

Canada: Toward Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israeli Apartheid. McGill University

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Six years before the fall of the South African apartheid, an editorial by The Daily (“[South Africa Love it and Leave it](#),” September 12, 1985, Editorial, page 4) noted optimistically, “Now, even the most conservative authorities are recognizing that revolution is inevitable. Now, they are divesting not on principle, but out of self-interest.” McGill would later, in [November 18, 1985](#), join dozens of other North American universities in divesting its holdings from South Africa, also becoming the first Canadian university to do so – something that played an important role in taking down legislated apartheid in the country.

Thirty years later, the end of Israeli apartheid appears distant on the horizon as it has been ever since the occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel in 1967. The use of the term “apartheid” is a parallel drawn by human rights organizations and activists between the past racial segregation of South Africa and the Israeli concept of Hafrada (“separation”), whereby Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are literally walled off via the Israeli West Bank barrier and the Gaza barrier.

Palestinians in the West Bank – one of two self-governing Palestinian territories as per the Oslo Accords of 1993 – live under Israeli military occupation, or are confined to small islands of land under limited self-control. The Gaza Strip, the other Palestinian territory, home to 1.8 million people in one of the most [densely populated areas in the world](#), suffers the consequences of Israel’s blockade and over a decade of periodic wars with Israel. Israeli settlements in these territories, including East Jerusalem, are considered illegal under international law, especially the Fourth Geneva Convention, though Israel disputes this.

Meanwhile, Israel expands its domination over all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, driven by the most right-wing government in the country’s history. While many Palestinians continue to resist this situation with remarkable steadfastness, no conservative authorities are making the claim today that a “revolution is inevitable” in Palestine, or are divesting from Israeli corporations out of self-interest, let alone on principle.



Illustration by Sarah Meghan Mah

Growing Influence of BDS

But the growing influence of [Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions](#) (BDS) campaigns have the potential to impose a cost on the ordinary operations of Israeli apartheid. The BDS Movement was launched in 2005 by [a call from 171 Palestinian Civil Society organizations](#) and, to quote the call, was “inspired by the struggle of South Africans against apartheid.” It specifically called on “people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel [...] until [it] meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people’s inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law.”

The dominant trend for BDS campaigns has included passing divestment resolutions that target Israeli and multinational corporations that are complicit in the violations of the rights of Palestinians. Such campaigns don’t strictly adhere to the 2005 call, which supports “boycott, divestment and sanctions campaigns against Israel,” rather than multinational companies profiting from the occupation. However, such campaigns are generally supported or initiated by the [Palestinian BDS National Committee](#) (BNC) – the organization in Palestine responsible for directing BDS campaigns worldwide – and have successfully compelled companies to withdraw their services from the occupation and settlement expansion.

The creation last week [on February 4th] of the [McGill BDS Action Network](#), or simply McGill BDS, is a part of the spread of these campaigns, and the network’s first goal is to pressure the University to divest from companies profiting from the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Documents from [McGill’s Office of Investments](#) show that the University holds investments in at least four companies that profit from activities in the occupied territories: G4S, L-3

Communications, Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank, and RE/ MAX. The money invested in these companies constitutes a small portion of the McGill investment portfolio – less than 1 per cent of the University’s total investments – making divestment a reasonable possibility, fiscally speaking.

The McGill Board of Governors’ Committee to Advise on Matters of Social Responsibility (CAMSR)’s terms of reference make explicit their stance toward investing in companies like these that arguably do cause social injury. CAMSR [defines “social injury”](#) as “the grave injurious impact which the activities of a company is found to have on consumers, employees, or other persons, or on the natural environment. Such activities include those which violate, or frustrate the enforcement of rules of domestic or international law intended to protect individuals against deprivation of health, safety, or basic freedoms, or to protect the natural environment.” One can argue that many of Israel’s actions in the occupied territories and within its own territory constitute serious violations of human rights and international law, and the complicity of these companies in such activities gives reason to believe CAMSR can be persuaded to divest.

Support for the Prison System

The British private security systems corporation G4S has become the target of BDS campaigns in Europe and around the world especially after 13 Palestinian organizations made a [statement](#) call for action against the company in the midst of hunger strikes by Palestinian political prisoners in 2012, mostly due to its service to the Israeli Prison Service (IPS).

According to Who Profits, a research centre that details commercial involvement in the Israeli occupation, [the company has](#) “provided a perimeter defense system for the walls of the Ofer facility [in the West Bank] and installed a central command room inside, from which the entire facility could be monitored.” Who Profits also states that the company also “provided the entire security system for the Ketziot Prison, a central command room in the Megiddo Prison and security systems in the Damon Prison,” all of which are located in Israel and have Palestinian detainees. G4S systems have also been installed at the Jerusalem and Kishon interrogation and detention centres.


Israeli prison facilities often hold Palestinians under [administrative detention](#) – that is, detention without [charge or trial](#), which can last for periods of several months, sometimes years. By comparison, according to the [Associations for Civil Rights in Israel](#), Israelis living in Jewish-only settlements throughout the West Bank are judged under an ordinary criminal court system and live as right-bearing citizens under Israeli law and the Israeli court system. The difference in these legal systems was even recently acknowledged by the American Ambassador to Israel, who [rightly stated](#) that “it seems Israel has two standards of adherence to rule of law in the West Bank – one for Israelis and one for Palestinians.”

Palestinian political prisoners [are tortured](#) at Israeli prison facilities. A 2013 [UN report](#) wrote that even “Palestinian children arrested by [Israeli] military and police are systematically subject to degrading treatment, and often to acts of torture.”

Under intense pressure from European BDS groups, [G4S stated](#) in 2011 that “when certain contracts expired [they] would not renew them,” and reaffirmed this in June 2014. The ongoing campaign has had success with interrupting the usual operations of the IPS, and

bringing awareness to the illegitimacy of administrative detention and the treatment of Palestinian political prisoners. BDS campaigns against G4S will continue, however, following a call from the BNC to escalate efforts against the company until it cancels all the contracts the company has with Israel.

Support for the Military Occupation

G4S and L-3 both provide goods to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), enabling violence against Palestinians. Research by Who Profits on both companies shows that they provide equipment to military checkpoints in the West Bank and to the Erez (border) Crossing at the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by the IDF in order to limit the flow of goods and people into the Strip. L-3's subsidiary L-3 Combat Propulsion Systems also signed [a multi-year contract](#) with the Israeli Ministry of Defense for the "[production and remanufacture of diesel engines for tank and armed personnel carriers.](#)" According to a November 2007 news release by L-3, the company's subsidiary L-3 Communications MAS and Israeli  drone manufacturer Elbit Systems "[built on their respective knowledge to offer the state-of-the art Hermes 900 UAS \[Unmanned Aerial System\],](#)" which was [used for the first time](#) in Operation Protective Edge, the 2014 military campaign launched by Israel, resulting in the wounding and death of thousands of people, many of whom were Gazans.

Israel's periodic military assaults against Gaza are another method of imposing control over the Strip, the most recent of which was Operation Protective Edge. Israel deployed battle tanks and UASs on a large scale in this assault, including the Elbit Hermes 900. Elbit Systems and the IDF are secretive about the details of how their drones operate, although [advertisements](#) for the Hermes 900 boast that the drone's multi-payload capacities help to close "the sensor-to-shooter cycle, quicker than ever before."

Further, the matrix of military checkpoints in place throughout the West Bank restricts the free movement of Palestinians between cities. Who Profits reported that [G4S provided](#) these checkpoints with luggage scanning equipment, metal detectors, and services, while L-3 provided them with [SafeView magnetometric scanners](#) and [ProVision personal screening machines](#) used to detect concealed objects on individuals. Any Palestinian from Ramallah wishing to visit their relatives in Jerusalem, for instance, will be one of hundreds or thousands of people herded through [the Qalandia checkpoint](#) each day. There, they may be detained and searched alongside other Palestinians of all ages – and possibly scanned with equipment from L-3 and G4S – delaying the short journey by several hours.

According to Who Profits, the IDF uses the same scanners at the Erez Crossing into the Gaza Strip. While scanners provided by G4S and L-3 are used for screening people entering Gaza, and not economic goods, it is still relevant to note that Israeli control over Erez and all other crossings into the territory is maintained in order to enforce the blockade of goods into Gaza, [strangling the Gazan economy](#) and maintaining Israeli control over most aspects of daily life for the 1.8 million people living there.

Support for the Settlements

The remaining two companies, RE/MAX and Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank, profit from settlement activity in the West Bank. The settlements that are built on occupied Palestinian territories could be considered illegal under article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. According to this article, so long as the territories remain occupied, "the Occupied Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies."

A Human Rights Watch (HRW) [report](#) from January 19 notes that “in November 2015, for example, [RE/MAX] listed 80 properties in 18 settlements on its Israeli website,” and operates an office in Ma’aleh Adumim, one of the largest settlements in the West Bank. By selling real estate in these territories, usually to settlers coming from Canada and the U.S. or from within Israel’s internationally recognized borders, the company facilitates the transfer of Israelis into the West Bank. UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967 Richard Falk, in a [report](#) for the UN General Assembly, said that the company “assist[s] in the growth of settlements [...] by selling settlement properties.”

Mizrahi-Tefahot, the fourth-largest commercial bank in Israel, operates branches in the settlements of [Karnei Shomron](#), [Alon Shvut](#), and [Ramat Eshkol](#). More significantly, it provides mortgages to homebuyers in settlements, and finances settlement construction. Their mortgage services to these homebuyers, like RE/MAX’s real estate sales, enable settlement growth and expansion. Settlement construction is financed by “accompaniment agreements” made between construction companies and Israeli banks, in which the banks “provide the loan for the construction and protect buyers during the construction phase,” according to the HRW report. According to Who Profits, one such agreement was signed with Mizrahi-Tefahot and Israeli construction company Kotler-Adika to develop a housing project in Ma’aleh Adumim. Furthermore, it is also alleged that the bank has financed the building of [several hundred housing units](#) in other settlements.

For these reasons, RE/MAX and Mizrahi-Tefahot have become targets for BDS. The United Methodist Church in the U.S. [blocked Mizrahi-Tefahot from its investment fund last month](#), and Luxembourg’s state pension fund [divested in 2014](#), while a [campaign](#) led by U.S. anti-war group Codepink is encouraging people to boycott RE/MAX.

The Rationale for BDS

Divestment from these companies could have meaningful outcomes for Palestinians. RE/MAX and Mizrahi-Tefahot are significant candidates for divestment not simply because of their services and operations in Israeli settlements, but because they play a crucial role in helping transfer Israeli citizens into occupied territory. BDS initiatives targeted against these companies and others like them have the potential to restrict further Israeli colonization of the remaining fragments of land belonging to Palestinians.

Campaigns aimed at companies servicing Israel’s military or prisons, like L-3 and G4S, also serve their own purpose. Although such initiatives have yet to result in Israel losing contracts with the defense industry, successful campaigns have the potential to impose a real economic cost on the occupation. Furthermore, the anxiety in Israel generated by the prospect of BDS campaigns against the Israeli military infrastructure could limit state violence against Palestinians. For instance, in the fall of 2015, the Israeli [repression](#) of a growing revolt by young Palestinians elicited protests and actions around the world under the banner [#SolidarityWaveBDS](#). Actions like these – especially if they’re targeted at military infrastructure – might compel IDF soldiers to exercise some caution in their operations, perhaps by avoiding use of live ammunition on demonstrators, in order to prevent the possibility of provoking greater international support for BDS.

The BDS movement obviously won’t lead to Palestine’s emancipation. But the efforts of BDS organizers, if guided properly, might prove important in supporting resistance to further colonization and oppression in Palestine. There is a willingness amongst many non-

Palestinian organizers to ask the difficult question of how to properly exercise solidarity with these struggles. Lending support to BDS campaigns is by and large the best way to do this, as it allows non-Palestinians to work alongside Palestinians, using the resources available to those abroad, in countries such as Canada and the U.S., to impose pressure on Israel, while working within the framework outlined in the initial call for BDS. In this way, efforts abroad can supplement Palestinian struggles for self-determination without infringing on them.

Dan MacFadden is a pseudonym for an activist with the McGill BDS campaign. This article first published by the [The McGill Daily](#).

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