

# Divisions within The Boycott, Divests and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel

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With the new campaign by Palestine to gain the world's official recognition 63 years after the fact, BDS activities in Europe and North America — the main holdouts — have gained new momentum

The Boycott, Divests and Sanctions (BDS) movement is growing relentless. On the *boycott* front, Natacha Atlas, who won a 2007 BBC Music award for her fusion of Arabic and Western styles, cancelled a planned concert in Israel: "I had an idea that performing in Israel would have been a unique opportunity to encourage and support my fans' opposition to the current government's actions and policies, but after much deliberation I now see that it would be more effective a statement to not go to Israel until this systemised apartheid is abolished once and for all."

Atlas, who grew up in Belgium, is of Egyptian, Moroccan and Palestinian ancestry and has Jewish roots. She was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Conference Against Racism in 2001, which was boycotted by the United States and Israel, for raising issues about US treatment of African Americans and Israel's treatment of Palestinians.

The flip side of cultural boycotts of Israel is to prevent Israeli cultural figures from presenting a false image of Israel abroad. Idan Raichel, "Israel's most popular dread-locked musician" according to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, prominent in Masa (Journey) Israel tours to recruit young Jews from American and Europe to Israel, is more than just a musician, seeing Israel's cultural icons as "ambassadors of Israel in the world, cultural ambassadors, hasbara ambassadors, also in regards to the political conflict".

Raichel's hasbara message prompted American Jews to protest a recent Masa "journey" across the US, using the Internet to coordinate leafletting at the concert tour sites. His recent album "Open Door" prompted signs at the demos entitled "Does 'Open Door' include Palestinians?" and "Don't entertain apartheid." "Idan Raichel can't support apartheid," countered one concert-goer, "He sleeps with a black woman!" Raichel is part of the Brand Israel campaign, which aims to bring arts to the world in order to, in the words of an Israeli foreign ministry official, "show Israel's prettier face, so we are not thought of purely in the context of war".

A Finnish campaign is under way to cancel a new deal to purchase Israeli drones. Like Canada, the US, Turkey and Russia, Finland has been attracted by Israeli know-how in lethal weapons. The Finnish Defence Ministry recently signed an agreement on drone purchases, in defiance of EU regulations. This prompted Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja to break ranks with his colleagues and declare, in reference to Israel, that "No apartheid state is justified or

sustainable.” Earlier while in opposition, Tuomioja himself signed a petition calling for an end to the arms trade with Israel. As foreign minister, Tuomioja could demand the suspension of EU-Israel Association Agreement, which gives Israel special trade access to EU markets, but on condition that Israel respects human rights.

The EU’s “common foreign policy” has been a bitter disappointment, especially with respect to Israel, as consensus prevents principled nations within the EU from acting, and attempts to enforce EU regulations are easily buried in bureaucratese. For instance, the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) provides research funds for universities and companies from Israel as a result of the Association Agreement. Despite Israel’s consistent violation of the Agreement’s human rights clause, Israeli companies such as Ahava, “academic” institutions such as Technion, and worse, Elbit Systems and Israeli Aerospace Industries receive European funding through FP7 on an equal footing with EU member states.

EU Scientific Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn insisted that there was no reason to exclude Israel’s Motorola company from EU-related activities since she did not have “any information about any radar systems Motorola Israel might or might not have installed in the West Bank”. Geoghegan-Quinn is not reading her inbox, where she would have found reports to the European Commission by the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel and “Stop the Wall” documenting Motorola’s work in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

An ambitious boycott-*divestment* effort by the newly launched KARAMA (Keep Alstom Rail And Metro Away) and the ongoing “Derail Veolia and Alstom” campaign, celebrated an important victory. Alstom lost the bid for the second phase of the Saudi Haramain Railway project linking Mecca with Medina, worth \$10 billion, due to its involvement in Israel’s Jerusalem Light Rail (JLR) project. Alstom also suffered when the Dutch ASN Bank and the Swedish national pension fund AP7 excluded it from their investment portfolios. Veolia has lost more than \$12 billion worth of contracts following boycott activism in Sweden, the UK, Ireland and elsewhere.

A national conference of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) took place from 14-16 October at New York’s Columbia University, bringing together 400 American student activists from a hundred campuses. SJP activists have made famous their mock checkpoints, walls, and die-ins on campus, to bring home the reality of Israeli persecution of Palestinians.

Delegates brainstormed about divestment campaigns and how to counter the power of AIPAC. Codepink’s Medea Benjamin, who gained world celebrity status for interrupting Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s speech to Congress in May, explained how to lodge a complaint with the Office of Congressional Ethics against the American Israel Education Foundation Congressional trips to Israel, which violate Congressional Ethics Rules.

Columbia University grad student Dina Omar said the conference helped create a “solid network and apparatus to help protect students from being systemically targeted by institutional power.” A week before the conference, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) reported on the “growing strength” of SJP. Ironically, it was a 2010 ADL statement calling SJP one of the top 10 “anti-Israel” groups in the US that pushed 67 chapters to unite. Max Ajl said: “The timing was key – everywhere there was the buzz that we are part of a broader mobilisation, the Occupy Wall Street movement. There is now both the opportunity and the incentive to link these struggles.”

Interestingly, there is division in the anti-BDS ranks over how hard to crack down on BDSers by claiming that Jewish students might be made “uncomfortable”. While the ADL lauded the US Department of Education’s 2010 decision to expand the 1964 Civil Rights Act to include “anti-Israel and anti-Zionist sentiment that crosses the line into anti-Semitism”, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA) cautions Jewish groups against suppressing free speech by invoking civil rights laws. “Lawsuits and threats of legal action” should only be used “for cases which evidence a systematic climate of fear and intimidation coupled with a failure of the university administration to respond with reasonable corrective measures.”

Ali Abunimah, co-founder of Electronic Intifada and author of *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian*, argues that the ADL strategy is “inherently anti-Semitic because it assumes incorrectly and ahistorically that all criticism of Israel equals criticism of Jews”, and thus condemns all Jews for the racism practiced by Israel. “It seems that at least some in the pro-Israel community fear that this aggressive campaign of censorship and intimidation may do more to cast Israel’s defenders as thugs, than to improve Israel’s image on campuses.”

In interview with *Time*, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan questioned why *sanctions* are promoted by the US when dealing with Iran and Sudan, but are taboo with regards to Israel. Sanctions imposed by the United Nations on Israel would have resolved the issue of Mideast peace long ago, he said. “Until today, the UN Security Council has issued more than 89 resolutions on prospective sanctions related to Israel, but they’ve never been executed.” The reason the international community had stood by without sanctioning Israel was that the Quartet – which includes Russia, the United States, the European Union, and the UN – was not genuinely interested in resolving the Mideast conflict or “they would have imposed certain issues on Israel.”

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