

## **Israfrica: it involves music too**

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BDS France Campaign

The international Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) Campaign calls upon all artists invited to Israel not to perform in a country which practises apartheid and colonisation and rejects the right of return for millions of Palestinian refugees.

This month's invitations to Malian artists, Salif Keita and the Amadou and Mariam duo, to play at the Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival (being held from 20 to 23 August) have caused quite a stir. As happened in the case of Erik Truffaz and Jacky Terrasson at the start of this year, these artists have received letters from the international Boycott-Divestment-Sanctions (BDS) Campaign, appealing to them not to play there. While waiting for these musicians to take a conscientious decision, we are pondering on a few things.

These invitations throw a light on the new charm offensive that Israel has recently been aiming at certain communities in Africa. Israel's policy with regard to Africa, or Israfrica, is trying first of all to make everyone forget its long collaboration with South Africa during the apartheid era. Apart from the covert deals to sell arms and surveillance equipment to numerous African governments, Israel's strategy distinguished itself as of 2007 by its support to the rebels in Darfur, and its support today to South Sudan, with its oil and mining resources, against the regime in Khartoum. For this purpose Israel uses simplistic and misleading rhetoric, pitting « Africans », supported by Israel, against « Arabs », imagined to be allies of the Palestinians. Such deliberately racist descriptions ignore the fact that all of the parties involved are black Africans and that most of them speak Arabic and are Muslims.

These links with Africa serve to obscure the situation of Africans living in Israel. One must bear in mind that all citizens of Israel do not enjoy equal rights and equal access to public services, such rights and access depending on whether one is Jewish or Christian or Muslim. Some sixty laws have been identified as clearly discriminatory, and no fewer than fourteen administrative obstacles make access to university more difficult for non-jewish citizens, to take only one example. Moreover, Jews of Ethiopian origin are notoriously discriminated against and a recent scandal revealed that for several years the females had been subjected to campaigns of forced contraception. As for other non-jewish Africans who are either illegal immigrants or considered as such, dozens of them were recently wounded during racist pogroms on the streets of Tel Aviv. The member of parliament Miri Regev was even heard qualifying African immigration as « the cancer in Israeli society ». Not to be outdone, the Israeli government qualifies the migrants as « infiltrators », forbids them from sending money home, and arrests men, women and children, cramming them into the Saharonim camp near Eilat before deporting them, sometimes in agreement with their home countries and in exchange for new arms deals!

It is against this backdrop that Israel's policy regarding Africa also involves music. Several Israeli officials have admitted that Israel's cultural policy is an integral part of its international political strategy, and especially of its propaganda efforts to improve its image. Without government aid, how could a promoter invite African musicians, knowing that Israel represents a small market and is not on their usual tour itineraries? So it is not surprising that Israeli State agencies, like that organising the Jerusalem Sacred Music Festival, are the ones trying to attract an African country – in this case, Mali, whose war is making the front pages and is being presented, again, as a conflict between « Africans » and « Arabs ». Although Malian artists have rarely played in Israel before, invitations have been pouring out over the past two years: to Oumou Sangaré, Vieux Farka Touré, Amadou and Mariam, Fatoumata Diawara, Tinariwen... and now to Salif Keita.

In the 1970s, marked by decades of struggle against colonisation, African artists spontaneously sided with the Palestinians and would have openly refused such invitations. Today, for contractual reasons, it is harder for these artists to express their political reasons for cancelling an engagement so they use instead the pretext of a scheduling problem, or fatigue, or a fear for their personal safety. But despite everything, more and more African artists are now joining the cultural boycott of the State of Israel: the Malian Oumou Sangaré, the Egyptian Natacha Atlas, and South African artists such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Andy Kasrils, Ewok, for example, but also the South African members of Artists Against Apartheid and the members of the Kenya Palestine Solidarity Committee who recently took action against an Israeli film festival organised at the *Alliance Française* in Nairobi. In fact it is when States interfere in culture that artists (and their audience) start to realise that they play a political role, that they're being made to play one...

- [1. http://tinyurl.com/m7hbw3c](http://tinyurl.com/m7hbw3c)
- [2. www.pambazuka.org/en/category/advocacy/87806](http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/advocacy/87806)