

Essay 10 - The Boycott Movement – Who is delegitimising Israel?

- **Arab delegitimation of Israel started from the beginning of the state's existence.**
- **Changes in the nature of the western left have added to the hostility to Israel.**
- **Britain is today perhaps the major centre outside the Middle East itself for the boycott movement.**

Arab rejectionism long predates 'the occupation'.

One modern myth is that Arab rejection of Israel is a product of 'the occupation' – that is, Israel's control of the territory that it captured in the 1967 war. In fact, Arab rejectionism long predates the occupation, and was the cause rather than the consequence of the 1967 war.

Arab opposition to Jewish immigration provoked the anti-Jewish violence in Palestine which erupted in 1921, 1929 and 1936.

Arab boycotts of Jewish businesses in Palestine started as early as 1922, 26 years before the establishment of Israel.

Arab delegitimation of Israel started from the beginning of the state's existence.

In 1947-8, the attempts first by the Palestinian Arab militias and then by the armies of the Arab states to prevent the creation of a Jewish state failed and Israel was born.

The Arabs responded to their defeat not by making peace, but by seeking other ways to defeat Israel, specifically through boycotts and delegitimation.

The Arab League was founded in 1944, and in 1945 began a boycott of Zionist goods and services in the British controlled mandate territory of Palestine. In 1948, following the war establishing Israel's independence, the boycott was formalised against the state of Israel and broadened to include non-Israelis who maintain economic relations with Israel or who are perceived to support it. The boycott is administered by the Central Boycott Office, a specialized bureau of the Arab League.

From 1973 the Arab states used the oil weapon to force their rejectionist policies on other countries

The 1973 oil embargo, intended to put pressure on western countries to abandon Israel in the context of the Yom Kippur War, gave a shock to the world economic system. In addition, the massive increase in revenues enjoyed by the oil-producing countries gave them a new weight in world affairs. They used this influence to pressure other countries which had enjoyed close relationships with Israel (e.g. in Africa) to end these relationships.

Changes in the world political order increased the influence of the rejectionists.

In the post-World War II era, decolonisation gave rise to a large number of newly independent states, often with anti-Western worldviews. This shifted the balance in the United Nations dramatically compared to the pro-Israel majority it had enjoyed in its early years. The Arab states were able to present Israel as a holdover of colonialism instead of the authentic embodiment of Jewish self-determination it in fact was.

The passage of the notorious UN 'Zionism is racism' resolution in 1975 was emblematic of this shift – although this resolution was rescinded in 1991.

Changes in the nature of the western left also added to the hostility to Israel.

Up until the 1960s, the focus of most left-wing parties and movements in western countries lay in campaigning among working class people. In this world of trade unions and working-class parties, the Israeli labour movement was a recognised and accepted component, and many on the left were strongly pro-Israeli.

From the 1960s onward, however, the western left changed. Partly it embraced social issues that alienated it from often socially conservative working-class communities. Leftists started looking elsewhere than their home country's working classes for the agents of revolution and many seized on the anti-colonial movements as the only plausible enemies of capitalism. In this romantic 'third-worldism' the Palestine Liberation Organisation was seen as one of the champions of the anti-colonial struggle along with the Viet Cong and the IRA.

The rise of radical Islamism and the 9/11 attack polarised western opinion.

While most were horrified by the carnage of 9/11, there were plenty on the left whose 'third-worldism' and anti-Americanism led them to the view that 'America had it coming'. Versions of this view spread to broad sections of liberal opinion through opposition to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

This approach meant that hostility to Israel, seen as an ally to America's regional agenda, increased on the left even while the country was experiencing its worst terrorist outrages. Subsequent incursions into Jenin and Gaza – even though motivated by the need for Israel to defend its own people – provoked outrage.

Britain is today perhaps the major centre outside the Middle East itself for the boycott movement.

The BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) movement was launched by various Palestinian NGOs in 2005 in a conscious effort to "South Africanise" the debate about Israel by adopting the language and tactics of the anti-apartheid movement. The analogy with apartheid is comprehensively rebutted in [this document](#).

In the UK BDS was promoted as a way of cementing the alliance between the far left and radical Islamists as the anti-Iraq War movement lost momentum after 2003.

The prime mover of BDS in the UK is the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), a coalition which includes far-leftists, Islamists and others. It is active in many local areas and devotes a large part of its efforts to preventing others from buying Israeli goods and disrupting Israeli cultural events.

Its campaigns usually take the form of targeting retail outlets such as Ahava or SodaStream, or Israeli goods sold in supermarkets and elsewhere. The far larger Israeli export trade, in computer and mobile phone components, software and medical equipment is untouched. The boycotters also disrupt Israeli cultural events, such as the 2012 visits by the Batsheva dance company and the Habima theatre company. They try to persuade local authorities to boycott environmental services contractor Veolia because it helped build the Jerusalem light rail network, but this is difficult to achieve as it breaches procurement law.

The boycott movement does not have widespread public support in the way the anti-apartheid boycott did. However, it has made some headway among certain churches, trade unions and academic organisations.

Trade unions such as UCU (which represents university and college lecturers and administrative staff), Unite (the UK's largest union) and UNISON (Britain's main public sector union) support a boycott of Israel. This has included boycotting Histadrut, the Israeli trade union federation, despite its record of representing Israeli workers regardless of ethnic origin (20% of its members are Arabs, and it has positive discrimination policies in place to improve their position in the movement).

UCU in particular also has a policy of boycotts. In particular this involves the so-called academic boycott, which opposes relationships with Israeli academic institutions. It need hardly be pointed out that this policy is an attack on academic freedom – not just that of Israeli academics, but also of academics at British universities. After all, if a boycott were actually implemented, the latter would find themselves prevented from attending academic conferences, engaging in international collaborations and so on, on political grounds. This would legitimate a structure of control over British academics to which in other contexts the union is totally opposed.

Such a boycott would also of course fall foul of equality legislation, which forbids discrimination on grounds (among others) of national origin, and hence would be illegal in terms of British law.

Such boycotts are typically the result of extremist domination of the unions' conferences and governing bodies, and usually have no real support among the memberships. Thus whenever UCU members have been given the opportunity to express their views they have always rejected boycotts.

No British university has ever adopted the academic boycott, nor are there any signs of them doing so.

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