

# Members and supporters of 20 groups banned from entering Israel

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Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's ban on the members of 20 organisations from entering the country because of their support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign is the latest escalation in Israel's offensive against the Palestinians.

The ban prevents many of those who support the establishment of a Palestinian state from entering Israel, East Jerusalem—which Israel annexed illegally after the 1967 war, and the Occupied Territories. Its aim is to deepen the isolation of the Palestinians and quash both international and domestic opposition. The move is a violation of free speech, above all the right to criticise government policies and human rights violations and to advocate non-violent actions to address human rights abuses, as well as the right of free movement and travel.

The 20 organisations include the Palestine-based BDS National Committee, the UK-based Friends of al-Aqsa group, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Palestine solidarity and BDS activist organisations across Europe, in South America, South Africa and the United States, the anti-poverty NGO War on Want, the US-based Jewish Voice for Peace group, the American Quaker organisation, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) that won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947 for helping victims of the Nazis, American Muslims for Palestine, and Code Pink.

Minister of Strategic Affairs Gilad Erdan announced the list, saying that “boycott organisations need to know that the state of Israel will act against them and not allow [them] to enter its territory to harm its citizens.”

“We have shifted from defence to offence. No country would have allowed critics to harm the country by entering it,” he added.

BDS was founded in 2005 following a boycott of Israeli academic and cultural institutions, academic boycotts initiated in Britain, and after a call by 170 Palestinian NGOs for boycott, divestments and sanctions as a form of

non-violent pressure on Israel. Run by the Palestinian BDS National Committee, it seeks an end to Israel's occupation, settlements in Palestinian land and the Golan Heights and the blockade of Gaza, full equality for Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel and acknowledgement of the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

Although the BDS movement has had little effect on Israel's economic relations, with its main impact being in the field of academic boycotts and the cancellation of some entertainers' visits, it has provoked a furious response from Israel.

In July 2011, the Knesset made it a civil offence to publicly call for a boycott of economic, cultural or academic links with the State of Israel. It enables anyone calling for a boycott to be sued and forced to pay compensation.

In 2015, Netanyahu appointed Gilad Erdan to head the Ministry of Strategic Affairs, set up in 2006 at the request of then deputy prime minister and now Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, to coordinate security and plans against “strategic threats” posed to Israel, including from Iran. Erdan's brief was extended to include attempts to “delegitimise” Israel, including the BDS movement, previously the remit of the Foreign Affairs ministry.

Israel's Intelligence and Atomic Energy Minister Yisrael Katz called at the *Yediot Aharonot* conference in Jerusalem in March 2016 for Israel to use “targeted civil eliminations” against leaders of the BDS movement such as Omar Barghouti.

Since then the Israeli authorities have imposed a travel ban on Barghouti and his residency status in Israel is under threat.

*Ha'aretz* reported that the Ministry of Strategic Affairs was going to set up a “dirty tricks” unit to establish, hire or tempt not-for-profit groups not associated with Israel to spread “negative information about BDS supporters” with an annual budget of at least \$25 million. Just last week, a

further \$75 million was added.

Israel has put pressure on its allies to criminalise the BDS movement, quash free speech and counter support for the Palestinians and opposition to Israel's inhuman and illegal policies on university campuses in the West.

*Ha'aretz* has reported seeing government contracts worth at least \$1 million with law firms in Europe and the United States to oppose the movement, but details were redacted on national-security grounds.

In the US, 23 states have criminalised boycotts, including California and New York. There is a bill pending in Congress, the Israel Anti-Boycott Act, proposing large fines and long prison sentences for companies and their personnel if they impose a boycott on Israel or its settlements. US billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who finances a pro-Netanyahu daily free sheet in Israel, is underwriting a variety of initiatives to fight the BDS movement, including on college campuses.

France's highest court of appeal has equated a boycott against Israel with "inciting hate or discrimination." In Britain, the government sought to ban local authorities from divesting their pension plans to participate in the movement, a move later ruled as unlawful by the High Court in London.

In March 2017, the Knesset amended the Entry into Israel Law, banning entry of anyone who made a "public call for boycotting Israel" or the Israeli settlements.

The move was opposed by Jewish groups around the world including the Jewish Voice for Peace, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in the US, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, Jewish Leadership Council and Union of Jewish Students in the UK, which criticised the move, calling it "anti-democratic", "indiscriminate" and "deeply problematic." These organisations are very aware of the degree to which Israel's brutal actions against the Palestinians is jeopardising Jewish support for the Zionist state.

Israel had deported Isabel Phiri, a citizen of Malawi living in Switzerland and a senior official of the World Council of Churches, after landing at Ben-Gurion international airport in December 2016. According to the Interior Ministry's Population and Immigration Authority, she was the first tourist to be prohibited from entry "based on anti-Israel activity and promoting economic, cultural and academic boycotts against it."

Israel has had a long history of excluding people because of their opposition to Israel's suppression of the Palestinians. The first to be banned under the new legislation was Hugh Lanning, chairman of the UK-based

Palestine Solidarity Campaign and a longstanding human rights campaigner and frequent visitor to Israel and Palestine. Israel also stopped five BDS supporters from boarding a flight from the US to Israel. Three of the five were Jewish Voice for Peace members, an organisation that promotes human rights for Palestinians, who were travelling to Israel as part of an interfaith delegation to meet religious leaders and human rights activists in Israel and Palestine.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has sharp political differences with the BDS campaign, which holds Israeli citizens responsible for the actions of the Israeli state. This is no more tenable than holding US or British citizens responsible for the criminal actions of their governments that rule on behalf of the corporate and financial elites. The BDS movement has served to politically confuse workers and students, and to reinforce divisions between Palestinians and the Jewish citizens of Israel and between artists and academics who are equally opposed to Israel's brutal measures.

In Israel, the BDS movement has allowed the government to create a siege-like mentality and reinforce national chauvinism, while opening up its supporters abroad to charges of anti-Semitism.

Despite these political differences, the attack on the BDS movement must be strenuously opposed as an attempt to intimidate and criminalise all those who defend Palestinian rights. Israel's reactionary campaign, including travel bans and attempts to curb free speech on campuses in Europe and the US, are a threat to basic democratic rights.

The BDS campaign seeks to apply pressure on the Israeli regime and its imperialist backers with the aim of establishing an unviable mini-state for Palestinians as part of a "two-state" solution. This is a bankrupt outlook that rejects the fight to unite Arab and Jewish workers against the Zionist occupation.

Instead of creating another mini-capitalist state in the region, the aim must be to forge a unified movement of Arab and Jewish workers seeking to end the division of the region into hostile nation states based on the brutal exploitation of its peoples and to build a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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