

The BDS Movement and European Leaders: Mixed Trends and Questions about the Future

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The BDS movement, which was founded in 2005, has called upon international civil society to divest from and boycott Israel, similar to the sanctions imposed on apartheid South Africa. The call was intended to assist in achieving the aims of the movement: terminating Israeli control over Palestinian and Arab territory conquered in 1967, destroying the security fence and Israeli settlements in the West Bank, ending Israeli discrimination against its Palestinian citizens, and respecting UN decisions regarding the right of Palestinians to return to their homes.

A number of statements have been made in recent years by senior European leaders about BDS. For example, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Jerusalem in February 2014, she said: “We do not support the demands for a boycott. This is not an option for Germany.”¹ This article examines whether this statement by Merkel reflects a similar trend in other central European countries – the UK, France, and Spain² – and discusses to what extent decision makers are aware of the trends of delegitimization. It also questions whether there are trends that counterbalance the negative influences of delegitimization among decision makers in these countries.

After over a decade of activity, it is fair to say that the BDS movement, whose activity is focused mainly in the Western world, has based itself in the margins of civil society in a number of countries (for example, the UK, Ireland, Sweden, France, and Spain), succeeding from time to time to penetrate the awareness of mainstream civil society. The movement’s agenda

received media attention in the wake of the EU decision to label products from West Bank settlements and to prevent the transfer of money to fund EU activities beyond the Green Line. Among the movement's achievements in Europe were its Apartheid Week activities in London in February 2016, when anti-Israel posters were posted at a number of underground stations, and the decision (later retracted) by the large department store in Berlin, KaDeWe, to remove wine produced in West Bank settlements and the Golan Heights from its shelves following the EU decision in November 2015 to label goods produced in the territories. BDS also takes credit for successes such as the decisions by a number of European corporations to end operations in Israel: the French infrastructure company Veolia, the Irish construction company CRH, and the French cell phone company Orange, as well as the announcement by the British private security company G4S that it will end operations in the future.³

Despite EU declarations that the decision to label products from the territories was a purely technical step,⁴ the move can be seen as an explicitly political act intended to highlight the distinction between Israel and the occupied territories. This act is seen by supporters of BDS and by some in Israel as the imposition of a boycott on Israel or at least a first step in that direction.⁵ However, the European Union, aware of the BDS movement and its goals, has made clear its opposition to BDS and its anti-Israel activities on a number of occasions. Thus, for example, the EU ambassador to Israel, Lars Faaborg-Andersen, during his speech at the Stop the Boycott Conference organized by the newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* in March 2016, said that “the European Union is against BDS, our policy is totally the opposite of BDS, our policy is one of engagement with Israel and we have a long, long track record to prove it.” Regarding the labeling of products made in the settlements, he said: “It is very important to distinguish between BDS and our policy regarding the settlements, which has no connection to BDS.”⁶ Similar statements have been made by European leaders and governments, who distinguish between criticism of Israeli policy on the settlements and the occupied territories and calls and actions intended to boycott Israel.

On inaugurating a financing project for medical cooperation between Israel and the UK in February 2015, David Cameron, the former UK prime minister, said: “I have a clear message – Britain opposes boycotts... Israel's place as a homeland for the Jewish people will never rest on hollow resolutions passed by amateur politicians.”⁷ President François Hollande, in a phone

call with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in July 2015, expressed his strong opposition to boycotting Israel and his desire to maintain the economic relations between France and Israel. This occurred subsequent to an uproar over the remarks of the CEO of Orange, the French cell phone company, in Cairo, stating his decision to end the company's operations in Israel (which took effect in early 2016), seemingly demonstrating the company's capitulation to demands by boycott supporters (despite his later denials).⁸ In the wake of the decision to label settlement products in July 2015, a spokesperson for Angela Merkel said that "there will not be an Israel boycott in Germany. Israeli products will, of course, continue to receive preferential market access."⁹ Nonetheless, Merkel's government responded in the negative when asked whether it sees BDS as anti-Semitic.¹⁰

The BDS movement also engages in extensive activity in Spain. In August 2015 the management of a reggae festival announced (and later retracted after condemnations by politicians) the cancellation of a show in Valencia by the Jewish-American musician Matisyahu due to the activity of a local BDS chapter. Spokespersons for the chapter claimed that the musician refused to clarify his position on a Palestinian state. The Spanish Foreign Ministry condemned the cancellation but noted that Spain supports the establishment of a Palestinian state as a result of bilateral negotiations.¹¹ At the same time, the Spanish government promoted actions that are consistent with those endorsed by the BDS movement in Spain. For example, the Spanish Agency for International Development (an operational arm of the Foreign Ministry) helped subsidize organizations that work to delegitimize Israel.¹² Nonetheless, the former prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, who in the past had promoted a proposal to expand the NATO alliance to include Israel, Australia, and Japan,¹³ stated in 2010 that if "Israel falls, we [the West] all fall,"¹⁴ and in 2011 the then foreign minister, Trinidad Jimenez, declared that "Israel is the homeland of the Jews."¹⁵

These declarations by Cameron and Jimenez about Israel as the Jewish homeland are unusual. While EU leaders have publically held back from calls to boycott Israel, they have remained quiet on the question of Israel's delegitimization. The European Union has repeatedly declared its support for a two-state solution but refrains from referring to two states for two nations. Even if there is an understanding among EU decision makers that Israel is the state of the Jewish people, they eschew saying so explicitly due, in part, to the lack of consensus on this issue.

There appears to be a disparity between Israel's negative public image in West European countries¹⁶ and the basic commitment of the European political elite to the continued existence of the State of Israel – a commitment that derives from a more pragmatic and complex understanding of the strategic reality. Provided it is not too wide, this disparity currently allows leaders some flexibility. There is, however, concern that if the disparity becomes too wide, the political elite will have difficulty ignoring Israel's negative image. A similar disparity can be seen between the political elite and the advocates of the boycott, who have a not insignificant influence on the mainstream of various population groups. This disparity was illustrated, for example, by the publication of regulations in the UK prohibiting pension funds from basing their investment policy on unrelated matters such as political boycotts. Likewise, regulations were passed prohibiting local governments from acts of boycott in the issuing or awarding of tenders, based on the claim that such actions violate World Trade Organization regulations.¹⁷ It should nonetheless be pointed out that the official justification for these regulations was economic and resulted from international legal considerations and not from opposition to the BDS movement itself.¹⁸ In France, as laws against discrimination already make things difficult for supporters of the BDS movement, new legislation is unnecessary.¹⁹ In Spain too, the media furor surrounding the cancellation of Matisyahu's performance and the condemnation by politicians acted as a boomerang against the BDS movement.²⁰ However, winds of change are blowing in Europe, which can be seen, for example, in the statement by the Dutch foreign minister, Bert Koenders – following similar statements in Sweden and Ireland – that calling for a boycott of Israel is legitimate within the framework of freedom of expression.²¹

The BDS movement operates against the backdrop of much larger burning issues on the European agenda, including the refugee crisis, Brexit, and the EU's economic and political crisis. Competition for public attention is therefore difficult, particularly if no large-scale military offensive breaks out in Gaza. From Israel's perspective, there are both advantages and disadvantages to the weakening of some of the veteran political parties in Europe and the rise of new right-wing populist parties. Some of these right-wing parties, such as France's far-right National Front headed by Marine Le Pen, are currently open to some of Israel's claims.²² But Israel must ask itself whether, in light of the moral dilemmas involved, it is interested in a connection with extreme right-wing parties. In this context it should be noted that the rise in

Islamophobic trends in Europe, which is linked to the refugee crisis, goes hand in hand with the increase in anti-Semitism, with both expressing racism and intolerance.²³ And on the other side of the political spectrum, left-wing parties are also a challenge for Israel. The British Green Party, for example, supports the movement to boycott Israel.²⁴ Likewise, the suspension of a number of British Labour Party members in April-May 2016 due to anti-Semitic statements demonstrates the difficulties facing Israel in its contacts with these kinds of left-wing parties.²⁵

Conclusion

Decision makers in the major European countries – Germany, the UK, France, and Spain – are certainly aware of the delegitimization trends and their implications, as can be seen from their statements regarding Israel. While their public statements seem to reflect a rejection of the movement to boycott Israel and they have taken practical steps against large-scale BDS activities, there is no guarantee that things will not change in the future. The weakening of the “old” politics and the rise of new parties that lack any historic commitment to Israel and show signs of animosity toward Israel may indicate a problematic trend.

Moreover, it can be assumed that the European leadership’s response to delegitimization efforts is connected to their attitudes regarding a feasible and desirable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Israeli skepticism grows about the possibility of a two-state solution, so too will attention to the BDS movement’s calls for a one-state solution with equal rights for all citizens. Even if the claims of BDS supporters do not achieve a significant hold among the political elite, it remains a phenomenon that Israel must address due to its influence in the public sphere. We can, therefore, assume that the (currently) limited negative influence of the BDS movement and its aims on decision makers in Europe would be further minimized by a diplomatic process with the Palestinians toward a two-state solution. Declarations by Israeli politicians rejecting this solution undermine Israel’s legitimacy (which is based on the historic partition decision) and aid those who support a “state of all its citizens.” Active Israeli policy will help European decision makers deal with the criticism leveled at them regarding their stance toward Israel. The continued expansion of the West Bank settlements, on the other hand, is likely to lead to additional EU steps distinguishing more clearly between Israel and the territories.

Notes

- 1 Tovah Lazaroff, "Merkel: Boycott Not an Option, Settlement Labeling Acceptable," *Jerusalem Post*, February 25, 2014, <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Merkel-Boycott-not-an-option-settlement-labeling-acceptable-343489>.
- 2 Germany, the UK, and France are discussed due to their importance in the European Union. Germany was also selected because of its unique relationship with Israel. Spain is discussed as a major country within the European Union that supports the BDS movement.
- 3 The private security company G4S is the largest of its kind in the world and had 8,000 employees in Israel. See "Security Firm G4S Pulling Out of Israel, Denies BDS Influence," *Haaretz*, March 10, 2014. See also Itamar Eichner and Daniel Batini, "Giving in to the Boycott? Irish Construction Company CRH Sells its Holdings in Israel," *Calcalist*, January 12, 2016; John Reed, "Transdev Exits Jerusalem Light Rail Project," *Financial Times*, August 30, 2015.
- 4 The European Commission claims that since the European Union does not recognize Israeli sovereignty beyond the pre-1967 lines, EU regulations must reflect this position regardless of the status of these territories in Israeli law. See Barak Ravid, "European Commission Adopts Guidelines for Labeling Products from Israeli Settlements," *Haaretz*, November 11, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.685428>.
- 5 Ariel Kahane, "Toward a Boycott? Europe is Completing Guidelines for Labeling Products from the Territories," *Makor Rishon-NRG*, October 24, 2015.
- 6 From a recording of the ambassador's speech that appears in Itamar Eichner and Yael Friedson, "EU Ambassador: West Bank Product Labeling Not a Boycott," *Ynet*, March 28, 2016.
- 7 "U.K. Prime Minister Announces \$4.9 Million for British-Israeli Medical Research," *Haaretz*, February 12, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.642258>.
- 8 Itamar Eichner, "Hollande: France Opposed to BDS Movement," *Ynet*, July 6, 2015.
- 9 Benjamin Weinthal, Herb Kenion, Lahav Harkov, and Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Merkel Government Announces Support for EU Labeling of Settlement Products," *Jerusalem Post*, July 12, 2015.
- 10 Benjamin Weinthal, "German Government Refuses to Label BDS as Anti-Semitic," *Jerusalem Post*, September 3, 2015.
- 11 "Spain Condemns Cancellation of Jewish Musician Matisyahu at Reggae Festival," *Jerusalem Post*, August 19, 2015.
- 12 Soeren Kern, "Is Spain Fueling the BDS War against Israel?" Gatestone Institute, August 22, 2015.
- 13 Manfred Grestenfeld, "Spain, NATO and Israel," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, September 26, 2006.
- 14 "Former Spanish Prime Minister: If Israel Falls, We All Fall," *Ynet*, June 27, 2010.

- 15 Barak Ravid, "Spain Recognizes Israel as Jewish Homeland, for the First Time," *Haaretz*, September 25, 2011.
- 16 For example, in a *BBC* global survey in 2014, in the four countries surveyed (France, UK, Spain, and Germany) only a minority of respondents said that Israel's influence is mainly positive. See <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/country-rating-poll.pdf>.
- 17 Henry Mance and John Reed, "Cabinet Embroiled in Battle Over Israeli Goods Boycott," *Financial Times*, February 15, 2016.
- 18 Eylon Aslan-Levy, "Did Britain Just Ban Boycotts of Israel? Not Quite," *Tablet Magazine*, February 23, 2016.
- 19 "French High Court: BDS Activities Guilty of Discrimination," *Times of Israel*, October 23, 2015.
- 20 Herb Keinon, "BDS Seen in the Spanish Press as a Violent Organization," *Jerusalem Post*, August 23, 2015.
- 21 Tovah Lazaroff, "In Huge Blow to Israel, Netherlands Declares BDS Free Speech," *Jerusalem Post*, May 26, 2016.
- 22 Michelle Malka Grossman, "A Far-Right Pro-Israel France? Expert Says This is Where All of Europe is Heading," *Jerusalem Post*, August 12, 2015.
- 23 Eszter Zalan, "Commission: Most Muslims Not a Threat to Europe," *EUobserver*, October 1, 2015.
- 24 "U.K.'s Green Party Leader Backs Israel Boycott," *Haaretz*, April 18, 2015.
- 25 In this context, see also Herb Keinon, "Analysis: The Upside of the British Labor Party's Anti-Semitism Furor," *Jerusalem Post*, May 3, 2016.