. If they want to see an Israeli production, they can travel just a few miles and see it inside Israel. Moreover, they should travel those few miles and relocate permanently inside Israel because their settlement in the occupied West Bank is illegal under international law and contributing to the daily human rights violations of Palestinians.

How does this compare with the Palestinians’ access to theater and culture?

It is highly doubtful that Palestinians would be allowed to attend the performances at the Ariel Cultural Center.

Moreover, the severe impediments to Palestinian mobility caused by the Israeli settlements, the Separation Wall, the checkpoints, and the blockade of Gaza create real challenges to the ability of Palestinians to meet and hold their own cultural events.

In addition, Israel exercises total control of who can enter and leave the West Bank from abroad to participate in a Palestinian cultural event or festival. For example, Israeli authorities recently denied entry to Ivan Prado, the Director of the International Clown Festival in Galicia, en route to a similar festival in Ramallah. Shortly after this incident, Israeli police abruptly closed the Palestinian National Theatre in East Jerusalem on what was to be the first night of a week-long Palestinian literary festival sponsored by UNESCO. Members of the audience and speakers were ordered to leave, forcing them to scramble to find another venue. Israeli said the events breached its ban on Palestinian political activity in the city. This is particularly ironic, given that Israeli government officials insist that culture and politics do not mix.

Why does the Israeli government insist that Ariel is “part of the national consensus”?

"Part of the national consensus" is a phrase used to argue that Israel should keep Ariel because most Israelis want Israel to keep it, viewing it as too large and too much of an Israeli “city” to “give up.” By building settlements, encouraging immigration to them, and creating amenities such as the Cultural Center in Ariel, Israel creates “facts on the ground” which become harder and harder to reverse.

But the whole concept is turned on its head: Israel cannot “give up” what it does not legally own.

The “national consensus” argument was recently used by Jacob Dayan, the Israeli Consul General in Los Angeles, who has reportedly been lobbying key people in industry against signing the American petition in solidarity with the Israeli actors: “Instead of dealing with these things, you should support Israeli culture, which is in need of support. And don’t let them involve you in internal Israeli politics, even more so since Ariel is part of the national consensus.”

It is ludicrous to assert that Israeli breaches of international law beyond its borders are simply internal Israeli matters. This is part of the continuous blurring by the Israeli government of the distinction between Israel and its Occupied Territories.

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15 According to the Israeli human rights group B’tselem report on the settlement of Ariel: “Israel has blocked Palestinian entry to Salfit from the north via a road branching off the Trans-Samarian Highway that also serves as the main access road to Ariel. As a result, Palestinians must travel a long way, via the Tapuah junction and the villages Yasuf and Iskaka, to the eastern entrance to Salfit. What was once a five-minute trip now takes 30-40 minutes, sometimes more.” (Ariel settlement fact sheet, B’tselem, Aug 30, 2010.)