

Boycott as a Strategy against Israeli Occupation and Apartheid: Present-day Realities and Aspirations

ACRPS Conference Background Paper

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) will convene an international academic conference on the growing global movement to boycott Israel. The meeting, “Boycott as a Strategy to Counter Israel’s Occupation and Apartheid: Present-day Realities and Aspirations”, will be held in Tunis from August 4-6, 2016, and will discuss the re-emergence of boycotting as an expression of solidarity with Palestinians by the world community.

Popular resistance has long formed a pillar of the struggle against Israeli occupation. More recently, the mass-scale commercial boycott of Israel as a means to combat the occupation has gained momentum. Spearheaded by the democratic grassroots in the Arab region and beyond, this movement is inspired by principles of international human rights law, which it makes use of against Israel. Today, the movement’s ranks are being swollen by ever-growing numbers of supporters drawn from political, economic, academic, cultural and sporting circles. Collectively, this movement has come to form a cornerstone of the Palestinians’ popular resistance to the Israeli occupation. This forms a sharp break with history, when the commercial boycott of Israel was limited to official Arab circles enjoined by member states of the Arab League. The earliest official call by the Arab League to boycott the then nascent Zionist state predated the post-colonial period: on December 2, 1945, the Arab League demanded that the products made by commercial enterprises within the Zionist settlements be banned from Arab countries.

The official, state-sanctioned boycott of Israel by the Arab League became more regimented following the formal declaration of the Israeli state and the Palestinian *Nakba*. A major milestone was passed on May 19, 1951 when the Arab League established a monitoring commission to follow up on the implementation of the Arab boycott of Israel*. Headquartered in Damascus, that commission was headed by a Special Commissioner appointed directly by the Secretary General, and assisted by special officers appointed by the individual member states. Its existence reflected the belief that the conflict with Israel was a region-wide “Arab-Israeli” conflict related to collective Arab security and not a conflict between Israel and the Palestinians exclusively.

Despite such high level support, Western economic support for Israel and the lack of a comprehensive Arab strategy resulted in limiting the impacts of the Arab boycott effort

* For a fuller list of Arab League resolutions on the Palestinian question, see this list (in Arabic): <http://muqtafi.birzeit.edu/InterDocs/arab.htm>

on Israel. With time, peace agreements signed by a number of member states of the Arab League served to undermine even these modest efforts. The official Arab League position became defunct, limited to futile, periodic meetings, the last of which was held on August 18, 2015 (the 89th such meeting) and chaired by the Deputy Secretary General of the Arab League for Palestine Affairs, and attended by the Special Commissioner for the boycott, as well as by officers representing the individual states alongside representatives of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Differences of opinion between Damascus and a number of Arab states over the Syrian revolution resulted in the meeting being hosted by Egypt—which itself has commercial and political relations with Tel Aviv. Complicating matters further, the Palestinian National Authority does not officially support a boycott of Israel, a fact made abundantly clear by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' firm rejection of attempts to isolate and delegitimize Israel. All of this leads to a number of puzzling questions regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of these innumerable international conferences and the extent to which Arab governments abide by their own commitments.

Numerous peace agreements signed by Arab states with Israel have led to the regional integration of the Israeli economy, further discrediting the previously standing pan-Arab commitment to boycott Israel. This integration is typified by the creation of Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ), which were first rolled out in Jordan following the Wadi Araba Agreement (1994). As part of the framework which provided for these specialized zones, legislation passed by the US Congress in 1996 allows Jordanian products preferential access to American markets—which represent 40% of the world economy, when ranked according to the size of the pre-tax economy—provided that these products were fabricated within a QIZ and that the “Israeli component” of such products accounted for no less than 11.7% of their value. By 2004, Egypt became the second Arab country to host these QIZs. Ultimately, the siting of these industrial parks will allow for the entry of (partially) Israeli goods to enter Arab markets by virtue of the Arab Free Trade Agreement.

The Oslo Accords (1993-1995), and the consequent birth of the Palestinian National Authority transformed the official Arab policy towards Israel from one of enmity and boycott to one based on coexistence and peace. With the growing burden on the Palestinian armed struggle, itself transformed from a movement for national liberation into one aimed at mere survival and self-defense, the need for novel popular resistance strategies which are free of the constraints of the official Arab order—including the “Palestine Regime”—and which can put pressure on Israel became even more pressing.

To fill this gap, a global grassroots movement to boycott and economically isolate Israel has emerged as one of the most important, novel tools available to the Palestinian people. This growing movement allows the Palestinians to take the reins in their

national struggle, and to rebuild older alliances with progressive forces around the world. It also gives long-time friends of the Palestinian movement a role to play, after having been relegated to the role of bystanders to the negotiations process.

The failure of the Oslo peace process to find a just and comprehensive solution to the Palestinian predicament has brought into sharp relief the need for pressure to be placed on Israel. During the more than 20 years since the Oslo Accords were first signed, the settlement enterprise across the West Bank and the war crimes committed by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip and beyond have continued unchecked, entrenching Israel's over-arching regime of racial separation (Apartheid). With parallels being drawn between apartheid South Africa and Israel, the boycott movement is yet another parallel emerging and captivating the imaginations of a dispersed and decentralized global grassroots.

The majority of groups and individuals committed to the wider boycott of Israel have today been united under the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) banner, but they also benefit from the movement's decentralized structure, allowing each individual or group within it to operate in accordance its own local circumstances. Equally, and in keeping with a global reality, the BDS campaign emphasizes the central role of the individual in creating political change. Based on volunteerism, the BDS movement is immune to financial pressures from external parties and draws strength from the fact that its aims embody the unassailable, legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, enshrined in UN resolutions. These include ending the Israeli occupation of Arab territories, the dismantling of the West Bank Separation Wall and an implementation of the Right of Return for Palestinian refugees.

Israel's rightwing governments have obdurately stood in the way of peace, refusing to award fig leaf concessions even to those Palestinians it deems moderates. Now widely exposed due to the spread of new media, this reality has driven thousands of people into the BDS camp, catalyzing a systematic drive to strike at Israel by means of an economic boycott. With pressures from progressive political parties in Europe, these economic measures are beginning to have a tangible effect on the Israeli economy. Recent high profile successes in this regard include Dutch water company Vitens cutting off ties to the Israeli public water company for its activities in the settlements (2013); the boycotting of the Israeli Bank Hapaolim by Denmark's Danske Bank (2014); and the divestment from Israeli enterprises involved in the occupation by the national pension funds of the Netherlands, Norway and Luxembourg (2014; 2015 and 2014). These steps were taken in the wake of a European Union decision in mid-2013 which banned EU bodies from dealing with Israeli bodies which profited from the occupation of the Palestinian Territories, whether in the public or private sector, and which led to the

freezing of EU funding for projects being carried out in Israeli settlements on the West Bank¹.

The cultural and academic boycott of Israel is no less important, with growing numbers of academics, artists, writers and cultural figures from around the world refusing to work with Israeli institutions or perform in Israeli venues. This echoed some of the earliest calls for an organized BDS campaign, back in 2002, and which was followed by an October, 2003 demand by Palestinian academics and intellectuals that their peers across the globe boycott Israeli academia, within the Occupied Territories as well as in the Palestinian Diaspora (known as the Palestinian Academic Boycott of Israel, “PACBI”). The mantle was taken up by academics’ federations in the United States and the UK, in addition to nation-wide students’ unions in the UK (the National Union of Students, or NUS) and across South Africa. By holding Israel accountable for its racist policies, the BDS movement has dislodged Israel from its previous position as the sole representative of the victims of Nazism and the Holocaust. Revealing the true face of Israel as a racist state, the BDS campaign has managed to embarrass Israeli decision-makers.

So successful has the BDS campaign become that it has even given rise to its own reactions, even in its infancy. Working hand in hand with pro-Israel advocacy groups in the West, the Israeli government has been forced to intervene. This has seen Israeli government funds used to support Israel advocacy groups in the West, including the “Global Coalition for Israel” (GC4I), meant to counter the expanding worldwide BDS movement, which was formed following a meeting convened by Israeli ministers in February, 2016. Israeli efforts to combat the boycott movement have also been joined by academics working at Israeli universities, and a proposal by Israeli cabinet minister Avigdor Lieberman to strip political parties which support boycott efforts against Israel of public funding. These Israeli efforts have been felt in legislation and government action across many countries. The clearest example of this is the United Kingdom, where new government guidelines prevent state supported bodies—ranging from local government authorities to health bodies to educational institutions—from boycotting Israeli goods and services. In the US, President Obama has also approved a series of bills which continue a long standing policy of opposing measures to boycott Israel from Washington, a policy first conceived in opposition to the official Arab League boycott.

Today’s highly sophisticated movement to boycott Israel has proven itself to be an indispensable method in the struggle against Israeli oppression. It merits careful consideration and study to better understand its importance and the best means by

¹ For a fuller discussion, see: “European Union Measures against Israeli Settlements”, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, August 4, 2013: <http://english.dohainstitute.org/release/cef125ba-6a45-427f-8cc4-bd243a4688bb>

which it can be bolstered. Most pressingly, we ask: is the boycott movement merely a protest movement that responds instantaneously to Israeli aggressions? Or is it, instead, a complete strategy with both medium- and long-term aims? What role is there for Arab states, and émigré communities to play in the boycott movement? To what extent can Palestinians living both within the Occupied Territories or within the Green Line be expected to take part in the boycott movement?

Scholars and activists interested in participating in the Conference are encouraged to submit papers addressing one of the following themes:

1. Apartheid in South Africa and the lessons learned
2. Reflecting on the experience of the Arab League boycott and salvaging what remains possible of the official Arab boycott.
3. Arenas of the Boycott: Why the Arab region, North America and Western Europe embrace BDS even as the Far East and Eastern Europe embrace Israel?
4. The boycott of settlement goods and the impact on the Israeli economy.
5. European and global distinctions between boycotting Israel and boycotting the settlements.
6. The academic and cultural boycotts and their impacts on Israel's image worldwide.
7. Youth and the boycott movement: the role of student bodies and students' unions.
8. The role of Arab émigré communities.
9. Israeli strategies to counter the BDS movement.
10. How can the BDS movement become an accepted Palestinian strategy to counter the Israeli occupation?"