

BDS: Nourishing Palestinian Hope in the Struggle for Freedom, Justice and Equality

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The Palestinian-led, global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions ([BDS](#)) movement for Palestinian rights salutes the Irish Congress of Trade Unions for supporting the movement since 2007, reflecting the deep roots of Irish-Palestinian solidarity. The challenge ahead of us is how to translate this principled and highly appreciated support into effective, strategic campaigns that can significantly contribute to our struggle for freedom justice and equality, given the sharp escalation by Israel's regime of occupation, settler-colonialism and apartheid of its war crimes, siege, ethnic cleansing and dehumanization of the entire Palestinian people.

Israel's military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, [including East Jerusalem](#), turned 50 last month. The "[gigantic fraud](#)" of the so-called peace process has made a *just* peace farther than ever by providing a fig leaf for Israel's intensifying [colonization](#) and denial of our basic human rights. It is high time for concerted, meaningful action.

Along with colonizing Palestinian lands, Israel has for decades attempted to [colonize our minds](#) with despair and the futility of hoping to live in freedom and dignity. The long path to justice and freedom, therefore, must commence with exorcizing our deeply-seated inhibitions and embarking on a process of decolonizing our minds, for we cannot possibly pursue freedom while our minds cannot envision what it looks like.

This decolonization of the mind, in turn, demands rekindling our well-founded hope. Hope, after all, can be contagious. This is precisely why Israel's regime of oppression is desperately trying to suppress the BDS movement, a main source of our hope, a key part of our nonviolent popular resistance, and the [most effective](#) form of international solidarity with the Palestinian struggle for rights.

Begun in 2005 by the [broadest coalition](#) in Palestinian civil society, BDS calls for ending Israel's 1967 occupation, ending what even the US State Department once criticized as Israel's system of "[institutional, legal and societal discrimination](#)," which meets the [UN definition of apartheid](#), and upholding the [right of Palestinian refugees to return](#) to the

homes and lands from which they were [uprooted and dispossessed](#) during 1948 and ever since.

These three basic rights correspond to the three main components of the Palestinian people: those in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem (38% of the Palestinian people, according to 2016 [statistics](#)); Palestinian citizens of Israel (12%), and those in exile (50%). More than two thirds of Palestinians are refugees or internally displaced persons.

BDS is deeply inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement and the US Civil Rights movement.

Anchored in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the BDS movement has [consistently and categorically opposed all forms of racism and racial discrimination](#), including anti-Jewish racism and Islamophobia. From Belfast to Bethlehem, we strongly believe, one's identity should never diminish or restrict one's entitlement to universal rights. BDS, as a result, targets complicity, not identity.

BDS is an inclusive movement that enjoys growing support among diverse communities, including a growing number of [Jewish-Israeli BDS supporters](#).

Despite the obvious differences between [Israel's regime of oppression](#) and that of apartheid South Africa, the similarities are striking. South Africa's Speaker of Parliament, [Baleka Mbete](#), has recently stated, "Apartheid in South Africa was a picnic compared to what we have seen in the occupied [Palestinian] territories."

A few months ago, [ESCWA](#), a UN agency, concluded that Israel is guilty of the crime of apartheid against the entire Palestinian people and recommended BDS measures to hold Israel to account.

Israeli apartheid is recognized as such by [Israeli figures and commentators](#), some of whom admit that Israel's more than [60 racist laws](#) form a pillar of this apartheid regime even inside Israel's pre-1967 borders. Earlier this year, for instance, Israeli forces destroyed most of [Umm al-Hiran](#) - a Bedouin village in the Naqab (Negev) desert whose residents are Palestinian citizens of Israel - [to establish a Jewish only settlement on its ruins](#). Israel maintains a completely [segregated education system](#) that enforces racial discrimination against its non-Jewish (i.e., indigenous Palestinian) students.

Globally, Israel is becoming more openly [associated with the rising far-right](#), including xenophobic and anti-Semitic groups in the [United States](#) and [Europe](#). Richard Spencer, a white supremacist leader supporting Trump, for example, has defended his racist nationalism as “[a sort of white Zionism](#).” This unmistakable allusion to Israel’s exclusionary foundations, as a state that privileges Jewish settlers over the indigenous Palestinian population and that treats African asylum seekers as a “[cancer](#),” further exposes the often-observed contradiction between Israel’s regime and liberal ideals.

As a result, support for holding Israel to account is growing worldwide, especially among [Jewish Americans](#) and the broader US public. A 2014 poll showed that [46 percent](#) of non-Orthodox Jewish American men under forty support boycotting Israel to end its occupation. A 2016 survey by the [Brookings Institution](#) reveals that almost half of all Americans support imposing sanctions or taking tougher measures against Israel to stop its illegal settlements.

BDS draws a lot of inspiration from the growing bonds of mutual solidarity with movements defending the rights of refugees, immigrants, women, workers, [Black Americans](#), Muslims, [Native Americans](#) and the [LGBTQI](#) community. Beyond the ethical imperative to stand with all oppressed communities against oppression, we understand that isolated we fail and united we prevail.

But what about the impact of BDS?

Large multinationals that are complicit in Israel’s violations of Palestinian human rights have been successfully targeted by the BDS movement. In September 2015, [Veolia](#), the French corporate giant, became the first international company to end all its involvement in illegal Israeli operations, following an extensive seven-year BDS campaign that cost it tenders around the world worth [billions of dollars](#). This has triggered a domino effect, with companies like [Orange](#) and [CRH](#) also pulling out of Israel’s economy in 2016.

Bowing to BDS pressure after suffering what the [Financial Times](#) called, “reputational damage,” G4S, the world’s largest private security company, decided also in 2016 to [end](#) most of its involvement in illegal Israeli business. G4S had lost contracts in Jordan, Norway, Lebanon, the European Parliament, South Africa, and Colombia, among others.

In the first weeks of 2016, the \$20 billion [United Methodist Church](#) pension fund declared the five largest Israeli banks off limits for investment, following the lead of the second

largest Dutch pension management fund, PGGM, which in 2014 [divested](#) from these Israeli banks as well.

The [Presbyterian Church](#) has voted to divest from Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard (HP) and Motorola Solutions, as did other [mainline churches](#) in the US, due to these companies support for Israel's occupation.

[Tens of city councils in Spain](#) have declared themselves Israeli apartheid free zones, while the Northern Irish city of [Derry](#) announced its full support for BDS.

While many artists have [cancelled gigs in Tel Aviv](#) or refused to participate in events there in the first place, of the [twenty-six Oscar nominees](#) in 2016 who were offered expensive, all-paid propaganda trips by the Israeli government none has taken the offer. Six out of eleven [National Football League](#) (NFL) players in the US have turned down a similar Israeli junket.

[US academic associations](#) as well as academic and teachers' unions in Ireland, the UK, South Africa, Canada and elsewhere have adopted the institutional academic boycott of Israel, and [tens of student governments](#) in universities across the world have voted for various BDS measures, including [divestment](#) from companies involved in Israel's occupation.

Support for a military embargo against Israel is also spreading. In Ireland, BDS partners are campaigning against the shameful purchase by government of Israeli drones "field-tested" on Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

But BDS cannot claim full responsibility for Israel's growing academic, cultural and – increasingly -- [economic isolation](#). Israel's regime itself deserves a considerable share of the credit.

Israel's 2015 election brought to power its "[most racist government](#)" ever, leading Israeli political and military figures to publicly express concerns about the state's future. Ehud Barak, a former prime minister, [warned](#) that Israel has been "infected by the seeds of fascism," while the current deputy chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Yair Golan, [compared](#) "revolting trends" in Israeli society to Germany in the 1930s.

Alarmed at how effective the BDS movement has become, Israel adopted in 2014 a new strategy for fighting BDS. Evoking memories of [McCarthyism](#), it employs [legal warfare](#), [espionage](#), reputation tarnishing [propaganda on steroids](#) to undermine, or even

outlaw, BDS advocacy. BDS activists, like myself, have been threatened with “civil assassination.”

A new Israeli anti-BDS law now [denies entry](#) to anyone who supports the boycott and the [Minister of Strategic Affairs](#), who coordinates the government’s fight against BDS, advocated “[black-listing](#)” Israeli citizens who support any boycott of Israel or its settlements.

These Israeli measures have alienated many in the [liberal mainstream](#) who consider freedom of expression an essential part of democracy.

The [European Union](#), the governments of [Sweden, Ireland, Netherlands](#) and the parliaments of [Spain](#) and [Switzerland](#), as well as leading international human rights organizations such as [Amnesty International](#), the [International Federation for Human Rights \(FIDH\)](#) and the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), have all defended the right to boycott Israel as a matter of freedom of speech.

To conclude, if boycott, at the most fundamental level, constitutes “refusing to cooperate with an evil system,” as [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) taught us in another context, BDS fundamentally calls on all people of conscience, all institutions and all corporations to end their respective complicity in Israel’s denial of Palestinian human rights.

“Do no harm” is, after all, not an appeal for charity; it is a demand for solidarity, for fulfilling one’s profound moral obligation to respect the human rights of all—Palestinians included.

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