

# **Boycotting Israel – Current Efforts and Future Challenges**

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## **Introduction**

Israel is a settler-colonialism project which has been committing crimes of apartheid against the Palestinians since its illegal formation in 1948. Reputable human rights organizations have attested to this reality, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and B'tselem.

Just as the international community once boycotted South Africa due to its apartheid policies towards its black citizens, Israel, too, deserves to be boycotted. Crimes of apartheid in South Africa only stopped in 1993 when the global boycott of the regime eventually forced it to abandon its policies.

The global BDS movement currently spearheads the efforts to boycott Israel. Nevertheless, to achieve success, it needs the support of governments and people of conscience globally. Even though there are challenges facing the movement, they are surmountable.

## **The BDS movement**

The BDS movement was established in July 2005 by the Palestinian civil societies, supported by 170 Palestinian NGOs, and imposed three demands on Israel. To understand the demands, we have to take note that Palestinian society consists of three components:

1. Refugees in exile
2. Palestinians under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip
3. The discriminated Palestinian citizens of the Israeli state.

Therefore, the three Demands of the BDS Movement on Israel are:

1. Recognize the right of return of all Palestinian refugees.
2. End the occupation of the West Bank and the illegal blockade of Gaza.

3. End the oppression and discrimination of Palestinians living in Historic Palestine (now called Israel).

The BNC, or the BDS National Committee, coordinates the policies and activities of the global BDS movement. The BNC was set up in 2007 following the BDS Conference in Ramallah in November 2007. The BNC coordinates all the BDS campaigns and the targets of global boycotts.

### **BDS Malaysia**

The efforts to establish BDS Malaysia were initiated by several pro-Palestine organizations, namely Aqsa Syarif, Viva Palestina, and Al Quds Foundation. In addition, some individuals were also involved. They organized the first BDS conference in Malaysia on September 12 2015, at the University of Malaya. Following the conference, BDS Malaysia was formally established on November 29, 2015, and officially registered in March 2016. The current organizational members of BDS Malaysia are Aqsa Syarif, Viva Palestina Malaysia, Palestinian Cultural Organisation of Malaysia, Al-Quds Foundation of Malaysia, MAPIM, and Harmoni.

BDS Malaysia has decided to be part of the global BDS movement and has, therefore, decided to work closely with the BDS National Committee. It consults with BNC on significant policy issues, including targets of boycott efforts.

### **Boycott Efforts in Ending Apartheid Policies in South Africa**

It is worth reminding that before 1993, the South African government implemented apartheid policies towards black South Africans. Many innocent Africans were killed, tortured and jailed for their efforts to gain justice, freedom and equality. One of the most famous victims was Nelson Mandela, who was jailed for 27 years. However, the international boycott of South

Africa was one of the most critical factors that contributed to the ending of the apartheid regime there and in 1994 and Nelson Mandela becoming the first black president of South Africa.

There are more formidable challenges facing a boycott of Israel efforts than a boycott of apartheid South Africa. The most crucial factor is that Israel is politically, economically and diplomatically supported by both the United States and the European Union. Moreover, the Israeli lobby is the most powerful lobby group in the United States. It has so far been able to convince most Americans to ignore Israeli apartheid crimes.

Other challenges include the relatively more fractious situation among Palestinian liberation movements than the South African liberation movement. The latter is more united behind the African National Congress, which engaged in armed struggle against the apartheid regime of South Africa and called for a global boycott of it. On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority has decided to normalize relations with Israel following the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993. In other words, the boycott efforts lack the support of the Palestinian political leaders. So far, among Palestinian political leaders, only Hamas leaders have expressed unequivocal support for BDS efforts. Unfortunately, the US and the EU have convinced much of the world that Hamas is a terrorist organization. As a result, Hamas's support for BDS efforts is being used by Israel to tarnish the BDS movement.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the ANC was also considered a terrorist organization by the West. That did not stop the world from eventually realizing that the apartheid South African regime needed to be boycotted.

### **BDS Threat to Apartheid Israel**

Israel knows it will suffer the same fate as the South African apartheid regime if the international community are united in boycotting it. This situation may appear at first glance to be daunting. Nevertheless, social media and other avenues have enabled news on Israeli apartheid crimes to reach the ordinary people making more people worldwide aware of Israeli apartheid crimes towards the Palestinians.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Jerusalem Post, Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy officials announced the start of a 'new era' in the Israeli government's campaign against Israel-boycott organizations, proclaiming the rise of the 'Start-Up Ministry' called the Strategic Affairs Ministry. Its principal mission is to 'push back, in creative and

innovative ways, against the delegitimization of Israel and the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement'. As a result, Israel is trying its hardest to counter the threat posed by the global BDS movement to the extent of setting up a ministry with a budget of millions to counter the BDS movement.<sup>i</sup>

Many Israeli ministers have also expressed their alarm at the threat the BDS movement poses. Its previous justice Minister Tzipi Livni warned that Israel was facing South Africa-style boycotts.<sup>ii</sup> Labour Party leader MK Herzog was also quoted as saying that the boycott movement 'is turning into a strategic threat' to the country. This was echoed by the former Jewish Home hardliner MK Ayelet Shaked who described 'the cultural and academic BDS campaign as the greatest threat faced by Israel'.<sup>iii</sup>

Israel's late President Shimon Peres said 'the danger of an economic boycott' to be 'far more palpable than a security threat, given how Israel 'live[s] on exports'.<sup>iv</sup>

Finally, at a conference aimed at combating the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) at Jerusalem's International Convention Center on March 28, 2018, the Israeli Minister of Transportation, Israel Katz, called for the 'focused civilian elimination of the leadership of BDS.'<sup>v</sup>

Israel has also pressured US politicians to take action against BDS activists and has succeeded to a large extent. For example, during her bid to become the president of the USA, Hillary Clinton wrote a letter to one of her supporters, the businessman and top American Zionist Haim Saban, in which she wrote, '... We need to make countering BDS a priority.' She also added that there is a need to work 'across party lines' to 'fight back against further attempts to isolate and delegitimize Israel.'<sup>vi</sup>

The Israeli lobby effort culminated when former President Obama signed an anti-BDS law on June 30, 2015. The bill was part of the Trade Promotion Authority legislation, but it also contained anti-BDS provisions.<sup>vii</sup>

### **BDS Support Getting Stronger**

However, the support for the BDS movement is getting stronger by the day, as evidenced by its global reach. For example, the annual 'BDS Global Day of Action' has occurred in more

than 20 countries. Moreover, the annual Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) organized by BDS activists have been carried out in more than 200 cities worldwide.

BDS campaigns have succeeded in creating more public awareness of the apartheid crimes being committed by Israel. Even Hollywood stars have been affected by this increase in public awareness. For example, famous actress Scarlett Johansson resigned as Oxfam ambassador due to her advertising contract with Soda Stream, a company targeted by the BDS movement because its factory was located in one of the largest illegal Israeli settlements built on stolen Palestinian land, on the ruins of seven Palestinian villages whose inhabitants were forced out to make way for a Jewish-only town, in contravention of international law and decades of stated US policy. <sup>viii</sup>

In the United States, the support for BDS is most robust among the youth and at university campuses. As an example, last year, the editorial board of the Harvard Crimson endorsed the movement to boycott, divest, and sanction (BDS) the Jewish state in an April 29 editorial. <sup>ix</sup>

Recent surveys have also shown that American voters are increasingly supportive of BDS, especially among Democratic party voters. According to the surveys conducted in May and in June by the University of Maryland's Critical Issues Poll, 33 per cent of Democratic voters support BDS, while 10 per cent oppose it; the majority, 37 per cent, said they did not know, while another 20 per cent said they neither supported nor opposed it. The polls also showed that they oppose laws criminalizing boycotts against Israel. <sup>x</sup>

### **Challenges Facing the BDS movement**

The BDS movement faces complex challenges in the US and some European countries. In the US, the solid Zionist lobby has successfully convinced many US politicians to condemn BDS actions. More than 30 states in the US have passed laws that seek to prevent actions related to BDS efforts, with support coming from both the Republican and Democrat parties. Most anti-BDS laws have taken one of two forms: contract-focused laws requiring government contractors to promise that they are not boycotting Israel; and investment-focused laws mandating public investment funds to avoid entities boycotting Israel. <sup>xi</sup>

In 2019, the US House of Representatives passed an anti-BDS bill co-sponsored by 350 representatives and supported by 398. Only sixteen Democrat representatives and one

Republican representative opposed the bill. The bill stated that it ‘opposes the Global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (BDS Movement) targeting Israel, including efforts to target United States companies engaged in legal commercial activities under United States law, and all efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel.’ Not surprisingly, the passage of the bill was applauded by the AIPAC, the powerful pro-Israel lobby group.<sup>xii</sup>

BDS activists also face challenges in Germany. In May 2019, the German parliament voted to condemn the BDS movement and use the term ‘anti-Semitic’ to describe its activities and tactics. Even though the vote is non-binding and did not criminalize BDS activities, nevertheless, the vote is a symbolic condemnation and is a setback to the movement.<sup>xiii</sup>

Interestingly, in response to the declaration, a group of 60 Israeli academics responded with a letter that criticized the motion and said it was part of a more considerable effort to delegitimize supporters of Palestine. A few months later, another letter signed by 240 Israeli and Jewish academics was sent to the German government, criticizing its stance and stating that the BDS movement is not antisemitic. These letters were followed by another letter signed by five United Nations special rapporteurs, which opposed the anti-BDS vote and criticized the German government.<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Challenges Facing BDS efforts in Malaysia**

BDS efforts in Malaysia are also facing stiff challenges despite the country not having any diplomatic relations with Israel. Generally, most Malaysians, especially Muslims, are very sympathetic to Palestinians and see Israel negatively. However, among specific segments of the population, especially non-Muslims, there is a distinct lack of awareness and understanding of Palestine. Many are unaware that Israel came into being due to ethnic cleansing performed by Jews from Europe who came to settle in Palestine. They are also unaware of the current injustices that are happening in Palestine. As a result, their attitude towards BDS can be hostile.

Despite the intense feeling of sympathy among Muslims in Malaysia towards Palestinians, many are, however, unaware of the boycott efforts by the global BDS movement or sceptical regarding their effectiveness, despite many years of efforts by BDS Malaysia to educate them on their importance. Most are content to support Palestinians through financial donations. Every year millions of Malaysian Ringgits are donated via numerous charity organizations.

However, when it comes to efforts to boycott companies such as HP, PUMA or Caterpillar, even though they are complicit in committing crimes of apartheid against the Palestinian people, for them, the economic implications of such boycotts are unacceptable since the financial sacrifice for Malaysians in terms of jobs and incomes is too high. This is because HP maintains a huge facility in Malaysia and employs many Malaysians. In the case of Caterpillar, it is distributed by a sizeable government-linked company throughout the region, including China, generating sales amounting to billions of ringgit. It is the primary income earner of the company.

The role of BDS Malaysia is to educate more Malaysians to be aware of the crimes of apartheid committed in Palestine by the Zionist settler-colonial regime. Once the awareness is widespread, more Malaysians will support the efforts to boycott Israel and organizations complicit with Israel.

## **Conclusion**

Israel is weaker now compared to any other time in its short history as more and more people worldwide are aware that Israel is simply a Zionist settler-colonialist project. More are also aware of the Israeli crimes of apartheid against Palestinians.

Israel can carry out these crimes because of the support it is getting from European countries and the United States. Another source of support is the despotic regimes in the Middle East. Greater awareness of the scale of injustice that is taking place in Palestine, plus more democracy in the Middle East, will mean the Israeli apartheid regime is going to end soon.

Nevertheless, people of conscience worldwide need to work harder to spread awareness regarding the actual situation in Palestine. One of the best ways to do that is by supporting the global BDS movement's activities and campaigns.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2017/05/30/israels-anti-bds-start-up-ministry/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/livni-we-face-south-africa-style-isolation-because-of-settlements/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://bdsmovement.net/news/spring-step-bds-worried-israel-plans-pushback>

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/905761/%7B%7B>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/hillary-clinton-fighting-the-anti-israel-bds-movement-should-be-a-top-priority-across-party-lines-7-2-2015>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/obama-signs-anti-bds-bill-into-law/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://bdsmovement.net/news/%E2%80%9Csodastream-still-subject-boycott%E2%80%9D>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/4/29/editorial-bds/>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-more-democrat-voters-support-bds-oppose-it-new-polls-show>

<sup>xi</sup> Cuffman, T. (May 29, 2018). "The State Power to Boycott a Boycott: The Thorny Constitutionality of State Anti-BDS Laws". *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law*

<sup>xii</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-house-overwhelmingly-passes-anti-bds-resolution/>

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/germany-bds-israel-idUSL5N22T4OA>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/17/german-parliament-declares-israel-boycott-campaign-antisemitic>