

Is growth of anti-Israel boycott all good news for Palestinians?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Some Palestinian activists are reveling in the anti-Israel boycott's momentum as it approaches its 10th anniversary in July.

From Stanford's student senate to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a broad spectrum of foreigners are pressuring Israel to end its occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Israeli leaders and supporters appear increasingly rattled, holding debates in parliament, organizing conferences on anti-boycott strategies and fundraising efforts, and launching websites against the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement. Some critics of the movement say it targets Israel's very existence, not just the occupation.

"The BDS movement has triggered unprecedented debate within Israeli society about Israel's regime of occupation, settler-colonialism, and apartheid, showing Israeli society that there is a fast-rising price to be paid for maintaining this regime of oppression," said Omar Barghouti, a Palestinian human rights activist and cofounder of the movement.

But there's also a cost for some Palestinians: Those engaging with Israelis—in business, sports, culture, and dialogue to address the conflict—are increasingly pressured to quit. They are branded negatively as "normalizers"—appearing to endorse the Israeli occupation as normal or sustainable—or even traitors, and some have received death threats.

At issue are two different perspectives on the Israeli-Arab conflict. One portrays it as one-sided colonial oppression that can be overcome via financial, legal, and social pressure. The other sees it as an asymmetrical conflict fueled by hatred and fear that perpetuates a cycle of violence and cannot be solved by power alone.

Building trust to resolve conflict

As Israeli and Palestinian societies become increasingly segregated, those seeking engagement with the other side say such activities are not only legitimate but a crucial means to ending the occupation—and the conflict.

“If we don’t have this trust, we will never have any kind of solution for this conflict,” said Wisam Mousa Seder of Minds for Peace, which organizes peace congresses of Israeli and Palestinian citizens that draft grassroots peace agreements and push their leaders to follow suit.

Last year, its congress in Ramallah was disrupted by protesters, and the participants were whisked away under Palestinian Authority police escort. Seder, a boxer and coach who has competed at more than 20 international competitions, was suspended from the Palestine Olympic Federation.

“We understand the desire of Palestinian activists to avoid programs that can be exploited to make the status quo—which is untenable for Palestinians—appear comfortable,” said Leslie Ordeman, press attaché for the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem. “However, the anti-normalization movement feels almost Orwellian. . . . It effectively cuts off any type of interaction between average Palestinians and average Israelis, which makes it very easy for each side to dehumanize the other.”

Meeting the ‘other’ through music

On a recent evening, half a dozen Israeli and Palestinian teenagers sat with their instruments on a balcony overlooking the Old City of Jerusalem. As the iconic Dome of the Rock lit up with sunset colors, their voices mingled with the evening call to prayer, singing a song they co-wrote based on one member’s experience growing up in a refugee camp.

For some, this band was their first introduction to the “other,” and the first time anyone challenged their national narrative. It’s an initiative run by Heartbeat, which brings together young musicians to build critical understanding, and provides field trips and facilitated dialog in addition to music.

Last year, the BDS movement targeted Heartbeat for not identifying the Israeli occupation as the root cause of the conflict. The group has taken a year to formulate a response to such criticism and what they say is broader misunderstanding of their

work—a process that they say has strengthened them and helped them to more clearly communicate their mission.

“In my eyes, those kinds of pressures are good to reevaluate what we do and put everything we do under a critical lens,” said Tamer Omari, a Palestinian facilitator with Heartbeat in Jerusalem.

How the BDS movement started

Supporters of BDS say the movement was created to redress a fundamental imbalance of power between Israel and the Palestinians.

Diana Buttu, a lawyer and former adviser to the Palestinian negotiating team in peace talks with Israel, recalled Israeli negotiators in Taba, Egypt, in 2001 discussing redrawing the map so that a Jewish settlement deep in the West Bank would be part of Israel. She asked on what basis of law they were doing so.

“Look, we will respect the law when we’re forced to respect the law,” she recalled the negotiator saying. “And until then, it’s just you and me in a room.”

She concluded that the conflict is fundamentally about power, and credits BDS with empowering Palestinians to hold Israel accountable under international law after years of “futile, closed-door” negotiations.

The BDS movement was established in July 2005, and was endorsed by 170 Palestinian organizations encompassing academia, trade unions, refugee groups, and religious figures.

Today it is a loose network of activists and organizations worldwide sharing three key goals—ending the occupation, ending Israeli racial discrimination, and granting the right of return for Palestinian refugees—but free to make their own decisions about whom to target and how.

‘When you go down, you get up again’

When the environmental group Friends of the Earth International moved to support the BDS movement, it presented a quandary for their Middle East branch. While it wanted to see an end to the conflict, it was also engaged in many joint Israeli-Arab initiatives for a sustainable future, such as building essential wastewater treatment

plants in Palestinian communities.

So Friends of the Earth Middle East cut ties with their parent organization and reverted to their original name, EcoPeace.

“We left Friends of the Earth International because of our great disappointment in the organization over a decade—the growing strength of what we think is an extremist voice,” said Israeli director Gidon Bromberg. “The decision of Friends of the Earth International to support BDS is an example in point.”

Some Palestinian members of EcoPeace have received death threats. Others criticize BDS for playing out mainly on social media, instead of through direct engagement.

Barghouti counters that, however.

“BDS engages with groups that seem confused and are slipping into normalization without a premeditated political agenda, usually under the lure of money, prestige, and selfish gains,” he said. “We try to privately convince them not to be part of undermining the Palestinian struggle for freedom, justice and equality. When private communication fails, we go public to apply moral pressure on them to stop their damaging activities that provide Israel with Palestinian and/or Arab fig leaves to cover its regime of oppression with.”

The pressure has led some Palestinians to abandon their work or go silent.

But others have been strengthened, such as Seder, the boxer who works with Minds for Peace, who said he has brought the mentality of a fighter to his work. After a year of reasoning with his adversaries, he finally was able to reassume his various posts, including with the Palestinian Olympic federation.

“When you go down, you get up again, and you will fight with more power,” he said.