

UCC votes for divestment from Israel as BDS marks tenth anniversary

by [Christa Case Bryant](#) in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Some Palestinian activists reveled in the momentum of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement as it marked its tenth anniversary in July.

[The movement has been backed by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The United Church of Christ voted 508-124 at its denominational gathering in Cleveland on June 30 to divest from U.S. companies that profit from Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and to boycott products by Israeli companies in West Bank settlements.]

"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—are increasingly pressured to abandon their work or go silent. They are branded as "normalizers," appearing to endorse the Israeli occupation as normal, or traitors. Some have received death threats.

At issue are two different perspectives on the Israeli-Arab conflict. One portrays it as one-sided 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.

As Israeli and Palestinian societies become increasingly segregated, those seeking engagement with the other side say such activities are crucial means to ending the occupation.

BDS supporters 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 the environmental group Friends of the Earth International moved to support the BDS movement, it presented a quandary for their Middle East branch, which was engaged in joint

Israeli-Arab initiatives, such as building essential wastewater treatment plants in Palestinian communities.

So Friends of the Earth Middle East cut ties with its parent organization and reverted to its 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.”