

The Boycott Divestment Sanctions Movement

Adam Horowitz and Philip Weiss | June 9, 2010

In April the student senate at the University of California, Berkeley, twice held all-night sessions to debate a proposal urging the school to divest from two US military companies "materially and militarily profiting" from the occupation of the Palestinian territories. Hundreds of people packed the hall, and statements in support of the measure were read aloud from leaders, including Noam Chomsky, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Naomi Klein and Alice Walker. In the end the divestment measure failed (the senate majority of 13 to 5 was not enough to overturn the student government president's veto), but the outcome was surely less significant than the furor over the issue. Following related battles last year at Hampshire College and the Toronto International Film Festival, the Berkeley measure was yet another signal that the divestment initiative, part of a broader movement popularly known as BDS, for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, has become a key battleground in the grassroots struggle over the future of Israel/Palestine.

"We're at a super-exciting moment, truly a turning point," says Rebecca Vilkomerson of Jewish Voice for Peace, an activist organization that supports selective divestment from companies profiting from the occupation. "For the first time we're seeing a serious debate of divestment at a major public university." BDS supporters say the movement has the potential to transform international opinion in much the way that the divestment movement in the 1980s isolated the South African apartheid regime. Or as Tutu wrote to the Berkeley students:

The same issue of equality is what motivates the divestment movement of today, which tries to end Israel's 43 year long occupation and the unequal treatment of the Palestinian people by the Israeli government ruling over them. The abuses they face are real, and no person should be offended by principled, morally consistent, nonviolent acts to oppose them. It is no more wrong to call out Israel in particular for its abuses than it was to call out the Apartheid regime in particular for its abuses.

Opponents of BDS see just that threat—that Israel will be isolated. They say that BDS unfairly singles out Israel for conduct that other states are also guilty of and that it seeks to delegitimize the Jewish state in the eyes of the world, thereby threatening Israel's existence. Some argue that grassroots actions put the emphasis on the wrong target. As Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center said on *Democracy Now!* in March, "It's the United States government you've got to look to, not private industry or private commerce. So that's one really big difference simply at strategic and tactical levels."

When did the BDS movement begin, why is it growing and what does it want?

The campaign traces its origins to a July 2004 advisory opinion by the International Court of Justice (the World Court), which found Israel's separation wall in the West Bank to be "contrary

to international law." The ICJ also recommended that the parts of the wall built inside the occupied territories be dismantled and that Palestinians affected by the wall be compensated. When a year passed with no sign that the opinion would be enforced, a wide-ranging coalition of more than 170 organizations representing Palestinian civil society issued a call for boycott, divestment and sanction of Israel "until it complies with international law and universal principles of human rights." Compliance meant three things: ending the occupation, recognizing equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel and respecting the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194 of 1948.

The "call" (which can be found at bdsmovement.net [1]) was notable for unifying the Palestinian grassroots and for the simplicity and coherence of its platform. BDS was seen as an "essential component" for shifting the playing field in the Palestinians' favor after the slow death of the peace process, the Israeli settlement expansion and the inability of the international community to hold Israel accountable.

Boycotts are not a new tactic for Palestinians. As far back as the 1936–39 revolt against the British Mandate, Palestinians incorporated general strikes and boycotts into their struggle. During the first intifada in the late 1980s, they boycotted Israeli goods, and the West Bank town of Beit Sahour led efforts to refuse to pay Israeli taxes that helped finance the occupation. And in 2001 an international boycott effort was launched after the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. It quickly met forceful pushback, notably in a 2002 charge by Harvard president Lawrence Summers that divestment was anti-Semitic "in effect, if not intent."

Today the BDS movement is loosely coordinated by a body called the Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions Campaign National Committee (BNC), which is made up of nongovernmental organizations representing Palestinian civil society. The BNC is not affiliated with any political party (though it has been endorsed by some) and does not take positions on issues that fall outside the specific principles of the "call." Thus it does not endorse either a one-state or two-state solution to the conflict.

Israel's 2008–09 attack on Gaza spurred the campaign in the United States and around the world. "The most important thing for the Palestinian movement is the rise of the solidarity movement worldwide after the war crimes in Gaza," Palestinian activist and former Palestinian Authority presidential candidate Mustafa Barghouthi said earlier this year at a demonstration in the West Bank. "Boycott is the best way of changing the balance of forces. Military force will not work, because of the imbalance of forces, but also because it is not right. I don't think Israel will change its policy unless it hurts, and BDS will hurt it."

Most recently, Israel's raid on the Free Gaza flotilla, which killed at least nine activists, has added fuel to the campaign. The attack on a humanitarian ship seemed to reignite much of the international furor from the Gaza invasion of the year before, as it highlighted Israel's inhumane policy of collective punishment in the besieged territory. And with this latest outrage came even louder calls for accountability.

BDS represents three strategies: boycotts are commonly carried out by individuals, divestment by institutions and sanctions by governments. For example, organizers have called on people to

avoid buying products made in Israeli settlements; on churches to sell stocks of companies such as Caterpillar, which makes the infamous D9 bulldozer used to demolish Palestinian homes and fields; and on politicians to make conditional or end US aid to Israel. BDS's proponents argue that unless Israel experiences material, political and moral pressure, it will maintain the status quo. Nobel laureates Shirin Ebadi, Mairead Maguire (Corrigan), Rigoberta Menchu Tum and Jody Williams made this point in a letter supporting the Berkeley divestment bill:

We stand united in our belief that divesting from companies that provide significant support for the Israeli military provides moral and strategic stewardship of tuition and taxpayer-funded public education money. We are all peace makers, and we believe that no amount of dialogue without economic pressure can motivate Israel to change its policy of using overwhelming force against Palestinian civilians.

The movement has won adherents by saying that it will accept any gesture of boycott or divestment that Westerners are willing to make. "If you only want to boycott an egg, we want you to boycott an egg," said Omar Barghouti, a founding member of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), which is part of the BNC, during a tour of America last year to drum up support.

Even the Palestinian Authority—never celebrated for its connection to the grassroots—has made a nod toward the movement, with Prime Minister Salam Fayyad vowing to empty Palestinian homes of goods made in the settlements. But BDS's biggest victories have come in the West and have involved divestments from businesses profiting from investment in the West Bank, where 2.5 million Palestinians live under an occupation whose hundreds of armed checkpoints and separate roadways for Jewish colonists have led some South Africans to declare that the system is worse than apartheid. French multinational Veolia Transport was targeted for its role in building a light-rail system that will connect West Jerusalem to settlements in the occupied territories. Veolia dropped out of the project following an escalating international campaign against the firm, during which the Dutch ASN Bank severed ties to Veolia. Israeli diamond merchant Lev Leviev was also targeted because of his funding of settlements. Last year the US investment firm BlackRock divested itself of stock in Leviev's Africa-Israel company, and Britain canceled plans to move its Tel Aviv embassy into a Leviev-owned building. Similarly, the Frankfurt-based Deutsche Bank recently divested its shares in the Israeli military contractor Elbit Systems, which supplies components for the separation wall. Wiltrud Rösch-Metzler, vice president of Pax Christi Germany, who helped lead the campaign, called it "a huge success.... [Deutsche Bank] went out of their way to list numerous standards and international ethical commitments to which the bank is party, highlighting how Elbit investments would violate them all."

The immediate aftermath of the flotilla attack saw a surge in BDS activity across Europe. Most notably, Britain's largest union, UNITE, passed a motion to "vigorously promote a policy of divestment from Israeli companies," along with a boycott of Israeli goods and services. At the same time, the Swedish Port Workers Union announced it would refuse to load or unload any ships coming to or from Israel for nine days, to protest the flotilla raid.

In the United States, BDS has been percolating among activist groups, churches and campuses for several years. Since 2005 the Presbyterian Church (USA) has undertaken what it calls a "phased, selective divestment" process aimed at five companies benefiting from the occupation [see Hasdai Westbrook, "The Israel Divestment Debate," May 8, 2006]. Again, the West Bank is the focus. Adalah-NY, a New York-based justice group, regularly leads pickets of Leviev's Madison Avenue jewelry store and pressured UNICEF and the humanitarian organization Oxfam to distance themselves from Leviev. The peace group Code Pink has led a campaign called "Stolen Beauty" that targets Ahava, a cosmetics company based in a West Bank settlement that uses ingredients from the Dead Sea.

"What we've seen in the past two years is a rapidly growing, diverse movement dedicated to universal human rights and international law," says David Hosey, a spokesman for the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, a national coalition of grassroots organizations that supports BDS. "On campuses and in communities across the United States, people are sending a clear message that if the US government won't hold Israel accountable for violations of Palestinian human rights, then civil society will step up and do the job."

Two of the biggest divestment fights in the past year in some ways could not have been more different—Hampshire College in Massachusetts and the Toronto International Film Festival. One year ago Hampshire students ignited a firestorm with a campus divestment campaign that drew national attention, including calls from Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz to student organizers on their cellphones. The Hampshire board of directors voted to divest from six military companies involved in the occupation and to adopt a "social responsibility" screen for Hampshire's investments. Though the administration denied that the divestiture was specifically aimed at the Israeli occupation, the headlines helped catalyze the national student BDS movement. In November the college hosted a divestment organizing conference of student leaders from more than forty campuses, including Berkeley; UC, San Diego; the University of Arizona; and Carleton University in Ottawa—whose campaigns all made news this past spring. The movement won a notable victory in June when the student body of Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington—Rachel Corrie's alma mater—voted to call on the college to divest from companies profiting from the occupation and to ban the use of Caterpillar equipment on campus. The resolution passed with nearly 80 percent of the vote. Evergreen junior Anna Simonton explained that the issue resonated across the student body because of the US role in the conflict. "This issue is something we're all complicit in," she said. "It's our money and our taxes."

At the Toronto International Film Festival last fall, movie premieres were overshadowed by the controversy over a "city to city" promotion by the festival that paired Toronto with Tel Aviv. In a "Toronto Declaration," critics said the showcase had been pushed by the Israeli consulate as part of its efforts to "rebrand" Israel after the horrific public relations fallout from the Gaza war months earlier [see Horowitz and Weiss, "American Jews Rethink Israel," November 2, 2009].

The response from Israel's supporters was immediate and forceful. Big-name stars, including Sacha Baron Cohen and Jerry Seinfeld, came out against the declaration, and so did filmmakers David Cronenberg and Ivan Reitman. Dan Adler, a former executive at the Creative Artists Agency, worked with the Los Angeles Jewish Federation and United Jewish Appeal of Toronto to push the claim that the declaration was a boycott of the festival and a blacklist of Israeli

artists. The declaration was neither, but the response was a sign of where the battle was headed, with many Israel supporters describing BDS as a Trojan horse aimed at delegitimizing Israel as a Jewish state.

In January the Reut Institute, a Tel Aviv think tank, issued a report describing BDS as part of a campaign "to demonize Israel." The movement has had limited "practical success," the Reut study said, but it has been "highly successful in generating publicity and in mobilizing anti-Israel activism, in effect uniting anti-Zionists with critics of specific Israeli policies." The risk, Reut went on, was to Israel's image: "that such campaigns will create an equivalency between Israel and apartheid-era South Africa that penetrates the mainstream of public and political consciousness."

This fear was echoed by Asher Fredman, a commentator on the website of the Israeli paper *Yediot Ahronot*, who described the BDS movement as a "soft war" against Israel. "The point that must be internalized is that the soft war constitutes not simply a nuisance or even an economic threat," Fredman warned. "It is a process that could play a major role in shaping the future status quo between Israel and the Palestinians."

Many American Jewish community groups have taken action against the movement on a similar basis. The delegitimization worry has generated some surprising alliances between liberal Zionist groups and right-wing hawks. BDS supporters counter that it is Israel's actions, not the protest, that are delegitimizing Israel in the eyes of the public. Ali Abunimah, author, activist and co-founder of the Electronic Intifada website, said at the Hampshire BDS conference, "Israel's self-image as a liberal Jewish and democratic state is impossible to maintain against the reality of a militarized, ultranationalist, sectarian Jewish settler colony that has to carry out regular massacres of indigenous civilians in order to maintain its control. Zionism simply cannot bomb, kidnap, assassinate, expel, demolish, settle and lie its way to legitimacy and acceptance."

Some liberal Jewish organizations and individuals have adopted a now-is-not-the-time policy. Naomi Paiss of the New Israel Fund says she respects colleagues who do not buy goods made in the territories, but she believes an "official" boycott of companies in the territories would be impossible to implement, given that major Israeli companies and the Israeli government itself are involved. "We think it's a delegitimizing tactic, inflammatory, won't end the occupation and isn't productive," she e-mailed. Cora Weiss, a longtime liberal leader who championed Hampshire's South Africa divestment initiative in the 1970s, when she was on the board, says BDS is too broad-brush. "César Chávez led a focused boycott—grapes—and for several years no one ate grapes," she recalls. "That had an impact."

Americans for Peace Now has also criticized BDS as being counterproductive and even anti-Semitic. The longtime peace group said in a recent statement that the campaign creates a "circle the wagons" reaction in the Jewish community:

Such a response is understandable, since much of the pressure for such campaigns comes from historically virulently anti-Israel sources that are often not interested in Israeli security concerns or Palestinian behavior. This in turn creates very real and understandable worries about global

anti-Semitism and the perception that the campaigns are not truly (or only) about Israeli policies but rather reflect a deep-seated hatred for and rejection of Israel.

Parts of this ad hoc coalition went into action during the Berkeley divestment debate. J Street, the new alternative Israel lobby, joined forces with such right-wing groups as the Anti-Defamation League, the David Project and StandWithUs\SF to decry the original Berkeley senate bill. The issue is "complex," the coalition warned, and that "complexity should be reflected in the dialogue on campus rather than singling out one side or another for condemnation and punishment."

According to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, Berkeley Hillel, a Jewish campus organization, "coordinated a comprehensive national lobbying campaign consisting of a teach-in, face-to-face meetings with student senators and an intervention by a Nobel laureate [Elie Wiesel], all aimed at robbing the divestment supporters of three senate votes." Adam Naftalin-Kelman, Berkeley Hillel's newly installed executive director, said the strategy was devised at a roundtable convened by Hillel and attended by representatives of local branches of J Street, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and the Jewish Community Relations Council, as well as local rabbis and Israel's consul general in San Francisco. This strategy included circulating antidivestment talking points that urged students to reframe the debate as an attack on the Jewish community and to avoid talking about the particulars of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

But Jewish organizations face insurgent generational forces over the issue. Some students in J Street's college organizations quietly support BDS as a nonviolent means of doing something to end the oppression of Palestinians. This tension was even on display at J Street's organizing conference in October. During a student workshop called "Reckoning With the Radical Left on Campus: Alternatives to Boycotts and Divestments," there was reportedly considerable interest in divestment campaigns targeting the occupation. At the same time, "J Street U," the student branch of J Street, is officially opposed to divestment and has begun an "Invest, Don't Divest" campaign, which encourages students to "Invest \$2 for 2 States" as an alternative to BDS activities on campus.

By opposing direct action, the older generation is arguing that government must take the lead through a peace process that so far has resulted in little more than further Israeli colonization. "I find boycotts kind of distasteful. It's a little bit like collective punishment," says Ralph Seliger, long associated with Meretz USA, a left Zionist organization. "That probably wouldn't be very emotionally satisfying to someone who was upset about the issue. But I think it's part of growing up to understand that the world is not here to give you emotional satisfaction, and in this issue there is both complexity and perplexity, and you need to learn as much as you can, and be receptive to all sides, and be discerning."

Portions of the BDS call have been unsettling even to longtime advocates for Middle East peace. Its support for the refugees' right of return is a deal breaker for many liberal Zionists, who believe Israel needs to maintain a Jewish majority. Other activists have said BDS should focus primarily on the US role in the conflict. Israeli writer and activist Joseph Dana says that while the campaign has informed people around the world about the issue, almost all US military aid to Israel winds up in the United States with military manufacturers, so "it would be more

productive for the BDS campaigns to focus on these companies," especially if American citizens are doing the pressuring.

Perhaps the most controversial part of the BDS movement, even for some supporters, has been the call for a cultural and academic boycott. Organizers of the boycott explain that it is directed at institutions, not individuals, meaning that people are encouraged to boycott academic conferences, events or products (i.e., films, talks or performances) sponsored by the Israeli government or Israeli universities but not individual academics based on their politics. MIT scientist Nancy Kanwisher recently circulated anonymous letters of support for an academic boycott from two colleagues. One colleague said that while refusing to support Israeli academic research, "I will continue to collaborate with, and host, Israeli scientific colleagues on an individual basis."

Alisa Solomon, a noted critic of Israel's actions and editor, with Tony Kushner, of *Wrestling With Zion: Progressive Jewish-American Responses to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, says she supports BDS but draws the line at academic boycott. "I believe in and support a lot of [the BDS movement]; I just see a lot of different strains and approaches and am enthusiastic about some (economic boycotts against settlement products, companies participating in and profiting from occupation, plus think we should cut military aid, etc.), generally supportive of others ("don't play Sun City" efforts), and have qualms about academic/cultural in this direction both for the free expression reasons and because it requires declaring some people kosher and some not," she wrote in an e-mail. "I prefer direct to symbolic action, so taking money away from occupation seems to me a far better effort than denouncing, say, a choreographer."

For their part, supporters of the academic boycott say that Israeli universities are implicated in the occupation because they are intimately connected with the Israeli government in ways that outstrip even American university contributions to the Vietnam War effort a generation ago. The argument was lent support last year when Rivka Carmi, president of Ben-Gurion University, attacked faculty member (and frequent *Nation* contributor) Neve Gordon for advocating BDS in an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*. Gordon had crossed "the boundaries of academic freedom," Carmi said, and she questioned his ability to work at the school: "After his...extreme description of Israel as an 'apartheid' state, how can he, in good faith, create the collaborative atmosphere necessary for true academic research and teaching?"

The controversy came to Tel Aviv University this spring when novelists Margaret Atwood and Amitav Ghosh were named as recipients of a \$1 million prize from the Dan David Foundation, which is headquartered at the university. Boycott activists, including students from the besieged Gaza Strip, implored Atwood and Ghosh to refuse the award because of its relationship to the university. In the end, the writers accepted the prize and criticized the activists in their joint acceptance speech: "the all-or-nothings want to bully us into being their wholly owned puppets." They also quoted Anthony Appiah, president of PEN American Center, who said, "We have to stand, as we have stood from the very beginning, against the very idea of a cultural boycott. We have to continue to say: Only connect." After she got home, Atwood wrote a piece for *Ha'aretz* saying that Israel's greatest threat was now internal: "The concept of Israel as a humane and democratic state is in serious trouble."

Another prominent focus of the BDS campaign has been on musicians. In recent months Leonard Cohen played Tel Aviv despite an appeal to him to cancel, while Gil Scott-Heron and Elvis Costello pulled out of their Israeli appearances. Costello explained on his website that his decision was "a matter of instinct and conscience" and that "there are occasions when merely having your name added to a concert schedule may be interpreted as a political act that resonates more than anything that might be sung." The *Forward* recently quoted an anonymous music industry insider who said more than fifteen performers have recently refused to play in Israel, and in the week after the flotilla attack three more popular groups—the Klaxons, Gorillaz and the Pixies—canceled upcoming performances to protest the raid.

In the end many in Israel, and its supporters in the United States, return to the fear that BDS is advancing the likelihood of the dissolution of the Jewish state—the delegitimization issue. "The BDS movement seems dominated by those whose endgame is one state, not two," Meretz USA executive director Ron Skolnik wrote in *Israel Horizons*, a liberal Zionist publication. The movement "apparently wishes to build on legitimate international opposition to the 1967 occupation in order to undermine Israel's independent existence."

Rebecca Vilkomerson says that is not the case. Her group, Jewish Voice for Peace, does not take a position on the two-state versus one-state solution. Many Jewish students who spoke out against the Berkeley measure, she said, objected in highly subjective terms, saying, "We feel marginalized, we feel scared, we feel intimidated, we feel alienated" by the legislation. According to Vilkomerson, the best response to this came from Tom Pessah, an Israeli PhD student at Berkeley and co-author of the bill, who said that it was "OK" to have such feelings. He says he also felt uncomfortable when he first learned how much of his freedom in Israel was based on Palestinian dispossession—and so he feared what justice would entail.

Such anxieties would seem to accompany any transformative social movement, and BDS supporters are beginning to acknowledge them. Palestinian leader Mustafa Barghouthi addressed the issue in his appeal to the Berkeley students on grounds they might best understand. He has lived his life under occupation, he wrote; he and his community seek freedom: "Do not stand in the way like those angry Alabama students 50 years ago blocking integration. You have, I trust, nothing in common with those students but misplaced fear."

The Berkeley bill failed, but the all-night debates only seemed to give the movement confidence that the next vote will go differently. We might not have to wait long to find out: six more American university student bodies are said to be taking up the call in the near future.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.bdsmovement.net>