

Policy Snapshot

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) and realising the rights of the Palestinian people

What's the issue?

The Palestinian people are today facing an accelerating process of settler colonisation that dates back to British colonial rule in Palestine between 1917 and 1948. The policies of dispossession, *de facto* annexation, military violence and fragmentation practised by the current extreme Israeli government violate the basic rights Palestinians possess under international law on a daily basis.

In order to end international complicity and mobilise international solidarity with the Palestinian people, in 2005 Palestinian civil society issued the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) call. The call drew upon the long history of Palestinian boycotts and the more recent example of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, which contributed to ending apartheid in South Africa.

More than 170 Palestinian civil society groups, including trade unions, women's groups, professional associations and NGOs, Palestinian civil society groups have called for people of conscience around the world to engage in Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel until core Palestinian rights, enshrined in international law, are achieved and request that Israel:

1. Ends the illegal military occupation and colonisation of the land.
2. Recognises the right of Palestinian Citizens of Israel to full equality.
3. Recognises, respects, and promotes the right of return of Palestinian refugees, as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

Boycotts have long been used by oppressed communities to resist injustices and mobilise international support for their cause. Colonised peoples have historically practised boycotts against colonial regimes such as in India or apartheid South Africa in order to achieve their fundamental liberties. The history of Palestinian boycotts includes multiple calls within and outside the country at different periods of resistance to colonial rule, including under British rule and before under Ottoman rule at the start of Zionist colonisation.

Governments in Europe and North America have consistently failed to defend the Palestinian people against settler colonialism in Palestine and ensure that they are able to freely exercise their rights, through their trade policies, provision of military aid and diplomatic support, they also play an active role in perpetuating Israel's regime of apartheid and colonialism.

What's the UK position?

Far from acknowledging its ongoing and outstanding colonial debt, the UK is an increasingly active participant in the oppression of the Palestinian people.

- In July, the government introduced the 'Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) bill, which is intended to prohibit public bodies from taking financial decisions that demonstrate 'regard to a territorial consideration' in a way that indicates 'political or moral disapproval of foreign state conduct.'
- This law aims at preventing local councils, universities and other public bodies from engaging in boycotts at a time when accountability for Israel's breaches of international law is urgently needed.
- The draft legislation allows for the exception of foreign states sanctioned at the time by the government. However, it explicitly excludes Israel from this category, thereby proposing to afford it special protection in UK law.

Why does it matter?

- The anti-boycott bill would provide Israel with unique protection from accountability and could force public bodies to invest in illegal settlements by banning them from taking into consideration international law or human rights abuses.
- The special protection this would afford Israel, including its actions in the occupied Palestinian territories, not only marks a major shift in UK foreign policy but would also breach the UK's international legal obligations by prohibiting public bodies from taking steps to promote Palestinian self-determination.
- By granting Israel immunity from accountability, the UK government is singling out Palestinians as the only people to be denied protection by the law when they need it most, and has allied with the most extreme Israeli government in its history in order to undermine support for Palestinian rights.
- The anti-boycott bill harms local democracy, undermines freedom of expression, and threatens campaigns for social and climate justice. UK civil society opposes it, as a broad coalition of nearly 70 organisations (<https://righttoboycott.org.uk/>) including trade unions, charities, NGOs, faith, climate justice, human rights, and solidarity associations demonstrates.
- Despite this having major consequences for the Palestinian people as a whole, including British Palestinians, they have been entirely ignored. Palestinians are absent from the government's impact assessment and the government has failed to consult with Palestinian civil society, including British Palestinians.

What can British policymakers do?

1. Take proactive steps to vigorously oppose the government's anti-boycott bill legislation and encourage all colleagues to do the same.
2. Promote the ability of public bodies to make ethical investment and procurement decisions in order to fulfil their international legal obligations, including to promote Palestinian self-determination.
3. Actively reject and call out misinformation about the movement for Palestinian rights, including the Palestinian call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS).
4. Hold Israel to account under international law and abandon steps which serve to enhance UK complicity in human rights violations.

Where can I learn more?

- Right to Boycott coalition: <https://righttoboycott.org.uk/>
- BDS Movement: <https://bdsmovement.net>
- Palestine Solidarity Campaign Anti-Boycott Bill briefing: <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/Anti-Boycott-bill-PSC-briefing-updated-June-2023.pdf>
- Amnesty International UK Briefing Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2023-06/Amnesty%20International%20UK%20Briefing%20-%20Economic%20Activity%20of%20Public%20Bodies%20Bill%5B27%5D_1.pdf?VersionId=J3XcaLkQ7I197eyhCM1GwzUTklfvNEeH
- Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Before BDS: Lineages of Boycott in Palestine*, *Radical History Review* (2019) 2019 (134): 58–95

The British Palestinian Committee is an independent organisation working to ensure that British Palestinian perspectives are integral to public discourse and policy making on Palestine.

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