

# Israel Steps Up Dirty Tricks Against Boycott BDS Leaders

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Global Research, April 05, 2017

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*Israeli prime minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** addressed cohorts of Israel loyalists in the United States by video link last week at the annual conference of AIPAC, the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee.*

They should, he said, follow his government's example and defend Israel on the "moral battlefield" against the growing threat of the international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement. In Netanyahu's simple-minded language, support for Palestinian rights, and opposition to the settlements, is equivalent to "delegitimisation" of Israel.

The current obsession with BDS reflects a changing political environment for Israel.

According to an investigation by the Haaretz newspaper last month, Israeli agents subverted the human rights community in the 1970s and 1980s. Their job was to launder Israel's image abroad. **Yoram Dinstein**, a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, led the local chapter of Amnesty International, the world's most influential rights organisation of the time, running it effectively as a wing of Israel's foreign ministry.

Dinstein's interference allowed Israel to falsely characterise the occupation as benevolent while presenting the Palestinians' liberation struggle as terrorism. The reality of Israel's oppression of Palestinians rarely reached outsiders.

Israel's task is harder five decades on. The human rights community is more independent, while social media and mobile phone cameras have allowed Palestinians and their supporters to bypass the gatekeepers.

In the past few days, videos have shown an Israeli policeman savagely beating a Palestinian lorry driver, and soldiers taking hostage a terrified eight-year-old after he crossed their path while searching for a toy.

If concealment at source is no longer so easy, the battle must be taken to those who disseminate this damning information. The urgency has grown as artists refuse to visit, universities sever ties, churches pull their investments and companies back out of deals.

Israel is already sealing itself off from outside scrutiny as best it can. Last month it passed a law denying entry into Israel or the occupied territories to those who support BDS or "delegitimise" Israel.



But domestic critics have proved trickier. The Israel government has chipped away at the human rights community's financial base. Media regulation has intensified. And the culture ministry is cracking down on film productions that criticise the occupation or government policy.

But the local boycott movement is feeling the brunt of the assault. Activists already risk punitive damages if they call for a boycott of the settlements. Transport minister **Yisrael Katz** stepped up the threats last year, warning BDS leaders that they faced "civil targeted assassination". What did he mean?

**Omar Barghouti**, the movement's Palestinian figurehead, was arrested last month, accused of tax evasion. He is already under a travel ban, preventing him from receiving an international peace award this month. And Israeli officials want to strip him of his not-so "permanent" residency.

At the same time, a leading Israeli rights activist, **Jeff Halper**, founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, was detained by police on suspicion of promoting BDS while leading activists on a tour of an illegal settlement.

These are the first signs of the repression to come. The police minister, **Gilad Erdan**, has announced plans for a database of Israelis who support BDS, to mirror existing spying operations on BDS activists overseas. The information will help a "dirty tricks" unit whose job is to tarnish their reputations.

Erdan also wants a blacklist of companies and organisations that support boycotts. A law passed in February already shames the few companies prepared to deny services to the settlements, forcing them publicly to "out" themselves.

Why is Israel so fearful? Officials say the immediate danger is Europe's labelling of settlement products, the first step on a slippery slope they fear could lead to Israel being called an apartheid state. That would shift the debate from popular boycotts and divestment by civil society groups to pressure for action by governments – or sanctions.



The inexorable trend was illustrated last month when a United Nations commission found Israel guilty of breaching the international convention on the crime of apartheid. Washington forced the UN secretary-general to repudiate the report, but the comparison is not going away.

Israel supporters in the United States have taken Netanyahu's message to heart. Last week they unveiled an online "boycotters map", identifying academics who support BDS – both to prevent them entering Israel and presumably to damage their careers.

For the moment, the Israeli-engineered backlash is working. Western governments are characterising support for a boycott, even of the settlements, as anti-Semitic – driven by hatred of Jews rather than opposition to Israel's oppression of Palestinians. Anti-BDS legislation has passed in France, Britain, Switzerland, Canada and the US.

This is precisely how Netanyahu wants to shape the "moral battlefield". A reign of terror against free speech and political activism abroad and at home, leaving Israel free to crush the Palestinians.

On paper, it may sound workable. But Israel will soon have to accept that the apartheid genie is out of the bottle – and it cannot be put back.

*A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.*

**Jonathan Cook** won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jonathan-cook.net](http://www.jonathan-cook.net).

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