

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS): The Global Campaign to Delegitimize Israel

Since the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and the Durban Conference of 2001, organized campaigns around the world have promoted a policy of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel. The campaign intensified following the July 2004 joint statement by The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), and a July 2005 statement by Palestinian civil society organizations calling on the international community “to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era.” Proponents of BDS also called for pressure on governments “to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel.” A key element of the BDS campaign is the specific rejection of a two-state solution to the conflict. The campaign was endorsed by pro-Palestinian organizations in Europe and the United States, and the call for BDS against Israel has since become a mainstay of the global anti-Israel movement.

Campaigns have been launched demanding the “divestment” of university, municipal, church, union and other investment portfolios from companies that do business with Israel, as well as the banning of Israeli products, professionals, academics, academic institutions and artistic performances (in Israel and abroad). In the past few years, student governments at several dozen universities and colleges have voted on non-binding divestment resolutions against multinational companies that do business in Israel.

The BDS movement tries to emulate the 1980s campaigns against South African apartheid. Its supporters claim Israeli policies towards Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank are akin to South Africa’s apartheid regime, and that the same tactics used to demand apartheid be dismantled in South Africa should be employed to ostracize, marginalize and pressure Israel.

Some supporters of BDS may genuinely believe that these efforts will encourage Israel to change policies with which they disagree. However, the predominant drive of the BDS campaign and its leadership is not criticism of policies; it is to demonize and delegitimize Israel. It is clear that the majority of BDS supporters reject a two-state solution and deny the Jewish right to self-determination and statehood in favor of supporting the right of return for Palestinian refugees and their descendants.

Indeed, the BDS movement’s official platform, which includes a call for the “right of return” for all Palestinian refugees and their descendants, would result in Jews being the minority and end of Israel as a Jewish state.

Despite the best efforts of these activists, and some minor gains among church groups and British trade unions, the divestment and boycott campaign has largely failed to have more than a public relations impact, particularly in the U.S. To date, campaigns have failed, in every instance, to get

targeted institutions to divest from Israel or to keep U.S. companies from doing business with Israel. Even when the American Studies Association voted to boycott Israeli academic institutions in late 2013, it is nearly impossible to see any visible outcome of that decision. Even more compelling is that more than 200 university administrators condemned the pro-boycott decision and, in a strong show of support for the Jewish state, reiterated that their institutions will not boycott Israel.

These campaigns do, however, garner publicity and potentially have a negative impact on public perceptions of Israel. Increasingly, BDS campaigns have become an effective way for anti-Israel activists to attract attention to their message, particularly on college campuses where BDS initiatives draw students, faculty, campus organizations and administrations into what generally becomes a highly politicized and publicized debate.

Key Points to Make Against BDS Campaigns

- **Promote reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians through constructive measures.** BDS campaigns represent a hostile tactic that rests on a fundamental rejection of Israel's right to exist or defend itself. BDS does nothing to promote peace. Indeed, the movement's efforts often target the very people, companies and institutions that can help bring Israelis and Palestinians closer to peace, including progressive multinational companies that work with Israel and famous celebrities, artists, and cultural icons who can bridge gaps between the two peoples. Concerned individuals should promote initiatives that build connections, encourage interaction, foster relationships and help prepare both societies for peace.
- **Israel is committed to making peace with the Palestinians.** The harsh rhetoric of BDS proponents ignores the Israeli public's support for a two-state solution, as well as Israeli government willingness to engage in negotiations and support Palestinian efforts to create institutions and infrastructure to improve the on the ground situation for Palestinians, all while overlooking Palestinian intransigence and violence. Efforts to delegitimize, punish or isolate Israel unfairly seek to place the entire onus of the conflict on one side. The global BDS movement, as clearly stated on its website, does not support a two-state solution and the continued existence of Israel as a Jewish state. Instead, it calls for the right of return for Palestinian refugees which, if granted, would result in the dismantlement of Israel as a Jewish state. Even Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, declared in a media interview: "We do not support the boycott of Israel."
- **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about land and security, and will be resolved at the negotiating table.** There is no Israeli ideology, policy or predetermined plan to segregate, persecute or mistreat the Arab population. There is no valid comparison between Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, which are driven by security concerns, and apartheid South Africa.

- **Israel is a proud democracy.** Israel is a leading stable democracy in the Middle East, with all the institutions – a free press, a multitude of political parties, an independent judiciary and religious freedom — that are at the heart of true liberal democracies. The Middle East, and indeed the world, has many states that do not come close to living up to Israel's standards. Criticism of Israel, like criticism of any other sovereign country in the world, can be reasonable and legitimate. But BDS campaigns, which single out Israel for pariah status, are unfair and disproportionate.

How to Counter Boycott and Divestment Campaigns

- Know the facts. Educate yourself on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Keep up to date on current developments. Develop confidence in your grasp of the issues.
- Study and distribute materials on why efforts to isolate and demonize Israel are wrong. Fact-based talking points and “messages that work” are readily available online. Use them as the basis of your own personal advocacy, opinion pieces and letters to the editor.
- Get involved in your community, on your campus, in your workplace. Develop relationships with peers who are active in their church, student group, community or business organization or union. Share your views on why these campaigns are wrong and counterproductive.
- Gather and publicize public statements from respected community leaders that oppose these campaigns. For example, numerous university presidents and administrators have spoken out against divestment and deplored the animosity these campaigns have often brought to campus (while upholding the supporters' right to free speech).
- Organize or support local initiatives to promote Israeli goods, such as “buycotts” of Israeli products.