

After the Massacre in Gaza, US Congress Attempts to Outlaw “Opposition to Israel”

What has been the U.S. government’s response? To protect Israel.

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The world watched in anger and horror as Israeli sharp shooters [killed 18](#) Palestinian demonstrators and wounded more than 750 on March 31. Footage of the blatant murder of civilians, including children shot in the back while running away, can be easily seen on the web.

What has been the U.S. government’s response? To protect Israel.

A bill now pending before Congress would make it illegal in the U.S. to support the movement to Boycott, Divest and Sanction Israel.

100 organizations protest repressive bill

More than 100 national and state based organizations recently called on Congress to reject the Israel Anti-Boycott Act. In a public memo they contend that the oppressive bill, aimed at the BDS movement, is meant to stifle free speech and has extreme penalties for those who do not comply.

The [memo](#) explains,

“In the past two years, 24 states have enacted laws aimed at punishing participation in political boycotts for Palestinian rights. Together with these state laws, the Act will create a severe chilling effect on people across the country who are otherwise inclined to support First Amendment-protected boycotts for Palestinian rights, or who are merely curious to learn more.”

Rabbi Joseph Berman of Jewish Voice for Peace, a signer of the memo calls it a “[gag bill](#)” designed to “shield U.S. companies that support and profit from Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the occupation.” Berman’s group plays a major role in BDS in the U.S.

What is BDS?

BDS is a Palestinian-led movement meant to pressure the state of Israel into ending its apartheid policies and human rights violations. Inspired by the South African anti-apartheid movement, it calls on groups and organizations across the world to join in to put a strain on Israel and its business partners and bring attention to the apartheid policies of Israel. Its three demands to the state of Israel are: 1) ending its occupation and colonization of all

Arab lands and dismantling the West Bank separation wall, 2) recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality, and 3) respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194. Started in 2005, BDS has steadily gained traction, with support snowballing in recent years resulting in many victories.

The Israel Anti-boycott Act

This is the second time this bill has been submitted to Congress. The first bill was withdrawn after legal advocacy groups and grass roots individuals and organizations raised an outcry. That bill sought to punish individuals who participate in a boycott of Israel.

While the amended version does not directly target individuals, it is still an atrocious attack on the free speech of those sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. The bill would prohibit companies, organizations and their employees from participating in, or even furnishing information about, a boycott of Israel called for by an international governmental organization like the European Union or the United Nations. Violations would be punishable with severe criminal financial penalties: a minimum of \$250,000 and up to \$1 million in penalties; the possibility of 20 years in prison. Just one penalty could absolutely cripple a progressive organization making it unable to do its work.

The Israel Anti-boycott Act would be the first such law on the federal level, giving more power to the federal government and presidential administrations to go after progressive groups who support the Palestinian cause, according to the memo.

Organizations responding to this outrageous attack

The over 100 groups that signed on to the memo include Palestinian, anti-war, civil rights watchdog groups and progressive religious organizations. Some are opposed the bill primarily because it is an assault on the Palestinian human rights movement, others because it is an assault on civil rights in general, setting a precedent that could usher in a whole new era of political suppression.

“This bill is unconstitutional because it seeks to impose the government’s political views on Americans who choose to express themselves through boycotts,” explained Ben Wizner, of the American Civil Liberties Union. It penalizes “participants in political boycotts in violation of the First Amendment.”

Political repression: a bipartisan effort

Many people think tactics like those described above are dirty tricks used only by the Republican Party and the rightwing. But in reality, both ruling class parties have long histories of championing political suppression and attacking progressive movements. This bill was originally introduced in the Senate by Benjamin Cardin, a Democrat from Maryland.

One of the most vocal proponents of the bill is Senate minority leader, Democrat Chuck Schumer. Schumer recently called BDS “anti-Semitic” at this year’s American Israeli Public Affairs Committee conference, a false accusation often thrown at pro-Palestine organizations. Palestinian rights have nothing to do with anti-Semitism. This was made clear

by the fact that 15 of the signers of the memo opposing the bill identify as Jewish groups.

Democrat and Republican presidents alike have always been quick to show their “allyship” to the state of Israel. The U.S. government has given billions of dollars of the most advanced military technology to Israel, along with other forms of support. Israel could not have fired into the March 31 Gaza demonstration without a [green light](#) from the Trump administration. In exchange for this support, Israel guards U.S. interests in the oil rich and strategic Middle East.

Bill or no bill, say no to apartheid!

Israel and its allies in Congress are scrambling to get the Israeli Anti-Boycott Act passed because they fear how successful BDS is becoming. Boycotts, divestment and sanctions were tactics that lead to the fall of South African apartheid, and it can bring down Israeli apartheid as well. But even if this repressive bill passes, organizers vow that it will not stop BDS. The bill will only evoke more outrage.

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