

# Common questions on BDS & the academic boycott of Israel

## *What is Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS)?*

The call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions is a Palestinian-initiated response to Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, its siege of Gaza, and its systematic oppression of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories. Launched in 2005 by numerous Palestinian civil society organisations on the model of the successful campaign against South African apartheid, BDS promotes basic equality, practical peacebuilding and democracy in Israel-Palestine. It categorically rejects all kinds of discrimination, including anti-Semitism, and aspires to the achievement of basic equality for all people in Israel-Palestine, regardless of race or religion.

## *What exactly does the academic boycott involve?*

The international academic boycott is part of the wider BDS movement. It applies to Israeli *institutions*, not individual *academics*, and calls on academics to refuse to participate in or facilitate *official, institution-level activities* with Israeli universities, such as, in particular, *conferences* convened or sponsored by Israeli institutions, and *institutional exchange agreements*. These and similar arrangements contribute to the legitimisation of Israel in the eyes of the international community by normalizing academic relations with it. The boycott call is predicated on the empirical fact that all official Israeli academic institutions currently actively support Israel's policies towards Palestine.

As staff at the University of Sydney we have a responsibility not to work with institutions that either remain silent while the Israeli state destroys the educational infrastructure of Palestine, or are actively complicit with this destruction. A large body of evidence shows that Israeli academic institutions deliberately and intensively support the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory through, among other things, a variety of lucrative military research and training efforts. Other areas in which this support is manifested include obstruction of Palestinian access to education and academic freedom; in some cases, the maintenance of premises on stolen Palestinian land; or, simply, the failure to officially condemn Israel's policies, thereby contributing to their legitimisation. If an Israeli university did not support Israel's current policies towards Palestine in any way, it would not be subject to the boycott.

The academic boycott does *not* apply to individual Israeli academics or students: mere institutional affiliation to the Israeli academy is not a sufficient condition for

applying the boycott. BDS is, furthermore, a tactic, not a strategy or a dogma: the decision to boycott or not to boycott in any particular instance should be the result of an assessment about which course of action will best further justice in Palestine. Finally, BDS is a pluralistic movement and does not mandate any one way of responding to the boycott call.

## *Shouldn't we be encouraging dialogue between Israel and Palestine, not boycotting Israel?*

As Nelson Mandela famously remarked on negotiation with the government during apartheid in South Africa, "only free men can negotiate". Genuine dialogue and negotiation require parity among the participants. Over 160 countries acknowledge the illegality of Israel's Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank and recognise that these settlements and the widespread abuses of Palestinian human rights are a significant impediment to peace. Parity certainly does not exist between the parties to the negotiations over Palestine. It's impossible for a hostage to have a genuine dialogue with their kidnapper. Decades of officially sponsored negotiations have only strengthened Israel's hand. While talks continue, more illegal settlements are built. Only a logic of pressure holds any chance of creating the conditions necessary for a breakthrough. Israel's marked hostility to the BDS movement as opposed to other forms of Palestine advocacy is evidence of the political traction BDS is gaining.

## *What's the connection with Sydney University?*

Sydney University is a conspicuous supporter of Israel, maintaining formal connections to a number of Israeli academic institutions through well funded exchange programs, such as the exchange with the Hebrew University, and a partnership with the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology. Sydney has also refused to distance itself from the Australian government's position on the extreme fringe of international public opinion on Israel (Australia abstained in the 2017 UN vote against Trump's inflammatory relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem). Through its active support of Israeli institutions the University of Sydney effectively endorses – and is therefore complicit with – Israel's oppression of the Palestinians, and helps Israel to whitewash its acute human rights violations.

### ***Why does BDS target Israel specifically?***

Unlike many other instances of alleged or proven human rights abuse in the world, Israel's breaches of international law are massively supported by the US and its allies, including Australia, which signed a defence industry cooperation agreement with Israel in 2017. This imposes an obligation on people in these countries to speak out. Attempts to discredit BDS on the grounds that its supporters show selective concern for Israel/Palestine over other situations of oppression are mistaken both factually and in principle. The criticisms are factually mistaken since BDS targets Israel's crimes against Palestine precisely *as* flagrant instances of oppression and discrimination, thereby contributing to the broader struggle for a just world. Many BDS supporters, such as the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, are at the forefront of other campaigns for human rights. Members of the Sydney Staff for BDS group are also active in the refugee rights movement, antiracism campaigns, the environment movement, the NTEU and progressive politics more broadly.

Such criticisms are also wrong in principle: it is no argument against a political position that it does not adopt the most general demands possible. Campaign focuses are chosen as a function of particular political circumstances and with a view to what is achievable. The campaign against coal-seam gas in NSW cannot be reasonably criticized for not also directly addressing other international environmental issues. This is exactly analogous to the relation between the movement for justice in Palestine and the wider struggle for peace and justice in the world.

### ***BDS and academic freedom***

Far from infringing academic freedom, BDS *promotes* it by drawing attention to Israel's denial of basic academic opportunities to Palestinians. Clearly, activities or actions in support of oppression and the denial of basic rights cannot be justified just by appeals to "academic freedom". This applies straightforwardly in the case of boycotts of Israeli institutions. Israeli academics are only affected BDS if they choose to participate in official institutional activities over and beyond their affiliation with an Israeli university.

### ***Why should academics and their union, the NTEU, get involved?***

Israeli policies severely restrict the lives and futures of our Palestinian colleagues and their students, including their right to education and their freedom of movement, to say nothing of their access to basic resources, including electricity and water. On January 22, 2014, the Israeli military launched an attack on the Palestinian Al Quds University. Rubber-coated steel bullet rounds were fired and more than 100 students suffered from excessive tear-gas inhalation. The students and academics of Birzeit University, located in the West Bank near Ramallah, are

required to pass through checkpoints manned by Israeli soldiers where they are interrogated and searched and subjected to violence and humiliation. The Israeli military has frequently entered the university itself, made arrests, and even used blockades and curfews to close down the entire campus. We cannot remain silent when our own institution refuses to act against these abuses.

Furthermore, NTEU members have consistently been targeted for their support for Palestine. Most notably, A/Prof Jake Lynch was prosecuted by an Israeli 'lawfare' group after refusing to support an application for a fellowship under a joint scheme linking Sydney University with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in response to the BDS call. In a significant victory for the BDS movement, the prosecution was defeated in 2014, and the case established a strong legal precedent for the legality of academic BDS in Australia.

The union movement has always had an internationalist focus. The struggle for working people's rights depends on global solidarity. The BDS campaign is endorsed by a growing range of unions, professional associations and other organizations internationally, including the University of Johannesburg, the American Studies Association, national trade union federations in South Africa, UK, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, the Basque Country, Brazil and other countries across Latin America, in addition to scores of national and local unions including the Maritime Union of Australia.

### ***Is BDS antisemitic?***

BDS is opposed to all forms of discrimination including racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and sexual discrimination. Targets of BDS are defined in function of their support for the occupation, not their race or nationality. International companies and organisations that support Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, and that are not Israeli or owned by Jewish people, are a key focus of the BDS campaign. They include Veolia, Adidas, G4S, Hewlett-Packard and Caterpillar. Organisations which support BDS regularly work with a range of Jewish and Israeli activists, academics, authors etc. The Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney is no exception: it frequently hosts and supports a range of Israeli and Jewish academics and speakers.

This fact-sheet has been prepared by members of the Sydney Staff for BDS group: [sydneystaff4bds.org](http://sydneystaff4bds.org)

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