

THE BDS MOVEMENT

Since 2001, organized campaigns around the world have promoted the “boycott, divestment and sanctions” (BDS) of Israel. The campaign intensified following the July 2004 joint statement by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), and a July 2005 call by Palestinian civil society organizations on the international community “to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era.” The campaign was endorsed by pro-Palestinian organizations in Europe and the United States and the call for BDS against Israel has since become a key tactic within the global effort to delegitimize and isolate Israel.

Campaigns have been launched demanding the “divestment” of university, municipal, church, union, and other investment portfolios from companies that advocates claim “aid Israel’s occupation,” as well as the “boycott” of Israeli products, professionals, professional associations and academic institutions, and artistic performances (in Israel and abroad).

Some supporters of BDS may genuinely believe that these efforts will encourage Israel to change policies towards Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank with which they disagree. However, the predominant drive of the BDS campaign and its leadership is not criticism of policies, but the demonization and delegitimization of Israel. BDS campaigns promote a biased and simplistic approach to the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and present this dispute over territorial and nationalist claims as the fault of only one party—Israel. The BDS campaign does not support Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and rejects a two-state solution to the conflict.

Despite the best efforts of BDS activists, the campaign has largely failed to have more than a public relations impact, particularly in the United States. For the most part, campaigns have failed to bring major institutions to divest from Israel or to keep companies and institutions from engaging with Israel or Israelis. There have been some gains among church groups and British trade unions. At universities where student governments have passed divestment resolutions, the president, chancellor or board of trustees have refused to implement it. Graduate student unions who voted to support divestment have had the resolution nullified by their international union. Even academic associations who have voted to boycott Israeli academic institutions have not implemented these policies in a discernible way.

BDS campaigns do, however, garner publicity and often have a negative impact on perceptions of Israel. Increasingly, BDS campaigns are used by anti-Israel activists to attract attention to their message, particularly on college campuses where BDS initiatives draw students, faculty, campus organizations, and administrations into a highly politicized and publicized debate.

Many of the founding goals of the BDS movement, including denying the Jewish people the universal right of self-determination along with many of the strategies employed in BDS campaigns and activists are antisemitic. Many individuals involved in BDS campaigns are driven by opposition to Israel’s very existence as a Jewish state. Often time, BDS campaigns give rise to tensions in communities—particularly on college campuses—that can result in harassment or intimidation of Jews and Israel supporters, including overt antisemitic expression and acts. This dynamic can create an environment in which antisemitism can be expressed more freely.