

WATCHING BRIEF: WB 19-4 BOYCOTT, DIVESTMENT and SANCTIONS (BDS) UPDATE

As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.

June 2019

Update

At Australia Yearly Meeting 2019, Friends will be asked to discern if AYM should divest from any investments that are contributing to Israel's occupation of Palestine as part of the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Several Regional Meetings have already taken this step.

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee is re-issuing our 2013 Watching Brief on BDS, with a short update, to contribute to the AYM discernment process.

In September 2017, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) announced *Engaging Critics of BDS A Resource for Activists*, written by the Quaker Palestine Israel Network (<https://qpiblog.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/engaging-critics-of-bds-print-version.pdf>) . T

This concise resource provides responses to ten common criticisms of BDS and opens with John Woolman: *May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not.*'

On 7 January 2018, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was included in a list of 20 social justice groups banned from Israel because of its supports for the BDS movements. The blacklist was compiled by Israel's Strategic Affairs Ministry and is being implemented by the Interior Ministry. AFSC is considered to be significantly contributing to the rise of anti-Israel hatred (some sectors believe that the organisation also spreads anti-Semitism).

An AFSC news and commentary post on 7 January 2019 confirmed the organisation's ongoing support for the BDS movement.

In February 2019, Australian artists called on SBS Australia, Sony Music Australia and the ten contestants competing to represent Australia at Eurovision 2019 (in Tel Aviv) to boycott the event scheduled for May. The event took place as scheduled.

Background

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) explains that BDS campaigns have emerged in recent years in different forms – street protests, board room lobbying, shareholder actions, lawsuits, strikes, teach-ins and other action to call attention to corporate and institutional complicity. The principal focus is to end complicity with Israel’s occupation and violation of human rights. The Palestinian BDS refers to a call by over 170 Palestinian organisations in 2005 asking that “the international community implement broad boycotts and... divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era”.

The Palestinian BDS hopes to end the occupation of Arab lands, dismantle the wall, call on Israel to recognize the rights of Palestinian citizens, and support the right of refugees to return to their homes (UN Resolution 194). It seeks to expose and challenge repressive policies using non-violent means.

How the BDS Movement has Developed

According to *Wikipedia*, several significant events in support of BDS occurred in 2009:

- (a) Large demonstrations at several UK universities led to a decision by Cardiff University to divest all investments in BAE Systems, an arms manufacturer that co-operates with Israel.
- (b) Tourism advertisements for Israel were removed from the London underground network in response to pressure from the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign.
- (c) The French company Veolia withdrew from the Jerusalem Light Rail Project and sustained a court challenge which found against the company.
- (d) Dexia, a Belgian-French financial group, stopped all financial services to Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the occupied territories, Richard Falk, in a report to the UN Human Rights Council in 2012 recommended that businesses named in his report – including US firms Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, Motorola, Sweden’s Volvo and Assa Abloy, France’s Veolia, UK’s G4S, Belgium’s Dexia, Netherlands’ Riwal and Mexico’s Cemex – be boycotted “until they bring their operations into line with international human rights and humanitarian law and standards”.

A number of prominent people have lent their support to the BDS – Stephen Hawking, Noam Chomsky, Malcolm Levitt, and Naomi Klein. According to John Collins of Columbia University, there is an increasing number of young people supporting the campaigns, including “the young Jewish activists throughout North America who have thrown their support behind the BDS movement and engaged in previously unimaginable actions such as the disruption of speeches by senior Israeli political leaders”.

The BDS campaign has been the subject of considerable discussion among NGOs and churches in many parts of the world. As a result, many groups have passed resolutions in support of BDS. For example, the United Church of Canada in May 2013 initiated a Palestine Israel Education and Economic Action Campaign involving engagement with companies and stores, and action against some settlement products. Nine conferences out of the 63 in the United Methodist Church in USA in June 2013 responded to the concerns of many members by moving to divest their church's pension funds of companies involved with the occupation of Palestine. This followed a significant division of opinion at the UMC General Conference in 2012 about divestment.

In May 2013 Suzanne Ismail wrote *in Earth and Economy* (a blog of Quakernomics UK) that Unilever (UK-Dutch multinational) has become the latest company to distance itself from the illegal Israeli settlements, by moving production from the Barkan industrial zone to within Israel proper. This move follows publication of a report called *Trading Away Peace: How Europe helps sustain illegal Israeli settlements*. Quaker Peace & Social Witness (UK) and the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) were two of 22 organisations that published the report in 2012.

According to Suzanne, parliaments across Europe have discussed the report's recommendations – for better labeling rules, discouraging European companies from doing business in the settlements, and a ban in importing settlement goods. As Israel continues its policy of expanding settlements, the campaign will continue.

On 8 June 2013 the 4th national BDS conference was held in Bethlehem, attended by around 700 participants. According to Asa Winstanley (*Electronic Intifada*), the Palestinian Authority came in

for criticism for collaborating with Israel over the occupation. Many in the BDS movement see 'normalising' activities in schools and universities (including cross-cultural youth camps) as undermining efforts to remove the occupation. The conference reinforced the goal of spreading BDS through local campaigns in the occupied territories. In a report issued on 4 July, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel said that the conference "represented a turning point in the impressive global growth of the BDS movement...a distinguished platform for exchanging ideas among representatives of political parties, Palestinian youth and student activists, trade unionists, women activists, decision makers, intellectuals, academics, representatives of the private sector, and leading NGO networks".

The Knesset (Israeli Parliament) in July 2011 passed a law making it a civil offence to call publicly for a boycott against the State of Israel. Under the law, anyone calling for a boycott can be sued and forced to pay compensation. There were objections to the law, and this led to decision by the Israeli Supreme Court in December 2012 freezing the law and asking the Government to show cause why the law should not be struck down. No final decision has been made. In the meantime the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has become active in seeking funds from wealthy supporters to counteract the BDS campaign, according to a report by commentator Nahum Barnea on 25 June on the website of Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

Australia and BDS

There has been considerable controversy in Australia about the BDS campaign. In 2011 protests took place against the Max Brenner stores, which are part of the Strauss Group which is a large food and beverage company that supports Golani and Givati brigades in their human rights abuses against Palestinians. In Melbourne some protesters were charged with trespass, but were acquitted in a court case which upheld the right of peaceful protest.

Other companies that have seen protests in Australia are Veolia (transport), the Body Shop (part of L'Oreal which has heavy investments in Israel), Seacret (cosmetics using Dead Sea resources), and Caterpillar (bulldozers).

Politically, the Greens in NSW initially adopted a resolution in favour of BDS, but later modified their approach to be closer to Federal Greens policy of not actively supporting BDS. There was a vigorous debate in Marrickville Council about whether to support BDS, and the decision went against support. The head of the General Delegation of Palestine to Australia, Izzat Abdulhadi, said in 2011 that he was against the full scale BDS campaign, apparently because he was concerned it could lead to violence.

Jewish groups such as the Executive Council of Australian Jewry have opposed the campaign, and Julia Gillard as Prime Minister made it clear in 2012 that "the campaign does not serve the cause of peace and diplomacy for agreement on a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine". Kevin Rudd is on record as condemning the protests. *The Australian* newspaper has taken a strong anti-BDS position. Both the Government and Opposition have said they will cut off federal grants for individuals and institutions that support the BDS campaign.

Antony Lowenstein, an independent journalist and author, says that BDS is a legitimate non-violent tactic that targets the illegal occupation of Palestine. He says: "Anti-Semitism has nothing to do with this movement... Freedom for Palestinians will only come when Jews, Palestinians and others join together to demand justice for an occupied people. Universities and corporations who profit from this occupation deserve to be named, shamed and boycotted".

A critic of BDS, Nicholas Herriman (Anthropology, La Trobe University), said in an article on 2 July on *The Drum* website that "BDS would be less open to charges of anti-Semitism if it acknowledged the complexity of the situation... It does not acknowledge the contested nature of Israeli politics. Nor does it criticize the intransigence of some Palestinian groups".

Within the religious sector, there is a Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network (PIEN), formed in 2006, which aims to express solidarity with the people of Palestine and Israel, especially Christians, and influence public opinion and policy. It has links with the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC), as well as the Christian community in Israel and Palestine. It is affiliated to the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) which advocates for peace and justice based on UN resolutions

and international law, seeks self-determination for Palestinians, and to raise awareness in Australia. Australia YM joined APAN earlier this year.

In May 2013 Dr Mona El Farra, President of the Red Crescent Society of Gaza visited Australia (with the support of a number of groups including Quakers). She stressed the importance of the BDS campaign as part of the overall resistance to the occupation.

According to CBN News (10 April 2019) Airbnb reversed its decision of November 2018 to ban home listings in Israeli settlements. This change followed a court settlement with American Jewish plaintiffs who sued the company.

The German Parliament labelled BDS anti-semitic in May 2019 (The Guardian, 18 May) following a campaign by members of the Jewish community. This decision call forth an open letter signed by 60 Jewish and other academics expressing concern that this Government action demonised supporters of Palestinian human rights.

Quakers and BDS

As in many other religious groups, Quakers have been considering how best to respond to the traumas of the Israel-Palestine conflict over many years. British, European and American Friends have been especially exercised, and have undertaken many efforts to promote peace and justice. In more recent times, BDS has been a major issue for many Friends. The Ramallah Monthly Meeting in the region sent an Epistle to Friends everywhere in March 2010, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Meeting House there. The Epistle spoke of the efforts of many to end the occupation and restore human and civil rights by non-violent means. They called on Friends to uphold Ramallah Friends Meeting in its witness, and to discern what they can best do to end the conflict. They concluded by saying: "We ask Friends to consider adopting boycott, divestment and sanctions as we may be led to do, individually or corporately".

One response to this call came in April 2011 when Quakers in Britain (through their Meeting for Sufferings) agreed to boycott products from the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, on the basis that the settlements are illegal under international law. This decision was seen as building on other moves since 2002 such as the involvement of many Friends in the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) which provides observers to promote non-violence and monitor human rights abuses.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) supports an end to Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories. It has participated in boycott and divestment campaigns on civil rights, anti-apartheid and prison rights. Since 1948 AFSC has worked with Palestinians and Israelis to achieve a just and lasting peace, and supports non-violent action to this end.

In April 2012 Friends Fiduciary Corporation, an investment firm serving over 300 Quaker organisations in the United States, dropped Caterpillar Corporation from its list of socially

responsible corporations. This year it has dropped its holdings of Hewlett-Packard and Veolia

Environment in view of their support for the occupation. Caterpillar bulldozers are used to destroy Palestinian homes, Hewlett-Packard products are used in the blockade of Gaza, and Veolia vehicles transport people to and from the settlements.

In May 2012 Netherlands Friends wrote to their government urging a ban on the sale, export and transfer of weapons to Israel, and a ban on importing goods produced in the illegal settlements in the occupied territories.

What Australian Friends Can Do

For Australian Friends this has so far not been a major area of action. QPLC believes it is timely for Friends to give closer attention to the issues raised by BDS. Here are some suggestions:

- Hold a meeting among Friends in your own Meeting to discuss BDS and how it connects with Quaker testimonies and priorities for peacemaking.
- Contact other church/religious groups to arrange a dialogue about the challenges posed by the Israel/Palestine conflict and how to build support for non-violent responses.
- Learn more about the range of investments in the occupied territories from outside the region, and consider whether joining BDS would be relevant.
- Raise questions with companies that do business in the region about how their policies impact upon the conflict.
- Speak with political representatives about their policies and whether threatening to withdraw government funding to BDS supporters is a denial of human rights.

QPLC would value hearing from correspondents and clerks about what action is being taken on this issue.

Relevant Websites

www.afsc.org/document/bds-handout

www.quaker.org.uk/quakers-boycott-products-israeli-settlements

www.bdsquaker.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/Ramallah-monthly-meeting/

www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycott,_Divestment_and_Sanctions

www.australianbdscampaign.wordpress.com

Canberra

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