

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE BOYCOTT/ DIVESTMENT/SANCTIONS (BDS) MOVEMENT AGAINST ISRAEL

BEST PRACTICES: IF YOUR ORGANIZATION IS BEING TARGETED BY BDS

Every situation is different, but the following principles are important when navigating any BDS controversy:

- Many institutions, universities and corporations have policies in place for evaluating political requests and legal counsel for guidance. Check with your organization's communications and management team to understand the policies in place and involve them in the process.
- When faced with a pro-BDS effort whether on campus, or in the religious or corporate environments, it is best to recognize that BDS is a divisive issue, with both proponents and opponents presenting their strongly held beliefs as advancing justice and fighting racism. It is best, therefore, to do "due diligence," and understand the issue better before reacting. Ill-considered responses will only lead to unnecessary difficulties such as the need for issuing retractions and clarifications. (See sidebar.)
- Many BDS activists care less about the boycott or divestment of a particular product, and more about creating a public perception that Israel is always in the wrong, no matter what. Thus, not all BDS efforts have to be countered publically, especially when doing so only provides the BDS activists the attention they crave. BDS activist groups include Students for Justice in Palestine, (SJP), Jewish Voice for Peace, U.S. Campaign to End The Israeli Occupation, CODEPINK and Adalah-NY. SJP focuses largely on the campus.
- When consumer products have been targeted at stores, groups opposed to BDS have sometimes organized "buycotts," undermining the BDS efforts by increasing demand for the Israeli-linked products the boycotters are targeting.¹
- In most cases, organizations that choose to welcome the free speech of BDS proponents, while declining to agree to their requests, fare best.
- While often the best approach is to not issue a statement, it can be helpful to prepare one for use reactively if absolutely necessary. When BDS supporters are denied a chance to speak, they claim the mantle of free speech and portray themselves as victims.

"BDS is the latest attempt to single out Israel on a world stage... I am also very concerned by attempts to compare Israel to South African Apartheid. Israel is a vibrant democracy in a region dominated by autocracy, and it faces existential threats to its survival."

**– Former Secretary of State
Hillary Clinton**

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/2158218/hillary-clintons-letter-to-haim-saban-against-bds.pdf>

Numerous institutions have not only been drawn into the political conversation inadvertently, but have had to make apologies or corrective statements following a protocol misstep within the organization.

The organizers of the Spanish music festival that had disinvited Matisyahu (the American Jewish artist) acknowledged it had been a "mistake" to do so and blamed their initial decision on a "campaign of pressure, coercion and threats" by a local BDS group. The Spanish newspaper El Pais editorialized that the decision to exclude Matisyahu was "unacceptable discrimination," noting that "[i]t is absolutely unacceptable that in the Spain of the 21st century, individuals and organizations can still demand that somebody explain themselves in ideological terms in order to be able to exercise their profession, and takes us back to the dark days when everybody was required to prove their religiosity and purity of blood... Anti-Semitism and discrimination on the grounds of ideology cannot be tolerated and must be stood up to."²

¹<http://www.buycottisrael.com/why-buycott/>

² <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Spanish-festival-reinvites-Matisyahu-after-worldwide-criticism-412598>

“The petition [urging divestment] alleges human rights abuses and compares Israel to South Africa at the time of apartheid, an analogy I believe is both grotesque and offensive.”

– Columbia University President Lee Bollinger

http://www.thejewishweek.com/features/columbia_president_blasts_divestment_petition

THE BDS PLAYBOOK

- In the US, BDS activists typically initiate a consumer-related boycott request by approaching school or retail representatives and catching them off guard with disturbing, politically charged and frequently inaccurate information. Book store managers, college campus cafeteria purchasers, deli managers are typically targeted with materials and/or protestors who present a one-sided, dogmatic and distorted narrative of a complex political conflict.
- BDS activists aim to inspire knee-jerk reactions, such as pulling products from shelves. They then quickly claim success and position the organization or institution within the media as having aligned politically with their mission.
- Generally, the group, while not large in number, is vocal and skilled at driving media and on-site attention.

“Cultural boycotts singling out Israel are divisive and discriminatory, and will not further peace. Open dialogue and interaction promote greater understanding and mutual acceptance, and it is through such understanding and acceptance that movement can be made towards a resolution of the conflict.”

– JK Rowling (and others, in a open letter)

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/22/israel-needs-cultural-bridges-not-boycotts-letter-from-jk-rowling-simon-schama-and-others>

In the spring of 2014, Harvard University’s dining services suspended purchases of products by SodaStream, after receiving complaints from the Harvard College Palestine Solidarity Committee and the Harvard Islamic Society. Harvard University President Drew G. Faust asked for an investigation, and Harvard’s provost Alan Garber issued a statement stressing that, “Harvard University’s procurement decisions should not and will not be driven by individuals’ views of highly contested matters of political controversy... If this policy is not currently known or understood in some parts of the University, that will be rectified now.” A spokesperson for the dining services then issued a statement acknowledging that it had “mistakenly factored political concerns” into its decision, and that “procurement decisions should not be driven by community members’ views on matters of political controversy.”³

Actress Scarlett Johansson decided to leave her role as ambassador for the charity Oxfam, when it criticized her for serving as a spokesperson for the Israeli company SodaStream, which, at the time had a plant in the West Bank, employing many Palestinians. She said she was a “supporter of economic cooperation and social interaction between a democratic Israel and Palestine,” and had a “fundamental difference of opinion in regards to the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement.”⁴

³ <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/12/18/HUDS-statement-sodastream/>

⁴ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/10606240/Scarlett-Johansson-stepping-down-as-Oxfam-ambassador-over-SodaStream-deal.html>

“[P]rofoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities. Serious and thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect if not their intent.”

**– Former Harvard President
Lawrence Summers**

http://www.harvard.edu/president/speeches/summers_2002/morningprayers.php

BACKGROUND

- The BDS movement against Israel was launched in 2001 at the antisemitic⁵ UN World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa. Its leaders’ objective is the end of Israel as a Jewish state. BDS activists issued calls for a cultural and academic boycott of Israel in 2004. In 2015, they issued a broader call for opposing “Israel’s colonization of all Arab lands,” essentially objecting to Israel’s founding as a Jewish state in 1948. They also insist on the return of Palestinian refugees from 1948 (and their descendants) while ignoring the roughly equivalent number of displaced Jews from Arab lands. The two key pro-BDS organizations are the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, based in Ramallah⁶, and the BDS Movement, also based in Palestine. Omar Barghouti,⁷ one of the key figures promoting BDS, admits “you cannot reconcile the right of return for refugees with a two state solution. That is the big white elephant in the room and people are ignoring it — a return for refugees would end Israel’s existence as a Jewish state.”⁸
- BDS sometimes purports to boycott “only” Israeli academic institutions and corporations whose products are associated with the “Occupation” (meaning produced in the West Bank or used by Israel in administering the West Bank). But BDS leader Barghouti insists BDS should be against all things Israeli.⁹ And some BDS proponents even favor singling out Jews, and not just Israeli Jews. In 2015 they pressured a Spanish music festival to disinvite the American Jewish artist Matisyahu when he, alone among scheduled artists¹⁰, was asked to make a political statement in support of a Palestinian state and declined to do so.¹¹ Soon after, the music festival reversed its decision, and Matisyahu played, but noted the antisemitism he faced when performing.¹²

⁵ Both the United States and Israel withdrew from the conference given what U.S. Secretary of State Powell called “hateful” language about Israel. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=80564&page=1> And hatred wasn’t limited to the official documents being debated. The antisemitic forgery “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” was distributed <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/UN/durban1.html#1>, people chanted “Hitler didn’t finish the job,” and Jewish delegates were victimized with abuse by other delegates – they were told “I won’t talk to you until you take off that thing [referring to a yarmulke],” “Why haven’t Jews taken responsibility for killing Jesus?” “Jews are not members of the human race!” “I believe in a Jewish state . . . on Mars.” In a session on hate crimes, Israel’s existence was called a “hate crime.” And when a Jewish delegate raised an issue of procedure, there were reportedly shouts of “Jew, Jew, Jew, Jew.” Kenneth Stern, *Antisemitism Today* (American Jewish Committee, 2006) p. 31 http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/ANTISEMITISMTODAY_122006.PDF

⁶ <http://pacbi.org/>

⁷ <http://972mag.com/interview-the-man-behind-the-bds-movement/107771/>

⁸ <https://electronicintifada.net/content/boycotts-work-interview-omar-barghouti/8263>

⁹ <https://electronicintifada.net/content/boycotting-israeli-settlement-products-tactic-vs-strategy/7801>

¹⁰ <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Rotom-Sunsplash-spokesperson-The-decision-was-made-between-Matisyahu-and-BDS-not-us-412383>

¹¹ <http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/1.671389>

¹² <http://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Matisyahu-Anti-Semitism-at-Spanish-reggae-festival-was-something-I-never-experienced-before-413733>

- Many Israelis and many Jews view BDS through the historic lens of discrimination against Jews, which often included calls for boycotts of Jews and Jewish products.¹³ Even prior to the re-establishment of Israel in 1948, Arab nations and organizations promoted boycotts of Jews and thereafter of Israeli products, and of companies that did business with Israel.¹⁴
- While many people are drawn to BDS to protest Israeli policies including the settlements, many others (including leaders of the movement) have a different goal—denying Israel's right to exist. This questioning of Israel's right to exist as the national home of the Jewish people transgresses the U.S. Department of State's Definition of Antisemitism,¹⁵ in part because treating Israel by a different standard than other nation states is reminiscent of classic antisemitism, which treated Jews differently from other peoples. No state other than the Jewish state is being targeted with a BDS campaign.
- In 2002, BDS proponents organized their first divestment campaign aimed at ending investment in Israeli companies on some American campuses, including Harvard¹⁶, the University of California, the University of Michigan, Yale, Princeton, and MIT. To date, not one university has divested.
- BDS's proponents tend to target colleges and university campuses, churches, food co-ops, supermarkets, corporations, entertainers, and not-for-profits.
- While BDS activists lose more often than win, they have had some successes. They also frequently misrepresent their losses as victories. (See case study of Hampshire College, below.)
- Most supporters of the two-state solution, whether from the political right or left, oppose BDS as against the interests of peace, and because it empowers extremists on both sides.
- In the US, BDS has developed a reputation for misrepresenting facts. For example, a BDS group named Historians Against the War supported an anti-Israel resolution in the American Historical Association that blamed Israel for damage to educational institutions in Gaza, without even mentioning that Hamas had fired rockets into Israel from such sites.¹⁷ The resolution failed.¹⁸ And a proposed American Library Association resolution, which condemned Israel for the destruction of Gaza's libraries and schools, did not mention that rockets were fired from those schools,¹⁹ nor did the proponents explain why they were silent about the terrorist destruction of a 78,000 volume library in Lebanon, just a few months before,²⁰ or the ransacking of Mosul's central library (and the destruction of 100,000 volumes) a few months later.²¹ (It failed.²²)

"I think the BDS movement will gain strength from forthrightly explaining why Israel has no right to exist."

**– BDS author
John Spritzler**

http://www.stopbds.com/?page_id=48

¹³ <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005678>

¹⁴ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Arab_boycott.html

¹⁵ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/fs/2010/122352.htm>

¹⁶ <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2002/5/6/faculty-urge-divestment-from-israel-a/>

¹⁷ <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/160553>

¹⁸ <http://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/americas/56793-150105-american-historical-association-rejects-israel-boycott>

¹⁹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/03/us-mideast-gaza-toll-idUSKBN0GY1DS20140903>

²⁰ <http://stateofmind13.com/2014/01/04/lebanon-loses-78000-books-to-terrorism-tripolis-infamous-al-saeh-library-burned/>

²¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/26/isis-destroys-thousands-books-libraries>

²² http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2015_annual_council_documents/cd_40_Res%20_Libs_Schls__Gaza_Israel_final.pdf

“No doubt many if not most of the supporters of BDS are the naïve, idealistic types of people... But their innocence—and the abuse that results from opposing them—does not excuse our responsibility to condemn the intellectual masquerade in which BDS engages and the destructive consequences it supports.”

– Eric Alterman, Distinguished Professor of English and Journalism, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, Professor of Journalism at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism and columnist for The Nation

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/02/07/brooklyn-college-and-the-bds-debate.html>

Hampshire College

In 2008, the pro-divestment organization Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) asked the administration at Hampshire to support BDS. Hampshire declined, but a year later as part of an unrelated financial decision, the college sold some of its shares in a company previously targeted by BDS activists. BDS activists publicized this as a victory, though the Hampshire administration, after an initial delay in setting the record straight, made it known that their actions had nothing to do with Israel, and in fact the school continued to invest in Israeli companies. Hampshire President Ralph Hexter said, “No college or university should use Hampshire as a precedent for divesting from Israel, since Hampshire has refused to divest from Israel. Anyone who claims otherwise is deliberately misrepresenting Hampshire’s decision...”²³

Co-ops

Unlike big chain stores that make decisions on a corporate level, local food co-ops answer directly to their customers. In the case of the Davis food co-op²⁴ in California, when a group of members approached the co-op board with requests to boycott Israeli products, the board conducted a thorough investigation into BDS activists’ claims and the possible implications of supporting a boycott. During the investigation process, the Davis co-op board made sure to take into account the opinion of members on both sides of the issue. They concluded that not only would it be disadvantageous for the co-op to participate in an anti-Israeli boycott, but participating in any boycott would undermine the spirit of the international co-op movement. Additionally, by supporting a boycott, the co-op would essentially be accepting BDS advocates’ assertions as fact when they were, at best, opinions or selective presentations of complicated situations. In contrast the Olympia co-op in Washington neglected to examine both sides of the issue when approached by members to stop selling Israeli products. The decision to boycott was made, resulting in an immediate backlash. Not only was the co-op making headlines around the world, but many members resigned because of perceived racism and antisemitism. Additionally, litigation over the decision to boycott is still ongoing, five years later.²⁵

Consumer Products

There have been selective boycott attempts against Israeli products such as Israeli couscous at Trader Joe stores, Israeli-owned stores such as Max Brenner chocolates, Israeli companies whose products are manufactured in the West Bank (Ahava and SodaStream), and an American company partly owned by an Israeli company, Sabra Dipping Company. Sabra—which manufactures, distributes and sells its products exclusively in North America—has been targeted by BDS activists who leverage this popular brand of American

²³ <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2009/02/22/hampshire-disputes-dershowitz-claims>

²⁴ https://daviswiki.org/Davis_Food_Co-op/Boycott,_Divestment,_And_Sanctions#head-aec4e16751a36a829da483742de653cf020df535

²⁵ http://www.rcfp.org/sites/default/files/docs/20150528_154935_wa_supreme_court_davis_v_cox_opinion.pdf

‘This is an historic milestone... as American opposition to insidious efforts to demonize and isolate the Jewish state is now the law of the land. The bipartisan bill enacted today conditions any free trade agreement with the European Union on its rejection of BDS. ‘

– Rep. Peter Roskam (R-IL)

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

hummus to attempt to drive media attention to politics in Israel, often presenting inaccurate or false information about the brand. A few campuses have seen efforts to remove Sabra hummus. A student resolution to remove the brand did not pass at DePaul. Vassar²⁶ reversed its decision to remove Sabra in a day, calling it a “mistake.” Campuses that have been targeted often issue statements indicating food service decisions are not driven by individuals’ political views.

Boycott Against Israeli Academics and/or Israeli Academic Institutions

Starting in 2005, various British academic unions passed resolutions in support of boycotting Israeli academics and/or academic institutions. The American Association of University Professors issued a strong statement denouncing the boycott effort as a violation of academic freedom. The purpose of the university is to increase knowledge based on the merits of the ideas expressed, not on the nationality of those presenting the ideas.²⁷ Over 400 American university and college presidents endorsed a statement from Columbia University President Lee Bollinger, decrying the British union’s decision, and stating that if the union went ahead with its plans, it should treat these American universities as if they were Israeli, and boycott them too.²⁸ In late 2013 the American Studies Association passed a boycott resolution, which was denounced by hundreds of university presidents.²⁹ The Associations of American Universities also spoke out against academic boycotts in 2013, and reiterated its opposition in early 2016.³⁰

CONCLUSION

BDS proponents no doubt believe they are targeting Israel in order to create a better world. But those behind BDS are not simply trying to influence current Israeli policy, they object to the right of the Jewish people to have a national home in their historic homeland. Anyone who is concerned with helping Palestinians and Israelis achieve a lasting political settlement should support initiatives that bring Israelis and Palestinians (and their respective supporters) together on collaborative projects to promote peace, rather than efforts like BDS, which can only drive them further apart.

²⁶ <http://freebeacon.com/issues/vassar-college-says-ban-on-israeli-foods-a-mistake/>

²⁷ <http://www.icjs-online.org/index.php?article=254>

²⁸ <http://thebrandeishoot.com/articles/1779>

²⁹ See, for example, <http://www.micua.org/index.php/news-headlines/1421-micua-presidents-reject-american-studies-association-boycott>

³⁰ <https://www.aau.edu/news/article.aspx?id=16930>

MJ Rosenberg, "The BDS Movement is about Dismantling Israel, not the '67 occupation."
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mj-rosenberg/the-bds-movement-is-about-d_b_5038233.html

Kenneth Stern and Michael Berenbaum, "Should Jews Fear BDS?"
http://www.jewishjournal.com/cover_story/article/should_jews_fear_bds

Kenneth Stern, "The Case Against The Academic Boycott of Israel,"
http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/the_case_against_academic_boycotts_of_israel

Eric Alterman, "Brooklyn College and the BDS Debate,"
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/02/07/brooklyn-college-and-the-bds-debate.html>

Cary Nelson and Gabriel Braham, Editors, The Case Against the Academic Boycott of Israel,
http://www.amazon.com/Case-Against-Academic-Boycotts-Israel/dp/0990331601/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1453829902&sr=8-1&keywords=the+case+against+academic+boycotts+nelson

YouTube clip showing BDS proponents are against two-state solution
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnpilMYsR0I&feature=youtu.be&t=35s>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Justus & Karin Rosenberg Foundation staff is available to provide help and advise, confidentially, on any BDS matter. Contact the Foundation by going to: <http://jkrfoundation.org/contact>
Or calling: **718-503-4441**

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