



Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement (BDS)

A Nexus Issue Brief for Policymakers

This campaign season has many wrestling with how to talk about several tough issues without evoking antisemitic tropes. This document is part of a series of issue briefs from the Nexus Project designed to help ensure that complex issues can be debated thoroughly and clearly, while maintaining important sensitivity.

The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement is one of the most contentious issues in conversations about Israel and Palestine. People participate in BDS and other Israel-related boycotts for a wide range of political, economic, and ethical reasons, and participation should not, on its own, be treated as evidence of antisemitism. Whether a particular boycott raises concerns about antisemitism depends on its specific context, including what is being targeted, why, and how. **The Nexus Project does not take a position on participation in BDS.**

WHY IS BDS SO CONTENTIOUS?

The organized BDS movement traces its origins to a 2005 call from Palestinian civil society for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel. **Today, “BDS” is also used more loosely to describe Israel-related boycott activity** by individuals, campaigns, and institutions that may not participate in or endorse the organized movement.

Concerns about BDS often center on who or what is targeted.

- Some boycotts focus on Israeli government actors, particular policies, or companies connected to specific conduct. Others extend to Israeli businesses, universities, artists, cultural institutions, or anything produced by Israeli society broadly.
- **Critics worry that broader boycotts can assign collective responsibility** to Israelis or single out Israel for treatment not applied elsewhere. These concerns become more acute when boycotts extend to American Jews, Israeli-born Americans, or U.S. institutions because of their connections to Israel.
- **Supporters may instead view broad economic or cultural pressure as a strategy for producing political change, rather than hostility toward Israelis or Jews** – citing the success of boycott and divestment campaigns against Apartheid-era South Africa.

BDS has received renewed attention amid pro-Palestinian campus protests, where divestment and other institutional boycotts have been prominent demands.

The law is also unsettled. Political advocacy and association receive significant First Amendment protection, while courts have treated some nonexpressive commercial boycott activity differently. This guide does not attempt to resolve those legal questions.

ISRAEL-RELATED BOYCOTTS VARY IN SCOPE AND FORM

Israel-related boycott activity can differ substantially in **target**, **rationale**, and **form**. It may be directed toward a range of actors with no involvement in policy making or in the mistreatment of Palestinians, simply because of their identity:

- **Israeli government actors** or policies.
 - Ex. Some college protest movements have made efforts to prevent their schools from having Israeli government spokespeople platformed on campus.
- **Companies or institutions** based on specific conduct, including activity in West Bank settlements.
 - Ex. In 2021, Ben & Jerry's announced they would no longer sell their ice cream in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.
- **Israeli commerce, academic or cultural institutions**, or cultural exchanges more broadly.
 - Ex. There are countries that threaten to boycott the Eurovision song contest as long as Israel is participating.
- **U.S. businesses or organizations** because of their connections to Israel or support for Zionism.
 - Ex. Restaurants owned by Michael Solomonov have been boycotted because of the chef's connection to Israel.
- **Individuals** because they are Israeli, Jewish, Zionist, or otherwise connected to Israel.
 - Ex. A viral document called "Is your fav author a Zionist" listed authors with a wide range of connections to Israel and Judaism as suspect and worthy of boycott.

The form of participation can also vary.

- An individual consumer choice, an advocacy campaign, a student government or union resolution may issue a recommendation or call on a university to divest. The boycott is not a fact until the institutional governing body or investment decision-makers determine whether the issue meets the institutional criteria for making investment changes for an endowment, pension fund or business.
- **These distinctions matter, but do not themselves determine whether a boycott or the campaign calling for the boycott is antisemitic.** A boycott of an Israeli government ministry or a company based on specified conduct raises different questions from a boycott of a U.S. business because its founder was born in Israel. At the same time, a broad boycott may reflect a strategy of applying economic or cultural pressure rather than antisemitic motivation.

WHEN BDS CROSSES THE LINE

Boycotts of Israel are not inherently antisemitic. Criticizing Israel, opposing Zionism, advocating divestment, or choosing not to purchase Israeli products does not, by itself, demonstrate hostility toward Jews.

Antisemitism concerns arise when a boycott campaign:

- **Uses antisemitic tropes or stereotypes**, such as claims about Jewish money, power, control, or dual loyalty.
- **Holds Jews collectively responsible for Israel**, including by assuming that Jews inherently support Israel or Israeli government policies.
- **Targets or excludes Jews because they are Jewish**, or subjects Jews or Jewish institutions to heightened scrutiny because of assumed connections to Israel or Zionism.
- **Uses opposition to Israel or Zionism as a proxy for hostility toward Jews**, including by boycotting Jewish individuals or institutions based on assumptions about their political beliefs.
- **Advances an eliminationist vision that denies Jews in Israel equal rights, physical safety, or the ability to remain in the country as equals.**

But conduct that is not directly antisemitic may still be objectionable. Excluding someone because they were born in Israel or imposing an Israel-related political litmus test for participation in civic life may raise concerns about exclusion, or even unlawful discrimination. The same may be true of boycotting a business **simply because its owner identifies as a Zionist, rather than because of specific actions or positions taken by the owner or business.** Depending on the circumstances, some conduct may also raise separate legal or civil-rights questions.

Not every objectionable BDS-related action needs to be characterized as antisemitic to be criticized. At the same time, describing an action as political protest **does not resolve concerns about how it treats other people.**

BDS SHOULD NOT BE USED AS A PROXY FOR ANTISEMITISM

Supporting BDS is not itself evidence of antisemitism. There are many reasons people of all backgrounds choose to take part in different forms of boycotts, and BDS enjoys the support of some Jewish and Israeli participants.

When criticizing BDS, identify the specific concern:

- If Jews are being held responsible for Israel, say so.
- If individuals are being excluded solely based on their identity, identify the discrimination.
- If antisemitic stereotypes or tropes are being used in the campaign, call them out.
- If the objection is that a boycott unfairly targets Israel, harms Israelis unconnected to government policy, imposes ideological conformity, or is counterproductive, make that

argument without automatically labeling the conduct antisemitic. Since civil rights law bars discriminatory treatment of individuals because of their national origin, other forms of discriminatory treatment may come into play.

Using precise allegations of antisemitism for specific actions rather than broad, sweeping accusations against an entire movement allows us to confront antisemitism where it occurs, without foreclosing legitimate political debate.

RESPONSIBLY ASSESSING SPECIFIC BDS CASES

The question “**is BDS antisemitic?**” is often too broad to be useful. Assessing a specific case requires examining its conduct, targets, and rhetoric, and **distinguishing the concerns it raises from what response, if any, is appropriate.**

The following questions can help:

What is being targeted? Government policy, settlement activity, specific corporate conduct, Israeli institutions or commerce broadly, U.S. organizations with Israel connections, or individuals?

Who is acting? Whether a boycott is an individual choice, an action by a private institution, or a policy adopted by a government body may not determine whether the conduct is antisemitic, but it can affect what legal, institutional, or policy response is appropriate.

What is the basis for the boycott? How closely is the target connected to the policy or conduct motivating the boycott?

What role does identity play? Would the person or organization still be targeted if they were not Jewish or Israeli, but engaged in the same conduct?

What rhetoric accompanies the boycott? Does it involve collective blame or antisemitic stereotypes, or is the argument focused on particular policies and political objectives?

What is the nature of the concern? Antisemitism may be one concern, but discrimination, exclusion, political intolerance, or other objections may be more accurate descriptions in some circumstances.

Specificity Matters. Because substantially different types of activities can be called “BDS,” policymakers considering legislation, resolutions, funding conditions, or other government responses should take those differences into account and **avoid using the BDS label itself as a proxy for antisemitism or discrimination.**

