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The Campaign to "Kill" the BDS Movement Against Israel Extends Far and Wide

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Israel is facing declining public support in the United States and sees the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign as a key threat to its legitimacy. That's why Israel is enlisting the US government, American university administrators, and even tech companies like Zoom and Facebook to try to destroy the BDS movement.

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A day before a scheduled San Francisco State University lecture on "gender, justice and resistance" with Black, Palestinian, Jewish, and South African activists, the online meeting company Zoom announced it would not permit the event to take place on its platform. A spokesperson for Zoom cited concerns that hosting the event could violate "applicable U.S. export control, sanctions and anti-terrorism laws," and the company ultimately threatened to cancel the Zoom account for the entire California State University system if the event went through.

Zoom's decision to de-platform the event followed a staunch pressure campaign from right-wing Zionist organizations, who took credit online for its cancellation. Tech giants Facebook and YouTube followed suit, cutting the event stream and removing promotional materials from their platforms.

The incident sets a dangerous precedent for private tech companies to censor academic freedoms, university-sanctioned events, and social justice organizing. Dima Khalidi, director of Palestine Legal, explains that the incident is an attack on discussion of Palestinian freedom, "in response to a systemic repression campaign driven by the Israeli government and its allies." The campaign to censor and de-platform the event exemplifies the growing, coordinated efforts to destroy Palestinian liberation struggles, which have been made even more complicated by the virtual organizing strategies that the COVID-19 pandemic requires.

In recent weeks, the US State Department has committed to "target," "fight," and "kill" the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, a non-violent political campaign exercising free speech on American soil. The comments, made in a recent interview by a spokesperson for the State Department's Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, referred to the Trump administration's ongoing efforts to squash the BDS movement, expanding what is already a multimillion-dollar campaign encompassing government and private actors, and deploying counterinsurgency tactics, lawfare, and surveillance operations against activists campaigning for equal rights for Palestinians.

The BDS movement, conceived by Palestinian civil society groups in 2005, seeks to exert pressure on Israel to finally end its more than fifty-year occupation of Palestinian lands, to recognize the right of return for displaced Palestinian refugees, and to grant equal rights to Palestinian citizens of Israel. The State Department's commitment to "kill" this liberation struggle, a movement modeled on the international boycotts against apartheid South Africa, is part of a nationwide right-wing push to suppress criticism of Israel.

US State Department Special Envoy's Elan Carr has claimed that attempts to "economically strangle the state of Israel" are unequivocally anti-Semitic and said that the department's efforts to clamp down on BDS would include targeting even those campaigns which call for boycotting goods produced by companies profiting from the expansion of illegal settlements in Palestinian Occupied Territories.

Despite citing economics as a justification for their anti-BDS campaigns, the US State Department and its partners in the Israel lobby admit that boycotts do not pose a viable threat to Israel's economic security. The US government and the Israel lobby instead fear the political motivations of the movement and the growing successes of its capacity to shift public opinion toward Israel's apartheid regime.

Israel is facing a critical challenge in maintaining stable, long-term public support in the United States. While the alliance of Republicans, the mainstream Democratic Party, and the evangelical Christian movement continue to staunchly support the Israeli State — to the tune of $3.8 billion in annual military aid — this support is notably diminishing among progressives, Black Americans, and young people, particularly young Jews.

Within this context, the US Israel lobby has mobilized to neutralize this threat for many years. Israel lobby groups have invested millions toward derailing BDS organizing, particularly on college campuses, and defaming supporters of the movement. Taking stock of campaigns against the BDS movement offers insight into expanding repression against social-justice movements across the United States. The State Department's commitment to this agenda isn't just a threat to pro-Palestinian activism, but to Black Lives Matter solidarity campaigns, free speech, and political dissent more widely.

Lawfare

Among the primary tactics the Israel lobby uses to derail Palestine solidarity movements are legal and legislative processes to turn legitimate criticisms of Israel into expressions of anti-Semitism. At a moment when right-wing anti-Semitic violence is on the rise, this is particularly dangerous. The Israel lobby's lawfare campaigns are intended to criminalize and sanction anti-apartheid activists for participating in "discriminatory conduct" and even "hate speech."

In January 2020, the Trump administration bolstered these efforts by implementing the "Executive Order on Combating Anti-Semitism," cementing federal use of the controversial International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism which includes criticism of Israel.

The order also expanded the scope of federal Title VI policies to categorize criticism of Israel as a form of academic discrimination against Jews. The order gives Betsy DeVos's Department of Education power to launch investigations against and ultimately withhold funding for universities that allow BDS organizing on their campuses, on the grounds that

the government would be funding “anti-Semitism.”

These legal and legislative projects incentivize academic and institutional censorship of pro-Palestinian voices and strengthen what is sometimes called “the Palestinian exception to free speech.” The consequences of these tactics are not hypothetical.

In 2016, the dean of students at Fordham University, Keith Eldredge, used his veto power — the first time he did so in his tenure — to overturn a student government vote to approve the establishment of a Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) chapter on campus.

He explained in an email to students that SJP’s commitment to BDS was a primary reason for his decision to veto the group’s establishment. BDS, he claimed, “presents a barrier to open dialogue and mutual learning and understanding” promoting “polarization rather than dialogue.”

After a four-year legal battle with the university, courts ruled that the university must recognize the student group affirming the right of activists to campaign in solidarity with Palestinians. While the judge ultimately ruled in favor of the students’ free speech, the legal battle consumed years of energy and organizing potential.

This is often the real goal of lawfare operations: entangling organizers in legal and legislative battles is a tried and tested method which eats up activists’ time, energy, and money.

The redefinition of anti-Semitism to include criticism of the Israeli occupation has paved the way for a coordinated national campaign to punish businesses and individuals for divesting themselves from apartheid and settlement abuses. According to Palestine Legal, more than a hundred anti-boycott laws and executive orders have been introduced into state and local legislatures over the past six years alone.These measures, many of which restrict state funding and contracts to proponents of the boycott movement, have already been adopted in thirty states. Seventy-eight percent of people living in the United States now live under such anti-boycott provisions.

The proliferation of anti-BDS laws across the United States has had a chilling effect on political speech, not to mention some bizarre effects. In 2017, for example, hurricane victims in Dickerson, Texas were required to sign a pledgecommitting not to boycott the state of Israel in order to receive access to the city’s relief grants.

Texas ACLU legal director Andre Segura explained the measure was a violation of the First Amendment, noting the incident is “reminiscent of McCarthy-era loyalty oaths requiring Americans to disavow membership in the Communist Party and other forms of ‘subversive’ activity.”

US State Department representatives noted that pushing international allies to replicate similar measures, to condemn the BDS movement, and to adopt comparable redefinitions of anti-Semitism, was a priority strategy.

Surveillance and Smear Campaigns

The Israel lobby is also investing enormously in intelligence-gathering and smear campaign operations targeting critics of Israel, especially students and academics. The evidence is in their budgets.In 2019, Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs (MSA), an intelligence agency

established to map out and combat growing support for BDS around the world, was provided over $35 million in government funding over three years, a budget set to be matched by private donations. Intelligence gathering operations against US university students are being conducted in Israel but are also operated and financed in the United States.

"The Lobby USA," *Al Jazeera*'s 2016 undercover investigation into America's Israel lobby, revealed the partnerships between Israel's MSA and US-based lobby groups. Executive director of the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC) Jacob Baime admitted in undercover footage that his organization coordinates and communicates with the MSA, boasting about his organization's rapidly expanding budget and growing intelligence gathering capabilities.

As Baime explains, the ICC's surveillance strategy is "modelled on General Stanley McChrystal's counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq." The organization surveils the activities of student Palestine activists and releases online smear campaigns: "if one of these terrorists on campus wants to disrupt a pro-Israel lecture and unfurl a banner or whatever else, we're going to investigate them and look into bad stuff they've done.... The only thing is that we do it securely and anonymously, and that's the key."

Baime outlines that what the ICC has found most effective is conducting opposition research and releasing the information online through anonymous websites, alongside targeted Facebook ads. "Every few hours" he explains, "you drip out a new piece of the opposition research. It's psychological warfare. It drives them crazy."

A 2018 investigation by *Forward* revealed the ICC has also used their surveillance technologies to monitor the activities of progressive Jewish students, including those taking part in the Open Hillel conference at Swarthmore College.

Canary Mission is an infamous pro-Israel website which publishes profiles maligning Palestine solidarity organizers as "anti-Semites" in an attempt to intimidate people away from such activities, and, as the formerly anonymous organizers of the blacklist make clear, ruin potential future job prospects of those it profiles.

The website, which disproportionately targets Arab and Muslim students and academics, has been used to interrogate, detain, and even bar Americans and Palestinians traveling to Palestine through Israeli territory. "The Lobby USA" alleged, through covertly recorded conversations with an employee at The Israel Project (TIP), that billionaire real estate mogul Adam Milstein was the primary funder and creator of the website. Milstein has denied this allegation.

As with lawfare strategies, surveillance and smear campaigns serve not only as a threat and deterrent to advocating for Palestine, but also consume the time and energy of activists who are defamed for their role in the social justice movement. Jacob Baime explained how targeted activists "either shut down or they spend time responding to it and investigating it, which is time they can't spend attacking Israel. That's incredibly effective."

Severing Solidarities

Initiatives to disrupt Palestine liberation struggles and the BDS movement include the targeting of Black Lives Matter and other social justice movements which see their freedom struggles as integrally intertwined with Palestinians'. In 2014, Ferguson, Missouri rose up against racist police brutality after the murder of Michael Brown. At the same time, Israel launched its siege of the Gaza Strip, resulting in thousands of casualties.Protesters in

Ferguson and Palestine exchanged messages of solidarity on social media, including tips on how to relieve the effects of tear gas. Two years later, the Movement for Black Lives included in its platform a condemnation of Israeli apartheid, a rejection of US military aid to Israel, and a pledge to support the BDS movement.

Speaking at the 2016 Israel American Council conference, Israeli consul-general of Atlanta Judith Varnai-Shorer highlighted the Black Lives Matter movement as a threat to public support for Israel. "The major problem with Israel is with the young generation of the Black community. Black Lives Matter starts there" she says.

Andy David, Israel consul general of San Francisco stated on the same panel, "Martin Luther King would turn in his grave if he saw the anti-Israel tendencies or policies that are starting to emerge within Black Lives Matter."

Viewed as a threat to Israel's unchallenged political support in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement is also subjected to the lawfare, surveillance, and smear campaigns leveraged against proponents of the BDS movement.

A former employee of TIP in Washington, DC revealed that the Israel lobby had worked to disrupt Black Lives Matter events. He admitted TIP called upon its donors to push a New York City nightclub to cancel a Black Lives Matter benefit because of the movement's stance on Israel.

Effects of State Repression

The State Department, operating in tandem with Israeli intelligence and US-based pro-Israel lobbying groups, have committed to ramp up efforts to disorganize and target BDS and Palestine solidarity organizing. Their tactics are not dissimilar from the strategies of COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) or other historical counterinsurgency projects targeting social justice movements and political dissenters.The consequences of these projects aren't hypothetical. They have consumed the academic and political careers of numerous Palestine solidarity activists across the country. The continued expansion of this state repression is already producing a chilling effect on organizing for Palestinian liberation.

As we move into another academic year of social justice activism at universities, made even more complicated by virtual organizing and the COVID-19 pandemic, activists will need to think critically about the forces working to stop them.

We can take solace, however, in the fact that the State Department's project to "kill" BDS is nevertheless an indication of the movement's political influence. This expansion of state repression is evidence of the movement's ability to threaten the material support for colonialism, apartheid, and occupation that is at the heart of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.

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Featured image: Protester holds up a sign supporting the BDS movement. (John Englart / Flickr)

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