



Winning the BDS Battle

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The BDS movement is driven by anti-Zionism, but its ability to generate support depends on casting Israel as undemocratic and solely responsible for the lack of peace. Consequently, the proposed law targeting pro-BDS NGOs does more harm than good by eroding Israel's image as a democracy. To defeat society-led BDS, the government should let Israeli society and pro-Israel groups abroad take the lead. To do otherwise would inflate the standing of the boycotters and allow them to deflect attention from their own extremism.

The recent Association of American Studies (ASA) boycott of Israel is the latest chapter of a general campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against the State of Israel. In examining BDS there are three key questions one needs to answer: Who and what is behind this? What is the extent of the threat? And how should Israel respond?

The BDS Threat

The hardcore elements behind this campaign hail from the radical Left and are anti-Zionist – that is, they oppose the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. The good news is that the overwhelming majority of the public in the West oppose this position. The bad news is that the BDS hardcore recognizes this and focuses publicly on the issue of settlements and the “disproportionate” use of force by Israel in order to broaden their support. Indeed, they have had some success in this regard, as the consensus in the West feels that settlements are wrong or at least counterproductive.

One should not exaggerate the significance of the ASA boycott. The American public's support for Israel over the Palestinians is overwhelming and despite

their criticism of settlements, more American liberals sympathize with Israel than with the Palestinians. With the exception of the mainline Protestant Church in America, the real battlefield for BDS is in Western Europe; right now none of the boycotts have had much practical effect.

However, it would be grossly misleading to take this as a sign that all is well, because the goal of society-led BDS is to create a hostile political environment; the material consequences are secondary. The struggle is over political legitimacy and symbolism. BDS is not going to bring Israel to its knees, but it has the potential to inflict substantial diplomatic, economic, and even military damage on Israel over time. If the current peace talks collapse, the Palestinians will seek to impose sanctions against Israel at the UN and in other international bodies. In addition, they will seek to have Israeli army officers tried at the International Criminal Court, a threat which could have negative consequences for Israeli deterrence. Society-based boycott initiatives play into this strategy by allowing the Palestinians to claim that there is widespread support for sanctions among Western publics.

Responding to BDS

How should Israel and its friends abroad respond to this threat?

First, it is critical to divide up the responsibility appropriately. Government institutions should lead the interaction with foreign governments and international organizations like the UN. There are many things foreign governments can do to dis-incentivize society-led BDS, and the Israeli government is best placed to make the case. Indeed, it is already doing this.

In terms of political symbolism, the government needs to remember two things. First, especially if the peace process collapses again, it is very important that Israel be viewed as willing *in principle* to agree to a two-state solution involving extensive territorial concessions in exchange for peace and security. Concern about BDS should not trump Israel's vital and legitimate interests on issues such as refugees and security. However, pointing out Palestinian extremism or recalcitrance will not suffice to deflect BDS, as the retort will simply be that pressure is needed on both sides. Without Israeli credibility on this score, BDS has the potential to move from the leftist periphery to the liberal mainstream and beyond.

Second, a major bulwark against BDS is the fact that Israel is a democracy, not simply in terms of voting and majority rule, but also in terms of liberal rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association. This is the critical point for most of those who support Israel in the West and it is a major weapon in

the symbolic struggle over BDS. Therefore, attempts to combat BDS by passing laws that are seen to significantly curtail those democratic freedoms are entirely counterproductive.

The latest initiative in this vein is a government-approved bill to restrict funding to NGOs that support BDS, which is opposed by the Attorney-General on the grounds that it will have a chilling effect on free speech. Such anti-Zionist NGOs need to be combatted, but this must occur within the context of democratic norms. Making such NGOs suffer by imposing financial penalties is populism that will boomerang and erode the resonance of Israel's most important asset in the war over political symbolism. The supposed remedy will inflict more damage than the disease itself.

Combatting Society-Led BDS: Government Support, Not Control

In terms of dealing with society-led BDS abroad, the lead must come from Israeli society and Israel's friends in the West. The government should facilitate and cooperate, but not lead. For Israel to directly enter a fight with various pro-boycott organizations abroad simply raises their status. It will be viewed as inappropriate even by members of those organizations who oppose BDS. Israeli academics, trade unionists, and religious leaders should engage their foreign counterparts. In order to be listened to and have the required legitimacy and standing to act, it is critical to have the appropriate partner.

In addition, it is crucial to recognize that local activists opposed to BDS are best placed to take the lead, since they know the environment best and have the appropriate standing. They also have the advantage of not being bound to defend every policy of the Israeli government. Being able to differentiate between the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the policy of this or that Israeli government is critical to ensuring widespread disdain for BDS. It is the government's job to defend its policy; it is therefore unsuitable for the government to take the lead. Taking the lead will play into the boycotters' hands by allowing them to make Israeli policy the main issue, about which Israelis and Israel's supporters are often divided.

Since this division of labor was put in place by Israel and Jewish Diaspora organizations, the tide of BDS which rose significantly from 2005-2009 has been held back. However, there is now talk of creating a new governmental body to deal with BDS. This would be a mistake. It would shift the strategy from one based on the premise that "it takes a network to fight a network" to one based on the directives of Israeli politicians whose political priorities lie elsewhere. Witness reports of the Knesset committee discussion on the issue, where Right and Left vied to impose their ideological stamp on the issue.

Conclusion

If the anti-BDS cause is blurred and subjugated to other concerns, and the means deployed to combat it are inappropriate and heavy-handed, things will go from bad to worse. If, however, the focus is the legitimacy of Israel itself, and the means employed to combat BDS are appropriate and sophisticated, then Israel is well positioned to defeat BDS efforts.

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