

# The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaign against Israel

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The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign moves ahead in Washington, California, British Columbia, Harvard and Brown Universities, and the Netherlands,

In July, in Rachel Corrie's hometown of Olympia, Washington state, the popular Food Co-op announced that no Israeli products would be sold at its two grocery stores. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a principal endorser of this new Israel Divestment Campaign, issued a statement endorsing the boycott. "The Olympia Food Co-op has joined a growing worldwide movement on the part of citizens and the private sector to support by non-violent tangible acts the Palestinian struggle for justice and self-determination."

In a surprise move in August, Harvard University divested itself of all its Israel investments, almost \$40m worth of shares, including Pharmaceutical Industries, NICE Systems, Check Point Software Technologies, Cellcom Israel and Partner Communications. Initially, Harvard gave no explanation for its actions to the SEC. John Longbrake, spokesman for Harvard, maintained that Harvard has not divested from Israel, that these changes were routine and did not represent a change in policy. But was Harvard in fact caving under BDS calls and trying to do so as quietly as possible to avoid a Zionist backlash? In the past, Harvard has divested from companies for purely political reasons, but they did so publicly. For instance, five years ago, Harvard divested from PetroChina in order to protest China's actions in Sudan.

In Vancouver, Canada, port truck traffic slowed to a crawl in late August as a group of about 50 protesters approached drivers with leaflets asking them to observe the world boycott campaign against Israel, and in particular to refuse to unload the Israeli container ship Zim Djibouti, one of the largest in the world, that had landed in Vancouver harbour. "This action was part of the growing international campaign to pressure Israel to comply with international law and stop killing innocent civilians," said Gordon Murray, spokesperson for the Boycott Israeli Apartheid Coalition (BIAC). "Workers in South Africa, Scandinavia, the United States, Turkey and India have already responded to the Palestinian call for action," said BIAC spokesman Mike Krebs. "The international solidarity movement has decided that the best way to change Israel's behaviour is to take actions against Israeli companies and institutions in order to put pressure on the government there."

In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor* earlier this year, Jonathan Ben Artzi, a PhD candidate at Brown University and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's nephew, made clear his belief that equality and social justice will prevail in Israel when the government and people of the United States adopt a no-tolerance stance toward Israel's

abuse of Palestinians. Ben Artzi, whose family has lived in the region for nine generations, and who's seen a lifetime of Israel's abuse of Palestinians, declared: "Sometimes it takes a good friend to tell you when enough is enough. As they did with South Africa two decades ago, concerned citizens across the US can make a difference by encouraging Washington to get the message to Israel that this cannot continue." His reference to South Africa was to the protests, boycotts and divestment actions in the US between 1984 and 1989, which ultimately forced the white minority South African government to relinquish control over its oppressed Black majority. Ben Artzi served 18 months in prison for refusing his mandatory service in Israel's military.

The California Israel Divestment Campaign launched a campaign on 8 September for a California ballot initiative in November requiring public employee and teacher pension funds to divest from business activities in Israel. Said local campaign organiser Sherna Gluck, a member of the Public Employee Retirement System: "Our public retirement systems have more than \$1.5 billion invested in at least eight companies that provide war materials and services used in violation of internationally recognised human rights, including support for the illegal Israeli settlements and the Separation Wall." Archbishop Tutu told the Californians: "We defeated apartheid nonviolently because the international community agreed to support the disinvestment in apartheid campaign. A similar campaign can help to bring peace in the Middle East and do so nonviolently."

This is the just the first divestment launch in California. Similar launches in other California cities are soon to come. With this divestment campaign, Californians are poised to spark a state-by-state divestiture movement to parallel the anti-Apartheid campaign that helped defeat the oppressive rule in South Africa.

The Dutch government too has set an important precedent for European and indeed world governments. It dropped a bomb this week when the Foreign Ministry cancelled a tour of mayors from Israel planned for October. The forum is funded by the Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish-American charity, and the participant list included representatives from West bank settlements Efrat and Kiryat Arba in "Judea" and "Samaria". The Israeli Foreign Ministry harrumphed: "This is undoubtedly useless and harmless politics, and we hope that this is not the final word on the topic."

Well, I hope it *is*. The Netherlands has become notorious for the Islamophobia whipped up by Dutch politician and filmmaker Geert Wilders, who proudly says "I hate Islam," calls the Quran a "fascist book" and the Prophet Mohamed "the devil". He argues that Muslim immigration is a "Trojan Horse". His words are being echoed by Israeli politician Aryeh Eldad, who condemned the boycott move: "The Dutch surrender to the Arabs reflects their surrender to the Muslim minority." This principled move by the Dutch, clearly an attempt to fight the negative image of the Netherlands, will give pause for thought to all governments. Israel Local Council Chairman Shlomo Buchbut rightly concludes: "The decision by the Netherlands puts the [Israeli-Arab] conflict before anything else."

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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