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Israel's Crusade Against BDS Comes at the Cost of Its Own Democracy

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Opinion // Israel's Crusade Against BDS Comes at the Cost of Its Own Democracy

The boycott movement hasn't managed to hurt Israel from the outside. But it's beginning to hurt Israel from the inside

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Demonstrators carry signs and Palestinian flags during a 'Chicago Coalition for Justice in Palestine' protest in Chicago, Illinois, U.S., on Tuesday, May 15, 2018. Credit: Bloomberg

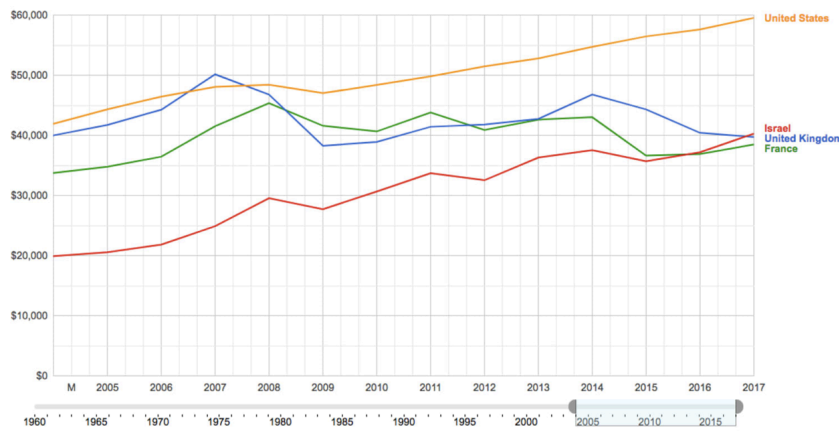
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The [Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions \(BDS\) movement](#) was founded in 2005 by 170 different Palestinian organizations, most of them NGOs. Inspired by the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, BDS urges nonviolent pressure on Israel until it complies with its three demands:

- 1) Ending the occupation that begun in 1967
- 2) Granting Israel's Arab-Palestinian citizens full equality and
- 3) Giving the Palestinian refugees the right of returning to their properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

Two years later, in 2007, the Reut Institute, an influential Israel think tank, framed the BDS movement as a "[strategic threat](#) with potentially existential implications" for Israel.

What have been the effects of BDS so far? In the economic sphere, precious little.



Data from World Bank Last updated: Jul 6, 2018
GDP per capita (current US\$) for Israel in comparison with the US, UK and France since the start of the BDS campaign in 2005 Credit: Google/World Bank

When the movement was founded in 2005, Israel's GDP (in current US\$) was \$142 billion, according to the World Bank. In 2017 (the latest available figure), it was **\$350 billion**. By comparison, the strong economy of the United States grew by 47% during the same period, France by 17% and the United Kingdom by 4%, according to the same World Bank [statistics](#).

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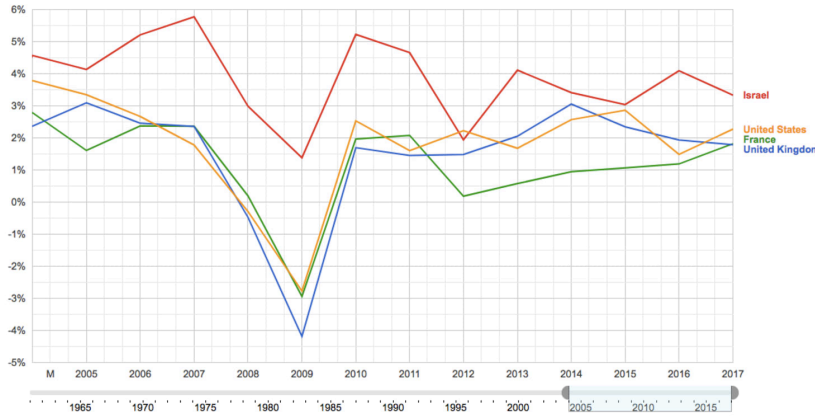
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GDP growth rate for Israel in comparison with the US, UK and France since the start of the BDS campaign in 2005 Credit: Google/World Bank

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Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows to Israel also reached **an all-time high** in 2017. Both 2017 and 2018 have also been **record years** for tourism in Israel with **more people than ever** visiting the country.

Israel is flourishing not just in the economic sphere but in the diplomatic sphere as well. Having written about Sweden's recognition of Palestine and whether EU members would follow - **so far none has** - it has long been clear that it is Israel that is enjoying increased recognition, and not the Palestinians.

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This is obvious when one looks at the many meetings Netanyahu has had with world leaders: from hosting the **President of Chad** recently, to his **trip to Oman**, to his secret dealings with **other Gulf and Muslim League countries**, to his close relations with the **Visegrad countries**, to his strategic **alliance with Greece** and so on.



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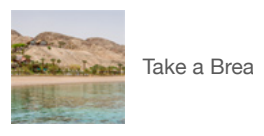


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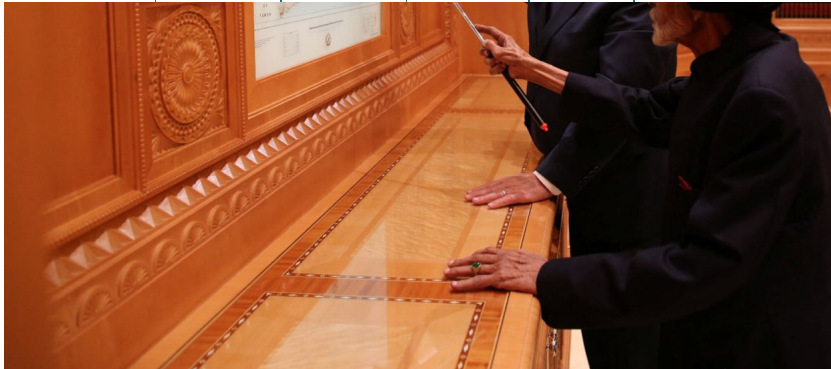
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Benjamin Netanyahu with Sultan Qaboos of Oman; the two met in Muscat on October 26, 2018 Credit: Israel government photo

In my university classes, we sometimes discuss which countries that are most supportive of the Palestinians. Turkey and Qatar are close friends of Hamas, but both the students and myself have a hard time listing the Palestinian Authority's top supporters. Diplomatic friends who work closely with the PA say that Sweden, France, Jordan, Ireland, South Africa and maybe Ecuador and Venezuela are the PA's top supporters at the moment.

Consequently, with an Israel that is stronger than it has ever been, economically, diplomatically and militarily, and the Palestinians at one of the low-points in their history, how on earth can supporters of the BDS movement claim they're winning?

There are different ways to measure the success or failure of a movement like BDS. The most obvious would be to analyze to what extent BDS has realized its objectives. The second would be to establish how far it has contributed to actual boycotts, divestments and sanctions against Israel. Thirdly, what other consequences and impacts it has had.

Regarding the first measure, no sane person could argue that the occupation is closer to end today as compared to 2005. In fact, the opposite is true. The same logic applies to Palestinian refugee return. It can be argued that the situation for Israel's Arab population has improved, for example the rise in Arab enrolment at Israeli universities, but it is hard to see BDS as a factor in this development.

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When it comes to actual boycotts, divestments and sanctions against Israel, there have over the years since 2005 been a number of small victories for the BDS movement, the latest of which was [Airbnb's de-listing](#) of accommodation in Israeli settlements (which now seems to be [in jeopardy](#)), possible new laws on the way [in Ireland](#) and [Chile](#) against the settlements, [academic boycotts](#), cancelled [music concerts](#), and two U.S. police departments' [cancelling of training](#) in Israel.

While these measures have received much publicity, they have - just like similar measures in the past - done very little to improve the situation on the ground for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.



Bedouin children of the Jahalin tribe near the Israeli settlement of Maale Adumim (seen in the background), June 16, 2012. Credit: Reuters

During the lifetime of the BDS movement, the number of settlers in the West Bank has actually [grown by almost 70%](#) (from 247,300 in 2005 to 413,400 in 2017), according to data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, used by Peace Now's Settlement Watch.

My own experience, from travelling regularly to the Palestinian territories over the past 15 years, is that the Palestinians, both in the West Bank and Gaza, are still searching for effective strategies to confront Israel. They don't believe they have that strategy in BDS. Indeed, only a small minority of Palestinians believe in the [effectiveness of non-violent resistance](#) against Israel, according to the latest poll from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research.

Finally, the BDS movement should be evaluated according to what other impacts it may have had. Here, it can be argued that the BDS movement has emerged as a central actor in what might be called the "the legislative turn" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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This trend can be seen across the political spectrum, in laws enacted by the Israeli Knesset, in the European Union's differentiation strategy against the settlements, in the UN Human Rights Council, in the Palestinians turning to the ICC, in anti-boycott legislation in the U.S. Congress and in more than 25 states.

It remains to be seen how this trend will play out in the future, but it will likely include much more of what is already being called the "BDS wars" between free speech on the one hand, and criminalization of the BDS movement and accusations of anti-Semitism on the other, as we are beginning to see more and more of already today, not least in Texas.

A peculiarity of the BDS movement is that it seems strongest in the Western country most friendly to Israel: the U.S., and almost non-existent in a country like Sweden, the Western country considered most critical of Israel.



A Jerusalem Day March outside Jerusalem's Old City May 17, 2015. Credit: Olivier Fitoussi

The BDS movement's role in the "the legislative turn" is connected to another trend of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "the authoritarian turn."

Both Israel and Palestine-West Bank were recently downgraded by V-Dem, the world's largest academic democracy ranking project. Israel was downgraded from being a "liberal democracy" to an "electoral democracy," replaced for the first time by Tunisia as the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. Palestine-West Bank was also downgraded from "electoral democracy" to "closed," while Palestine-Gaza was ranked at the bottom of the Liberal Democracy Index.

V-Dem's findings mirror those of other similar surveys and indexes



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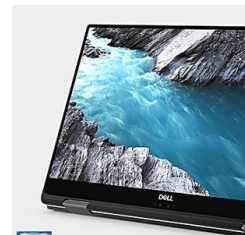
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over the last years when it comes to Israel and Palestine, such as Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2018](#) survey and The Economist's [Democracy Index](#). Freedom House's downgrading of Israel's civil liberties rating was triggered by "a series of laws that have been enacted or proposed in recent years with the aim of [tightening restrictions](#) on critical nongovernmental organizations and denying them access to international support."



A protester holding a Palestinian flag in front of Israeli soldiers during a protest marking Land Day near the border between Israel and southern Gaza Strip March 30, 2013. Credit: Reuters

Just recently, the 2018 Israeli Democracy Index found that close to half of the Israeli public, including 57% of secular Jews and 70% of Arab Israelis, believe that democracy in Israel [was in serious danger](#).

Like a bicycle that that must be ridden forward or fall over, it is in the DNA of a movement like BDS always to claim victories. Supporters of BDS typically say that their movement has had a steeper curve than the Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa, which needed over 30 years to end apartheid. But Israel's economic and diplomatic curves have far outpaced the BDS movement's curve during the 13 years since 2005.

One of few curves in Israel that is going down rather than up at the moment is Israel's status in democracy ranking projects. The importance of this should not be underestimated. No longer being able to credibly use epithets such as "liberal democracy" and "the only democracy in the Middle East" will likely create major identity and hasbara problems for Israel in the future.

Many critics of the BDS movement, including left-wingers like [Noam Chomsky](#) and [Norman Finkelstein](#), have long argued that the BDS movement's ultimate objective is not to fix Israel's problems, but to destroy it.

Whether that's true or not, the BDS movement has not been able to hurt Israel from the outside. But it is beginning to hurt Israel from the inside.

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