

Why

Boycott

Divestment

Sanctions



On July 9, 2005, one year after the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declared Israel's wall and settlements built on occupied Palestinian territory to be illegal, over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations urged the world to adopt a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israeli institutions. This rapidly growing campaign aims to block the political, military and economic support that allows Israel to continue to violate international law. Among its demands are a comprehensive boycott of all Israeli academic and cultural institutions until such time as Israel withdraws from all the lands occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem; removes all its colonies from those lands; agrees to United Nations resolutions relevant to the restitution of Palestinian refugees' rights; and dismantles its legalized and institutionalized system of racial discrimination, a system of apartheid, as defined by the United Nations.¹

Boycott, divestment and sanctions are the most effective non-violent, morally consistent means for achieving justice and genuine peace in the region. The BDS campaign mobilizes international pressure on the institutions of Israeli apartheid while building solidarity between Palestinians and those outside who believe in a just peace for Palestine.

Why an Academic Boycott? Israeli universities and the Occupation

Israeli academic institutions are deeply complicit in Israel's colonial and racist policies against the Palestinian people. Israeli universities and research institutions co-operate closely with the security-military establishment through research and other academic activities. They have never dissociated themselves from the occupation regime, despite over four decades of the systematic stifling of Palestinian education. Israeli universities have never condemned the entrenched and institutionalized apartheid system of discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel within the Israeli polity, society and academy. Israeli academic institutions offer "strategic analysis" and advice to military-intelligence agencies, and support research to develop weapons technologies for the Occupation forces. Israeli academia provides material and intellectual support to the ongoing occupation and its grave human rights violations against the Palestinian people. Academics such as Professor Arnon Sofer of Haifa University, infamous for his argument that Palestinian citizens pose a 'demographic threat' to the state of Israel, produce research, ideology, and new leadership for the Israeli state.

Israeli academic institutions restrict Palestinians' enrollment, persecute students for political involvement, gagging their freedom of expression, and actively work to keep international students away from Palestinian towns and villages. Several such institutions are part of Israel's settlements, which are located on ruins of demolished Palestinian villages or expanding onto Palestinian-owned land occupied in 1967. Bar-Ilan University's former subsidiary college in the illegal West Bank settlement of Ariel, renamed itself "The Ariel University Centre of Samaria" in August 2007. Its board of governors is chaired by former Israeli defense minister, Moshe Arens. The occupation government has supported such a transformation under the pretext that the move "would assist in enlarging the base of higher education in Israel as to benefit the Israeli society and economy."

What Is an Academic Boycott?

The academic boycott is aimed at the isolation of Israeli universities and other teaching and research institutions in order to challenge their complicity in maintaining the Israeli occupation and other violations of international law. An institutional boycott of Israeli universities targets institutional links between Israeli universities and overseas partners in the form of university pairing, exchanges, joint programs and research initiatives—it is *not* a ban on individual Israeli academics, regardless of their opinions.

Our Palestinian colleagues and their Israeli allies believe that institutional ties between Canadian and Israeli universities serve to legitimate Israeli state-funded institutions that act as partners in Israel's repeated violations of international law and denial of basic rights to Palestinians.¹ The campaign to boycott Israeli academic institutions is informed by a similar BDS campaign that targeted South African academic institutions during the struggle against apartheid in the 1970s and 1980s. Such a strategy entails calling on colleges, universities and their workers to:

- **Refuse participation in academic cooperation, collaboration or joint projects with Israeli universities;**
- **Refrain from attending or co-sponsoring conferences and other academic activities held at Israeli universities;**
- **Boycott Israeli universities, and suspend all forms of funding and subsidies to them;**
- **Promote divestment from Israel by academic institutions;**
- **Foster initiatives that directly support Palestinian educational institutions and ensure opportunities for Palestinian students and faculty.**

Does BDS violate academic freedom?

Some contend that an academic boycott impinges on academic freedom. In response, we note that university jobs do not give professors *carte blanche* to do what they like without ethical consideration. The rights to engage in intellectual inquiry and research are linked to responsibilities and realities. The mystique of the ivory tower and the romanticized image of the intellectual as standing apart from society deflect attention away from institutional and economic relations between international educational institutions and the state of Israel, which support the ongoing occupation. Given the material assaults on Palestinian academic freedom, such as air strikes on Palestinian schools and universities as well as UN-sponsored schools, and Israeli universities' direct contributions to violations of Palestinian rights and international law, the academic boycott movement offers the international community one means of protesting, and refusing to participate in, ongoing attacks on Palestinian academic freedom and the institutions and policies supporting such attacks.

Pro-Israel lobbies try to smear all critics of Israel with claims that they are "anti-Semitic." This is an attempt to shut down debate. It is not anti-Semitic to demand that the Israeli government follow recognized legal and ethical standards of international and humanitarian law. It is not anti-Semitic to endorse and practice non-violent strategies as a way to challenge illegal and discriminatory practices that have denied human rights and justice to Palestinians for over 60 years. Criticism of Israel's violations of human rights cannot be conflated with racism against Jews. Furthermore, the Palestinian BDS movement and its partners base their advocacy and activism on universalist values that reject all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism, and respect the equal rights of all human beings regardless of religion, ethnicity, etc.

How about dissenting Israelis within universities?

Most Israeli academics who oppose the occupation and Israel's special form of apartheid also believe that an academic boycott of Israeli universities is necessary, despite the effects that a boycott could have on their careers. Thus, although some non-Zionist members of the Israeli left may be inadvertently affected by boycott, in the 'bigger picture' they recognize that this is the price to be paid for achieving a just society

As Lawrence Davidson, Professor of Middle East History at West Chester University, Pennsylvania, argues, "Israel's academic community cannot be allowed to proceed as if it has nothing to do with the destruction of Palestinian society, including its academy and academic freedom. Given their direct and indirect complicity in this criminal process, the placing of temporary limits on the freedom of 9000 Israeli academics is a necessary price that must be paid in the struggle to restore the fundamental rights of millions of Palestinians." The academic freedom that is putatively violated by academic boycotts consists largely of the material privileges that accrue to academics in the course of their careers: access to institutional research funds, support for academic activities, and the like.

Does BDS Work? Lessons from South Africa

Taking many years to build, the international campaign to end the apartheid regime in South Africa employed a range of non-violent strategies and tactics, notably boycott, divestment and, ultimately, sanctions. These campaigns were mounted in response to calls from South African resistance movements and worked to isolate the South African state politically, economically, culturally and academically. Boycotts of South Africa's economy, sport, academia and culture played a significant role in ending the apartheid regime, supporting internal struggles for social and economic justice.

Canadian universities played a part in this global campaign. In 1982, McGill's Board of Governors announced that all of its holdings in Mobil and Shell had been sold, claiming that the companies were "providing substantial comfort and support to the South African military and police by supplying them with petroleum products, thereby assisting the policy of apartheid". In 1987, Carleton's Board of Governors announced that Carleton would fully divest from South Africa, including the university's endowment and its contracting policy for goods and services. That year, Queen's' Board of Trustees resolved to divest shares in corporations with direct investments in South Africa.



On July 13, 2005 the UN International Civil Society Conference adopted the Palestinian call for BDS. Highly esteemed intellectuals, academics, artists and community leaders have declared their support for BDS, including: Desmond Tutu, John Berger, Arundhati Roy, Ken Loach, Steven and Hilary Rose, Adrienne Rich, Naomi Klein, and Ilan Pappé, to name a few.

Since the brutal three-week Israeli offensive into the occupied Gaza Strip in January 2009, support for BDS has been rapidly growing. In the wake of Israel's bombing of the Islamic University of Gaza, the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees urged academics around the world to support a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. In response, thousands of academics and university workers from around the world signed petitions showing support for Palestinians, and in many cases committed themselves to holding discussions of the academic boycott, or adopting the boycott position. An open letter signed by over 400 professors from 40 universities across Canada, under the banner Faculty for Palestine, showed support for the Palestinian people. Over 120 professors and staff at Quebec universities and colleges signed an open letter calling for BDS.

Unions representing university workers across the world have also taken clear stands in support of BDS. In the UK, members of the University and College Union (UCU) moved towards adopting a BDS position at their annual congress on 27 May 2009. In France, the largest teachers' union (Fédération Syndicale Unitaire) endorsed BDS. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the British Transport and General Workers Union, the Scottish Trade Union Congress, the Centrale des Syndicats du Quebec (CSQ), Quebec's third largest labour federation, and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers have all adopted BDS positions. In Canada, university workers in the Canadian Union of Public Employees passed a motion calling for an academic boycott of Israel, as did the federation of teachers, Fédération autonome du collégial (FAC)--Quebec College Federation. CUPE-Ontario's University Workers Coordinating Committee (OUWCC), at its annual conference on 22 February 2009, resolved to "[e]ncourage its member locals to hold public forums to discuss an academic boycott of Israeli academic institutions;" to "investigate research and investment links between Ontario Universities and Israel's military;" to "[m]obilize campus allies to pressure universities from engaging in acts of cooperation that assist and aid military research at the institutional level with Israeli universities;" to "[p]ressure Ontario universities to refuse collaborations, corporate partnerships and investments that would benefit, either directly or indirectly, military research or the Israeli military."

A growing number of people in Israel support BDS. In January 2009, 540 Israeli citizens signed an open letter entitled "a call from within," urging the international community to implement the call by Palestinian human rights organizations to adopt concrete measures, including the imposition of sanctions, in order to ensure Israel's fulfillment of its obligations under international humanitarian law.

The increasing support for BDS is a clear indication that people everywhere see the need for concrete and concerted actions against the apartheid state of Israel. As journalist and author Naomi Klein puts it:

"It's time. Long past time. 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."

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