

## ECONOMIC BOYCOTTS

As part of comprehensive campaigns to exclude Jews from social, economic, and political life, there is a long and sordid history of efforts to boycott Jewish businesses in many countries. That anti-Semitic project reached its zenith in Nazi Germany. Arab boycotts of Jewish businesses began before Israel was founded as a country. The focus here, however, is not on that long history but rather on the recent boycott agendas promoted by the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and its allies. This entry will address potential economic impacts on Israel itself, the broader cultural and political aim to delegitimize the Jewish state, and the effects on local communities where many boycott campaigns have been carried out over the last decade.

In August 2015, after the Iceland's Reykjavik City Council passed a resolution advocating the boycott of all Israeli products, Knesset member Yair Lapid distributed a series of questions:

- Does the boycott include products made by Israel's Arab minority which is 20% of the population?
- Does the boycott include the 14 Arab Israeli parliamentarians who sit beside me in Israel's parliament?
- Does the boycott include Israeli factories which employ tens of thousands of Palestinians for whom this is the only opportunity to provide for their children?
- Does the boycott include Israeli hospitals at which tens of thousands of Palestinians are treated every year?
- Does the boycott include produce made by the 71% of Israelis who, according to the latest survey, support a two state solution and the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel?
- Among the products being boycotted is Copaxone, for MS sufferers, included?
- Does the boycott include "Tulip" wine, which is made by people with special needs and those who suffer from autism?
- And what about the books of Israeli Nobel Prize Laureate in literature, Shai Agnon?
- Does the boycott include Microsoft Office, cellphone cameras, Google – all of which contain elements invented or produced in Israel?

Almost immediately after publicizing the resolution, Reykjavik's City Council backpedaled, revising it to limit the scope to products produced on the West Bank. In any case, the resolution was purely symbolic, there being no national policy or mechanism in Iceland to enforce either form of boycott. That said, Reykjavik is Iceland's capital, so the symbolism would have publicity value and carry some cultural weight. It could contribute to the political movement to delegitimize Israel as a whole.

Meanwhile, the European Union was moving forward with its plan to require that products produced in the West Bank be so labeled, a plan that will have to address the complex question of what constitutes a WB product. Is a product made in Israel proper with WB raw materials a WB product? What percentage of WB material turns a product manufactured elsewhere into a WB product? Properly speaking, moreover, the EU's plan is not a boycott. It is a labeling regimen that gives both businesses and individuals a

choice about whether to purchase West Bank products. It also enables people to identify Israeli products that are **not** manufactured on the West Bank and buy them. People who want to buy WB products can do so, whereas those who wish to take a stand against the expansion of West Bank settlements can thus make a personal ethical and political decision to reinforce their views by way of their product choices. But they can also take advantage of the quality guarantees built into the vast majority of Israeli products. Would you prefer to buy medicines made in Israel or in countries with less reliable manufacturing safeguards? Made in XX is often a warning not to buy a product whose safety and efficacy are uncertain. It is thus information that consumers should have available for all imported products.

The EU's labeling agenda is also a challenge to those BDS advocates who contradictorily support boycotting all Israeli products, no matter on which side of the green line they are manufactured or produced, while claiming they are not hostile to the existence of the Jewish state. For the labeling protocol enables people to engage in a more politically focused form of symbolic politics. And it thereby clarifies which people are more fundamentally opposed to Israel.

The Sacramento, California, BDS chapter has a long online list of Israeli companies and products to be boycotted, along with the rationales for doing so. Examples include

**Sabra humus:** Sabra hummus, baba ghanoush and other foods is co-owned by Israel's second-largest food company The Strauss Group and Pepsico. On the "Corporate Responsibility" section of its website, The Strauss Group boasts of its relationship to the Israeli Army, offering food products and political support.

**Intel:** This technology company that manufactures computer processors and other hardware components employs thousands of Israelis and has exports from Israel totaling over \$1 billion per year. They are one of Israel's oldest foreign supporters, having established their first development center outside of the US in 1974 in Haifa. Al-Awda (the Palestinian Right to Return Coalition, [www.al-awda.org](http://www.al-awda.org)) has urged action against Intel for building a facility on the land of former village Iraq Al Manshiya, which was cleansed in 1949.

**TEVA:** An Israeli company that is one of the largest generic drug manufacturers in the world. Ask your pharmacist and doctor to find another brand.

**Estee Lauder:** This company's chairman Ronald Lauder is also the chairman of the Jewish National Fund, a quasi-governmental organization that was established in 1901 to acquire Palestinian land and is connected to the continued building of illegal settlements.

**Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream,** sold in illegal Jewish-only settlements in Palestine's West Bank in violation of international law.

**Naot shoes.** Naot maintains a factory outlet in one of Israel's illegal settlements inside Palestine's West Bank.

These are neither West Bank companies, nor West Bank products. Naot shoes and Ben & Jerry's ice cream are targeted merely because they are sold on the West Bank, along with stores throughout the U.S. TEVA is selected simply because it is an Israeli company. Estee Lauder is denounced because BDS doesn't like the company chairman, Intel because it has a factory on land vacated more than half a century ago. After SodaStream moved its factory from the WB to the Negev in 2015, BDS insisted its boycott campaign against SodaStream should be maintained—now based on the BDS claim that the new factory, which is near the Bedouin city of Rahat, is built on land stolen from the Bedouins. However one judges that assertion, it is worth noting that 30% of SodaStream's employees come from Rahat. In September, 2015, SodaStream's CEO and Talal Al-Krenawi, the mayor of Rahat, announced a plan to take in Syrian refugees and give them employment. BDS is unwilling to credit such practices or to make a functional distinction between Israel and the West Bank, echoing the radical Arab nationalist claim that no land in Israel proper belongs to the Jews. BDS's goal is not a major change in Israeli policies but rather a comprehensive economic and cultural boycott that leads to the elimination of the Jewish state.

That BDS goal is highlighted by the demand on the same web site to boycott "Wine from Occupied Golan Heights," hardly a response to the call from "Palestinian civil society" that BDS routinely cites as a reason for acting. Indeed, in the current political configuration to whom would Israel return the Golan Heights? ISIS? Hezbollah? Does Syria still exist? It would be hard to imagine a more thoroughly irrational action than for Israel to cede the Golan Heights now to anyone, though when Ehud Barak was Prime Minister it still seemed a plausible issue for negotiation. In any event, Israel extended civil law to the Golan in 1981, and the area is not under military administration, which makes it quite unlike the WB.

Should actual organized boycotts, as opposed to labeling, of West Bank products take hold, their economic impact on Israel will be minimal, since WB products make up a small percentage of Israeli exports overall and less than 1% of exports to the European Union. The scholarly literature, moreover, demonstrates that limited economic boycotts like this have only minimal impact. Despite the excitement BDS advocates display when a boycott campaign or its attendant publicity seem to effect company practices, such campaigns typically leave official state policy untouched. Politically speaking, limited economic boycotts are not game changers. They give advocates psychological satisfaction—and they may draw people to the BDS cause—but they are largely impotent as direct political weapons.

Although the economic impact of local boycott campaigns is insignificant, they can have psychological and cultural power. In 2012 members of the Park Slope Food Co-op in Brooklyn voted 1,005 to 653 against boycotting Israeli products. The battle gained national attention. People did not want their daily life branded with antagonism to the Jewish homeland; many could no longer shop at the co-op if it became an outpost of the BDS movement. Typically, the store carried few Israeli products, but among them, ironically, was a line of tapenades and pestos produced by PeaceWorks Foods with olives from Palestinian villages. BDS followers tried to press for a boycott there again in 2015, and there have been several similar drives in California and Washington. In the end, such

battles are fought over what kind of community people will understand themselves to be living in and whether they can perceive it as their home.

More narrowly focused campaigns at Harvard, UC Riverside, and elsewhere have focused on whether the university cafeteria should stop selling Israel's Sabra hummus as a protest against Israeli policy. At both these schools, administrators stepped in and directed that both Israeli and non-Israel hummus should be available so students could make a choice. As much as anything else, these campus campaigns are an effort not only to recruit people to a broad anti-Israel agenda but also to turn the campus into a hostile environment for pro-Israeli students. **While a pitched campus battle over serving a brand of hummus in the cafeteria might seem more appropriately considered theater of the absurd, rather than politics, hummus is obviously chosen because the cafeteria is a common space students frequent where public demonstrations can be staged. Refusing a food product is hardly a major sacrifice. If students' chests swell with a sense of righteous triumph when they pick another brand, they might be challenged to abandon that laptop with an Intel processor. Or they might be asked whether their prescription glasses have Shamir lenses. Widely considered the best such lenses in the world, they are manufactured on an Israeli kibbutz.**

Universities themselves, of course, are not appropriate vehicles for political opinion; students and faculty instead are free to develop and express both individual and group views, but the institution needs to remain neutral. Indeed a college's nonprofit tax status mandates that it not engage in political activity.

Finally, despite the campaign to label Israel an apartheid state, there is little interest among the major national governments to mount a comprehensive South Africa-style economic boycott of Israel. The United States, of course, would not support it. Nor would Canada, Germany, or numerous other countries. There is nothing even marginally comparable to apartheid to the west of the green line in Israel. Within its pre-1967 borders, Israel is a democracy.

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Also see Academic Boycotts, Apartheid, Divestment Campaigns