

# Achievements According to the BDS Movement: Trends and Implications

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Between July 2017 and December 2018, the BDS movement published four lists presenting what it casts as significant achievements by the movement during that period. This article analyzes the insights and the trends emerging from these lists with reference to the BDS campaign in particular, and the delegitimization of Israel in general. The article determines that the direct impact of many of the apparent achievements was limited, although some earned significant exposure and caused real damage. The main challenge posed by the BDS movement is at the cognitive level, in other words, its aim to instill negative attitudes toward Israel and blacken the country's image. The campaign for Israel's legitimacy is long and ongoing, and designed to influence the outlooks of different target audiences. Therefore, it is essential to measure and assess the threat represented by BDS activity and delegitimization efforts as a basis for shaping and planning Israel's counter efforts.

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The BDS movement (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions)<sup>1</sup> was founded in 2005, and today encompasses hundreds of organizations all over the world that with no unified hierarchy or directive promote campaigns to boycott Israel, withdraw investments from it, and impose sanctions on it and associated elements. Contrary to the BDS image as a liberal, humanitarian organization struggling for Palestinian rights, the movement seeks above all to promote the delegitimization of Israel and Zionism.<sup>2</sup> The movement is currently headed by the BDS National Committee (BNC), which operates out of Ramallah and consists of non-governmental Palestinian organizations.

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Between July 2017 and December 2018, the BNC published four lists of what the committee considers the main examples of success of the BDS movement in this period: 12 “achievements” to mark 12 years of activity (published July 9, 2017);<sup>3</sup> 30 “achievements” at the conclusion of 2017 (published February 6, 2018);<sup>4</sup> 70 “achievements” and events to mark 70 years since the Nakba (published August 8, 2018);<sup>5</sup> and 18 “achievements” to summarize 2018 (published December 3, 2018).<sup>6</sup> There is considerable similarity and even overlap among these lists.

This article surveys the achievements boasted (rightly or wrongly) by the BNC in the name of the BDS movement, presents the main insights from an analysis of the lists with reference to trends in the BDS campaign and the phenomenon of delegitimization of Israel in a broader sense, and offers recommendations for the pro-Israel camp as it relates to the balance of achievements in the fight against delegitimization.

### **Lists of Achievements: Main Findings**

The lists marking 12 years of activity and summarizing the years 2017 and 2018 are intended to present the outstanding achievements of the BDS movement in those years, and therefore deal only with issues relating to the boycott of Israel. By contrast, the list of 70 events marking the Nakba, in addition to the subject of the boycott (40 of the events on the list), also covers expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians, and corresponds with recent events such as the violent events since March 2018 on the Gaza border (21 events). The list thereby tries to link the leading motifs of the BDS movement, which promotes a boycott of Israel, with Palestinian national memorial days, events on the ground, and the latest issues at the heart of international public attention.

Among the events presented in the lists: declarations of support and calls for a boycott by various elements (public figures, politicians, artists, scientists and intellectuals, organizations, and authorities); cancellations of scheduled performances, visits, and events; and legal rulings and laws, either passed or canceled. It is clear that those who drew up the lists tried to present a wide range of areas of activity as well as a broad geographic spread, *inter alia*, to reveal the “social justice” expressed by many of the players involved in the work.

In terms of areas of activity, there is a prominent focus on political and cultural events; in the lists referring to 2018, activity in the local authority arena is also striking.

In terms of geographical distribution, most of the activity charted is in European countries (more than half the items on the list of events marking the Nakba, and about a third of the 2017 achievements) and in North America. In Europe, the most prominent activity is in Ireland (8 events in the list marking the Nakba), Britain, Italy, and Spain.

It appears that the broad distribution in terms of fields of activity and the various arenas is designed to emphasize that the movement's activity is global, and to strengthen the perception that the BDS movement has established a hold in many countries and among a variety of target populations, while at the same time boosting the organizations on the ground that are active in these arenas.

### Noteworthy Trends

In recent years there has been a gradual erosion of Israel's status among liberal-progressive groups in the West. It is hard to assign decisive weight to the role of the BDS movement in these trends, but it is clear that the movement is working to heighten these trends and uses them to promote its objectives and broaden the circle of its supporters. And indeed, the effect of most of the events described in the lists is cognitive and directed at the erosion of Israel's status among various segments of the public. The direct impact on Israel of many events listed was at most negligible, in economic, political, and awareness terms. However, there were also events that attracted significant media exposure, hurt Israel's image, and exacted a concrete price, such as the cancellation of the soccer match between Argentina and Israel in June 2018. The damage caused by such events is not just in their immediate impact, but also in their cumulative impact and the reciprocal effects between prominent events that attract media coverage and the efforts to create negative branding among the publics, leading to the entrenchment of negative attitudes toward Israel.

The contents of the lists to a great extent reflect a number of trends and ideas highlighted in previous BDS publications and in conferences organized by prominent delegitimization organizations in the United States and Britain in 2017 and 2018. Inter alia, there is the striking phenomenon of intersectionality as a central platform of the activity, the apartheid narrative

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as a leading idea, and the use of the support of Jewish public figures and organizations to counter accusations of anti-semitism in the movement and stress the gap between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. Other trends and emphases include the attention and resources directed to local authorities, turning Ireland into a significant arena of activity, and support for the movement by left wing parties all over the world. In addition, it is often possible to identify a gap between the reported achievements and actual events. This gap questions the reliability of the reports, but perhaps in terms of cognitive awareness in the current era, reliability carries little weight.

### *Inter-Sectionality*

One of the most prominent issues emphasized by BDS groups in recent years is the phenomenon of inter-sectionality, by way of cooperation with other bodies in order to broaden their support base. In other words, they reinforce the link between BDS activities and the Palestinian struggle with the promotion for the rights of disadvantaged groups, in the local or global arena, in an attempt to create an “alliance of the oppressed” that includes blacks, the LGBTQ community, migrants, women, and various minorities, as well as activists on behalf of the environment, human rights, trade unions, and more.

On the list of achievements for 2017, several events were notable in this context, such as the cancellation of planned visits to Israel by players from the American National Football League (NFL) in February 2017, where the majority who signed the request to the players were Afro-American activists. Similarly, the Nakba and 2018 lists include events of this kind, such as the expression of support for the Palestinians from the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and the demand to stop American security aid to Israel; support from Afro-American cultural figures for the demand of the Dream Defenders movement to release Ahed Tamimi and stop security aid; and support of organizations from the Indian Women’s Movement for the release of Tamimi and for BDS.

### *The Apartheid Narrative*

In order to reinforce the claims about the lack of Israel’s legitimacy, the BDS and other delegitimization organizations promote the analogy between Israel and the apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the achievement that opens the list for 2017 is the publication of a report from one of the UN committees determining “beyond a reasonable doubt” that Israel has

established an apartheid regime, and shortly after that, it presents support for BDS from South African organizations following a report entitled: "Apartheid in the Holy Land – Israel." Similarly, the list marking the Nakba contains repeated references to Israel's actions as an apartheid state, such as: "apartheid system," "Netanyahu's apartheid regime," "Israeli apartheid," and so on. In this context, the summary for 2018 stresses the support for BDS from the grandson of Nelson Mandela.

### *Support of Jewish Organizations*

The lists stress the support for BDS from Jewish organizations, by indicating their participation in the boycott of the PopKultur Festival in Berlin, and mainly by indicating the protests of Jewish groups against accusations of anti-semitism directed toward BDS activity, in the organization's attempt to repudiate repeated criticism of this kind. In this context, various delegitimization organizations have opposed the definition of anti-semitism of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) that was adopted by many governments, parties, and organizations, because it refers to some anti-Israel actions as expressions of anti-semitism. In addition, it appears that the emphasis on support from Jewish organizations is an attempt to highlight a widening rift between Israel and Zionism on the one hand, and Diaspora Jewry on the other, and to establish a narrative that Israel does not represent Judaism or the whole Jewish world.

### *Activity with Local Authorities*

The list of events marking the Nakba differs from its predecessors by having a separate parameter on local authorities. The addition of this field to the list, noting resolutions passed during 2018 by various authorities, in Europe, the US, and South America, is evidence of the efforts focused by the organization. This is a way of establishing its activity on the ground, while also demonstrating support and expressions of legitimacy from official public institutions representing the "mainstream" of the countries concerned. This effort has arisen, following the limited success to date of the movement's activities directed toward governments and national authorities.

### *Efforts to Counter Legislation, Regulations, and Restrictive Government Policy*

This issue was a central focus of BDS activity in 2017 and 2018. It is a reaction to efforts to introduce legislation, regulation, and government

policies in various European countries and the US designed to limit the movement's activities. So far 26 states in the US have adopted legislation against BDS, and federal legislation on the subject is pending. In Europe, France has passed legislation that bans boycotts, and Britain has imposed government restrictions on a policy of divestment by local authorities.<sup>8</sup> The list of achievements in 2017 describes a number of positive developments on this matter for BDS in Europe, and the Nakba list of 2018 also noted such events in the US. They include a ruling by a federal court in Kansas that overturned anti-BDS legislation, and the rejection of similar legislation in one of the Senate committees in Massachusetts. There is currently a public and political debate in the US regarding anti-BDS legislation, and a number of petitions have been filed against such legislation on the grounds that it is contrary to free speech. Many Democratic representatives have expressed opposition to legislation on this matter.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, those who prepared the lists chose not to mention a negative legal development, in which the Court of Appeal in Britain overturned a ruling by a previous legal forum that was presented as one of the 2017 achievements, and approved a decision by the UK to ban local authorities from adopting divestment initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

### *Support for the Palestinian Issue from Left Wing Parties and Organizations*

A recurring theme in the lists is the support for the Palestinian struggle from left wing parties throughout the world. In some cases there are detailed criticisms of Israel, while others are declarations of support for BDS. One of the most significant events in this context was the adoption of the BDS campaign by the Socialist International Council, which unites representatives of 140 left wing parties worldwide. In addition, there is reference to the British Labour Party, including leader Jeremy Corbyn, who is known for his criticism of Israel on the Palestinian issue. There has recently been a broad campaign in Britain against Corbyn, led by the Jewish community, for what are perceived as his anti-semitic attitudes.<sup>11</sup> There are also references to the Podemos party in Spain, PSOL in Brazil, the Green Party in Scotland and in Canada, and a branch of the US Democratic party in California. These parties are represented in their countries' legislatures, and so their expressions of support for the Palestinians and the BDS movement show how these issues have penetrated "mainstream" parties in various countries.

### *Activity in the Security Field; Focus on Foreign Companies*

The lists published during and after the violent hostilities in Gaza in the course of 2018 describe a large number of initiatives, declarations, and allegations calling for the cancellation of American security aid to Israel, the prevention of security and police collaboration, and the imposition of an embargo on the sale and transfer of arms to Israel. However, while the list summarizing 2017 deals with Israeli commercial companies, and in particular the security industries (Elbit Systems and IAI), the 2018 lists are mainly concerned with the activity of foreign international corporations in Israel, for example Airbnb. In 2019 the Human Rights Council of the UN is expected to publish a blacklist of Israeli and foreign companies active in the settlements.

### *Focus on Israeli Activity in the West Bank*

The lists present calls from various elements to boycott Israeli activity in the West Bank. Such calls appear to conflict with the declared position of BDS, which calls for a full boycott of Israel,<sup>12</sup> but they are intended to illustrate expressions of solidarity with the Palestinians, and to represent an issue considered more legitimate and accepted among many groups, governments, and organizations. Accordingly, this focus allows the movement, which is trying to undermine the legitimacy of the State of Israel, to blacken Israel's reputation and recruit critics of its policies to their struggle. It also enables the movement to show additional achievements.

### *Glorifying Partial and Inaccurate Reports*

The lists sometimes refer to events as achievements even if this is not the case, often omit relevant details, and give only a partial picture. Examples include the account of how actress Natalie Portman canceled her visit to Israel, which ignores her assertion that she does not support BDS;<sup>13</sup> the reference to the protests against the Giro d'Italia race in Israel, which omits the failure of the campaign to prevent the event; and the description of the withdrawal of Adidas sponsorship from the Israeli Football Federation as due to the BDS campaign, which contradicts the fact that the campaign was launched five months after the withdrawal of sponsorship was announced.<sup>14</sup> Another example is the erroneous and exaggerated description of the potential danger to HP as a result of the boycott campaign against the company.

## Conclusion

The four lists of achievements intended to glorify the successes of the BDS movement do not provide an objective portrait, including regarding the campaign to delegitimize Israel. The lists show a number of significant achievements, such as cancellations of participation by celebrities in cultural and sporting events, along with many events that were eventually seen as exaggerated or having negligible effect, or activities that failed due to counter moves by Israel and its supporters.

A full analysis of the events cited in the lists suggests that the campaign over the legitimacy of Israel, including the campaign against BDS, is long and ongoing. The campaign is conducted, *inter alia*, around the important “flagship” memorial days in the Israeli and Palestinian calendars, developments on the ground such as the violent clashes on the Gaza border, and prominent events such as the 2019 Eurovision in Tel Aviv. Both sides invest considerable efforts to score achievements in geographical arenas and in many areas of activity, but ultimately this will be a drawn-out campaign that seeks to affect target audiences around the world and gain their support. Therefore, the link between “winning a battle” and “winning the war” is neither direct nor inevitable.

The efforts of the BDS movement correspond to a large extent with counter moves by the pro-Israeli network, and both sides are engaged in an ongoing “learning contest.” Israel and its supporters have in recent years scored achievements in promoting legislation and other moves by government institutions in various countries, designed to damage the legitimacy of the BDS movement and its freedom of action. Examples include the adoption by entities and states of the IHRA definition of anti-semitism, the legislation and regulation against boycotts, and the financial damage to various BDS organizations. These moves are met by counter moves from BDS and its supporters, designed to neutralize any restrictions, while recording achievements in new arenas of activity. Thus, the activity involving local authorities and the links with left wing parties are a substitute for efforts to wield direct influence on government institutions, by strengthening support among “mainstream” populations in various countries. The emphasis on the support of Jewish organizations is intended to provide a defense against accusations of anti-semitism. Legislative moves are met by legal, political, and media moves (such as the Right to Boycott campaign<sup>15</sup>), as seen recently in the United States, for example.

The BDS movement invests much effort in extending its support base and operating among a variety of movements and population groups in order to create collaborations and alliances with different groups. Accordingly, there is also a prominent attempt to promote issues that are more widely accepted, such as opposition to Israeli activity in the West Bank, or the call to limit Israel's military power following reports of violence and casualties in Gaza. This phenomenon ("inter-sectionality") enables a radical, marginal group to amass achievements and support among important mainstream populations, and thus must be addressed with a comprehensive response from Israel and the global pro-Israel camp.

In conclusion, BDS and delegitimization are a complex, multi-layered threat – both physical-concrete and cognitive-abstract. There is ongoing mutual feedback between the negative branding of Israel, with cognitive and emotional dimensions, and real steps in the areas of legislation, law, economy, culture, and policy, even if there is no full and detailed coordination between all the activities and efforts.

Until now the BDS and delegitimization efforts have not had significant economic consequences for Israel in terms of measurable effects at the macro-economic level that can be unequivocally attributed to BDS.<sup>16</sup> While there have been some problems for certain companies, it is difficult to measure, quantify, isolate, and attribute these problems to those efforts in real terms as part of an overall picture.

Nevertheless, an important component of the campaign lies in the area of cognitive awareness, and in this framework there is a decline in Israel's image in international centers, mainly in Europe but also in the United States, among broad segments of the population, and particularly among the educated age group of the next generation of leaders. This is expressed by a drop in support for Israel, in erosion of its image as a democratic and legitimate state, as accepted in the West, and as a state that maintains human and civic rights and respects them.

An informed assessment of the achievements of BDS, and more important, of the trends in the broad campaign over Israel's legitimacy, requires a definition of clear metrics and processes for measurement and

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assessment over a long period of time. Such measurement must include documentation of events and verification of how they are reported, together with an examination of their direct and concrete impact; the cumulative effect on feelings about Israel and its support among various population groups; and the effect of such developing feelings on relevant actions and decisions by individuals, population groups, and institutions. This is a particularly complex measurement challenge, but it is essential. The establishment of measurement and assessment processes of this kind would provide the State of Israel and its supporters with an important tool to shape and plan efforts in the campaign for Israel's public legitimacy and its international political standing. In addition, these processes are essential to support the formulation of Israeli policy and decision making on domestic and foreign issues, which have an impact on Israel's international status and its ability to strengthen its legitimacy and external support.

## Notes

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