

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is the BDS call and what is PACBI?

In 2005 the Palestinian civil society issued a call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against the state of Israel (BDS Call) until the state complies with all international law and respects Palestinian rights.<sup>1</sup> This followed on an earlier call by Palestinian artists and intellectuals (PACBI Call) addressed at their colleague throughout the world to boycott Israeli cultural and academic institutions in solidarity with the Palestinians.<sup>2</sup>

The boycott call stands in accordance with international law and demands that Israel

- Ends its occupation and colonization of all Arab lands and dismantles the Wall
- Recognizes the fundamental rights of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality; and
- Respects, protects and promotes the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

### How have people in Switzerland answered these calls in the past?

In 2011, in response to the Culturescapes Israel festival's showcasing of Israel, the BDS movement in Switzerland wrote an open letter to Swiss professionals in various cultural fields,<sup>3</sup> to inform them about the campaign and ask for their solidarity. Following that letter, 170 artists and cultural workers in Switzerland signed a declaration of solidarity and a pledge to respect the boycott.<sup>4</sup>

### Does a cultural boycott limit Freedom of Expression?

Contrary to common accusations, we do not call for any constrictions to the freedom of expression. The cultural boycott of Israel targets Israeli institutions complicit in the oppression of Palestinians. It does not target individuals, and thus does prevent artists and scholars from expressing their views and disseminate their ideas.

It is important not to restrict the discussion of the cultural impact of the boycott only to cultural productions which are promoted by Israel. While Israel promotes itself through arts, cultural institutions in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are routinely attacked and raided, (Palestinian) artists are prevented from traveling and access to education as well as any professional exchange are systematically denied. Furthermore, when a whole society is under attack, artists, scholars and students are severely affected as well, and are often prevented from pursuing or sharing their cultural work. Any discussion of "freedom of expression" ought to take into account the effects that the regular, daily and extraordinary violence, to which Palestinians are subjected, have on culture and on the free flow of art and ideas. Pressuring Israel through cultural boycott not only does not inhibit culture, but can help those artists who are indeed under severe attack, who are silenced, and whose right to cultural expression and free speech is being denied every day.<sup>5</sup>

Further, Israel's funding of culture is highly political and racist. As an example, in 2013, the subsidies for Arabic theater accounted for less than 0.06% of the general subsidies for theaters, whereas Palestinians constitute 20% of the citizenry.<sup>6</sup> The racist nature of Israel's funding of arts mocks those claims, such as the one made against a boycott by the officials of the Locarno Film Festival, that spotlighting Israeli culture shows a commitment to being "a place of freedom of expression [...] without distinction of ethnicity, religion or nationality." Events, festivals and curators that refuse to collaborate with Israeli institutions can offer their audience a more representative and broader selection of culture than the one offered by the Israeli official organs.

### What is achieved by refusing to perform in Israel?

The model for the cultural boycott of Israel is the anti-apartheid movement of the nineteen-sixties and -seventies. Ahmed Kathrada, who spent 26 years in a South-African prison, explained in 1956 that "the believers of the international boycott base their premise on the point of view that at this stage [...] The perpetrators of racialism in this country derive strength and courage from the closeness that they feel to the outer world; indeed from the almost tacit consent and recognition that they receive from particularly the Western countries in the form of cultural and sports contact, economic and military association."<sup>7</sup>

The same is true for Israel. Despite maintaining a brutal military occupation for nearly seventy years, despite systemic, legal racial discrimination against the indigenous non-Jewish population of Palestine, despite flaunting dozens of UN resolutions calling for an end to Israel's endless list of war crimes,<sup>8</sup> despite the continuous crime of refusing to respect the right of return for the refugees of the massive ethnic cleansing of 1948, Israel is able to stay steadfast in crime because of the unwavering support from Western states, in the form of financial and political support, trade, and arms sales.

In the face of this situation, it is first and foremost the duty of the citizens of those states that enable Israel to support the Palestinians' struggle for their rights by taking action against the West's "tacit consent and recognition" and the "closeness [...] to the outer world" that emboldens Israel.

### But is it not important for artists to show their work in Israel? Is it not more effective to come to meet and speak to the Israeli public and bring a message of peace and inclusiveness rather than boycott?

Before performing in Israel in 2006, Roger Walters wrote "I have a lot of fans in Israel, many of whom are refuseniks. I would not rule out going to Israel because I disapprove of the foreign policy any more than I would refuse to play in the UK because I disapprove of Tony Blair's foreign policy."<sup>9</sup> But after visiting the Occupied Palestinian Territories, he wrote "In my view, the abhorrent and draconian control that Israel wields over the besieged Palestinians in Gaza, and the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank (including East Jerusalem), coupled with its denial of the rights of refugees to return to their homes in Israel, demands that fair-minded people around the world support the Palestinians in their civil, non-violent resistance...For me, it means declaring my intention to stand in solidarity, not only with the people of Palestine, but also with the many thousands of Israelis who disagree with their government's racist and colonial policies, by joining the campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel, until it satisfies three basic human rights demanded in international law."<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, after performing in Israel, Macy Gray wrote that “I had a reality check and I stated that I definitely would not have played there if I had known even the little that I know now.”<sup>11</sup>

While artists often claim to speak for peace and universal values, words matter little when they are said in a context that sends the opposite message. One cannot declare support for workers on strike while crossing the picket line. Likewise, no matter what the intentions are, performing in Israel sends the wrong message to the Israeli public: that Israel is normal, that the racist foundations of the state, its racist and discriminatory legal system, and its military violence are acceptable. By rejecting the Palestinian call for solidarity, artists who perform in Israel collude with the continuation of the violence against Palestinians.

Furthermore, Israel’s racist policies against Palestinians enjoy wide domestic public support. Over 90% percent of the non-Palestinian public in Israel expressed support for the state’s last massacre in Gaza,<sup>12</sup> and a majority of Israeli citizens consistently tells pollsters they do not want Arabs to have a say in politics.<sup>13</sup> There is no non-confrontational way of bringing about social change under such conditions of entrenched and widespread racism. Bringing “a message of peace” to the Israeli public is an empty gesture that only serves to flatter the ego of the artists who claim to do so. The message of conscience is a message of solidarity with the Palestinians’ demand for their rights and with the small number of Israelis who support them.

[Israeli artists are often dissidents and critics of the government. Isn't the boycott you are advocating attacking the wrong people, the very Israelis who are on the right side?](#)

No, BDS is not attacking any critics of the government because BDS does not advocate a boycott of individual artists and scholars, and we do not demand that Israeli artists are shunned or not invited anymore. We call for severing ties with the institutions of Israeli apartheid, including cultural institutions that willingly serve the propaganda of the state of Israel. Israeli artists have a choice to refuse to allow the use of their art and their name in order to create a positive image of the state, and they can and are most welcome to join the boycott, as few of them already have done.

Although we do not call for a boycott of artists, it is worth noting that presenting the art scene in Israel as inherently progressive and as an ally for the Palestinian demand for justice is highly misleading. Only a handful of Israeli artists, and not a single Israeli cultural institution, have taken an unambiguous stand against the ceaseless violence of the state and for equality. Indeed, the widespread acceptance of this false representation of Israeli culture is itself a perfect example of how Israel uses art and culture to sell a favorable but a deceiving image of itself in order to counter demands for justice.

Furthermore, Israel’s real critics and dissidents do not benefit from the governmental promotion of culture. There is an increasingly repressive attitude towards criticism in Israel, and governmental bodies attack and intimidate critics of the government, for the purpose of “ensuring that the content of artwork falls in line with government policy.”<sup>14</sup> The conditions of art and culture in Israel cannot be separated from the continuing violence against Palestinians.

[Many states violate rights and most artists rely on state subsidies. For example, why shouldn't Swiss artists be boycotted for Switzerland's islamophobic laws?](#)

The boycott of Israel is a response to a demand of solidarity from Palestinians. It is an effective non-violent tactic and a form of pressure that Palestinians have chosen, not an attempt by us to express our moral purity. The case for boycotting Apartheid South Africa was not invalidated by the human rights abuses committed at the same time in Argentina. It was a response to the demand for

solidarity of the South African resistance. There is a reason why the declaration “others do the same or worse” is not acceptable as a criminal defense. If it were, all demands for justice would have to be postponed until every offense is ranked and worst offenses would have to be dealt with first. Who would benefit from that except those who benefit from impunity?

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- 1 Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) website : <http://www.bdsmovement.net/>
  - 2 Palestinian Campaign for the Academic & Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) website :  
<http://www.pacbi.org/>
  - 3 Open letter Culturescapes Israel: A showcase for Apartheid in Switzerland?,  
<http://pacbi.org/pacbi140812/?p=1575>
  - 4 Declaration of Swiss Artists We Refuse to be Complicit! <http://www.bds-info.ch/index.php?id=460&items=1070>
  - 5 For example, see <https://anthroboycott.wordpress.com/2016/05/08/violating-the-right-to-education-for-palestinians-a-case-for-boycotting-israeli-academic-institutions/>
  - 6 Haaretz.co.il, 22th May 2015. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/black-flag/.premium-1.2640239>
  - 7 Ben White, Apartheid and Cultural Boycott, <http://www.bacbi.be/pdf/BWhite.pdf>
  - 8 Haaretz, "Study: Israel Leads in Ignoring Security Council Resolutions",  
<http://www.haaretz.com/study-israel-leads-in-ignoring-security-council-resolutions-1.31971>
  - 9 The Guardian, "Palestinian plea to Floyd's Waters",  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/mar/09/israel.artsnews>
  - 10 Roger Waters, " Tear down this Israeli wall",  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/mar/11/cultural-boycott-west-bank-wall>
  - 11 IPSC, "2011 Successes of the Cultural Boycott of Apartheid Israel", <http://www.ipsc.ie/press-releases/2011-successes-of-the-cultural-boycott-of-apartheid-israel>
  - 12 The Guardian, "Israeli polls show overwhelming support for Gaza campaign",  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/31/israeli-polls-support-gaza-campaign-media>
  - 13 Haaretz, "Poll: Most Israeli Jews Believe Arab Citizens Should Have No Say in Foreign Policy",  
<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/poll-most-israeli-jews-believe-arab-citizens-should-have-no-say-in-foreign-policy-1.327972>
  - 14 Chen Tamir, "Censorship in Israel", <https://www.guggenheim.org/blogs/map/censorship-in-israel>