

# Is the UK Government Set to Define the Boycott of Israel as ‘Antisemitic’?

As Israel exports anti-BDS efforts around the globe, the Conservative government plans to directly target the movement

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*One of the first bills to be [introduced](#) by Britain’s new Conservative government will reportedly stop “local authorities from boycotting individual companies”, a move described as targeting the Palestinian-led boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement.*

The Conservative Party election [manifesto](#) did indeed pledge to “ban public bodies from imposing their own direct or indirect boycotts, disinvestment or sanctions campaigns against foreign countries”, on the grounds that such moves “undermine community cohesion”.

## Intensified attacks

Meanwhile, Eric Pickles, the British government’s “special envoy for post-Holocaust matters”, told a [conference](#) in Jerusalem on Sunday that “BDS is antisemitic and should be treated as such”, in remarks [celebrated](#) on Twitter by Conservative Friends of Israel.

According to a [report](#) by the right-wing outlet Jewish News Syndicate, “Pickles said Johnson’s government would make BDS illegal for governmental and public bodies, a move that would prevent them from working with anyone who supports the effort to isolate and financially punish Israel.”

For now, it is unclear precisely what the government is planning; there may be an attempt at intimidation, rather than a new law.

In 2016, the government issued a procurement guidance note for local authorities that merely restated existing policy, in contrast to a [supposed](#) “ban on boycotts” trailed months previously. Restrictions on Local Government Pension Schemes, meanwhile, are being [contested](#) in the [courts](#).

But more radical plans could be afoot – for example, banning pro-BDS groups from using local authorities’ facilities (as [seen](#), and [contested](#), in Germany).

Events in Britain are part of a bigger picture of intensified attacks on Palestinians and their allies, including in the [United States](#) and [France](#). What unites such developments is a concerted effort by the Israeli government, and its supporters, to shield apartheid from accountability.

## **Conflating antisemitism and anti-Zionism**

Thus, as Israel cements a single, apartheid state on the ground, two related moves are being made to stigmatise international opposition as a form of “antisemitism”.

Firstly, any kind of action pertaining to accountability – even just accurately [labelling](#) Israeli settlement products, never mind boycotting them – constitutes a “singling out” of Israel, and is thus antisemitic.

Secondly, questioning or criticising Israel’s identity as a “Jewish state” because of what that means for Palestinians is also deemed “antisemitic” – which, in a post-two-state era, will be increasingly used to delegitimise calls for the transformation of the apartheid status quo into a single democratic state.

Both of these elements are part of definitions of antisemitism being used to stifle debate, including in the formation of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) document. As Jared Kushner wrote in [The New York Times](#) last week: “The Remembrance Alliance definition makes clear what our administration has stated publicly and on the record: Anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism.”

And the author of the text on which the IHRA definition is based, Kenneth Stern, last week felt forced to [call out](#) how claims of “antisemitism” are being used to attack legitimate free speech. “I suspect that if Kushner or I had been born into a Palestinian family displaced in 1948, we might have a different view of Zionism, and that need not be because we vilify Jews or think they conspire to harm humanity,” Stern acknowledged.

“Further, there’s a debate inside the Jewish community whether being Jewish requires one to be a Zionist. I don’t know if this question can be resolved, but it should frighten all Jews that the [US] government is essentially defining the answer for us.”

## **Criminalising solidarity activism**

The claim that BDS is antisemitic underpins efforts to toxify or even criminalise Palestine solidarity activism. “We are [advancing](#) legislation in many countries against the BDS ... so that it will simply be illegal to boycott Israel,” Israel’s ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, said back in 2016.

In this regard, the Israeli government is working alongside non-state groups that focus on smearing Palestinian, Israeli and international organisations calling out Israel’s violations of international law, as well as attacking any initiative designed to hold Israel to account.

The main protagonists in such efforts are very open about their efforts, as you can see in a [video](#) of a panel discussion earlier this year including NGO Monitor, Eugene Kontorovich of the right-wing think-tank [Kohelet Forum](#), Shurat HaDin, and an official from Israel’s Ministry of Strategic Affairs.

Kontorovich, for example, illustrates the overlap between those in Israel seeking to both normalise, and advance, Israel’s permanent hold on the occupied West Bank, including its [illegal settlements](#), while simultaneously placing meaningful opposition to colonisation and annexation [beyond the pale](#).

## **Battle to intensify**

As Joshua Leifer, associate editor of Dissent Magazine, [put it](#) earlier this month: “As the two-state paradigm finally passes from the scene, the Israeli government is pushing initiatives around the world to codify opposition to the one-state reality as antisemitic.”

Under British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, there is unfortunately good reason to expect that a Conservative government [pursuing](#) a close relationship with the Trump administration – and with a cabinet including committed supporters of Israel – will be eager to play its part in the dehumanisation of Palestinians.

If that sounds too strong, then heed the [words](#) of editor Amjad Iraqi, who warned last week of the “chilling message” being delivered by the likes of the US and French governments: namely, that “Palestinians are not entitled to political agency as a people fighting for justice and human rights”.

That is the grim territory being contested, and here in Britain, the battle to insist on Palestinians’ humanity and basic rights is only set to intensify.

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