



Frequently Asked Questions about Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions (BDS)

Thanks to the [BDS National Committee](#), the [Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel](#), the [Institute for Middle East Understanding](#), the [Palestinian Grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign](#), and [Birthright Unplugged](#) for guidance on these answers.

1 - What is BDS?

On July 9, 2005, Palestinian civil society issued a historic call for "international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era" and to pressure "states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel" until Israel "meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law by:

1. Ending its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantling the Wall;
2. Recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
3. Respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

The call was made by [over 170 Palestinian organizations, unions, movements, and political parties](#) representing Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Palestinians in the Diaspora.

The call has been endorsed by hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals around the world, including the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Alice Walker, and Naomi Klein. Specific BDS Campaigns have been endorsed by Noam Chomsky, Danny Glover, Harry Belafonte, Norman Finkelstein, Howard Zinn, Richard Falk, and Neve Gordon, among many others.

2 - What is the call for academic and cultural boycott of Israel?

Similar to the [boycott](#) against [apartheid South Africa](#), the Palestinian call for boycott [includes](#) an institutional boycott of Israeli cultural and academic institutions. The [website](#) of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) provides a thorough explanation of the nuanced [cultural](#) & [academic](#) boycotts, clarifying some key misunderstandings of the boycott, and providing guidelines of how to apply it. (Source: Institute for Middle East Understanding)

3 - "Doesn't BDS hamper progress because it polarizes (and delegitimizes) rather than encouraging dialogue and diplomacy?"

- Diplomatic efforts have failed for over 60 years precisely because with unconditional Western support **there is no strong incentive for Israel to change**. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Privilege is given up only when it comes at a cost. BDS threatens the status quo more than any diplomatic effort has in a long time by taking the profit out of occupation & apartheid. The role of boycott in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and Anti-Apartheid South Africa Movement showed that rather than hindering change, pressure from boycotts political leaders to the negotiating table, not to haggle whether or not to end oppression, but to figure out how best to do so on the basis of universal human rights and international law. In this way, one could argue that it is a diplomatic tool. BDS doesn't stifle change; it accelerates it.
- **What does BDS delegitimize?** War crimes, oppression, and Israeli impunity. There's nothing wrong with that.

4 - "BDS is opposed by many Israelis who support an end to the Occupation. By calling for BDS, aren't we alienating those Israeli allies and in effect strengthening the right wing?"

- Although the views of Israeli supporters should be taken into consideration, **Palestinians have the ultimate right to decide** on the best method for attaining their own freedom. It is not the role of international and Israeli supporters to dictate the terms of the struggle, especially when Palestinians' chosen form of resistance is nonviolent, as is the case with BDS.
- There have always been many Israelis opposing the Occupation, but that has never translated into real change, because—like the majority of Americans who oppose the Iraq War—most do nothing about it. **People are more likely to take action when they feel personally affected**. Polls have shown Israelis are more worried about boycott than diplomatic pressure or violence.
- As in the South African case, at first external pressure may indeed bolster the shift to the right in Israel, but **only at first**. When the boycott starts biting, many Israelis—like their Afrikaner predecessors—will rethink whether occupation and apartheid are worth maintaining.
- **A growing number of Israelis support BDS**, including academics, activists, cultural workers, and more. The [Coalition of Women for Peace](#) and [Boycott!: Supporting the Palestinian BDS Call from Within](#) are just some of many Israeli groups and individuals who support some form of BDS.
- BDS is a morally sound and effective means of struggle and it is already exerting more pressure on Israel than the Israeli Left or UN resolutions ever have. In short, unlike anything else, **it's working** (see Question #10). These factors should be the most important consideration for morally consistent individuals supporting genuine peace.

5 - "The Israeli occupation is totally different from South African Apartheid. You're using the wrong analogy and thus the wrong tactic."

- Defining Israel as an apartheid state depends not on analogy to South Africa but whether or not Israel's policies fit the UN **definition of the crime of apartheid**. Apartheid—as stipulated in the

1973 UN International Convention on Apartheid—is defined not by similarity to South African Apartheid, per se, but as any systematic oppression, segregation, and discrimination to maintain domination by one racial group—‘demographic group,’ in Israeli parlance—over another, as through denial of basic human rights and freedoms, including the right to work, education, movement, and nationality; torture or inhuman treatment; arbitrary arrest and illegal imprisonment; and "any measures designed to divide the population along racial lines by the creation of separate reserves and ghettos,... the expropriation of landed property belonging to a racial group... or to members thereof." The definition fits word for word.

- While there are differences between Israeli & South African Apartheid, **the similarities are huge**. Former US President Jimmy Carter describes Israel's policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territory as apartheid. South Africans like the Archbishop Desmond Tutu and members of the ANC have unequivocally confirmed that this is apartheid (and in some ways even worse than South African Apartheid). A legal academic study sponsored by the South African government reached a decisive conclusion that Israel's policies constituted "occupation, colonization and apartheid."
- We know BDS is an appropriate tactic because **it's working!** (See Question #10.)

6 - "BDS is a kind of collective punishment. If you think collective punishment is wrong towards Palestinians, why do you advocate it towards Israelis?"

- **Economic support/investment is not a human right**. To remove ourselves from Israel's crimes is a far cry from denying Israelis their fundamental rights, as Israel denies the Palestinians theirs. Ending our complicity in injustice cannot be seen as "punishment." In fact, it is an effective contribution to ending collective punishment against the Palestinians.
- At a certain point, **priorities must be weighed**. 80% of the entire Israeli economy is profiting in some way from the illegal settlements built on Palestinian land. You cannot stop funding settlements without affecting the Israeli economy and population. But by funding settlements we collectively punish the Palestinian people. Do we continue to participate in Israeli crimes because Israel's economy depends on those crimes? Or do we condition economic support to ensure an outcome that enshrines respect for equality and human rights, including economic rights, for everyone?
- Grassroots boycott is a **long-established and respected nonviolent tactic** that has been used by legitimate struggles throughout modern history, as in the 1830 boycott of slave-produced goods (encouraged by the National Negro Convention), boycotts throughout the US civil rights movement (most notably the Montgomery Bus Boycott), the Indian boycott of British goods organized by Mahatma Gandhi, and the successful campaign against apartheid in South Africa. Why is it appropriate to collectively hold a state accountable in some places but not in Israel?

7 - "Why are you singling out Israel for BDS? Lots of countries violate human rights. Why aren't you campaigning for a boycott of Saudi Arabian companies, for example?"

- **Successive US governments are the ones that have consistently singled Israel out**. Israel has unconditionally received more US economic and military aid than any other country in the world, in addition to virtual immunity in the UN thanks to more than 50 US Security Council vetoes of resolutions criticizing Israeli atrocities. US tax-payers should be particularly concerned with the atrocities Americans are supporting and paying for.

- **Israel is violating more UN resolutions** than any other country in the history of the UN, including Iraq & Iran—put together. Other countries are routinely punished for their transgressions. The question is not whether Israel should be singled out, but whether it should be held to the same standard as other countries.
- **BDS is a tactic, not a dogma.** We don't boycott for the sake of boycotting; we boycott when we think it can work (as in the case of Israel, which relies on moral legitimacy more than most countries—see "Israel's weak-spot" below), and we do it especially because it's a morally consistent tactic that the great majority of Palestinian civil society has asked us to embrace.
- If there was a campaign to boycott a company elsewhere also committing heinous crimes, morally consistent people of conscience should endorse that as well, especially if requested by those most directly affected by those crimes. It is not hypocritical to boycott Israel; it is hypocritical to single out Israel to not be boycotted). **Supporting BDS against Israel is part of a larger commitment to global justice and anti-racism**, consistent with opposition to human rights abuses around the world in Burma, Darfur, Kashmir, Tibet, etc.
- For Jews, there is a particular responsibility to focus more on Israel's crimes because Israel claims to speak on Jews' behalf and acts in **Jews' names**.
- It is actually very difficult for some to criticize Israel publicly. Arabs and Muslims in particular are routinely denied a voice and dismissed as not credible. Faculty members at various U.S. universities have lost their jobs for taking strong positions against Israeli Apartheid. Many others are afraid to speak openly for fear of being branded anti-Semitic. In reality, then, far from singling Israel out, **BDS in fact rectifies Israel's exceptional status in public discourse** as immune to critique.
(Source: Birthright Unplugged)

8 - "BDS will hurt Palestinians, who are just as dependent on the Israeli economy as Israelis are."

- This is the same argument that was used against boycotting South African products. Lecturing the oppressed on what is best for them is patronizing and ill-conceived. Any oppressed community can decide for itself what price it is willing to pay to attain freedom, justice and equal rights. South Africans stated clearly that losing their employment was **a small price for freedom** to live and work. Palestinians say the same.
- Arguably the only part of the UN definition of Apartheid that doesn't apply to Palestine is forced labor. Israel ended that and instead implemented forced unemployment for Palestinians, stifling all attempts towards building infrastructure and promoting commerce. Forcing Israel to reverse these policies **will undoubtedly benefit the Palestinian economy in the long-run**.
- Quite often people who use this argument tend to be unabashed Israel-supporters whose **bluff needs to be called**. If it is concern about Palestinian well-being that motivates them, are they willing to unequivocally condemn Israeli occupation and apartheid—without a doubt the main causes of Palestinian suffering—with the same vigilance as they do BDS?

9 - "BDS only works if there's widespread support. Don't we have to first focus on educating people before we start a BDS campaign?"

- Actually, **BDS is one of the most effective educational tools that we've got**. The controversy that surrounds BDS campaigns quickly spreads the idea that Israel is doing something wrong. At the very least, BDS plants a seed of doubt about Israel in most people's minds. Amidst controversy, people who were formerly apathetic or neutral are pressured to take a position, and they will start to educate themselves in the process.
- Through this BDS movement, **knowledge of Israel oppression has spread much faster** than at any period in the last few decades. Opening up discussion—even argument—hitherto largely muzzled, has been the key vehicle for increased public awareness.

10 - "Is BDS the right tactic? We're not nearly as strong as the anti-Apartheid South Africa movement was, and we're up against so much more opposition."

- Actually, at the beginning of the anti-Apartheid South Africa movement, people were up against a lot. This was during the era of **McCarthyism** and the ANC was widely associated with Communism while South Africa was a staunch Western Cold War ally, fighting Communists in Angola and Mozambique. The ANC, who were backed by Fidel Castro and the PLO, were labeled communists and terrorists; to side with them was taking a major risk. (Source: Michael Berg, St Louis Palestine Solidarity Committee)
- Clearly the opposition to BDS, especially in the US, is significant. Nevertheless, **BDS is growing**—quickly! The South African BDS movement took over 20 years to gain the momentum and popularity that the 2005 Palestinian call achieved in its first five years!
- Obviously, you will lose many campaigns. However, the effectiveness of BDS, especially at this phase, is not as much economic as it is a way of publicly rendering Israel a pariah state. Even if your BDS campaign "fails", **you've already won** by promoting debate on the real issues and thereby educating people! (See first bullet point in previous question.)
- We know BDS can work because the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (**AIPAC**, the strongest leg of the Israel Lobby)'s executive director **told us so!** Howard Kohr: "We need to recognize that this campaign is about more than mere rhetoric. This is the battle for the hearts and minds of the world... left unchallenged, allowed to go unchecked, it will work."
- BDS is **Israel's weak spot**. The average Israeli cares more about Israel's image, participation, and normalization in the world than about UN resolutions. The Israeli government has even supported the introduction of a proposed law in the U.S. Congress that would ban divestment, and is working with institutions and websites to stop the "danger that we will be exposed to an international boycott as was the case before the fall of the regime in South Africa" (Israeli Minister of Justice, Tommy Lapid, reported in BBC, January, 4, 2004).

11 - "How do I know which products to boycott or divest from?"

- You can find lists at www.whoprofits.org or www.interfaithpeaceinitiative.com/profitting.pdf
- If the first three numbers of the bar code are **729**, the product was made by Israel. However, there are also products made by Israel which do not have a bar code or use another number, like clothing or computers. If you're unsure, ask the merchant selling the product.

- It's important to point out that consumer boycott/divestment works when everyone picks one company or product and focuses on it in a very public way. Individuals looking at bar codes should instead work as a group and **pick a specific target**. Your local group can and should choose the target that makes the most sense in your context. The following are focuses of many US groups today:
 - [TIAA-CREF](#) (Jewish Voice for Peace initiative)
 - [Ahava](#) (Codepink initiative)
 - [Caterpillar](#)

12 - "Israel's contribution to science and high-tech is so great that a boycott would deprive us of important technologies. If we boycott Israel products, won't we have to throw away our computers?"

- Again, boycott works when groups focus on a specific target or a few chosen carefully and strategically according to what can work (remember, this is a tactic not a dogma). **It's not necessary to boycott everything** to achieve the goal of isolating Israel enough to exert pressure towards real change.
- Whether or not a state that is oppressing people is technologically advanced should not be a major consideration in deciding whether or not to boycott it. After all, few countries had contributed as much as Germany to science, music, philosophy, medicine, etc. Still, that was not an acceptable reason not to boycott it to end its genocidal crimes.

13 - "Won't an academic boycott infringe on academic freedom and silence progressive Israeli academics?"

- In the West, people associate—rightly or not—academic institutions with beacons of independent and progressive thought. **In Israel, academia and the military are deeply intertwined.** Settlements are designed in universities and some university campuses are literally built on settlements. Major weapons used against Palestinian civilians are developed and tested by Tel Aviv University (a leading academic institution in Israel) and Technion in Haifa. These are just three examples. Israeli academia is not our partner; it's at the core of Israel's occupation and apartheid policies.
- Academic boycott is **institutional, not individual**. Individuals are not judged by their beliefs; institutions are judged by their complicity with Israeli oppression of Palestinians.
- What about **Palestinian academic freedom**? Where were the Israeli apologists' protests for academic freedom when Israel closed Palestinian universities for four consecutive years during the first Intifada? Where is their outrage against the daily denial of Palestinian students' right to go to school unhindered? After 1948, tens of thousands of Palestinian books were destroyed by Israel in an attempt to annihilate both the academic and cultural history of an entire people. At a certain point, priorities must be weighed. Israeli "academic freedom" (often used to develop weapons and settlements) does not supersede Palestinians' basic rights.
- **No Israeli academic institution has ever issued a statement of condemnation**, let alone calling for equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel and refugees. No Israeli academic institution has

ever issued a statement demanding Palestinian students' and professors' right to even attend their universities. Israeli academia has never been a catalyst for change.

- Academic boycott **doesn't censor** individual Israeli academics; they can write, study, or publish anything they like. BDS demands that the rest of us refuse support for intellectual institutions that downplay or whitewash Israel's criminal actions against Palestinians.
- It's only with BDS against Israel that people want to be so **selective**. The boycott of South Africa did not exclude academic institutions—in fact, it included a blanket boycott against all individual academics, too! The boycott of Sudan is not just against products made in Darfur, but the whole country and its institutions. Would anyone say normalized collaboration with Sudanese universities is more important than ending the genocide in Darfur as quickly as possible?

14 - "Why punish Israeli artists with a cultural boycott? Don't art and music transcend politics?"

- Similarly to academic institutions, **Israeli official cultural institutions are part and parcel of the occupation and apartheid**. They are used cynically to whitewash occupation and apartheid. For example, to salvage its deteriorating image abroad, the Israeli government recently launched a "Brand Israel" campaign to put a pretty face on the country, covering up the crimes of the state with cultural events and performances.
- Artists commissioned by official entities are expected to perform as **cultural ambassadors** of the state. Therefore, any politically-tied cultural production will downplay or whitewash Israel's illegal actions. We are boycotting these efforts, not the artists themselves.
- To elaborate, cultural boycott is **institutional, not individual**. Artists are not judged by their beliefs; institutions are judged by their complicity with Israel's oppression of Palestinians.
- It's only with BDS against Israel that people want to be so **selective**. The boycott of South Africa did not exclude cultural ambassadors. Likewise, we would not today invite the Sudanese state orchestra to play in the United States, because we recognize that there can be no "business as usual" with that genocidal state.
- What about **Palestinian artists**, who have been punished for decades? Palestinian musical groups are prevented from performing abroad, arrested based on song lyrics, and affected everyday by all the facets of occupation. Promoting Israel's normal image comes at the expense of Palestinians' artistic and human rights.

15 - What good does it do for international artists to refuse to perform/showcase in Israel?

- Performing in a state that practices occupation, colonization and apartheid ... **cannot be regarded as a purely artistic act**, if any such act exists. Regardless of intentions, such an act is a conscious form of complicity that is manipulated by Israel in its frantic efforts to whitewash its persistent violations of international law and Palestinian rights. This is because artistic performances in Israel promote a "business as usual" attitude that normalizes and sanitizes a state that has committed war crimes ... under a guise of artistic and scientific glamour and a deceptive image of cultural excellence and "liberalism."

- An artist who performs in Israel today—just like any artist who violated the boycott and performed in Sun City, South Africa, during apartheid—can only be seen by Palestinians and people of conscience around the world as motivated by profit and personal gain far more than by moral principles ... Israeli concert promoters offer large sums of money to lure **international performers as part of Israel's "Brand Israel" campaign** designed explicitly to hide Israel's criminal violations of human rights.

16 - Isn't culture a way to communicate more progressive messages? Why not go and instead communicate a message of peace?

- Despite the best efforts of even the most progressive artists, the primary message that a performance in Israel sends to Israelis and the world is: "Israel is a legitimate place to perform." Conversely, refusing to perform sends the message that there will be **no "business as usual" with an apartheid state**.
- **Pretty words at a concert cannot possibly outdo or neutralize the far more substantial harm** from performances used by Israel to project a false image of normalcy that enables it to maintain its occupation and apartheid.
- Ultimately, a conscientious artist is expected to **heed the appeals of the oppressed as to what they really need** from them in the struggle to end injustice and colonial oppression.
- The main impact of the boycott at this stage is to expose Israel as a pariah, to increase its isolation, thus raising the price of its injustices against the Palestinian people and challenging international complicity in perpetuating its occupation and apartheid. **These goals will not be served by artists telling Israeli fans there should be peace.**

Main source for answers to #15 and #16:

["Cultural Boycott of Israel Takes Off: After the Flotilla Massacre" \(PACBI, June 2010\).](#)