

Under Boycott Pressure, French Telecom Company Orange Tries to Distance Itself from Israeli Operation

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Activists protest outside the annual general meeting of Orange at the Palais des Congrès in Paris, 27 May. ([BDS France](#))

The multinational telecom company [Orange](#) is trying to distance itself from its Israeli affiliate as it faces mounting pressure from a boycott called against its Egyptian subsidiary [Mobinil](#).

But [BDS Egypt](#), the organizers of the Mobinil boycott, have rejected company statements as “shameless deception” and an effort to mislead the Egyptian public.

The campaign has affirmed that the boycott of Mobinil will continue until Orange ends its contract with its Israeli affiliate [Partner Communications](#) over the latter’s complicity in human rights abuses and war crimes against Palestinians.

Mobinil, with at least 33 million customers in Egypt, is [99 percent owned by Orange](#), making Egypt one of the France-based multinational’s largest markets.

Meanwhile, French activists piled on the pressure, holding a rally Wednesday outside the Paris venue where Orange held its annual shareholders meeting.

Pressure mounts in Egypt

It took only days for the boycott campaign, [launched in Egypt last Saturday](#), to gain national media attention and elicit a defensive reaction from Orange-owned Mobinil.

The boycott received a [high-profile boost](#) when Hamdeen Sabahy, the liberal presidential candidate in Egypt’s 2012 democratic and 2014 [rigged](#) presidential elections, urged his 2.6 million followers on Twitter to support the boycott and switch their mobile phone service from Mobinil.

بارتنر @Orangell@ المتعاقدة مع @orange@ (Mobinil)، تدعم وحدتين عسكريتين لجيش الإحتلال، وحدة تدعى “إيزوز” والأخرى “شاتشار”. #قاطع_موبينيل

— حمدین صباحی (@HamdeenSabahy) [May 26, 2015](#)

The company reacted swiftly, [using its official Twitter account](#) to deny Orange’s indisputable connections to Israel’s Partner Communications. Mobinil chief executive officer Yves

Gauthier asserted in [statements published by Egypt's youm7.com](#) that Orange “has no operational presence in Israel, and has no ownership connection to the Israeli company Partner Communications.” Gauthier added that the contract under which Israel’s Partner Communications does business as Orange Israel was a legacy arrangement dating from 1998.

“Shameless dishonesty”

In a [statement posted on its Facebook page](#), BDS Egypt rejected Gauthier’s assertions as “shameless dishonesty by which the company seeks to conceal its complicity in the crimes of the [Israeli] occupation.” In fact, Orange operates in Israel through a franchise agreement with independently owned Partner Communications Ltd. Orange participates in systematic violations of Palestinian rights, according to an [investigation published this month](#) by a coalition of French and Palestinian human rights and labor organizations. The report notes that Orange profits from Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank as Partner operates hundreds of communications towers and other infrastructure, much of it on privately owned land confiscated from Palestinians. There are also dozens of Orange-branded stores in settlements Israel has built in the West Bank in violation of international law.

Support for Gaza massacres

What has generated particular outrage is that Orange Israel directly sponsors two Israeli military units, one of which – the Ezuz tank brigade – directly participated in some of the bloodiest incidents in last summer’s assault on Gaza that killed more than 2,200 Palestinians. In April, [The Electronic Intifada revealed](#) that Ezuz was present at two locations in Gaza – near Khan Younis and Rafah – at precise times when hundreds of civilians were killed and thousands of homes destroyed. Orange Israel, moreover, provided free service to Israeli soldiers and sent three mobile units to the front to meet all their needs. Mobinil CEO Gauthier added that Orange was contractually barred from interfering in Partner’s activities “in Israel.” But his assertion that the contract with the Israeli company is somehow a legacy is undermined by the fact that the lucrative deal was [renewed in 2011](#). It was [amended again this April](#), renewing the contract period for ten years and increasing the royalty fee Partner pays to Orange to use its brand name. In light of these facts, BDS Egypt warned Mobinil that “misleading the Egyptian people will not work.” “If Orange wishes to acquit itself of these crimes,” it added, the company “should take the correct decision to end its contract with Israel’s Partner, to halt its support for the occupation and its profiteering from this odious deal.” BDS Egypt has published a [fully referenced report in Arabic](#) on Orange’s activities in Israel and the occupied West Bank.

Paris protest

In Paris on Wednesday, activists from [BDS France](#) – some sporting orange wigs – rallied outside the Palais des Congrès where Orange was holding its annual meeting:

En ce moment dans le cadre du rassemblement contre [@orange](#) à Paris
[#OrangeSanguine pic.twitter.com/L8kCAF8QAt](#)

— BDS France (@Campagnebds) [May 27, 2015](#)

Présence BDS France au rassemblement de syndicats d'[@Orange](#), à l'occasion de l'[#AGOrange2015](#) [#OrangeSanguine](#) [pic.twitter.com/vEz2CaWky7](#)

— BDS France (@Campagnebds) [May 27, 2015](#)

The French state owns 25 percent of Orange's shares, meaning that the government profits from Israeli settlements that it officially claims to oppose.

[French civil society organizations and trade unions](#) have urged the government to end its complicity.

In a [statement on its website](#), BDS France noted that Orange CEO Stéphane Richard told shareholders that the company seeks to expand its business in the Middle East - where it already operates in Tunisia, Jordan and Iraq as well as Egypt and Israel.

"But he did not mention the company's shameful relationship with Partner," BDS France added.

"Thanks to the recent revelations by The Electronic Intifada, we have been able to see just how far this complicity with the Israeli regime goes," BDS France said in reference to Orange Israel's support for Israeli military units in Gaza.

The campaign reminded Orange of the "commercial failures of another French company, Veolia, following its complicity with Israel's colonial policies and apartheid."

After years of being targeted by campaigners and losing billions in contracts, Veolia was [forced to sell off](#) virtually all its businesses linked to the Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

BDS Egypt and BDS France have launched joint online petitions urging Orange to end its deal with Partner, in [English](#), [French](#) and [Arabic](#).

They have also been tweeting using the hashtags [#OrangeSanguine](#) (bloody Orange) and [#قاطع_موبينيل](#) (boycott Mobinil).

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