

The BDS Movement and the Palestine-Israel War

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Editor's note: a first draft of this article was received prior to the USFA Spring General Meeting on May 1, 2024, at which time a motion related to the BDS movement was presented for consideration by members present and passed.

It is time for members of faculty associations in Canada to consider the evidence regarding human rights abuses and violations of international law in the Israeli war on Gaza and join in solidarity with the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS). The BDS movement has its roots in the anti-apartheid era in South Africa. A number of groups, including universities, student associations, unions, religious and civil society groups joined together to form a movement to put pressure on the South African government to end apartheid. After roughly a generation of resilience and resistance, the movement ultimately succeeded.

My connection to this era is that I participated in anti-apartheid actions as an undergraduate university student. I had hoped that in my lifetime after this long struggle for freedom that apartheid would remain in the rear-view mirror. That is unfortunately not the case. I am not alone in holding this view. UN Rapporteur reports, as well as those of Amnesty International and other human rights groups, argue that the state of Israel has practiced an apartheid

against Palestinians for quite some time.¹

In 2005, inspired by the global anti-apartheid movement, Palestinian Civil Society (an independent and politically unaffiliated group) called for boycott of, divestment from, and sanctions against the state of Israel until it complies with International Law and Universal Principles of Human Rights. The purpose of BDS is to build international support for a non-violent, sustainable resistance against a burgeoning system of legal and political discrimination, forced segregation and dispossession, and carceral control against Palestinians as a group, in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian territories. BDS calls for the right of return of the more than five million Palestinian refugees who have been displaced by the state of Israel since the time of its establishment in 1948. It demands an end to Israel's flagrant violations of international law. In my view failing to take any action is not neutrality, but complicity with occupation, apartheid and, according to the [International Court of Justice](#),

the plausibility of genocide of the Palestinian people in whole or in part.

Many Canadians believe the conflict between the government of Israel and Hamas began with the terror attack of October 7, 2023. The Hamas-led attack included the killing of 1,200 people, who were predominately Jewish, and over 250 hostages were taken. During the attack and its aftermath, crimes of murder, torture, and rape have been documented and qualify as crimes against humanity and as violations of International Humanitarian Law. For Jewish people, it was the largest loss of life since "the Shoah,"² the genocide during World War II that exterminated over 6 million Jewish people and over 6 million non-Jewish people.³

However, the conflict between the government of Israel and Hamas did not start on October 7th. It began many decades ago. The Palestinian territories (including Gaza) have been under occupation since 1967. The International Court of Justice is presently hearing a case arising from a UN General Assembly

Resolution in 2022 for an advisory opinion on the legal consequences of the ongoing occupation, in which it is argued that the 57-year-old occupation is an illegal violation of the Palestinian right of self-determination. Indeed, even before the current war, eighty percent of Palestinians relied on food aid that is a direct consequence of the crippling occupation. The BDS movement asks to pause collaboration with Israeli institutions or organizations complicit in the deliberate starvation of Gazans and the decimation of life-supporting infrastructure in Gaza.

Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, a reconciliation leader in post-apartheid South Africa, endorsed the 2010 academic boycott by the University of Johannesburg against Israel's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. In his view, "Israeli Universities are an intimate part of the Israeli regime, by active choice. While Palestinians are not able to access universities and schools, Israeli universities produce the research, technology, arguments, and leaders for maintaining the occupation."⁴

The current war asymmetrically impacts Palestinian and Israeli institutions of higher education. All Palestinian universities in Gaza have been destroyed in the war and those in the West Bank operate under tight restrictions. Israeli universities, especially those intensive in science and technology, continue to greatly benefit from a long-standing, deep connection to the military. The success of the vast Israeli military-industrial complex is enabled by the willingness of governments, companies, universities, and research centres around the world to collaborate

with Israeli academic institutions and research centers. The technology, software, and artificial intelligence developed by these institutions have been used by the Israeli military and weapons industry to kill Palestinian civilians.⁵

To be clear: BDS' international campaign for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel (PACBI) is focused on Israeli academic institutions, leaders of institutions, and their actions—not individual academics. It opposes all forms of racism, including Islamophobia, antisemitism, discrimination and other violations of human rights prohibited by international law. ***BDS rejects boycotting individuals on the basis of their identity or religion and does not call for a boycott of individual Israeli academics based on their affiliation to a complicit university.*** However, if an individual academic, Israeli or otherwise, has complicity in, responsibility for, or advocates for violating international law or human rights, then censorship would be expected, just as it would be for a Holocaust denier. Representatives of complicit Israeli institutions, such as a university president or spokesperson, are not exempted from an academic boycott.

As a civil society movement, BDS seeks to isolate the state of Israel and its institutions in an act of protest. The relationships between Israeli academic institutions, the military and the current conflict is examined by author Dr. Maya Wind, a Killam Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of

British Columbia in her book [Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom.](#)

Here are examples of what an academic boycott may include and actions that faculty and their institutions may refuse to participate in or withdraw their support from:

- 1) Academic projects or activities sponsored by the state of Israel, complicit Israeli institutions, or Israel lobby groups.
- 2) Research and development projects with complicit Israeli academic institutions, the Israeli government, or complicit corporations.
- 3) International academic activities receiving funding from Israel, its lobby groups, or universities.
- 4) Speeches, including debates, at international venues by Israeli state officials or representatives of complicit academic institutions.
- 5) Schemes involving international students or academics enrolling at complicit Israeli institutions.
- 6) Awards given to Israeli state officials, complicit Israeli institutions, or their representatives.
- 7) Normalization projects.
- 8) Membership of Israeli associations in world bodies.
- 9) Publishing in or refereeing articles for journals based at complicit Israeli universities.
- 10) Providing advice, review, or referee services to Israeli universities.

Some ways for academics to support peace include:

- Advocating for institutional divestment in Israeli companies and corporations linked to human rights violations.

- Supporting an Academic and Cultural Boycott against complicit Israeli government funded universities and institutions.
- Providing support to Palestinian scholars and financial relief to Palestinian students.
- Supporting government sanctions against the Israeli government based on ongoing human rights violations.
- Upholding the right to freedom of speech, peaceful protest, and debate on campuses, while being vigilant about prohibiting hate speech.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/regular-sessions/session49/list-reports>, and <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/04/israels-housing-policies-occupied-palestinian-territory-amount-racial>

² <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>

³ Holocaust Encyclopedia: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution>

⁴ <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/uj-cuts-ties-with-israeli-university-1046158>

⁵ Interview with investigative journalist Yuval Abraham: https://www.democracynow.org/2024/4/5/israel_ai

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