

**Unpacking BDS:  
Exploring Identity, Principles, and Global Reactions**

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Resistance is Life: Popular Culture and Political Resistance in the Middle East

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## I. Introduction

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Hamas launched an attack against Israel. Regardless of how one judges each actor in this incident, it once again reminds the world of the continuing conflict between Israel and Palestine. The issue is complex and multifaceted, so making a value judgment is difficult. One of the controversial parts on the Palestinian side of this conflict is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. At first glance, BDS seems like a difficult concept to comprehend. Even if one comes to some understanding, it may seem minuscule in the wider Palestinian liberation movement. With people throughout the world integrating their stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict into their identities, it's clear that stances on the war have become a part of popular culture. Support of movements like BDS constitutes political resistance because support of resistance is, in and of itself, resistance. So, what is BDS, why does it exist, and how has the international political world received it?

## II. Defining BDS

### A. *What is BDS?*

In trying to grasp an understanding of BDS, there's no better place to turn than to its founder, Omar Barghouti. In his words, BDS is "a global campaign based on a Palestinian civil society call that came out in 2005 a year after the International Court of Justice ruling against Israel's wall in the occupied territories."<sup>1</sup> Barghouti mentions the

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<sup>1</sup> *Omar Barghouti Interview*, 2011, 0:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAwPRjWUKd0>.

Israeli wall, which is sometimes referred to as the “separation fence.” It was installed by the state of Israel on the country’s border with the West Bank. While Barghouti’s statement gives a great overview of the movement, one can dive deeper into BDS by exploring its identity, its principles, its goals, its calls to action, and its opponents.

(1) *Identity*. At first glance, it would seem that Palestinian nationalism is intertwined with BDS, and perhaps that’s the case to some degree.<sup>2</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, the core identity of the movement can’t be nationalism—Barghouti explains that BDS is “a global network of social movements.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, an obvious anomaly arises in the idea that Palestinian nationalism is at the core of the BDS movement. If the movement is worldwide, how can it be nationalistic? Citing Falk, John Chalcraft explains that BDS “relies on the voluntary participation of people at all levels of society, regardless of their ethnic and national identities, and without geographic limitations.”<sup>4</sup> Further, many supporters of BDS are against the idea of nationalism, including Barghouti, as shown by many of his statements and writings.<sup>5</sup> So, the lifeblood of the BDS movement is the diversity of its members. It is not just another nationalism movement, but one “based on international law and basic universal human rights.”<sup>6</sup>

(2) *Principles*. Now that an understanding of the identity of BDS has been attained, its principles merit exploration. At its core, BDS holds that “Palestinians are

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<sup>2</sup> John T. Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” in *Boycotts Past and Present*, 2019, 295, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=63e0bee2-c658-3f0f-81d3-30d91824f83f>.

<sup>3</sup> *Omar Barghouti Interview*, 1:03.

<sup>4</sup> Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” 297.

<sup>5</sup> Chalcraft, 296–97.

<sup>6</sup> *Omar Barghouti Interview*, 4:40.

human beings whose basic rights have been violated and on whom dispossession has been practised.”<sup>7</sup> It logically follows, then, that BDS exists to stop the violation of the human rights of these Palestinian people and to atone for their dispossession. Indeed, BDS is a rights-based movement; that is, support of BDS conveys support of the rights of the Palestinian people.<sup>8</sup> The rights that the movement invokes are very reminiscent of the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a widely important proclamation made by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948. Celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, the document “sets out, for the first time, fundamental human rights to be universally protected.”<sup>9</sup> For example—and notably for the conflict at hand—Section 2 of Article 13 of the UDHR guarantees one “the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.”<sup>10</sup> One of the demands of BDS is that Palestinians be allowed to return to their homeland. Note the similarity between the demand and the previously declared human right. Thus, it’s clear that BDS is truly a rights-based movement. In order to see the movement’s invocation of rights like those in the UDHR, one can turn to BDS’s goals.

(3) *Goals.* As with any other movement, BDS exists for a purpose. While it has been noted that BDS is a rights-based movement, exactly how does the movement invoke these rights? BDS aims to achieve the “basic inalienable rights” of Palestinians and to dismantle “forms of racism and apartheid that are actualized in forms of occupation,

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<sup>7</sup> Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” 298.

<sup>8</sup> Chalcraft, 298.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations (United Nations), accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations General Assembly, “General Assembly Resolution 217 A” (United Nations General Assembly, December 10, 1948), 74, [http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/217\(III\)](http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/217(III)).

colonization, and spectacular violence” that Israel brings on “rightless Palestinians.” It additionally aims to end the “continuous violations of international law and human rights.”<sup>11</sup>

So, BDS sees Israel as an apartheid state, like South Africa once was. On the basis of this vision, the movement pushes for the achievement of Palestinian rights in Israel—up to and including the termination of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Moreover, it demands that other countries hold Israel accountable for its multiple violations of international law. While it clarifies the core of the movement, this larger goal can be broken down. BDS hopes for an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and the dismantlement of the wall (“separation fence”); full equality for Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel; and for Israel to respect, protect, and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties.<sup>12</sup> While helpful in understanding the core of the BDS movement’s desires, these goals can’t be accomplished without some sort of action plan.

(4) *Calls to Action.* According to the founder of the movement, BDS calls for three things: boycotting, divesting, and imposing sanctions on Israel until it ends the occupation of the 1967 territories. This would include the dismantlement of the wall and the ending of the settlements in Palestine, an end to Israel’s internal system of radical discrimination against its Palestinian citizens, and the recognition and enabling of the

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<sup>11</sup> Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” 304.

<sup>12</sup> Maia Carter Hallward, “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” in *Routledge Companion to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 496, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=170b3cbf-11bd-3b62-98dd-fcb798580c60>.

right of return for Palestinian refugees.<sup>13</sup> Barghouti recognizes the final demand as the movement's foremost. One can note that all but the first call from BDS both require some level of action on the part of the State of Israel. It follows that the first call to action—addressed to individuals, businesses, corporations, and governments—places pressure on Israel to concede the second and third demands. In other words, BDS believes that a grassroots movement that places international pressure on Israel will force the Jewish state into some level of concession to the terms laid out by the BDS movement.

While the international pressure that BDS places on Israel is financial at its core, the symbolic pressure that BDS stirs is just as influential. According to Hallward, BDS campaigns “seek symbolic impact, informing the general public about the Israeli occupation and the daily reality of the situation on the ground for Palestinians.”<sup>14</sup>

So, BDS places two pressures on Israel: fiscal pressure and symbolic pressure. Through the application of these pressures, BDS hopes to see Israel concede and move toward the restoration of Palestinian control over its territories and the equality between Palestinian-Israeli citizens and Jewish-Israeli citizens, along with the Jewish state allowing Palestinian refugees to return. Yet as with any movement, BDS has its share of opponents.

(5) *Opponents of BDS*. There are two major opponents that BDS faces: Zionism and communalism. Firstly, BDS opposes Zionism.<sup>15</sup> According to Britannica, Zionism is a “Jewish nationalist movement that has had as its goal the creation and support of a

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<sup>13</sup> Omar Barghouti Interview, 0:38.

<sup>14</sup> Hallward, “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” 504.

<sup>15</sup> Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” 299.

Jewish national state in Palestine.”<sup>16</sup> With this in mind, Barghouti explains that the conflation of Zionism and Judaism is antisemitic, arguing that the idea that every Jewish person is a Zionist is incorrect, and such an assumption is itself an example of antisemitism.<sup>17</sup> With that distinction made, the movement is targeted only against Zionism—not Judaism—and it is therefore not antisemitic, only anti-Zionist.

Interestingly, BDS also rejects communalism, or the “us vs. them” visualization of the conflict. That is to say, BDS “is acutely opposed to the neo-Orientalist idea of a Judeo-Christian west opposed to an irrational and hostile Arab and Islamic East.”<sup>18</sup> This legitimizes the earlier claim that BDS is a human rights-based campaign because it simply wants an end to the oppression of Palestinians; its demands are not bundled with any other ideologies. This makes sense, as the movement is global and even has people inside of Israel campaigning on its behalf. Rather than viewing this conflict as against the Jewish state, BDS specifically fights for the recognition of Palestinian human rights. One of the interesting consequences of this view is that BDS “does not endorse ... Hamas.”<sup>19</sup>

In sum, BDS is a global anti-Zionist movement that seeks to expose Israeli actions to the world and push the Jewish state towards change through fiscal and symbolic pressure.

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<sup>16</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Zionism,” Encyclopædia Britannica, November 23, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zionism>.

<sup>17</sup> Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” 299.

<sup>18</sup> Chalcraft, 300.

<sup>19</sup> Chalcraft, 300.

### *B. Why BDS?*

Now that an understanding of the movement has been reached, the question must be posed: why does BDS need to exist? According to Barghouti, the failure of response from the international community to Israel after each of its controversial actions (the separation fence and the settlements, to name two examples) has demonstrated that Palestine cannot trust the international community to provide its citizens with their international rights. Thus, Palestinians must appeal to international civil society (not governments) with a grassroots movement that will hopefully pressure governments into imposing sanctions on Israel.<sup>20</sup> Even though that makes sense, why specifically boycott, divest and impose sanctions?

*(1) Why boycott?* Overtly, the act of boycotting does two major things: it places a level of fiscal pressure on the organization that is being boycotted, and it raises the public's awareness about an issue. In this case, the brands boycotted in BDS campaigns are pressured to pull out of Israel, thereby putting some level of fiscal pressure on the Jewish state itself. Additionally, the public, in noticing the boycott, will eventually become aware of the reasoning behind it. These are both wins for BDS—they pressure Israel both fiscally and socially. Boycotts “aim to undermine legitimacy and weaken [its] oppressive institutions.” They withdraw business as usual, which increases “debates about ... the forms of complicity of the institutions boycotted.”<sup>21</sup> So, boycotts directly attack the legitimacy of Israel, which could bring the Jewish state to its knees and allow for concession to the BDS demands.

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<sup>20</sup> Omar Barghouti *Interview*, 1:21.

<sup>21</sup> Chalcraft, “The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement and Radical Democracy,” 307.



(2) *Why divest?* Divestment is the opposite of investment, so it logically follows that divesting from a country's economy will weaken that economy. Divestment “[strikes] at the economic bases of operation and colonization,” targeting “companies and investments profiting from occupation or settlement.”<sup>22</sup> It serves to weaken the Israeli economy, placing financial pressure on the state. Again, this pressure is meant to force Israel to concede to the demands of the movement. More focused, this call for divestment isn't directed at everyone. The impact of any one person is simply not enough to make even a microscopic dent in a state's economy—the average person doesn't have enough wealth to have this effect. However, some entities do: enterprises, governments, investors, and other wealthy people can all possibly have an impact on a state. The logic is that if enough of these “larger” entities divest from Israel, the country will be forced to its knees—and to the discussion table.

(3) *Why sanction?* This prong of the movement is more self-explanatory than the other two. Sanctions are used by governments to hold other states accountable—or to pressure them into doing something. Sanctions can be very detrimental to a state or an economy, especially if many states impose sanctions on one state. This is because as sanctions are imposed, international economic opportunity is lost. For BDS, the idea is to use the sanctions to add pressure on Israel until it complies with the demands the movement has made. However, the call to impose these sanctions is directed towards other governments. BDS, being a movement and not a state, cannot sanction, and a

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<sup>22</sup> Chalcraft, 307–8.

Palestinian sanction would do little against Israel because the state has so much outside support. The way to hold Israel accountable, according to BDS, is to have all the nations that support Israel withdraw their support and instead impose sanctions. While this is very unlikely to occur, if it ever did, the Jewish state would likely be forced to concede to the BDS demands.

BDS exists to “bring back the basic human rights ...of the entire Palestinian people.”<sup>23</sup> While a mission statement like that is good, it alone is not enough for a movement like BDS to enact change. There must be a plan of action. BDS has a three-pronged plan that requires international cooperation, and it’s right in the name. Boycotts, divestments, and sanctions all serve to humble the Jewish state to concede to the demands of the movement.

### **III. Reactions to BDS**

Any movement as polarizing as BDS is bound to receive both positive and negative reactions. In fact, some states have gone as far as to pass “anti-boycott” laws aimed at preventing this movement from spreading. A brief look at some examples of reactions to BDS provides a helpful understanding of its reception.

(1) *Israel*. It seems most logical to begin with the response from the state which is most directly impacted by the BDS movement. Of course, Israel is against the BDS

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<sup>23</sup> *Omar Barghouti Interview*, 0:47.

movement, but anyone could easily understand that. In his speech at AIPAC in 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu argued that “BDS is morally wrong” and is “about making Israel illegitimate.”<sup>24</sup> He walked a line between explaining that BDS is wrong and should be rejected and explaining that Israel is not threatened by it in any way. He posed the rhetorical question, “how could anyone fall for the BS in BDS?”<sup>25</sup> It is very clear that Israel condemns the BDS movement it faces. According to Netanyahu, the “letters B-D-S really stand for: bigotry, dishonesty and shame.”<sup>26</sup> Israel remains confident that it can overcome the movement, but the Jewish state is still against the BDS movement.

(2) *United States.* Next, an examination of the US’s stance on BDS is warranted. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared that the “US regards [the] BDS movement as anti-Semitic.”<sup>27</sup> It makes sense that the US would be against BDS, as the US has been a large ally of Israel in the past. A response to this from BDS was already mentioned above: the conflation of anti-Zionism and antisemitism is antisemitic in and of itself because the belief that all Jewish people are Zionists is antisemitic. Furthermore, in a “398-to-17” vote in 2019, the House of Representatives moved to pass “a bipartisan resolution condemning the boycott Israel movement.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, “AIPAC Policy Conference Speech” (Political Speech, AIPAC Policy Conference, Washington, DC, April 3, 2014), <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/news/speechaipac040314>.

<sup>25</sup> Netanyahu.

<sup>26</sup> Netanyahu.

<sup>27</sup> “BDS Israel Boycott Group Is Anti-Semitic, Says US,” *BBC News*, November 19, 2020, sec. Middle East, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54999010>.

<sup>28</sup> Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Lopsided Vote in the House Against a Movement to Boycott Israel,” *New York Times* (1923-), July 24, 2019, 2754995741, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index.

Additionally, the US has seen the introduction of “anti-boycott bills” to both state legislatures and Congress. When it comes to these statutes, there’s an interesting debate to be had: do anti-boycott statutes violate the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution? Both sides of the argument can be seen. Jad Essayli and others who find that anti-BDS laws are unconstitutional claim that according to the decision of *NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware Co.*, “the Supreme Court recognized that participation in political boycott was a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment,” and therefore BDS is also protected under the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment.<sup>29</sup> The case stems from the launch of an NAACP-sponsored boycott of white merchants in Claiborne County, Mississippi. Although it consisted of mostly “nonviolent picketing, ... some acts and threats of violence also occurred.”<sup>30</sup> In 1982, the Court decided in favor of the NAACP with an 8-0 margin.<sup>31</sup> In other words, it was decided that the NAACP’s boycott was protected under the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment.

However, the comparison between BDS and *Claiborne* is not one-to-one. To begin, many scholars would claim that the comparison of BDS boycotts to the NAACP boycott discussed in *Claiborne* yields “multiple important factual distinctions” between the case and BDS boycotts that actually demonstrate that “support of BDS in and of itself is not protected speech.”<sup>32</sup> The scope of these movements mainly determines these distinctions. For example, in *Claiborne*, defendants boycotted “local businesses that were

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<sup>29</sup> Jad Essayli, “Restricting Your Right to Boycott: Free Speech Implications Regarding Legislation Targeting the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement in the United States and the European Union,” 2020, 480, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=1f201b2a-1687-30fc-9dd2-b0468e6b0b80>.

<sup>30</sup> “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People v. Claiborne Hardware Company,” Oyez, accessed December 10, 2023, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1981/81-202>.

<sup>31</sup> “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People v. Claiborne Hardware Company.”

<sup>32</sup> Mark Goldfeder, “Stop Defending Discrimination: Anti-Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions’ Statutes Are Fully Constitutional,” 2018, 222, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=32ed1848-ec55-3058-97a9-a6fd57ded1a9>.

involved in discriminating or supported discrimination against them,” while “those that support the BDS Movement advocate the boycott of an entire nation.”<sup>33</sup> Even more notably, “*Claiborne* involved private individuals seeking tort damages against other private individuals, whereas the anti-BDS bills involve the government, public funds, and no claim of tort damages.”<sup>34</sup> So, the case for BDS isn’t a cut-and-dry argument of precedent. As with all things political in the US, the argument is nuanced.

It is easily observed that the US government corporately takes a stance against the BDS movement, mainly because the state believes that the BDS movement calls for the end of Israel. However, individual lawmakers and scholars in the nation come to different conclusions about the constitutionality of actions of the government, which is to be expected from a politically diverse nation.

(3) *United Kingdom*. Moving away from official responses from states, organizations and individuals inside of countries also have opinions and views on the BDS movement. Although Britain as a state is very much in favor of Israel, some people inside the state paint a different picture. For example, Britain’s Association of University Teachers (AUT) voted to boycott Israeli academics in April of 2005.<sup>35</sup> Notably, this academic boycott doesn’t target the academic freedom of Israeli (or international) professors or students. It is an institutional boycott aimed at official state institutions, specifically Haifa and Bar Ilan universities, and explicitly does not target individual

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<sup>33</sup> Goldfeder, 222.

<sup>34</sup> Goldfeder, 222.

<sup>35</sup> Ben Lynfield, “British Boycott Riles Israeli Academics ; A British Academics’ Union Has Called for a Boycott of Two Israeli Universities, Prompting a Major Outcry.: [ALL Edition],” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 12, 2005, 405541509, African Newsstream; Asian Newsstream; European Newsstream; Latin American Newsstream; Middle East Newsstream; U.S. Hispanic Newsstream; U.S. Northeast Newsstream.

Israeli academics. The reasoning for the boycott is that it places pressure on the state of Israel, but in a different location than usual. If the state experiences enough pressure simultaneously, Israel might concede to some demands of the BDS movement.

(4) *Christian Organizations.* Another sector of organizations that have strong opinions on the conflict and BDS are religious organizations. For example, ever since its founding in 2006 by televangelist John Hagee, Christians Unified for Israel (CUFI) has been vigorously opposing BDS.<sup>36</sup> CUFI sources its advocacy from the Bible, interpreted literally. In Genesis 15, God promised the land of Israel to the Jewish people, so CUFI supports the state of Israel, adopting a Zionist identity.<sup>37</sup>

However, some Evangelical Christians have recently “taken a more critical stance towards Israel’s policies in the occupied territories.”<sup>38</sup> This stance is similar to the World Council of Churches’s (WCC) view of the conflict. Aligning itself centrally in the conflict, the WCC adopts the motto “peace with justice.”<sup>39</sup> In 2014, the Council wrote a position paper “[confirming] the Palestinians’ right to self-determination while at the same time recognizing Israel and its legitimate security concerns,” adding an item supporting BDS while not naming it directly.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the WCC is similar to the BDS movement in some of its calls to action, but the Council never directly aligns itself with BDS. In sum, this conflict is complex, therefore many different views will emerge, especially in a religion as theologically diverse as Christianity.

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<sup>36</sup> Claudia Baumgart-Ochse, “Claiming Justice for Israel/Palestine: The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Campaign and Christian Organizations,” *Globalizations* 14, no. 7 (2017): 1181.

<sup>37</sup> Gen. 15:7 (NIV).

<sup>38</sup> Baumgart-Ochse, 1183.

<sup>39</sup> Baumgart-Ochse, 1180.

<sup>40</sup> Baumgart-Ochse, 1180.

(5) *The Arab Council for Regional Integration*. On November 19 and 20, 2019, “30 public figures from 15 countries in the Arab world came together to repudiate the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement (BDS) against Israel.”<sup>41</sup> The group aims to better their countries by “[breaking] the barrier of boycotting within the region ... which [hinders] partnership in technology, medicine, infrastructure, business, economy, and the expanse of human aspiration.”<sup>42</sup> It is a non-governmental endeavor—that is, no official government agreements are being forged, but important members from these societies are trying to make change in their region. So, most of the Arab world also rejects the BDS movement.

It's clear to see that BDS has been received differently by different organizations, states, and individuals. While many states are against the movement, organizations and individuals inside these states have diverse opinions on BDS and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

BDS is an anti-Zionist movement that calls for the pressuring of the Jewish state to concede to its demands through fiscal and social pressure. With its three-pronged plan of action, the movement has stirred the international community. Some see it as a

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<sup>41</sup> Jenni Frazer, “A Groundbreaking Arab Initiative to Repudiate BDS,” *Jewish Journal*, November 20, 2019, <https://jewishjournal.com/news/worldwide/307371/a-groundbreaking-arab-initiative-to-repudiate-bds/>.

<sup>42</sup> Frazer.

movement for good, some see it as a movement to eradicate the Jewish state, and others don't know how to see it.

No matter one's judgement, it's clear that one's stance on the BDS issue is an instance of popular culture and an instance of political resistance. Social media is flooded with posts donning both the Israeli flag and the Palestinian flag; both the Star of David and the watermelon emoji are making constant appearances on these platforms. Society today is polarized, and this conflict is yet another display of that divide. These posts—each one a piece of popular culture—are supporting a movement of political resistance and are therefore in and of themselves political activism.

The world has never been more divided than it is now. With the advent of identity politics, issues like this war have become part of people's identities. It's no surprise that every issue has become a major debate! So, an analysis like this aids in the understanding of how the cultural divide works—both how it is drawn and how it continues to exist. Society can remain conscious of how it itself functions if and only if an understanding of how society works is accessible. The gap between an accessible understanding and remaining conscious of that information is simply a choice.

On October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the world was reminded of a multifaceted conflict in the Middle East—the defining dispute of the region. Each member of society is now confronted with a choice: how will they respond? They can either rationally approach the issue, making a judgement only after research, or to be quick to judge and slow to understand, making their stance on the conflict yet another part of their identity.



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