

BDS: The Global Campaign to Delegitimize Israel

BACKGROUND

Since the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 and the Durban Conference of 2001, organized campaigns around the world have promoted the “boycott, divestment and sanctions” (BDS) of 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 call by Palestinian civil society organizations 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.” 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 key tactic within the global effort to delegitimize and isolate Israel.

GOALS

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

Campaigns have been launched demanding the “divestment” of university, municipal, church, union and other investment portfolios from companies that advocates claim “aid Israel’s occupation”, as well as the “boycott” of Israeli products, professionals, professional associations and academic institutions, and artistic performances (in Israel and abroad).

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, but the demonization and delegitimization of Israel. BDS campaigns promote a biased and simplistic approach to the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and present this dispute over territorial and nationalist claims as the fault of only one party – Israel. The BDS campaign does not support Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, and rejects a two-state solution to the conflict.

PROGRESS

Despite the best efforts of BDS activists, the campaign has largely failed to have more than a public relations impact, particularly in the U.S. For the most part, campaigns have failed to bring major institutions to divest from Israel or to keep companies and institutions from engaging with Israel or Israelis. There have been some gains among church groups and British trade unions. At universities where student governments have passed divestment resolutions, the president, chancellor or board of trustees have refused to implement it. Graduate student unions who voted to support divestment have had the resolution nullified by their international union. Even academic associations who have voted to boycott Israeli academic institutions have not implemented these policies in a discernible way.

BDS campaigns do, however, garner publicity and often have a negative impact on public perceptions of Israel. Increasingly, BDS campaigns are used by anti-Israel activists to attract attention to their message, particularly on college campuses where BDS initiatives draw students, faculty, campus organizations and administrations into a highly politicized and publicized debate.

IS BDS ANTI-SEMITIC?

Many of the founding goals of the BDS movement, including denying the Jewish people the universal right of self-determination – along with many of the strategies employed in BDS campaigns are anti-Semitic. Many individuals involved in BDS campaigns are driven by opposition to Israel's very existence as a Jewish state. Often time, BDS campaigns give rise to tensions in communities – particularly on college campuses – that can result in harassment or intimidation of Jews and Israel supporters, including overt anti-Semitic expression and acts. This dynamic can create an environment in which anti-Semitism can be expressed more freely.

And, all too often, BDS advocates employ anti-Semitic rhetoric and narratives to isolate and demonize Israel.

KEY POINTS TO MAKE AGAINST BDS CAMPAIGNS

- **Promote reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians through constructive measures.** BDS campaigns represent a hostile delegitimization tactic that rests on a fundamental rejection of Israel's right to exist or defend itself. BDS does nothing to promote peace. A more constructive approach would be to promote initiatives that build bridges, promote interaction, and help prepare both societies for peace.
- **Israelis want to make peace with the Palestinians.** The harsh rhetoric of proponents ignores the support of the Israeli public for a two-state solution and Israeli government efforts to promote negotiations and improve the situation on the ground for Palestinians, and overlooks Palestinian intransigence and violence. Efforts to delegitimize, punish or isolate Israel undermine this commitment.
- **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is complex.** Holding Israel alone accountable for the conflict is inaccurate and unhelpful. The conflict over land and security can only be resolved at the negotiating table and through a two-state solution and both sides will be required to make difficult decisions and concessions.
- **Israel is a proud democracy.** Israel is the leading stable democracy in the Middle East, with all of 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 DISVESTMENT 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. Talking points and “messages that work” are readily available online. Use them as the basis of your own personal advocacy, opinion pieces, letters to the editor.

- Get involved in your community, on your campus, in your workplace. Develop relationships with those active in their church, student group, community or business organization or union. Share your personal connection to Israel.
- Gather and publicize public statements 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.

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