

ReViews¹ - 16th Issue:

The BDS Movement Promotes Delegitimization of the State of Israel

This issue of 'Reviews' exposes the underlying agenda of the catalysts² of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement against Israel. In theory, the BDS Movement promotes human rights, international justice, and peace. In practice, it advances the delegitimization of the State of Israel by undermining – whether explicitly or implicitly – its right to exist as a Jewish and democratic state.

Since Operation Cast Lead in early 2009, there have been increasing efforts within global civil society to isolate Israel. **The BDS Movement – an umbrella organization composed of loosely coordinated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals – stands behind these attempts to isolate Israel.** These efforts – which consist of pressure on individuals and organizations to economically or culturally boycott Israel, institutions and organizations to divest from Israel, and governments to sanction Israel – peaked in the aftermath of the flotilla affair on May 31, 2010.

It is very probable that many, and maybe even most, BDS supporters do not consider themselves to be delegitimizers,³ and genuinely aim to criticize Israeli policies. Their association with the Movement results from a purposeful effort advanced by the BDS Movement catalysts to depict it as apolitical and akin to progressive human rights movements, in order to harness the liberal European and North American elite and enlist wide public support.

However, in this document we seek to demonstrate how the BDS Movement Catalysts are clear delegitimizers, in many cases stated outright, and in others demonstrated by their: consistent singling out of Israel, efforts to undermine Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, promotion of the right of return, and comparison between Israel and apartheid. In addition, as far as BDS Movement catalysts are concerned, even selective or partial boycotts serve the overall goal of delegitimization.

See: [The Delegitimization Challenge: Creating a Political Firewall](#)

¹ ReViews is a product of the Reut Institute, which collects publicly available citations and reports that demonstrate political trends with strategic long-term significance.

² BDS Movement catalysts are those individuals or organizations that initiate the movement's activities and who drive the trend of Israel's delegitimization. These catalysts collect and spread information, create new initiatives, organize events and demonstrations, harness and train others, increase awareness, and brand and publicize their network.

³ In a document that the Reut Institute published in the beginning of 2010, Reut emphasizes **the need to distinguish between delegitimization** – which challenges the right of Israel to exist as a state that expresses the right of the Jewish people to self determination - **and criticism of Israeli policy, which, even if harsh or unfair, does not constitute delegitimization.**

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Background

The origins of the BDS Movement can be traced back to the 2001 'NGO Forum against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance,' which took place in Durban, South Africa in 2001 and was known as the First Durban Conference. The conference's agenda was taken over by several radical non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and turned it into an anti-Israel fest.

The NGO Durban concluding statement called for "a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state...the imposition of mandatory and comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links... between all states and Israel." ⁴This strategy turned into one of the main pillars of the BDS Movement, which was formally launched in July 2005. In recent years, the Movement has promoted boycotts, divestment measures, and sanctions primarily in the areas of culture, trade,⁵ and academia.⁶

The dominant organization in the BDS Movement is the Boycott, Divestments, and Sanctions Campaign National Committee (BNC), which is composed of Palestinian NGOs and whose main internet platform is <http://bdsmovement.net>. However, the Movement is not organized in a hierarchal structure, and operates as a network that is

⁴ See Alexander Lamsdorff, [NYTimes](#), 03/08/09 and [NGO Monitor, NGO Forum at Durban Conference 2001](#).

⁵ In recent years, the BDS movement has been active in promoting a series of decisions that call for boycotts against Israel in British trade unions. In April 2010, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) succeeded in mobilizing a boycott within the TUC of settlement produce. [See Jonny Paul, Jerusalem Post](#), 04/12/10.

⁶ In recent years, a number of attempts have been made in Britain to promote a comprehensive academic boycott. See Yuval Lidor, [NRG](#), 30/05/07. [BRICUP](#) is an example of the focus on the academic arena as a main goal of BDS against Israeli institutions.

driven by few catalysts – individuals or organizations that initiate the movement's activities and drive the trend of Israel's delegitimization.

Since Operation Cast Lead in early 2009, there have been increasing efforts within global civil society to isolate Israel. Among the most prominent examples are the highly publicized failure in April 2010 of the student senate at the University of California, Berkeley, to divest from two U.S. companies that support "war crimes" in the Palestinian territories, based on their ties with Israel, as well as the failure to ban the International Film Festival in Toronto, which presented Israeli films.

Following the flotilla affair on May 31, 2010, the efforts to boycott, sanction, and divest from Israel have increased and escalated. Prominent examples are: the decision of UNITE, the biggest trade union in Britain, to adopt a resolution to divest from Israeli companies and to boycott Israeli, and the wave of cancellations of performances in Israel by international performers.

However, thus far, the BDS Movement can boast few tangible achievements. The Movement has not managed to advance practical academic or consumer boycotts. In recent years, meanwhile, Israel's economy has actually grown and the state was recently accepted into the prestigious group of OECD countries.⁷

However, the damage caused by the BDS Movement lies in its promotion of delegitimization towards Israel through creating the comparison – whether implicit or explicit – between Israel and the former apartheid South African regime. Therefore, BDS should be viewed first and foremost as a tool to brand Israel as a 'pariah state' with the ultimate aim of undermining the legitimacy of its political structure.

The BDS Movement Presents Itself as Non-Political

The BDS Movement does not express explicit support for the destruction of the State of Israel, the one-state solution, or any other particular political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Movement's leaders try to depict it as non-political and liberal, and aim to establish the broadest possible common ground among critics of Israeli policy.

Pretending to be a progressive protest organization

The BDS Movement tries to tie itself to the world of liberal progressive values in Europe and North America, and to enlist wide public support. In fact, it is very probable that many of those who support BDS do not consider themselves as delegitimizers and genuinely strive to protest Israeli policies. Therefore, in defining the goals of the BDS Movement, there is a clear use of universally appealing language regarding international law, human rights, and universal justice:

- **Omar Barghouti**, a BDS Movement founder: The BDS Movement “does not adopt a particular political solution to the colonial conflict... The main strategy is based on the

⁷ See Tony Goldstein [YNET](#) 11/21/09.

principle that human rights and international law must be upheld and respected no matter what the political solution may be." ([The Forward](#), 09/16/09).

- **Asa Winstanley**, journalist and BDS supporter: "The BNC platform (the Palestinian BDS Movement) itself is broad, and does not take any position on specific political plans to resolve the conflict (rendering the one-state vs. two-state debate irrelevant in this context). Instead, [the BNC's 2005 United Call document](#) took a rights-based approach." ([New Left Project](#), 05/17/10).
- **U.S. Campaign to End Israeli Occupation**: "The U.S. Campaign does not endorse either a one-state or a two-state solution, but rather upholds the Palestinian right to self-determination." ([U.S. Campaign to End Israeli Occupation Web site](#)).
- The **British Committee for the Universities in Palestine (BRICUP)** Web site, one of the leading organizations calling for boycott, asserts that, "At this stage of the long struggle for Palestinian self-determination, an academic boycott is both a personal and a collective act made in solidarity with our Palestinian colleagues whose academic freedom is currently denied. By supporting this important sector of Palestinian civil society BRICUP seeks to help foster a non-violent and just solution in this troubled region." ([BRICUP](#)).

Everyone's welcome (even Zionists)

The leaders of the BDS Movement are willing to cooperate with anyone who criticizes Israel, and even with elements that define themselves as Zionist. In this way, the BDS Movement has managed to turn itself into a platform that includes both legitimate critics of Israeli policy and delegitimizers, without the former being aware of the radical values being promoted by the latter:

- BDS activist **Ahmed Moor** argues that, "The movement may be burgeoning but remains too small. Why shouldn't we indulge in ad-hoc partnerships to get things done? Richard Silverstein, Richard Goldstone, and many other self-proclaimed Zionists have done an immeasurably positive amount of work in skinning the Zionist cat...shouldn't they be asked to join the BDS movement? If it came down to it, I'd be happy to work with the racist up the street to get the city to fix a neighborhood pothole." ([Mondoweiss](#), 04/22/10)
- **BRICUP**: "Some Israeli supporters of BDS studiously avoid the political framework set by the Palestinian BDS Movement by casting their support for BDS as a strategy to end only the 42 year military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip...While some Israelis do employ the term colonialism or apartheid, they limit these terms' applications to the Palestinian territory occupied in 1967, not to Historic Palestine which now encompasses the State of Israel... we believe that the formulation of the need for BDS in these terms [1967 not 1948] vindicates one aspect of the logic of the BDS movement... whether out of Israeli self interest or based upon a principled commitment to comprehensive Palestinian rights, such Israeli support for BDS cannot be ignored and is to be welcomed." ([BRICUP Newsletter](#), 09/20/09).

In Practice, the BDS Movement Promotes Delegitimization

In contrast to the BDS Movement's attempt to portray itself as a progressive humanitarian movement, there are clear indications that the BDS Movement catalysts are using the Movement in order to promote an agenda of delegitimizing Israel.

This agenda is reflected in a wide array of statements by the Movement's catalysts that explicitly promote delegitimization. This agenda is being promoted by the Movement implicitly by advancing the 'right of return,' branding Israel as an apartheid state, singling Israel out, and seeking to undermine Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

BDS Movement catalysts are clear delegitimizers

The official tone expressed by **the BDS Movement publicly maintains a careful ambiguity** regarding the Movement's agenda vis-à-vis Israel's right to exist and the preferred political outcomes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, an evaluation of statements indicates that **many of the Movement's catalysts seek to undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel and Zionism, and view BDS as a tool to undercut the political model of the State of Israel:**

- In an article entitled 'Our South Africa Moment has Arrived,' **Omar Barghouti** writes that, "The conceptual origins of Israel's unique form of apartheid are found in Zionism, a racist European ideology that was adopted by the dominant stream of the Zionist movement in order to justify and recruit political support for its colonial project of establishing an exclusive Jewish state in historic Palestine." ([Scottish PSC](#), 03/19/09).
- **Dr. Haider Eid**, lecturer at Al Aqsa University in Gaza and activist for the one-state solution, argues that, "With pressure imposed by the international community through a BDS campaign *a la* anti-Apartheid campaign which brought Apartheid South Africa to an end, we believe that Israel itself can be transformed into a secular democratic state after the return of 6 million Palestinian refugees who were ethnically cleansed in 1948, a state for ALL of its citizens...therefore, we think that one of the major tools of the struggle towards a secular democratic state is BDS." ([Electronic Intifada](#), 11/18/09).
- **Ahmed Moor**: "So BDS does mean the end of the Jewish state...I view the BDS movement as a long-term project with radically transformative potential... the success of the BDS movement is tied directly to our success in humanizing Palestinians and discrediting Zionism as a legitimate way of regarding the world." ([Mondoweiss](#), 04/22/10).
- Writing in the context of Israeli Apartheid Week, **Ronnie Kasrils**, former activist against the apartheid regime in South Africa and supporter of BDS, argues that "BDS represents three words that will help bring about the defeat of Zionist Israel and victory for Palestine." ([Media Monitor Network](#), 03/17/09).
- American academic and supporter of the one-state paradigm and the BDS Movement **Virginia Tilley** writes that, "A coordinated movement of divestment, sanctions, and boycotts against Israel must convene to contain not only Israel's aggressive acts and

crimes against humanitarian law but also, as in South Africa, its founding racist logics that inspired and still drive the entire Palestinian problem." ([Scottish PSC](#), 04/06/09).

The BDS Movement explicitly advances the 'right of return'

The BDS Movement explicitly promotes the 'right of return'⁸ of 1948 Palestinian refugees to Israel, which clearly entails the end of Israel as a Jewish or democratic state. The Movement justifies this 'right' on its definition of Israel as a colonialist, racist state that was born in sin by ethnically cleansing its Palestinian residents:

- **Omar Barghouti:** "The most important of all three injustices is without doubt Israel's denial of the right of Palestinian refugees to return. The core of the question of Palestine has always been the plight of the refugees who were ethnically cleansed during the Nakba and ever since. [This issue is] the litmus test of morality for anyone suggesting a just and enduring solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict." ([Scottish PSC](#), 03/19/09).
- **Sami Hermez**, an anti-Zionist academic, writes that "BDS enables a discourse that moves beyond 'ending the occupation' to place demands for the right of return and equal rights for Palestinians in Israel as top priorities." ([Electronic Intifada](#), 10/01/09).
- **Mohammed Abed**, activist in the Al-Awda Movement, which works within campuses to promote the right of return, justifies BDS against Israel in light of "its various crimes, including the ethnic cleansing of 800,000 Palestinians from the areas over which Israel extended its sovereignty in 1948." ([Dissent](#), Fall 2007).
- From the **Palestinian United Call for BDS against Israel:** "Fifty seven years after the state of Israel was built mainly on land ethnically cleansed of its Palestinian owners, a majority of Palestinians are refugees..." Therefore, one of the three main aims of the BDS struggle is "respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194." ([Palestinian United Call for BDS against Israel](#), 06/09/05).

The BDS Movement brands Israel as an apartheid state

The BDS Movement creates a baseless connection between white South Africa and Israeli policies, and advances a false analogy between the illegitimate basis of the apartheid regime and Israel's alleged lack of legitimacy. This connection is strengthened by the intended diffusion of 'apartheid terminology' into discussions about Israel. The use of the apartheid language in a variety of contexts is purposefully undertaken in order

⁸ Sometimes, the positions of the Movement catalysts are even more radical than [UN General Assembly Resolution 194](#), which is beset by controversy. Clause 11 of 194 determines that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date..."

In addition, the clause also mentions two additional options: compensation and socio-economic rehabilitation in the area the refugees inhabit. **The term 'right of return' does not appear anywhere in the clause or in any other UN Resolution.** The meaning of this clause was argued over by the two sides, with the Arab side claiming it required a comprehensive right of return and Israel disagreeing. Even though Israel did not accept resolution 194, the Israeli side claims that the future of the refugees will be determined via negotiations.

to brand it as an apartheid state. The implication, by association, is that Israel's founding principles are unjustifiable and the natural conclusion is that Israel's political model should share the fate of the apartheid regime.

- **From a founding documents of the BDS Movement:** "Inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid... We, representatives of Palestinian civil society, call upon 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." ([Palestinian United Call for BDS against Israel](#), 06/09/05).
- Canadian writer and intellectual **Naomi Klein:** "The best strategy to end the increasingly bloody occupation is for Israel to become the target of the kind of global movement that put an end to apartheid in South Africa." ([The Nation](#), 01/07/09).
- **BRICUP**, a leading British organization calling for an academic boycott on Israel, dedicated a whole page to the comparisons between Israel and the South African apartheid regime: "The similarities between apartheid South Africa and present day Israel in the Occupied territories are almost uncanny... broadly the structural similarities in the situations of Israel and apartheid South Africa are profound." ([Coalition against Israel Apartheid Web site](#)).
- In a critique of a plan by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to 'brand' Israel, the Canadian organization 'Coalition against Israeli Apartheid' (CAIA) wrote that, "Just as Torontonians rejected attempts in the 1980s to 're-brand' apartheid-era South Africa, CAIA is confident that they will do the same with attempts to normalize Israeli apartheid... the 'Brand Israel' campaign is a testament to the strength and breadth of the growing BDS campaign against Israeli apartheid." ([Global BDS Movement Web site](#), 8/25/08).

The BDS Movement singles Israel out

One of the signs suggesting the BDS Movement is promoting a hidden agenda of delegitimization is in its use of this weapon *solely* against Israel. BDS consciously and publicly disproportionately criticizes Israel in relation to other countries. The aim is to isolate Israel as a unique international rogue state, which thus demands the adoption of uniquely aggressive measures against it.

There are a variety of excuses as to why BDS should be promoted solely against Israel: Israel's alleged continued flouting of international law, the global influence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the extent of Western support enjoyed by Israel, and the 'responsibility' of the West for Israel's initial establishment. Within these reasons is the paradoxical argument that due to Israel's democratic nature and close ties with the international community, BDS might actually be a more effective measure against Israel than against other countries.

- **Naomi Klein:** "Boycott is not a dogma; it is a tactic. The reason the BDS strategy should be tried against Israel is practical: in a country so small and trade-dependent, it could actually work." ([The Nation](#), 01/07/09).

- In an essay 'Singling out Israel is the right thing to do,' **Yaman Salahi** former Students for Justice in Palestine activist from Berkeley University writes that, "Today, more than ever, is the time to single out Israel for criticism and boycott – not because it is the only purveyor of injustice in the world, or even necessarily the worst – but because no other international institution has succeeded in stopping the injustices against the Palestinians." ([The Berkeley Daily Plant](#), 04/08/10).
- **Mike Cushman**, a BRICUP leader and an activist in promoting an academic boycott of Israel in the British University College Union (UCU), wrote: "[A]dvocates of consumer, professional and academic boycotts of Israel are asked 'why pick on Israel?'... Israel is not uniquely awful, but then neither was South Africa... Israel is our problem, as was South Africa, in ways other countries are not. Israel was created in response to Europe's inability to live at peace with its Jewish citizens..." ([BRICUP Newsletter](#), 2/25/10).
- **Mohamed Abed** (University of Wisconsin): "Unlike their counterparts elsewhere, Israeli institutions are fully integrated into the Western academic world... This makes Israeli academia more susceptible to outside pressure. In Israel's case, a boycott will be especially (if not uniquely) disruptive and inconvenient. Because the disapproval it expresses would be of great social significance, a boycott of Israeli academia would also instill a sense of cultural isolation and shame in the group at which it is directed." ([Dissent, Fall 2007](#)).

The BDS Movement seeks to undermine Israeli-Palestinian cooperation

By encouraging full boycotts of, and severing ties with, Israel, the BDS Movement explicitly aims to undermine Israeli-Palestinian cooperation. This tactic both damages current projects and prevents the development of new cooperative frameworks. Often such policies are implemented in contradiction to actual Palestinian interests.

- For many years, the Israeli Histadrut and its Palestinian counterpart, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), had conducted close relations. Until last year, the heads of Palestinian trade unions had opposed boycotting the Histadrut. However, following a meeting with the British Trade Union Friends of Israel (TUFI), the head of the PGFTU Shahr Saed and the Mayor of Nablus Adel Yaish were pressured by the British BDS Movement to withdraw their traditional position and publicly call for a boycott of the Histadrut. ([Global BDS Movement Web site](#), 11/25/09).
- **The decision to boycott the 13th International Film Festival** taking place in Tel Aviv was generated by people identified with BDS and the **Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel**, despite the fact that one of the main projects of the festival, "Coffee: Between Reality and Imagination," is intended to encourage cooperation between young Israeli and Palestinian film students.
- Until 2009, **Al-Quds University** maintained comprehensive links with Israeli academic institutions, which included close to 60 joint projects worth approximately \$5 million. The University's president, Sari Nusseibeh, is a prominent opposer of the boycott. In February 2009, the University administration decided to freeze all joint projects following the position of donors from Arab states. The University's decision received high acclaim

from the global Palestinian BDS Movement. ([The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), 02/03/09).

Both Full and Partial BDS Serve the End Goal

According to the ideology of the catalyst of the BDS Movement, a partial or targeted boycott also serves the goal of delegitimizing Israel, as it facilitates the recruitment of critics of Israeli policy and tarnishes Israel's reputation.

In December 2009, the British Government recommended marking products originating in the West Bank. In March 2010, the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) joined a campaign to boycott settlement produce.⁹ While one could argue with the logic or effectiveness of these actions, **there is no doubt that the motivation of the British Government and the TUC General Secretary was not to promote delegitimization against Israel.**

However, how is it possible to explain the fact that the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) – one of the organizations most identified with the BDS campaign – praised the British Government decision and was active behind the scenes in the TUC decision, which was seemingly intended to further the Two-State solution?

The answer, it would seem, is that from the perspective of the catalysts of the BDS Movement, even a selective partial boycott tarnishes Israel's reputation and is a milestone on a path towards a comprehensive boycott of Israel. Statements from the leaders of the BDS Movement reflect this logic:

- **Omar Barghouti** views BDS as a “comprehensive boycott of Israel, including all its products, academic and cultural institutions, etc” but shows flexibility for “the tactical needs of our partners to carry out a selective boycott of settlement products, say, or military suppliers of the Israeli occupation army as the easiest way to rally support.” ([The Forward](#), 09/16/09).
- **PSC activist Hugh Lanning** writes that "The Palestine Solidarity Campaign is committed to not only build an effective campaign for boycotting settlement goods with the TUC, but also to work to take TUC policy further, together with individual unions, many of which already have policy supporting a full boycott." ([PSC Web site](#)).
- **BDS activist Asa Winstanley** contends that "the BDS movement is a broad church, with room for different focuses and tactics. Those uncomfortable with the idea of boycotting “Israel proper” (aka pre-1967 Israel), such as Israeli group Gush Shalom, are free to focus on the boycott of settlement goods instead." ([New Left Project](#), 05/17/10).

⁹ See the [Jerusalem Post](#), 04/12/10