

BEHIND THE BOYCOTT:

THE HISTORY OF THE HATEFUL CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISRAEL

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Promoters of BDS—the movement to boycott, divest from, and bring sanctions against the Jewish state of Israel—are open about their aim of pressuring Israel to relinquish land for a Palestinian state. What they less often share is that a two-state solution—Israel and Palestine living side-by-side in peace—is not their goal.

THE ORIGINS OF THE ISRAEL BOYCOTT

Even before the State of Israel was officially declared in 1948, with the endorsement of the UN and backed by the immediate recognition of U.S. President Harry Truman, Arabs in British Mandatory Palestine and throughout the region declared war against the Jews. They sought to kill as many as possible, drive the rest out of the country, and end the Jewish state. That era of belligerency lasted over 30 years before Israel and its chief antagonist, Egypt, signed a peace accord in 1979.

When it became clear that war could not defeat Israel, those seeking to bring Israel to its knees shifted tactics, and the Palestinian Intifada was born. It came in two waves of terror, running from 1987 to 1993 and then from 2000 to 2005. These surges were premised on the idea that Jews were foreign colonizers who, like European imperialists in the Third World, could be driven out by making the cost of staying higher than the colonizers could bear. But the Palestinians learned during their terror campaigns that the threat of physical harm would not end the Jewish state, because the Jews knew that they belonged in Israel.

Next came the current stage in the long-running campaign against Israel—the movement to boycott, divest from, and bring sanctions against Israel, or “BDS” for short. By encouraging governments, churches, companies, universities, and individuals to

forego the products of the Jewish state, this boycott seeks to choke off Israel's economy—one of the great success stories of the rebirth of Jewish sovereignty.

Boycotts of Israel are not a new phenomenon.

Indeed, the Arab League imposed a boycott of Jews in Mandatory Palestine as far back as 1945—three years before the establishment

of the State of Israel. That boycott, which lasted decades, had largely failed by 2005, when a web of Palestinian NGOs came together to issue the manifesto that created the BDS movement.



The campaign has three objectives: (1) “Ending the occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the wall” (i.e., the security barrier that Israel constructed during the Second Intifada to curb the influx of suicide bombers into Israel); (2) “Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality;” and (3) “Respecting, protecting, and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes.”

While seemingly nobly intended, each of these objectives is flawed in a crucial way. The first is insufficiently defined. Which lands are the “Arab

lands” that Israel must stop “colonizing”? Does BDS object to the occupation that began in 1967 when Israel assumed control of the West Bank and Gaza, or does it object to the “occupation” created by Israel’s very existence? After all, the Arab League boycott that is the antecedent of the BDS movement targeted the very presence of Jews—even without a state—in Mandatory Palestine. Hind Awwad, a leader in the BDS National Committee, makes the goal explicit: “Israel is the oppressor, not the settlements.” The second demand implies that Arab citizens of Israel do not already have full civil rights—they do, including the right to petition Israel’s Supreme Court when they feel those rights are infringed upon. Finally, the third objective insists that Israel extend to Palestinians the opportunity to settle inside Israel, wherever their ancestors lived in 1948.

**There's no Israel.
That's what
it's really about.**

**Norman Finkelstein, academic
and anti-Israel activist**

In any of the various two-state solutions that have been proposed, the goal has been to create a Palestinian state that will peacefully exist side-by-side with the Jewish state of Israel. This plan is undermined by the so-called “right of return,” which would allow millions of Palestinians—for the most part descendants of the Palestinians who left Israel during

the 1948 war—to pour into Israel from the West Bank, Gaza, and wherever else they may live, effectively creating two Palestinian states—one, in the West Bank and Gaza, without any Jews, and one within Israel's 1967 borders with a Jewish minority. Advocates of a boycott push for these objectives because they do not support a two-state solution. The leadership of the BDS movement believes that there should be one state, a Palestinian state, between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

WHAT DOES THE BDS MOVEMENT WANT?

In 2003, at the height of the Second Intifada, when Palestinian terrorists were murdering Israeli civilians on buses, in cafes, and at bars, Omar Barghouti, who would soon found the BDS movement, had this to say: "Good riddance! The two-state solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is finally dead. But someone has to issue an official death certificate before the



rotting corpse is given a proper burial and we can all move on and explore the more just, moral and therefore enduring alternative for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Mandate Palestine: the one-state solution."



If, then, BDS leaders are opposed to the continued existence of a Jewish state, do they want a binational Arab-Jewish state instead—one country serving as the national homeland for both Jews and Palestinians? Apparently not: “I am completely and categorically against binationalism,” Barghouti went on to say, “because it assumes that there are two nations with equal moral claims to the land and therefore, we have to accommodate both national rights. I am completely opposed to that.”

No, the only thing that the BDS movement’s leadership will accept is the utter denial of any Jewish right to self-determination, a “solution” that both defies history and contradicts the established support for two states espoused by the U.S., the UN, and the European Union. Or, in the words of Iranian-American BDS activist Paul Larudee, a co-founder of the BDS organization Free Palestine Movement, they will boycott “the racist state of Israel until that state dissolves itself.”

If all of this feels slippery and convoluted, that’s intentional on the part of the BDS activists. Norman

Finkelstein, a Jewish professor and a long-time leader of the BDS movement, castigated his fellow anti-Israel activists for their disingenuousness. Finkelstein, too, believes that Israel should be destroyed, but he disagrees with the movement's strategy of hiding behind the fig leaf of Palestinian rights: "There's no Israel. That's what it's really about."

Many BDS sympathizers are undoubtedly sincere in their expressions of support for peace, some even support an equitable two-state solution. But these good people are manipulated by the leaders of the BDS campaign, who seek nothing less than the elimination of the Jewish state.

WHAT FORMS DOES THE BOYCOTT TAKE?

The hateful strategy to boycott Israel rests on a parallel drawn to the situation in Apartheid-era South Africa. Apartheid was a brutal system of racial segregation and colonialist oppression that whites in that country enforced against the native blacks. The international anti-Apartheid campaign triggered widespread boycotts of South Africa, offered solidarity and support to South African blacks, and helped bring the loathsome policy to an end. When Israel's foes make the Apartheid analogy, they cast the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a matter of race, promoting the Palestinian cause as if it were a struggle for human rights against Israeli oppression.

These detractors ignore several key points. First, Israelis and Palestinians are both native to the land of Israel—indeed, Jews have resided there for over 2,000 years—so there is nothing colonialist about the existence of a Jewish state. Next, the conflict is not a racial one but a national one, with two nations each claiming the land as their own. Finally, and most importantly, Israel extends full rights to all citizens—Jewish, Arab, or otherwise. By inaccurately comparing the situation in Israel to Apartheid, BDS ignores both the facts on the ground and the history of the conflict, and makes a two-state solution—which can only work if built on trust—less likely.

BOYCOTT ACTIVITIES FALL INTO FOUR MAIN CATEGORIES:



Some academic organizations, such as the American Studies Association, have voted in recent years to boycott Israel. While the specifics may vary, these academic boycotts generally include refusal to work with Israeli universities and professors. Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia University, had this to say about one such boycott in the UK: “I find this idea utterly antithetical to the fundamental values of the academy, where we will not hold intellectual exchange hostage to the political disagreements of the moment. In seeking to quarantine Israeli universities and scholars this vote threatens every university committed to scholarly and cultural exchanges that lead to enlightenment, empathy, and a much-needed

international marketplace of ideas.... Boycott us, then, for we gladly stand together with our many colleagues in



British, American, and Israeli universities against such intellectually shoddy and politically biased attempts to hijack the central mission of higher education."



When popular entertainers announce an upcoming performance in Israel, they can show up in the crosshairs of the BDS bullies, who use social media barrages and petitions to pressure for cancellation of shows and visits. This rarely works. In recent years, Israel has welcomed international megastars Justin Timberlake, Paul McCartney, Rihanna, and many more. When Israeli entertainers travel abroad, however, they often find a chilly reception. In 2012, for example, when Israel's national theater company performed at the Globe Theatre in London, it was met with fierce protests. Sometimes, cultural boycott leads to blatant antisemitism, as occurred in the summer of 2015 when Matisyahu, an American Jewish reggae star, was disinited from a music festival in Spain for refusing to explicitly condemn Israel. After widespread condemnation from around the world—including the Spanish government—Matisyahu was reinvited, and he put on a memorable performance.

ECONOMIC



BOYCOTT

Financial warfare against Israel can take many forms. Some people refuse to buy any Israeli products. Others will not buy anything produced in Israeli settlements on the West Bank. A particularly popular weapon is divestment from companies seen as benefiting from Israel's occupation of the West Bank: students campaign to convince their universities to divest from these companies, citizens lobby their governments to ensure that pension funds are not invested in Israel, and shareholders pressure corporations to cease doing business with Israeli companies. In practice, these actions hurt Palestinians, since those employed in Israel or in Israeli settlements make far more money than they would in similar jobs in Palestinian-controlled territory and they spend that money in Palestinian cities and villages, providing a much-needed stimulus for the Palestinian economy. The twin Israeli and Palestinian economies are too intertwined for BDS to target Israel without also harming Palestinians.

CHRISTIAN



BOYCOTT

Boycott activists claim the moral high ground in the hope of attracting church groups and religious leaders to their cause. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and United Church of Christ, for example, supported by a small cadre of radical anti-Zionist Jews, have voted to endorse BDS policies even as they claim to remain committed to interfaith dialogue. These religious groups see themselves as pursuing peace. But peacemakers don't make one-sided judgments.

By endorsing the bigoted boycott of Israel, they are simplistically choosing a side in an extremely complex conflict, rendering themselves useless in their ability to affect the situation. Additionally, since the vast majority of Jews (especially those who are religiously affiliated) are Zionists committed to Israel's future, any pro-BDS church will find it difficult, if not impossible, to engage in meaningful interfaith work with the organized Jewish community.

DO PALESTINIANS SUPPORT BDS?

There are plenty of Palestinians who don't support BDS. Some reject the boycott for economic reasons, like the 110,000 Palestinians who work in Israel (in better conditions and for better wages than they would have in the West Bank).

Some Palestinians are opposed to boycotting Israel for strategic political reasons. "No, we do not support the boycott of Israel," said Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in 2013 while attending the funeral of Nelson Mandela, who famously fought for an end to the South African Apartheid that proponents of a boycott of Israel suggest as their analog. One of Abbas' advisors, Majdi Khaldi, went further, explaining, "We are neighbors with Israel, we have agreements with Israel, we recognize Israel, we are not asking anyone to boycott products of Israel."

Noted Palestinian activist Bassam Eid, the founder of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, and a proponent of a two-state solution, rejects BDS outright. “For our own sake,” he says, “we need to reconcile with our Israeli neighbors, not reject and revile them.”

Even Edward Said, a father of Palestinian nationalism and the furthest thing from a Zionist, wrote before his death that it was “fatuous to impose total blockades against everything Israeli (now in fashion in various progressive Arab circles) and to pretend that that is the really virtuous nationalist path.”

HOW SUCCESSFUL HAS THE BDS MOVEMENT BEEN?

Is BDS effective? It can claim some small moral victories—a few cancelled concerts, non-binding divestment votes by a handful of university student governments, the support of some church groups and spiritual and political leaders—but to judge by the effect on Israel’s economy, the movement must be deemed a failure. According to a report by *Bloomberg*, the level of foreign investments in Israeli assets hit an all-time high of \$285.12 billion in 2015, nearly triple what it was when BDS began in 2005. A RAND Corporation study, conducted in 2015, came up with similar findings, and the Israeli government, too, reports that BDS has had little to no impact on the country’s economy.

The ineffectiveness of BDS can be seen in Israel's diplomatic successes as well. Israeli diplomats and government officials have lately enjoyed closer ties with countries that are not traditional allies of the Jewish state. In recent years, Benjamin Netanyahu became the first sitting Israeli Prime Minister to visit Australia, Singapore, and Kazakhstan, and made headlines traveling to Chad and Oman, two Muslim countries that have not seen an Israeli leader in the 21st century. If orchestrating a new diplomatic isolation of Israel is a goal of the BDS movement, it is utterly failing to achieve that goal.

Even so, BDS presents a challenge, particularly on American college campuses. Anti-Israel activity and antisemitic incidents are on the rise. In recent years, there have been dozens of instances on campuses across the country of anti-Israel activists shouting down Israeli guest lecturers, staging walkouts, and attempting to block educational programming. Videos of many of these disruptions were distributed widely, amplifying protesters' messages, and turning disruptions into international propaganda. And dozens of campuses have also seen BDS resolutions brought before student government or put on the ballot for a student body referendum.



These instances often acquire antisemitic undertones. For example, during a divestment campaign at UC-Santa Cruz, an elected Jewish student

government official received a message instructing him to abstain from a BDS vote because of his connection to the “Jewish agenda.” Damningly, one recent study found that the strongest predictor of anti-Jewish sentiment on campus was the presence of a BDS campaign.

There has also been a surge in attempts to mount academic boycotts of Israel. BDS activists have been testing the waters and forming relationships within academic associations for years. The American Anthropological Association (AAA – 11,000 members) and the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA – 2,000 members) passed BDS resolutions, though the AAA’s full membership narrowly voted down the resolution in an online vote.

What does this portend? The academic boycotts do not add up to a whole lot. The American Studies Association (ASA – 5,000 members), which voted to boycott Israel in 2014, has been plagued by internal squabbles about how to implement the boycott. And when push comes to shove, it’s very difficult to keep Israeli academics from attending conferences, despite the boycotter’s original intentions. Nevertheless, these boycotts send a powerful message to professors and students that Israel’s legitimacy is somehow suspect.

The true battle on campus is to ensure that America’s next generation understands Israel, empathizes with its struggles, and appreciates the value of the U.S.-Israel relationship. That’s a battle we must win.

IS BDS WRONG?

There are many reasons why someone might choose to back BDS: hatred of Israel; ignorance of the history of the region; the media image of an Israeli Goliath looming over the Palestinian David; or the feeling that only such a drastic move can get the peace process back on track. The key flaw of BDS, however, is that it empowers extremists on both sides and weakens moderate forces that seek peace.

Observing BDS, Israelis see that despite their country's peace offers in 2000 and 2008, despite the withdrawal from Gaza, despite the overwhelming restraint demonstrated by the Israel Defense Forces, Israel, and only Israel, continues to be blamed and punished for the continuing conflict.

At the same time, Palestinian intransigents who have spurned successive peace offers in the hope that Israel will someday disappear, see the first glimmers of their wish fulfilled in the limited successes of BDS. Perceiving that Israel is under pressure, they will encourage other Palestinians to reject peace talks and opt instead for stubborn resistance to compromise. After all, why enter a peace process that will require painful concessions from both sides when BDS pressure may eventually weaken and destroy Israel?

Questions? Email
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