

Israel and BDS: Reciprocal Mobilization, Strategy, Competition, and Wars of Position

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Patterns of Anti-BDS Mobilization in Israel: Rational or Epiphenomenal?

A standard move by those mobilized to defend Israel against its academic critics is to condemn them as “neo-Marxists” schooled in Gramscian techniques of “critical analysis.” Advanced most regularly by a censorious organization called “Israel Academic Monitor,” these descriptions—deployed as pejorative insults—are often correct. Not that most, if even very many, of these critics are “Marxists” of any stripe, but it is true that scientists and intellectuals in general, and certainly those trained over the last two or three generations, have been encouraged to think critically. That means that part of being an expert is learning to challenge paradigms, regnant narratives, or unrecognized assumptions, whether in natural sciences, the humanities, the social sciences. Thinking critically also means approaching the world with a hunch that conventionally accepted claims may owe their acceptance to something other than their validity. It also means identifying unevaluated constructions that surround and protect claims and theories against evidence of their weaknesses. It is not without irony that IAM’s own practice, of deconstructing every criticism of Israel as rooted in an overarching political agenda or biased set of assumptions, is itself a systematic, if wooden, application of the “critical studies” approach.

In this context it is less surprising, but no less ironic, that in 2019 The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, a right-wing Israeli think tank closely associated with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, published an explicitly Gramscian analysis of the threat to Israel posed by the “Red-Green Alliance” (right-wing vigilante speak for leftists and Muslims who criticize Israel) and how to respond to it and to the campaigns it inspires, such as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. The author, Eyal Lewin, attributed the strategies used by this alliance (“which, like a Trojan horse, threatens to destroy Israel from within”) to Gramsci’s teachings about how to fight a “war of position,” advising that a “rightist pushback” means “embracing Gramsci’s ideas.”¹ This exhortation to learn from BDS about how to fight against it has become a regular theme within the panoply of polemicists, foundations, strategists, NGO’s, think-tank analysts, Israeli government officials, and consultants that attend closely to BDS. With few exceptions, Israelis have classified BDS as a threat, while disputing how big a threat it is and over what time.

Mindful of the fact that evoking a strong response from its target is an important step for a transnational boycott movement in gaining political traction, we begin by analyzing Israeli responses to BDS. Our analysis considers how the Israeli response has unfolded and compares competing explanations for its trajectory. We ask how much of that response can be attributed to experience and learning vs. how much is explained by the outcome of struggles by rival Israeli actors to gain prominence, resources, and influence by advancing techniques whose successful implementation depend on the skills and assets that they command. In other words, to what extent does the overall trajectory of Israeli policies toward BDS trace a path of changing strategic calculation, and to what extent is that path a function of the outcome of struggles among competing guardians of Israeli interests?²

We then analyze the evolution of BDS strategies themselves to test effects of applying the same analytic devices to the character and timing of changes in the BDS movement itself. We find that BDS and counter-BDS mobilizations can be usefully depicted using both strategic learning and political competition frames, but that the difference in balance of power between the state and civil society as between Israel, and its advocates, on one side, and the Palestinians, BDS, and their allies on the other, leads to strategic convergence by Israel in its counter-BDS efforts but not (yet at any rate) on Palestinian side. We end by suggesting why the crucial battles seem to be taking place in the United States and Europe and by pointing to opportunities to learn from other transnational boycotts and reactions to them, specifically the cases of the anti-apartheid movement and the movement to enforce the McBride Principles to end anti-Catholic discrimination in Northern Ireland.

A Rationalist View of Israeli Responses to BDS

A rationalist narrative of the development of Israel's response to BDS is readily formulated. The Zionist experience with Arab boycotts made it natural for Israeli policy makers to expect that adversary use of that weapon could be effectively countered by conventional diplomatic and economic responses. In April 1936, the Arab Higher Committee declared a general strike and agricultural boycott in Palestine targeting both the British and the Jews. The British responded by giving the Zionists opportunities to increase their own self-reliance, including, especially, the right to create their own port in Tel-Aviv. Israel responded effectively to the Arab League economic boycott with traditional "*hasbara*" (propaganda), by using alliances with great powers, including protective legislation within the United States, clandestine evasions, and by launching a counter-boycott of companies honoring the Arab League demand. Since, in the past, Arabs suffered more than Zionism or Israel from boycotts, it was natural for those seeking to protect Israel from BDS to imagine that the struggle might even be turned to Israel's advantage.

Quickly, and without too much imprecision, we can divide the history of Israeli responses to BDS into three phases separated by two inflection points. In phase 1 (2001-2008) Israeli policy-makers were not particularly alarmed by calls for a global boycott, divestment, and sanctions campaign against Israel that developed between the Durban conference in 2001 and the Palestinian civil society call for a campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions issued in 2005. Indeed, until 2009 most Israeli strategists, policy makers, and "pro-Israel" activists either ignored BDS or treated it as insufficiently consequential to outweigh the risk of giving it the attention it craved by responding to it as an important threat. This phase ended following worldwide condemnation of the destructiveness of Israel's war on Gaza in 2009 (Operation Cast Lead), and the surge in BDS activity associated with the bloody seizure by Israeli commandos of the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla's" flagship—the Mavi Marmora—in 2010. These developments ushered in phase 2, associated with a major change in Israel's posture toward BDS. From 2010 to 2016 most contributors to Israeli discussions about BDS agreed that while BDS produced only irritating and inconvenient challenges in the cultural and legal arenas, and no immediate threat of significant material damage, it did pose a major threat of delegitimization. Virtually all participants in this debate advocated a major mobilization of resources to confront the problem. They disagreed, however, about how and under what auspices the counter-BDS and counter-delegitimization campaign should be conducted. Following a devastating critique of the government's response issued by the Comptroller's office in 2016, a third phase began. Phase 3 has been characterized by widespread agreement on what needs to be done and how—a strategy combining Israeli government surveillance and clandestine action against BDS activists on the one hand and programs to catalyze and subsidize "pro-Israel" networks to respond locally and semi-autonomously to BDS initiatives.

Neither strategies in wars of position (about what is to be taken as the common sense of public discussion) nor strategies in wars of maneuver (in which ad hominem attacks, intimidation, and violence are used to defeat opponents), base themselves importantly on the validity of substantive arguments. In this context it is instructive to consider the drastic change that has taken place in Israeli “*hasbara*.” In the past, Israeli propaganda efforts sought substantively to rebut claims and criticisms against Zionism in general and Israeli government policies in particular. But virtually no attention is paid in counter-BDS “*hasbara*” to questioning the merits of specific accusations against the Zionist movement or against Israel for discrimination or abuses against Palestinians, infringements of international law, or failures to advance workable solutions to the conflict. To be sure, books and monographs on how to counter BDS and the larger campaign of “delegitimization” it is portrayed as exemplifying often include final sentences or paragraphs gesturing toward the ultimate need for Israel to change its policies or at least project the image of its commitment to a negotiated solution. But these points are standardly characterized as “beyond the scope of the present work.”³

Figured as a rational actor, Israel learned from its underestimation of the challenge of BDS in phase 1. In phase 2 it considered different alternatives. Subjecting them to critical scrutiny, it chose a strategy that learned from BDS itself about how to fight for large scale change in arenas not dominated by the power and interests of individual states. The crucial stakes of this kind of contest pertained to international agendas, the standard languages of international discourse about Israel and the Palestinians, and the burdens of expectations placed on Israel vs. the Palestinians by the outcomes of these “soft-power” conflicts. In Gramscian terms Israel moved beyond treating BDS as a direct threat to its material interests and immediate political stability, by operating within legal frameworks (pressure politics) or outside them (a war of maneuver); to an embrace of a lengthy, worldwide “war of position” via construction of networks of heavily subsidized, but only loosely coordinated, hubs of resistance, to contain BDS and associated campaigns of delegitimization, and to launch counter-attacks.

Israeli Responses to BDS as a Process of Political Competition

But there is another way to give an accounting of how Israeli reactions to and counter-measures against BDS unfolded. The same inflection points appear, but, since no rational process of development is implied—a process that would entail tracing change from stage to stage, and following a familiar and understood logic—these points mark different “periods,” rather than phases. In each of these periods distinctive patterns of competition are apparent, but movement across those points, from period to period, is traced, not to the kind of learning process outlined in our rationalist treatment of “phases,” but to the changing outcome of competition among different groups whose positions, skills, and interests encouraged them to see the challenges facing Israel in very different ways. These patterns are schematized in Figure 1 below.

A commonplace among those who study Israel is that the country has never had a foreign policy, only a security policy. That is an exaggeration, but not a wild one. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) itself, officials in the *Misrad HaBitachon* (the Defense [literally “Security”] Ministry), *Shin Bet* (domestic security service), *Mossad* (international security service) and ex-security service operatives, and a wide array of think-tanks filled with former high-ranking IDF officers or intelligence officials, have played an often dominant role defining the problems facing the country, shaping acceptable terms of discussion for those problems, and delineating the range of plausible solutions.

From the perspective of most “*bitchonistim*” (security experts), the key question to ask about a potential problem has always been akin to that ascribed to Stalin: How many divisions has the pope? Real problems, in other words, were a function of “hard power”—military capabilities, proven willingness to use force, and geopolitical realities. From this perspective it was natural to dismiss, or at least downplay warnings that Palestinian activists and their sympathizers could, non-violently, threaten Israeli policies or raise questions about the state’s right to exist. In period 1 (2001-2009) this perspective dominated. But the global challenge of “delegitimization,” isolation, and consignment of Israel to pariah status, offered opportunities to ambitious elites with other skill sets, reputations, and resources. Thus, not until 2010 was BDS or the wider delegitimization campaign the subject of even one of hundreds of studies, reports, and commentaries issued by Israel’s most widely consulted security affairs think tank at the time, the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA). When the first such report was published, by the Center’s Director, Efraim Inbar, it avoided mentioning BDS, rejected talk of Israel’s “isolation” as left-wing propaganda, and minimized threats of delegitimization as something Jews have always experienced and of minimal significance in the context of his optimistic, if not triumphalist view of Israel’s prospects. Similar treatment of BDS as a failure and/or as insignificant can be found in the reports of another strictly *bitchonist* think-tank—the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center, whose sparse treatment of the issue between 2011 and 2019 focused on the failed if not, in the view of their analysts, puerile, mobilization efforts by Palestinian BDS organizers in the West Bank.⁴

But what was a side-show or a non-problem for these hard-line military analysts, was both a real threat *and* a real opportunity for their “soft-power” competitors. As a vehicle for enhancing their visibility, influence, and command over resources, a scary, non-militarized, global, and civil-society based threat to Israel was ideal. Whatever real threat BDS posed to Israel, it presented a perfect opportunity for Israeli think-tanks and Israel advocates oriented toward public diplomacy, international law, international civil society, and international public opinion, to challenge *bitchonist* dominance and advance their analyses as correct, their skills as crucial, and their claim on resources as justified. And this was true whether the political views advanced were right-wing or center-left.

For example, NGO-Monitor is an Israel advocacy organization devoted to “exposing” the nefarious activities of NGOs deemed inimical to Israel. Although it did not begin publishing reports and commentaries about BDS until some years after the BDS movement’s founding, NGO-Monitor began focusing on the threat of international boycotts in 2005,⁵ and on BDS specifically in 2008. Both were identified by the organization’s founder, Gerald Steinberg, as legacies of the 2001 United Nations Human Rights Conference in Durban, South Africa and the strategy of hundreds of NGO’s to conduct a global campaign to “demonize and isolate” Israel.⁶ The organization’s first explicitly BDS-focused publication appeared in April 2008.⁷ In that year it published six studies, reports, and analyses of BDS, 30 in 2009 and 31 in 2010. The torrent of publications rose to 64 in 2015, peaking at 70 in 2016.

NGO Monitor’s founders and backers have been closely identified with right-wing political groups and politicians including Dore Gold, a close associate and long-time adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu. Gold was appointed as Israel’s United Nations Ambassador in 1997 and later as Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Reut, on the other hand, is a think tank founded in 2004 by Gidi Grinstein, an Israeli entrepreneur who served in the office of the Prime Minister in the Ehud Barak government. Reut positions itself as in the pragmatic and sophisticated center of the Israeli political spectrum, registered by its at least implicit support for the principle of the “two-state solution” and a

lengthy list of members of its “Political Security Team” that includes representatives from a very wide swath of Israeli elite political opinion.⁸

Like NGO Monitor, however, Reut is soft-power oriented. Following Israel’s debacle in the 2006 Lebanon War, which featured both military and international public relations disasters, Reut launched an effort to replace Israel’s traditional *bitchonist* orientation toward security and foreign policy with a new “doctrine”⁹ anchored in public diplomacy, the acquisition and exercise of soft-power, and a focus on the “political-diplomatic arena” rather than military and security affairs.¹⁰ A 92-page study published by Reut in March 2010 used the BDS threat as the basis for arguing that it had been correct, in 2007, to call for Israel to transform its conception of the most serious challenges it faced and to shift attention from terrorism and other military threats to BDS and the soft-power requirements of defending the country from a dangerous campaign of delegitimization and isolation. Reut’s proposal was to adopt a “big-tent” approach to combatting BDS by isolating it from its progressive but non-Anti-Semitic constituencies, animated by adopting the structure and tactics of networks to mobilize and catalyze worldwide counter-attacks against BDS. In other words, according to Reut, “it takes a network to fight a network.”¹¹

But these efforts to shift Israeli attention to the BDS threat of delegitimization and isolation in the arena of international civil society did not have a powerful effect on Israeli policy or political discourse until the events of 2009 and 2010. Indeed, Reut took full advantage of the public relations disaster resulting from its botched seizure of the Mavi Marmora. Its August 2010 analysis of the global reaction to the event characterized its effect as the “collapse of Israel’s Political Firewall” and as a dramatic example of how Israel’s failure to adjust security and foreign policy doctrine in line with Reut’s suggestions had resulted in a successful surprise strategic strike for which the country had been completely unprepared.¹²

In response to these failures, the growing visibility of BDS, and the arguments of NGO Monitor, Reut, and other advocates of greater Israeli investment in “public diplomacy,”¹³ Prime Minister Netanyahu told his Cabinet in 2009 that BDS was to be considered a dangerous and potentially existential threat to Israel. Despite his remarks to the Cabinet there is no evidence that Netanyahu acted seriously or coherently to develop a strategy to counter BDS. In addition to the Premiership, Netanyahu also served as Foreign Minister and in part because he wholly distrusted the Foreign Ministry, he had drained its budgets. Nor did he protect it from attacks it suffered from all sides for its failure to adapt to challenges for which its elite-focused traditional methods of *hasbara* were, it appeared, wholly inadequate. Netanyahu’s primary move in regard to BDS was to revive the defunct Ministry of Strategic Affairs, but treated it as an opportunity for patronage disconnected from any sustained mission, including that of countering BDS. The Ministry, according to one Haaretz journalist,

was established mainly as a consolation prize for ministers when the need arose to pad them with a semi-security portfolio during the formation of governing coalitions, and has taken on various forms. It was founded in 2006 as a portfolio tailored to Avigdor Lieberman. It was dismantled two years later and reestablished in 2009 in a different format. ...During Lieberman’s tenure, its authority was defined mainly as “thwarting the Iranian nuclear program.” ...Then, under Moshe Ya’alon (2009-2013), the ministry focused on “Palestinian incitement” as well as the Iranian threat. During the term of Yuval Steinitz (2013-2015), the ministry was unified with the Intelligence Affairs Ministry

into the “Intelligence Ministry.” In May 2015, it was once again separated out and given to [Gil] Erdan, incorporating the Public Diplomacy Ministry, which had been removed from the Prime Minister’s Office.”¹⁴

From this “bureaucratic politics” perspective, period 2, the six years following the first inflection point of the aftermath of the 2009 Cast Lead war on Gaza and the 2010 Mavi Marmora debacle, was marked in Israeli policy circles by competition for the resources to pursue priorities and strategies among groups and organizations with different comparative advantages for soft vs. hard-power struggles. This competition was complicated by differing ideological positions and by overlapping and unclear jurisdictional boundaries among ministries and other state and parastatal organs. The result of all these sharp-elbowed fights was a disjointed set of uncoordinated and inconsistent policies and actions.

Period 2 came to an end following a savagely detailed report issued by the State Comptroller’s office in 2016. It offered a blistering critique of the Foreign Ministry, the Diaspora Affairs Ministry, the Prime Minister’s Office, and the Strategic Affairs Ministry (in its various forms). The Comptroller accused these organs of the state with failing to defend Israel (and diaspora Jews) against BDS and the worldwide threat of isolation and delegitimization and anti-Semitism it was seen to pose, for failing to recognize international civil society as an arena of crucial importance to Israel vital interests, and for failing even to develop operational plans to contain and defeat the BDS campaign to transform Israel’s image into that of an apartheid state which it said had begun in earnest in 2005.¹⁵ The report went into embarrassing detail in its account of the squabbling over turf and budgets among these ministries and government offices that, along with their analytic and policy failures, had accounted for the failures it had identified and the damage Israel had suffered as a result.

The Comptroller’s findings were widely and accurately reported in the Israeli press.¹⁶ Reaction to this report inaugurated period 3, marked by general convergence on a strategy for defining the BDS threat and combatting it that united most if not all competitors in the Israeli security/hasbara/foreign policy space. This new consensus represented a victory for the soft-power advocates, evident from the appearance of multiple position papers and in-depth analyses of how to confront BDS issued by think tanks that had not previously given much attention to BDS (such as INSS, JCPA, and IDC). The analysis that groups such as NGO-Monitor and Reut had been offering for at least five years was accepted. It was widely agreed that while the material threat of BDS was of limited consequence, the movement did pose a long-term and serious challenge to Israel’s legitimacy, one that was substantially degrading its ability to function effectively on the international scene and could potentially consign it to the category of countries, such as apartheid South Africa, expected to either transform their “political model” or disappear. A second key element in this consensus was that traditional hasbara techniques based on providing substantive responses to criticisms and emphasizing contacts with officials in national governments and international organizations would have to be replaced by actions and messaging campaigns operating in global and individual national civil societies.

Drawing selectively on themes present but not dominant in the overall conception of BDS as a long-term, nontraditional, nonviolent, but serious threat, this moment of strategic convergence featured slogans that identified BDS with a global, anti-Semitic, “Red-Green alliance” between Islamists and radical leftists. Operationally, this meant repurposing the “three D’s” campaign launched by Natan Sharansky in 2003 to combat what he characterized as the “new” anti-Semitism.” Under this rubric BDS was figured as epitomizing the new anti-Semitism by exhibiting all the tell-tale signs of this latest version

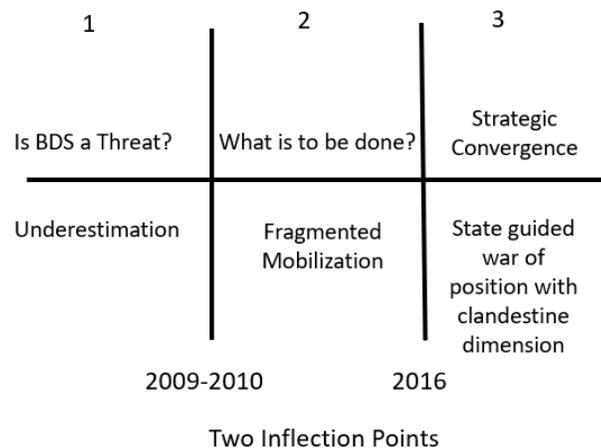
of the age-old threat to Jews. BDS was portrayed as seeking to **demonize** Israel and **delegitimize** it,” by imposing a **double standard** (i.e. failing to criticize other countries for harms similar to those committed by Israel). Israeli Ministers, officials, agencies, and advocacy thereby combined the urgency associated with perception of an imminent and potentially existential threat to Israel with long-term, well-established Jewish anxieties. Their objective was to use the Sharansky slogan, and accusations of anti-Semitism, to energize and loosely coordinate an anti-BDS “array” of hubs and cells—“molecules” in the vocabulary of one veteran Israeli politician—that would, as noted above, fight a network with a network.¹⁷

A third principle was added to this “soft-power” analysis, one that helped the *bitchonistim* to accept defeat. By characterizing the BDS campaign as not only viciously eliminationist toward Israel and akin to terrorism in the illegitimacy and illegality of its tactics, but also anti-Semitic in the origins of its extreme hostility, the anti-BDS campaign could expand from protection of Israel to protection of Jews throughout the world. That, in turn, justified elaborate, clandestine, and technically sophisticated efforts, especially in the United States and Europe, to surveil BDS activists and organizers, punish them in ways designed to affect their reputations and careers, and ban them from travel to Israel, including the Palestinian territories. By treating the struggle against BDS as a continuation of the struggle against terrorism and violent anti-Semitism, the “hard-power” oriented *bitchonistim*, including government officials, politicians, bureaucrats, and security experts, could embrace this version of Israel’s “long war” because it offered a central and well-funded role for their skills and preferred modes of operation. Increasingly, counter-BDS policies for conducting civil society struggles reflected the familiar and, for Israelis, comfortable language of IDF commanders: featuring “reconnaissance,” “offensive operations,” “counter-strikes,” “targeting strategies,” and the winks and nods conveying how much that could be said about what was being done was not being said because “*hayavin, yavin*” (those who understand, understand).¹⁸ To carry out these missions a variety of surveillance, opposition research, and dirty tricks-oriented companies appeared, each linked in barely deniable ways to Mossad and/or the Strategic Affairs Ministry.¹⁹

This second account of the evolution of Israeli responses to BDS highlights a typically ignored analytic principle. When considering why particular practices are prevalent, pass from the scene, or appear, as it were, to have been newly created, analysts are typically drawn to a focus either on the agents who frame and exhibit the practices or the circumstances that evoke or elicit these ways of doing things that correspond, in some fashion, to the requirements or exigencies imposed by structure. But another perspective, equally valid, but distinctive in its analytic implications is that of strategies themselves—the swarm of ways of doing things that agents become aware of, adopt, ignore, or discard, and whose adoptions structures can either incentivize or punish. In evolutionary biology, this is the perspective of genes, or traits, over time, rather than that of the progenitors (the gene carriers) or of the patterns of resources and scarcities that drive competition among progenitors (in the short run) and genes traits, in the long run.

Figure 1

Three patterns of Israeli responses to BDS separated by two inflection points



Palestinian-Led Boycott Mobilization

Both the rationalist and bureaucratic politics explanations can be similarly deployed to analyze the trajectory of Palestinian-led BDS mobilization, albeit with different inflection points and patterns of change. Elements of these two types of explanations, though rarely described as such or elaborated in depth, feature organically in the discourses of both BDS activists and their opponents. The accounts developed in the following sections build on these discourses to demonstrate how the two complementary logics can explain the trajectory and dynamics of BDS mobilization.

A rationalist explanation is prominent in the promotional materials, internal documents, and rhetoric of BDS organizers, and is also the dominant account offered by the most vociferous opponents of BDS. Omar Barghouti, for example, offers a coherent strategic logic for the timing, arguments, methods, and goals of the boycott, which is grounded in clear expectations about the effects of mobilization and counter-mobilization derived from the history of the South Africa anti-apartheid boycott. Although they attribute to it a slightly different logic, Dan Diker and Yossi Kuperwasser see BDS as a “political warfare campaign” based on strategic deception and subversion, the extremist character of which has been masked by professions of nonviolence and appeals to liberal democratic norms in the US and Europe.²⁰ In such an account, the rights-based language of BDS and ambiguity about end goals manifest eternal anti-Semitism and represent efforts to advance a Palestinian-majority one-state “solution” that would spell the end to Israel as a Jewish state.

Yet the limitations of a rationalist accounts of BDS mobilization are evident. Most importantly, a rationalist account cannot explain the absence of sustained support for BDS from the official Palestinian

leadership and the governing apparatus it controls. Enduring divisions among the Palestinians and the pursuit of divergent interests have complicated the strategic rationale of BDS and this lack of convergence has inhibited the movement's growth. Hence it should be unsurprising that features of a bureaucratic politics explanation are articulated by pro-BDS critics of the PA who advocate democratization of the national institutions and return to mass popular mobilization.

A Rationalist View of BDS Mobilization

The origins of BDS are commonly traced to a 2001 UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban. Although Arafat spoke at the conference, his contribution was not advocacy of a boycott, but rather denunciation of Israeli aggression and racism.²¹ More significantly for the emergence of BDS, NGO participants commonly drew comparisons between Israel and apartheid South Africa and the South African National NGO Coalition, SANGOCO, advocated cultivating a boycott movement similar to that which had challenged South Africa during the 20th Century. In a split that foreshadowed later divisions between state and civil society actors, both the US and Israel withdrew from the conference and the official UN Declaration and Programme of Action that came out of it barely mentioned Israel. Yet Israel featured prominently in the final NGO Forum Declaration, which called for "a policy of complete and total isolation of Israel as an apartheid state" with "comprehensive sanctions and embargoes, the full cessation of all links (diplomatic, economic, social, aid, military cooperation and training) between all states and Israel."²² Accounts offered by BDS champions as well as by its vehement opponents identify the Durban conference as the moment when civil society connections were forged that later proved to be key for developing the campaign.²³ Indeed, the Programme of Action that came out of the event became a reference point for Palestinian civil society activists years later when BDS organizers returned to a second Durban Conference in 2009 to challenge the previous treatment of questions about Israel and Palestine. The document they prepared for the second conference, "United Against Apartheid, Colonialism and Occupation: Dignity and Justice for the Palestinian People" was a strategic position paper that became an ideological touchstone for BDS.²⁴

Meanwhile in the US, at UC Berkeley, students started mobilizing for divestment as early as February 2001, when Ariel Sharon was elected as prime minister of Israel. Noura Erakat identifies this moment as marking the first university divestment campaign and the genesis of a movement that spread to other campuses, churches, and community organizations over the next few years, prior to the BDS call.²⁵ By one count, in October 2002, petitions for divestment had circulated to more than fifty American campuses.²⁶ During these early years, university and church divestment campaigns were the primary manifestation of boycott in the US, but there were a variety of other boycott campaigns being organized elsewhere by Palestine solidarity groups. Among the higher-profile campaigns was the one in the UK launched by Hilary and Steven Rose, who, building on a 2001 call by the Palestinian solidarity movement, wrote a public letter to the *Guardian* that called for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.²⁷ The letter is commonly cited as the initiation of the academic boycott (as distinct from the student-led divestment movement) and it was followed by other letters in France, Italy, and Australia. The call circulated by the Roses advocated a moratorium on EU and European Science Foundation funding to Israel "unless and until Israel abides by UN resolutions and opens serious peace negotiations with the Palestinians along the lines proposed in many peace plans, including those most recently sponsored by the Saudis and the Arab League."²⁸

These relatively narrow goals and loosely coordinated organizing techniques, driven by calls from different solidarity networks, were the inspiration and political basis for the emergence of BDS in 2005 as a formal claim on behalf of Palestinian society of the right to lead a global campaign for the broad realization of Palestinian rights—end of occupation, right of return, and equality for Palestinians within Israel. With these ambitions in mind, and building on two years of prior organizing, the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) was launched in Ramallah in April 2004.²⁹ The organizers of PACBI self-consciously built on and incorporated accumulating calls for academic boycotts and offered a statement of principles to guide dispersed activism.³⁰

Phase 1 in a rationally reconstructed history of BDS began in 2005 with an explicit call to found the movement and ended in late 2008 with the opportunities for BDS expansion associated with Israel's invasion of the Gaza Strip. The release of the BDS call provided an anchor for solidarity campaigns and a focal point for glocalist activists to unite around a common purpose and strategic vision.³¹ The first BDS National Conference in Ramallah in 2007 and the establishment of the Boycott National Committee (BNC) to coordinate BDS activities formalized organization of the movement, provided an articulation of its strategic vision, and served as a conduit for investments in its growth and development.³² From a rationalist perspective, the BNC can be figured as the center of strategic planning. Its organization was designed specifically to protect the institution's autonomy and prevent any political party or faction from dominating it.³³

A key objective was to unite the three core Palestinian constituencies: citizens of Israel, residents of the West Bank and Gaza, and the diaspora. This drive towards unity was a conscious turn away from the Oslo process, which had been predicated on separation of these three populations into distinct constituencies with different, albeit sometimes overlapping, political interests. By bringing together demands for rights of all three constituencies, BDS leaders sought to expand Palestinian political horizons beyond negotiations toward independent statehood, focusing instead on the pursuit of decolonization, equality, and rights by exerting sustained international pressure on Israel. These early years also saw a concerted effort to brand the campaign as non-violent, part of an effort to signal a shift away from the violence of the intifada.³⁴

The timing of the formal emergence of BDS supports the claim that the Palestinian use of boycotts can be understood as a rational response to the shifting capacities of national organization. As Abdel Razzaq Takriti has put it in his analysis of the history of pre-BDS boycotts in Palestine, "Boycott generally gained centrality in moments when national structures were seeking an alternative to timid diplomacy and negotiations but were unable or hesitant to carry out a more comprehensive extralegal strategy."³⁵ By the end of the Second Intifada, the diplomacy of the peace process had spectacularly failed to secure Palestinian statehood, Israel was unilaterally determining the withdrawal from Gaza, and severe Israeli repression of popular mobilization and armed resistance left the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza both reluctant and unable to continue their other modes of resistance. According to this logic, at this moment of low capacity, foundering diplomacy, and exhaustion, a transnational boycott movement appeared as a non-violent alternative, anchored in human rights, international law, and the UN Charter, that could put pressure on Israel and enable the continued pursuit of Palestinian national aims. Looking to South Africa as an example and for intellectual and material support in planning, and building on arguments of the need for the Palestinian struggle to shift to a "rights-based" as opposed to objective-based approach, BDS organizers articulated a strategic program for political change.³⁶ The campaign emerged from civil society rather than the PA because the official quasi-state

Palestinian leadership was still lured by the prospect of negotiations and the material incentives of engaging in them.

Initiation of a boycott can thus be understood as a strategic shift driven by a rational response to the failure of alternative strategies. This is the conventional genealogy of BDS, which locates its emergence as a response to the high costs of armed struggle and the failures of elite diplomacy to halt Israel's settlement project or make satisfactory progress towards realizing core Palestinian rights claims. In this account, BDS emerged as a civil society alternative to confront Israeli intransigence and repression after other approaches championed by the official leadership had failed.³⁷ Activists identified an opportunity and began organizing around a new approach. Although BDS does not offer a comprehensive strategy of liberation, it offers an alternative form of popular mobilization that rejects both the elite diplomacy of the peace process and the violence of the second intifada.

During phase 1, from 2005 to 2008, the predominant focus was on building BDS into a movement by developing a core organizational structure, crystallizing its platform and methods, and extending its networks of support. BDS reported many early "successes," but this phase was also characterized by disagreements about the proper messages, scope, and aims of the movement. The main source of contention was the appropriate targets, which was inextricably tied to questions about aims. There was disagreement among BDS leadership, activists, and potential supporters about whether the boycott should be selective or comprehensive, i.e., whether it would target only West Bank settlements or Israel as a whole. Support of each were based on two different theories of change: a selective boycott would make the settlement project the core issue, impose costs on the settlers and their supporters, and endeavor to curb its expansion or lead to its dismantling; a comprehensive boycott would pressure Israel to address all three of the core issues in the BDS call, including the refugees and citizens of Israel. What was being debated was not the legitimacy of boycotts, but rather the appropriateness of different targets and the theories of change that underlay the alternative approaches. Core BDS organizers were clear about the comprehensive nature of the call and the inseparability of the three core issues. The disputes arose in the process of engaging with critics and potential supporters who were not necessarily opposed to a boycott but were hesitant about making the leap from targeting settlements to targeting Israel as a whole and issuing such capacious demands.

The second phase, marked by dynamic expansion in the visibility of BDS and by opportunistic shifts of emphasis, was initiated by Israel's intensification of the siege of Gaza that began in late 2008 and early 2009 with Operation Cast Lead and took off with Israel's bloody seizure of the Mavi Marmora in 2010. These events provided BDS with well-exploited opportunities to intensify its campaign and rapidly expand the organizational infrastructure and capacity it had begun to develop during phase 1. Similar opportunities appeared with successive Gaza wars and incursions in 2012, 2014 and 2018.³⁸ Illustratively, a BNC coordinator in Palestine, Hind Awwad, reported in the summer of 2010 that BDS was growing at a surprising pace, especially relative to the development of the South African BDS campaign, and in assessing the effects of BDS, she elaborated that it "has ended the Israeli left's domination of the discourse which was limited to the occupation, dismissing the rights of Palestinians in Israel and the rights of the refugees. BDS has allowed us to set the terms of the discourse and define our rights."³⁹ This sense of growth and success in shifting the terms of discourse permeated the writings of BDS activists. In 2011, Omar Barghouti's monograph was published, announcing that Palestine's South Africa "moment" had arrived and claiming that the "most consequential achievement of the BSD movement in the first five years had been to expose the 'essential nature' of Israel's regime over the Palestinian

people as one that combines military occupation, colonization, ethnic cleansing, and apartheid. Israel's mythical and carefully cultivated, decades-old image as a 'democratic' state seeking 'peace' may, as a result, have suffered irreparable damage."⁴⁰

Phase 2 was also marked by intensive work to build progressive coalitions in the US, an opportunity provided in part by the convergence of Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock (a high profile Native American protest), and the 2014 Gaza War.⁴¹ BDS identified strategically located networks of potential supporters and sought to make deep and "intersectional" inroads into left and progressive movements with shared values and a shared language of nonviolence and transnational solidarity. These relations have been developed into explicit alliances with Black Lives Matter, climate and gender justice movements, indigenous groups in the Americas, and other movements based on claims to oppose "all forms of racism and discrimination, including anti-Black racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and antisemitism."⁴²

Although by this point BDS had accumulated a long list of self-declared victories, it was also becoming evident that materially these were not as substantial as some had hoped and the prospects of putting real economic pressure on Israel were distant. BDS could claim success when student groups voted to divest, but the gap between resolutions and actions, not to mention an aggregation of actions that would actually be felt in the Israeli economy, was evident. Some commentators expressed concern that the "S" (for "sanctions") in BDS was nowhere to be found, while other counseled patience, suggesting that the elevation of the movement into state sanctions was yet to come. Despite these limitations on the economic front, BDS did continue to grow and gain greater publicity and legitimacy as the Gaza wars were narrated to reinforce the argument that the problem was not merely the settlements, but the fundamental denial of Palestinian rights. This discrepancy became clarified and heightened during these years as the discourse around Israel shifted in Europe and the United States in particular, but there was still widespread reluctance to impose material costs on Israel.

One way that BDS learned to deal with this discrepancy was to explain that boycott advocacy should be seen as serving essential pedagogical functions in a long-term war of position. BDS "educates" audiences about the political situation facing Palestinians and Israel's violations of international law. It then offers a way to act in solidarity with Palestinians and elaborates on the legal and moral foundations of such a nonviolent civil society campaign. Yousef Munayyer has argued that in addition to any economic impact of BDS, "there are also educational and psychological effects that are perhaps equally important."⁴³ Ilana Feldman sees BDS contributing to "shifting the terms of engagement" and resisting efforts to cast Palestine (and Israel) in exceptionalist terms that make it incomparable to other cases of state repression and resistance.⁴⁴ Using a traditionally Marxian vocabulary, Abigail Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban understand BDS as part of a counterhegemonic movement to combat an international "racial contract" in which Zionism has been incorporated into the elite hegemony of western imperialism.⁴⁵ In each of these analyses, the educational role and discursive dimensions of BDS are presented as key elements of the movement, sometimes as more important than the economic dimension.

The shift into the third phase of the development of BDS, starting around 2017, was triggered by two developments. The first was the growth and crystallization of anti-BDS mobilization by Israel and its allies. As noted above, in 2016 Israel and Israel advocates were converging around an organized campaign to fight BDS. The arsenal of anti-BDS activists included lawfare campaigns that sought to

punish BDS supporters and criminalize boycotts of Israel.⁴⁶ Although efforts to criminalize boycotts in the US and EU stumbled over violations of free speech, fighting these lawfare campaigns required substantial mobilization of resources by BDS supporters and defenders who may not have supported BDS, but were concerned about the anti-democratic initiatives being pursued to fight the movement. The struggle was not simply to develop the boycott, but to defend the right to boycott against those who would deny it.

At the same time as these anti-BDS campaigns were gaining strength, the Trump administration's embrace of Israeli expansionism gave greater credence to the apartheid language that BDS activists had already been pushing for years. American political polarization around Trump created space for BDS activists to use the boycott as a wedge issue in the Democratic Party and progressive civil society.⁴⁷ Punitive Israeli and American unilateralism, including closure of the Palestinian mission in Washington, left the Palestinian leadership helpless, unable to leverage the minimal diplomatic status it had achieved via Oslo. This combination of limited space for the official Palestinian leadership to maneuver and increased visibility of the core issues in the conflict enabled BDS leaders to situate themselves and the boycott prominently in the new political landscape. They seized this opportunity to highlight the need for new strategies of resistance, assert their central role in the struggle for Palestinian rights, and redouble alliance-building efforts, not with states, but with grassroots and civil society movements. Highlighting their intersectionality and anti-racist, anti-colonial credentials, BDS positioned itself within a political bloc that stood in opposition to a global new right defined by critics as nationalist, populist, and authoritarian.

In this phase of its development, the dialectical relationship between BDS and its opponents has become crucial. BDS battles to defend itself, form new alliances, and produce public controversies that BDS proponents can turn into positive publicity. In this way the Trump-Netanyahu alliance may, in the long-term, have been beneficial for the BDS movement insofar as it helped bring key features of its advocacy into the mainstream. For one, the language of apartheid has become more prominent in describing the reality on the ground than at any prior time, even if this terminology is still a source of fierce debate. At the same time, the idea of a "rights-based" approach to Palestinian advocacy has gained ground, displaced much of hackneyed "two-state vs. one-state" debate, and has even featured in proposals of influential, high-profile think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment.⁴⁸

The other important development during phase 3 appeared in the regional arena. As Israel backed down from *de jure* annexation in the second half of 2020, the new series of Israeli normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco came into effect. Although appearing in the short run as a threat to Palestinians, and although BDS in reaction has intensified its "anti-normalization" campaign, in the long run opportunities to leverage Arab diplomatic ties with Israel to protect and even struggle for Palestinian rights may develop.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, although their common opposition to the Abraham Accords unites the Palestinian Authority (PA) and BDS, no formula for comprehensive coordinated action offers a basis for sustained cooperation between them. Indeed, strategic convergence on the Palestinian side is unlikely as long as the PA continues to define itself in relation to prospects to achieve an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Internal Competition and the Future of Palestinian Politics

Palestinian analysts and activists often claim that there is widespread agreement within Palestinian society about the appropriateness and desirability of BDS. Hence it has become a mantra

that BDS has broad, cross-factional support from Palestinian civil society.⁵⁰ In these accounts, civil society is presented as a relatively unified set of actors who act rationally and in coordination if not in unison. Illustrative of this logic is a 2005 report on the emergence of BDS in *al-Majdal*, the quarterly magazine of BADIL Resource Center, in which the editorial board describes BDS as appearing on the scene when “international Actors have ‘dropped the ball’” and “Civil society actors have therefore ‘stepped up to the plate.’”⁵¹ Palestinian civil society is thus presented as the rational actor that is picking up the mantle of nonviolent resistance, advocacy of rights, and pursuit of liberation.

There is a degree of accuracy in this representation, yet this rationalist explanation does not satisfactorily account for how BDS has developed in practice during the years since the campaign’s origin. Most significantly, it obscures the role of antagonism between pro-BDS civil society actors and the quasi-state PA leadership in shaping the trajectory of BDS. An alternative approach takes a critical view of this supposed agreement and asks who and what interests benefit from advancing BDS as an appropriate strategy for the pursuit of Palestinian rights and who and what interests are hurt by the campaign. This political competition perspective, identified above with Allison’s “bureaucratic” or “governmental politics” model of decision-making, directs attention to the extent to which BDS emerged and evolved in the context of a struggle *within Palestinian politics*, not merely against or in relation to Israel, over the direction and methods of the national struggle.

The central axis of division that has emerged is between the preferred strategies of grassroots civil society activists vs. those of the PA leadership. Contra the rationalist account in which BDS rises as a substitute for negotiations and elite diplomacy, in the political competition account, these strategies coexist, each pursued by actors competing for political legitimacy and support. As the below account illustrates, opportunities for convergence around BDS have arisen though attempts to achieve it have been largely unsuccessful.⁵²

From the origins of the Palestinian BDS movement, organizers have been aware that successful anti-apartheid mobilization in South Africa was built upon strong relations and complementary action between activists inside the country and those abroad. Anti-apartheid activists were quick to remind the Palestinians that international pressure was only one of the four pillars of the liberation struggle and that, moreover, it was most successful when coordinated with, and supported by, South African resistance organizations.⁵³ In contrast, the Palestinian-led BDS movement has not obtained such support from the official Palestinian institutions, especially not the PA. This circumstance has limited the efficacy and scope of BDS. Omar Barghouti, lamenting that diplomatic and political work with governments to isolate Israel has been extremely limited, argued that this strategy “is primarily blocked by a complicit Palestinian officialdom that lacks a democratic mandate, principles, and vision.”⁵⁴ In contrast to the complementarity of boycott and internal mobilization in South Africa, the PA has actively inhibited the growth of BDS and repressed internal mobilization because it (rightfully) identifies threats to its rule in the young and ambitious civil society activists.

Similarly, Nathan Thrall understands BDS as a challenge to both Israel and the Palestinian leadership, one that reframes the national struggle, has “shamed” the PA by denouncing its cooperation with Israel as collaboration, and “annoyed” the PLO by encroaching on its position as the exclusive and internationally recognized advocate and representative of Palestinians around the world.⁵⁵ This analysis highlights that BDS organizers, activists, and their allies have been key actors in driving a reframing of Palestinian advocacy around rights rather than outcomes or solutions. In this reframing, the PA and the

official leadership of the national movement become targets in the sights of political competitors who would democratize the governing institutions and pursue alternative strategies for liberation.

From the competitive politics perspective, the history of BDS can be again organized into three periods, albeit divided by different inflection points than in the rationalist account (see Figure 2 below). Period 1 in the evolution of the BDS strategy began with the official launch of the BDS campaign in 2005, which posed a challenge to the Palestinian leadership without renouncing diplomacy or the PA's state-building project. Instead BDS organizers stressed the need to expand and intensify Palestinian diplomacy in international forums and in friendly or strategically critical states. They expressed frustration with the PA for not making more political use out of the 2004 ICJ opinion on the wall and insisted on using the universal language of international law and human rights as the main reference points for Palestinian advocacy. During period 1, between 2005 and 2008, the extent of the challenge BDS could pose to the PA was not yet apparent. With Palestinian national institutions still in disarray after their destruction and dismantling during the intifada, BDS during this period can be understood as part of reconstruction efforts to define a new course for resistance but did not yet pose a substantial challenge to stronger and more entrenched Palestinian power centers.

Throughout this period, the peace process carousel was still spinning and there was pressure coming from the US for the PA to engage in negotiations irrespective of the reality that the prospects for achieving independent statehood were minimal.⁵⁶ The PA leadership remained reluctant to turn decisively away from negotiations and cooperation with Israel, per the demands of BDS organizers, and refused to adopt an approach that would pose a decisive challenge to the status quo. After the Goldstone Report was released in 2009, BDS organizers saw an opportunity to use it instrumentally, but the PA, under pressure from Israel and the US, delayed adoption of the report by the UNHRC. Omar Barghouti described this move as "nothing short of a betrayal of Palestinian civil society's effective...BDS campaign against Israel," just as it was leaping "into a new, advanced phase... [and had] finally reached the mainstream."⁵⁷ His response was to call for the dissolution of the PA, signaling a heightened intensity of the antagonism between the BDS movement and the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah. This confrontation between BDS organizers and the PA over the use of the Goldstone Report was emblematic of the deepening struggle within Palestinian politics over the methods and direction of the national project.

Period 2 (2010-11) was defined by a brief, tentative, and unstable move towards convergence around boycott by both civil society actors and the PA. In late 2009, grassroots activists renewed a local boycott of goods from settlements in the West Bank.⁵⁸ They targeted the settlements and promoted Palestinian self-sufficiency by encouraging local (national) production. Although these efforts emerged organically from the grassroots, both the PA and Hamas began to timidly support this selective boycott in 2010. With the blessing of Abbas, PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad launched a highly visible campaign by publicly burning \$1 million worth of settlement-made products in the West Bank town of Salfit and opening a "National Dignity Fund" to support local production and distribution.⁵⁹ Ziad Toame, then director-general of the Ministry of National Economy's Department of Industry, Trade and Consumer Services, was assigned responsibility to report boycott violations and confiscate goods from the violators. This campaign included a ban on the sale of settlement products in local markets, thereby targeting distributors rather than consumers but it was a selective boycott of settlement products, not a comprehensive boycott of all Israeli goods, which continued to be permitted to be sold in Palestinian markets.⁶⁰

Politically, the importance of this campaign was its candidacy as a strategy that could unite competing sectors of Palestinian society and leadership. In fact, neither convergence nor coordination was very much evident. Raja Khalidi reported that after a year of strict implementation, the departments in charge of the PA campaign lost both the capacity and the will to continue enforcement of the 2010 law. Occasional announcements of confiscations persisted, but in his assessment, the character of the local markets and their connections to Israel made circumvention of regulations easy and attractive in the absence of effective institutions that could regulate the markets.⁶¹ He argued that although in theory BDS could be invigorated without governmental participation, its “real success” would require adoption by political parties in power and opposition.⁶²

Yet as the PA was flirting with a selective boycott, civil society organizations were calling for a comprehensive boycott. One example came in 2011 when Palestinian trade unions held a boycott conference which saw the establishment of the Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS), which endorsed the 2005 call and called for a *full* boycott of Israel.⁶³ Advocacy of a comprehensive boycott was not new to BDS, but prior debates within civil society networks over selective vs. comprehensive boycotts became increasingly meaningless as Israeli policies to combat the boycott revealed the untenability of maintaining differentiation or asserting effective pressure through selective boycott. Breakdown of this temporary and partial convergence marked the beginning of period 3, when the PA abandoned the selective boycott in practice, if not formally, and civil society activists moved decisively towards advocating comprehensive boycott. Nadia Hijab described the PA’s foray into the boycott as an effort “to ‘manage’ both the popular struggle and BDS, providing funding for some segments of the former and claiming the mantle of BDS with a limited campaign targeting the sale of Israeli settlement products.”⁶⁴ Nor did she view the BNC as capable of providing leadership comparable to the United National Leadership of the first intifada. As she puts it, “current political splits and jockeying for power make it easier for Palestinian political and civil forces to unify around a strategy for rights—BDS—rather than to forge a national leadership.”⁶⁵ While the PA in practice abandoned even the selective boycott, its rhetorical support and tentative foray should be understood as recognition of the strategy’s popularity and potential to serve as a tool for cultivating legitimacy and fostering unity.

Over the next two years, Palestinian analysts and commentators continued to remark on the discrepancy between the growth of BDS abroad and the difficulties it faced within the occupied territories, expressing concern about lack of publicity and frustration about the role of the PA in preventing the campaign’s growth. These concerns about the local boycott efforts and creeping normalization became the focus of the fourth BDS national conference in 2013. In a clear illustration of the tensions between the PA and grassroots activists, during one panel the Minister of Economy Jawad Naji was pressed by attendees about why the 2010 campaign had been abandoned and why there was evidence of normalization, but Naji denied abatement of the campaign, refused to acknowledge any joint projects that could be considered normalization, and was eventually compelled to leave the conference.⁶⁶

Period 3 has been dominated by intensifying and increasingly explicit rivalry between the PA and civil society rights-based organizations, including BDS. While the PA has consistently articulated support for the “selective” boycott of settlements, civil society and Palestinian grassroots calls for the comprehensive boycott of Israel have continued. Especially since the failure of Kerry’s peace talks in 2013-14, which in even the most optimistic accounts were the last glimmer of hope for making progress through negotiations, the rationale for refusing to adopt the boycott has been subjected to increased

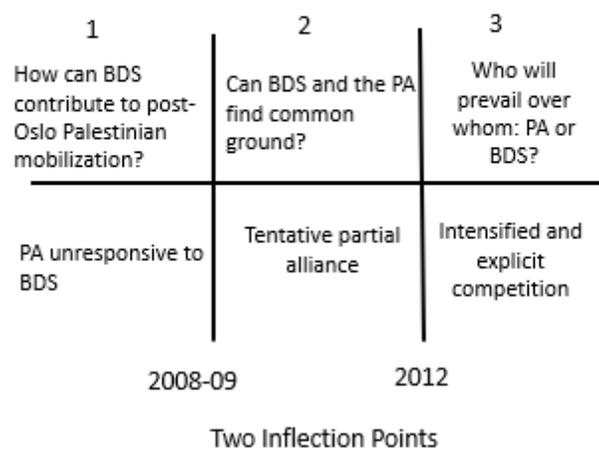
criticism by the Palestinian public, which largely perceives the PA as repressing dissent and cooperating with Israel to the detriment of the people.

Beyond their frequent threats to end cooperation with Israel, the PA has supported limited, short-term boycotts in response to distinct crises, such as Israel's decision to retaliate for Palestine joining the ICC in 2015 by withholding the transfer of tax revenues. The PA also halted security and civil cooperation with Israel for six months during 2020 in response to declarations of imminent annexation.⁶⁷ The fact is the PA is itself divided over BDS. The material incentives to maintain cooperation with Israel are so strong that limited uses of boycott should not be understood as endorsement of BDS as a strategy but as use of a boycott as a tactic to achieve short-term objectives.⁶⁸ The PA's enduring reluctance to enforce the selective boycott or endorse a comprehensive boycott, along with the discrepancy between its record of cooperation with Israel (in the domains of both security and economy) and the popular demand for it to end this cooperation, has driven a deeper wedge into the relations between the official national leadership and the people it claims to represent.

As the PA has continued to become more authoritarian, repressing dissent and popular mobilization in the West Bank, it has further polarized Palestinian society around a civil society largely supportive of BDS and political office holders who are either opposed on strategic grounds or are in principle supportive but have their hands tied. As became clear on policy platforms like Al-Shabaka, Palestinians organizing efforts to revitalize national institutions and revive the national movement see BDS as one tool to drive popular mobilization and galvanize change. Although the PA could have coopted BDS in its early stages and perhaps steered a mutually beneficial course, the gulf has instead widened and the antagonisms intensified, with implications that are still unclear.

Figure 2

Three patterns of BDS Mobilization separated by two inflection points



BDS may yet provide a basis for unifying Palestinians, but that appears unlikely as long as the current leaders of the PA remain in power. On the other hand, figures like Marwan Barghouti, who have openly associated with and supported BDS over the years, could be well-positioned to mobilize around the strategy if or when the opportunity arises. A 2015 public opinion poll from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research reported that 86% of respondents support the campaign to boycott Israel and impose sanctions on it and 88% said they stopped buying Israeli products, but only 64% said they believe the boycott will be effective in helping to end the occupation.⁶⁹ These numbers represent a significant degree of consensus about the appropriateness and desirability of BDS, but less agreement about its effectiveness. Without knowing the reasons behind the skepticism about the effectiveness of a boycott, we might hypothesize that they are related to Khalidi's point quoted above: there are inherent limitations to what can be accomplished without official support from the Palestinian quasi-state institutions and leadership. Although absence of institutional support has been a key limiting factor in efforts to apply real economic pressure on Israel, a conclusion to be drawn from this analysis of the disjuncture between "state" and civil society is that BDS nonetheless holds potential as a strategy in a long-term war of position to achieve change at a molecular level and galvanize Palestinian unity. Yet full realization of this potential will require either a change of heart by the official leadership or a change of that leadership.

The long-term war of position in which the BDS movement is involved cannot be measured by the successes or failures of individual outcomes of local struggles, but looked at from the bureaucratic politics perspective, it is possible to identify winners and losers in the competition to shape the methods and direction of the national struggle. With respect to political pedagogy, it is noteworthy that even when activists have "lost" to anti-BDS efforts, the pedagogical effects of those struggles on participants and observers contributed to defining lines of opposition and alliance while forcing debate about Israel and Palestine and the legitimacy of various strategies. As the PCPSR poll cited above demonstrates, there may be broad agreement about the legitimacy of BDS among Palestinians, understood as it being "morally sound," but there is less agreement about its effectiveness and the kinds of resources that should be devoted to the campaign. While in the Israeli arena, those advocating the use of soft power to combat BDS were able to attract financial and diplomatic resources for their preferred method of fighting the movement, among Palestinians, advocates of BDS do not command the same kinds of resources. BDS does not attract massive financial resources and is diplomatically unpopular in elite circles. Instead, the resources the BDS has been able to mobilize most effectively are public support and legitimacy. These are resources that the PA lacks yet requires. The challenge ahead for BDS activists is to channel this popular support into political power, and the long-term "success" of the movement may depend on their ability to do so.

Conclusion

Much too high a proportion of writing about BDS focuses on why and how it should be advanced or defeated. In this paper we have aimed to learn about BDS mobilization and counter mobilization by using theoretical tools appropriate for studying any transnational boycotts. Much previous scholarly analysis of BDS has been anchored in existing literatures on state sanctions and transnational advocacy networks. While the sanctions literature is state-centric and dominated by questions about efficacy, the transnational advocacy literature is dominated by extensions of Keck and Sikkink's "boomerang" model—grassroots demands for change within the repressive arena evoke international responses that empower grassroots mobilization.⁷⁰ We suggest that neither of these approaches is adequate for

understanding the trajectory of BDS or the mobilization patterns associated with it. The sanctions dimension of BDS may become more relevant in the future, but to this point it has been primarily a civil-society movement, despite efforts by its advocates to push it into the corridors of state power. Yet in the context of civil society boycotts, the boomerang model of call-and-response activism does not capture key dynamics of political struggles within the mobilizing community that standardly develop around boycotts and which we have highlighted above. We therefore offer an alternative framework that can be applied to other contexts for the purposes of comparative analysis. Our approach shifts focus from questions about efficacy to patterns of mobilization, learning, and the evolution of strategies arising from competition. We also place mobilization and counter-mobilization within the same framework, and analyze them dialectically. Although we develop two different types of explanations for boycott mobilization and counter-mobilization, we do so to highlight their complementarity rather than positioning them as “right” and “wrong” accounts.

Our approach is not new, although we have sought to formalize it. Literatures dealing with transnational sanctions and boycott movements such as the anti-apartheid movement targeting South Africa, the MacBride principles movement targeting anti-Catholic discrimination in British ruled Northern Ireland, and the boycott against the Nestle corporation targeting its breast milk substitute marketing practices in third world countries, all feature prominent lines of analysis that frame these movements as processes of rational learning and as outcomes of competitive process and that understand the evolution of these movements as functions of reciprocally interdependent relationships with campaigns by South Africa, Britain, and Nestle to combat them.⁷¹

One specific payoff of our approach is that it can help explain a striking pattern in the development of the struggle between BDS and Israel, namely why both sides see the crucial battles between them as taking place, not in Palestine or Israel, but in the United States and Europe. Within a rationalist frame this reflects recognition by both sides that the war of position that each are fighting cannot be won or lost except within the minds and on the media platforms of international society—which, when it comes to the Middle East, means minds and media in those regions that dominate international political culture.

Within the competitive politics frame, this pattern reflects another reality. Gramsci famously distinguished between the official state apparatus of bureaucratic, judicial, and coercive control and the larger state, which he referred to as civil society, composed of institutions and structures of power—the press, universities, foundations, corporations, and panoplies of associations—who normalize and standardize culturally defined boundaries of acceptable political behavior and political discourse. As an “official” state, Israel monopolizes the arena within Israel and Palestine itself so completely that wars of position can only be fought by Palestinians outside that arena—namely in the United States and Europe, and secondarily in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Both Palestinian political elites who decided to pursue a strategy of “internationalization” through international institutions and BDS advocates who have mobilized through international civil society have understood this reality. Accordingly, Israel and its defenders must engage with their opponents in this struggle, not in Palestine or Israel, but in London, New York, Dublin, San Francisco, Paris, Barcelona, and Rome. In this context we can appreciate more fully why the failure of BDS to have much of an economic or material impact on practices or economics in Israel is a false measure of its potential, even as it may be a useful indicator. For if and when that impact is discerned it will mean that Israel will have lost the war of position.

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- ¹ Eyal Lewin, "The Israeli Red-Green Alliance and Gramsci's War of Position," *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Vol. 30, 3-4, November 10, 2019. A primary target of Lewin's wrath is BDS and the boycott of Israel it advocates. Although Lewin does not make the reference, according to Gramsci "boycotts are a form of war of position." Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, eds., (New York: International Publishers, 1971) p. 229.
- ² "Rational actor" and "governmental" or "bureaucratic" politics are the names given by Graham Allison in his influential treatment of the Cuban missile crisis to his first and third models of decision-making. Graham Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 63, pp. 689-718.
- ³ For example, see the last three sentences of Nachman Shai, *Hearts and Minds: Israel and the Battle for Public Opinion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018) pp. 214-15;
- ⁴ "BDS, an Umbrella Network Striving to Boycott Israel," (March 29, 2011); "The Anti-Israeli BDS Campaign," The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (March 27, 2014);
- ⁵ NGO Monitor, "Boycotting the Jews," April 29, 2005; <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/in-the-media/boycotting-the-jews/>.
- ⁶ Gerald M. Steinberg, "Soft Powers Play hardball: NGOs Wage War against Israel," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 12, no. 4, Oct 2006 748-768 p. 752.
- ⁷ Gerald M. Steinberg, "Europe's Hidden Hand: EU Funding for Political NGOs in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Analyzing Processes and Impact," April 2008
- ⁸ Reut Institute, *Building a Political Firewall Against Israel's Delegitimization: Conceptual Framework* (Version A Submitted to the 10th Herzliya Conference, March 2010) p. 70, pp. 4-10.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ¹² Reut Institute, *The Gaza Flotilla: A Collapse of Israel's Political Firewall Case Study* (August 2010) p. 12.
- ¹³ For a elaborate suggestions by multiple Israeli experts in "public diplomacy" to adopt standard marketing and branding techniques in its response to critics see "The Neaman Document"—an elaborate study produced by the Neaman Institute at the Technion and presented to the Israeli Foreign Ministry in July 2009. *Public Diplomacy in Israel* (Hebrew), Dov Shinar, ed. (March 2009); <https://www.neaman.org.il/EN/Files/6-283.pdf>.
- ¹⁴ Uri Blau, "Inside the Clandestine World of Israel's 'BDS-busting' Ministry," *Haaretz*, March 26, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Comptroller, "The Diplomatic-Communications Struggle against the Boycott Movements and Manifestations of Anti-Semitism in the Diaspora," (Hebrew) <https://www.mevaker.gov.il/sites/DigitalLibrary/Documents/2016-66C-218-Maavak.pdf>
- ¹⁶ Barak Ravid, "Watchdog: Power Struggles Between Ministries Hindered Israel's Battle Against BDS," *Haaretz*, May 24, 2016; Blau, "Inside the Clandestine World of Israel's 'BDS-busting' Ministry," *op. cit.*.
- ¹⁷ Shai, *Hearts and Minds op. cit.* pp. 192-93.
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Ronnie Olesker, "The Securitisation Dilemma: Legitimacy in Securitisation Studies," *Critical Studies on Security* (2018) p. 12.
- ¹⁹ (JISS Amridor, Mossad, 2019) (Kelah David, front companies, etc.)
- ²⁰ Dan Diker, "BDS Unmasked: Radical Roots, Extremist Ends." Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (2016).
- ²¹ Full text of his speech available: <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2001/09/04/1036641.php>
- ²² Text of the NGO declaration: <https://www.i-p-o.org/racism-ngo-decl.htm> and the official UN declaration here: https://www.un.org/en/durbanreview2009/pdf/DDPA_full_text.pdf
- ²³ Dan Diker (JCPA) diagnoses BDS as an extension of worldwide anti-Jewish boycotts and an internationalization and intensification of the Arab boycott against Israel, but identifies the Durban conference as establishing the political an ideological infrastructure of BDS. See "BDS Unmasked: Radical Roots, Extremist Ends" by Dan Diker, Forward by Yossi Kuperwasser. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (2016). Likewise, Noura Erakat identifies the Durban conference as the beginning of the contemporary movement. Noura Erakat, "BDS in the USA, 2001-2010," *Middle East Report* 255, Summer 2010. <https://merip.org/2010/05/bds-in-the-usa-2001-2010/>
- ²⁴ Text available: https://bdsmovement.net/files/English-BNC_Position_Paper-Durban_Review.pdf
- ²⁵ Erakat (2010).

- ²⁶ Manfred Gerstenfeld, "The Academic Boycott Against Israel." *Jewish Political Studies Review* 15:3/4, 9-70 (2003).
- ²⁷ The initial letter can be found here <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/apr/06/israel.guardianletters> and a further explanation of the logic of the call was published by the Roses shortly thereafter: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jul/15/comment.stevenrose>. On the lead-up to this letter and the earlier call from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, see <https://electronicintifada.net/content/academic-boycott-israel-taking-hold-and-spreading/4268>
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, Apr. 6th Letter (first link above).
- ²⁹ For an account of the two years of organizing prior to the 2004 PACBI statement, see Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment*. Pluto Press: New York (2011) pp. 209-210.
- ³⁰ Since being incorporated into the BDS website, the PACBI section no longer includes an account of its own history, but an older description was archived here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141203175607/http://pacbi.org/etemplate.php?id=868>
- ³¹ See al-Majdal Issue No.38 (Summer 2008) pp. 31-102.
- ³² There have been a total of six national conferences held at irregular intervals in the West Bank: 2007 (Ramallah), 2010 (Nablus), 2011 (Hebron), 2013 (Bethlehem), 2016 (Ramallah), 2019 (Al-Bireh).
- ³³ Suzanne Morrison, *The Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement: Activism Across Borders for Palestinian Justice*. Unpublished Dissertation (LSE Department of Government, 2015), p. 185.
- ³⁴ Manar Makhoul, "Home and Away: A Review of BDS Discourse." *al-Majdal* Issue No.54 (Autumn 2013) p. 5.
- ³⁵ Abdel Razzaq Takriti, "Before BDS: Lineages of Boycott in Palestine." *Radical History Review* Issue 134, 2019.
- ³⁶ On the "rights-based" approach see Richard Falk, "International Law and the Peace Process," *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (Spring 2005) pp. 331-348.
- ³⁷ For example: Yousef Munayyer, "BDS: Where it Came From and Where it is Headed." *Geographical Review* Vol. 106, No. 2, 283-387, 2016.
- ³⁸ <https://bdsmovement.net/news/israels-freedom-flotilla-massacre-underlines-urgency-intensifying-bds-1> and <https://electronicintifada.net/content/global-boycotts-israel-intensify-after-bloody-flotilla-attack/8861>. We expect the same to be true in the aftermath of the violence of May 2021 and evidence of it is already appearing.
- ³⁹ Hind Awad, as quoted by Adri Nieuwhof in <https://electronicintifada.net/content/palestinian-boycott-coordinator-movement-has-huge-impact/8874>
- ⁴⁰ Omar Barghouti, *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011) p. 11.
- ⁴¹ Ramah Awad, "BDS as the Baseline of Solidarity: Toward a Model of Co-Struggling with Palestinians in their Movement for Justice and Liberation." *Human Geography* (2020)
- ⁴² Omar Barghouti, *Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions: Globalized Palestinian Resistance to Israel's Settler Colonialism and Apartheid*. Institute for Palestine Studies Current Issues in Depth, Issue No. 6, 2020, p. 10.
- ⁴³ Munayyer 2016, 285.
- ⁴⁴ Ilana Feldman, "Reframing Palestine: BDS Against Fragmentation and Exceptionalism." *Radical History Review* Issue 134, 193-202, 2019.
- ⁴⁵ Abigail B. Bakan and Yasmeen Abu-Laban, "Palestinian Resistance and International Solidarity: The BDS Campaign." *Race & Class* Vol. 51 (1), 29-54, 2009.
- ⁴⁶ On the Israel Anti-Boycott Act see <https://fmep.org/resource/israel-anti-boycott-act-read-law-amended-act/>
- ⁴⁷ Marc Lamont Hill's new book *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* exemplifies efforts to undermine the "progressive except for Palestine" position.
- ⁴⁸ Zaha Hassan, Daniel Levy, Hallaamal Keir, Marwan Muasher, "Breaking the Israel-Palestine Status Quo." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and U.S./Middle East Project (2021). <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/19/breaking-israel-palestine-status-quo-pub-84167>
- ⁴⁹ "UAE Condemns Jewish Extremists' Violence in Jerusalem: *Calls for Restraint*," *Times of Israel*, April 26, 2021.
- ⁵⁰ Jamil Hilal, for example, cites BDS as an example of new awareness and organization that combined different factions, civil institutions, and unions behind a unified strategy and vision. <https://www.masarat.ps/article/1513/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%83%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%8A>

⁵¹ Al-Majdal Issue No. 26 (Summer 2005) page 3.

⁵² Dana El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵³ Bangani Ngeleza and Adri Nieuwhof, "The Role of International Campaigns for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions." *Al-Majdal* (Summer 2005) pp. 10-14. Steven Friedman, "Lessons from the Campaign for Sanctions on Apartheid South Africa." *Al-Majdal* (Autumn 2013) pp. 10-14: "While the ANC was not in direct control of this mobilization, most of those who participated were loyal to it and they helped to ensure that the internal and international campaigns complemented each other. BDS will need to be accompanied by organized resistance within Palestine if it is to succeed" (14).

⁵⁴ Omar Barghouti, "BDS: Discussing Difficult Issues in a Fast-Growing Movement." *Al-Shabaka*, June 14, 2016. <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/bds-discussing-difficult-issues-in-a-fast-growing-movement/>

⁵⁵ Nathan Thrall, "BDS: How a Controversial Non-Violent Movement Has Transformed the Israeli-Palestinian Debate." *The Guardian* 14 August, 2018.

⁵⁶ Ian S. Lustick, "The Peace Process Carousel: The Israel Lobby and the Failure of American Diplomacy," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 74, no. 2 (Summer 2020) pp. 177-201.

⁵⁷ Omar Barghouti, "Dissolve the Palestinian Authority." *Counterpunch*. October 5, 2009.

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2009/10/05/dissolve-the-palestinian-authority/>

⁵⁸ <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/palestinians-boycott-settlement-goods-2009-2011>

⁵⁹ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/0225/Palestinian-Authority-steps-up-boycott-of-goods-made-in-Israeli-settlements-in-West-Bank>. For local sources see <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3830147,00.html> and <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3817082,00.html>

⁶⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/jun/29/palestinian-boycott-israeli-settlement-goods>

⁶¹ Raja Khalidi "The Prospect for Palestinian Economic Boycott of Israel: Forms and Difficulties." Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2016.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶³ BNC Statement, "Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS) Formed at Historic Conference." May 5, 2011. <https://www.bdsmovement.net/news/palestinian-trade-union-coalition-bds-ptuc-bds-formed-historic-conference-0>

⁶⁴ Nadia Hijab, "What if Peace Talks Succeed?" *The Electronic Intifada* September 27, 2010.

<https://electronicintifada.net/content/what-if-peace-talks-succeed/9044>

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ One account of this incident comes from Hani Al-Masry, "Boycotting Israel and Opposing Normalization" (2013). [Arabic] Another can be found here: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/national-conference-focuses-west-bank-boycott-efforts> and videos of Naji being chased out of the conference are available online: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/asa-winstanley/palestinian-authority-minister-flees-criticism-boycott-conference>

⁶⁷ The 2015 boycott was organized by Fatah activists and notably was aimed at a set of Israeli companies, not only settlement products. See Daoud Kuttab, "West Bank Boycotts Six Israeli Companies." *Al-Monitor* April 9, 2015.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/04/palestinian-boycott-israel-products-economy-occupation.html>

⁶⁸ Diker describes the Palestinian leadership's official position as "inconsistent and unclear," characterized by a combination of efforts at cooptation through tactical boycotts and avoidance of fully embracing BDS, pp. 54-60.

⁶⁹ <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/613>

⁷⁰ For the boomerang model see Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Examples of literature that situates BDS in the context of transnational advocacy and sanctions scholarship see Maia Carter Hallward, *Transnational Activism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Lee Jones, *Societies Under Siege: Exploring How International Sanctions (Do Not) Work*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Guy Grossman, Devorah Manekin, and Yotam Margalit, "How Sanctions Affect Public Opinion in Target Countries: Experimental Evidence from Israel," *Comparative Political Studies* No. 51, vol. 14 (2018), pp. 1823-1857.

⁷¹ See for example Michael Bucekert, "Boycotts and Revolution: Debating the Legitimacy of the African National Congress in the Canadian Anti-Apartheid Movement, 1969-94," *Radical History Review* No. 134 (May 2019) pp. 96-115; Kevin McNamara, *The MacBride Principles: Irish America Strikes Back* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009); and Tehila

Sasson, "Milking the Third World? Humanitarianism, Capitalism, and the Moral Economy of the Nestle' Boycott," *American Historical Review*, (October 2016) pp. 1196-1224.