

Israel's Strategies Against the BDS Movement: Contesting Narratives in the Israel-Palestine Conflict (2017-2019)

Muhamad Dzamirul Hakim, Wiwiek Rukmi Dwi Astuti

Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences,
Universitas Pembangunan Nasional Veteran Jakarta
e-mail: wiwiek.rukmi@upnvj.ac.id

Abstract

This research discusses Israel's strategies to counter the narrative of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement between 2017 and 2019. Employing a descriptive qualitative method and drawing upon constructivism theory and the concept of narrative power, this study explores how Israel responded to the BDS narrative, which alleges human rights violations. The research highlights the implementation of anti-BDS laws within Israel, and intensive lobbying in the United States and the European Union, as well as efforts to deny entry and arrest BDS activists. The findings indicate that while Israel deployed various legal, diplomatic, and propaganda strategies to discredit the movement and associate it with antisemitism, these efforts faced significant challenges. Israel's repressive policies strengthened the BDS narrative regarding freedom of expression violations and the delegitimation of Israel's democratic claims, fostering broader global solidarity and demonstrating the effectiveness of the BDS narrative in shaping international public opinion.

Keywords: *anti-BDS law, BDS movement, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, narrative power.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas strategi Israel untuk melawan narasi gerakan Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) antara tahun 2017 dan 2019. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dan berlandaskan pada teori konstruktivisme serta konsep narrative power, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi

bagaimana Israel merespons narasi BDS yang menuduh adanya pelanggaran hak asasi manusia. Penelitian ini menyoroti penerapan undang-undang anti-BDS di Israel serta lobi intensif di Amerika Serikat dan Uni Eropa, juga upaya untuk menolak masuk dan menangkap para aktivis BDS. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun Israel menerapkan berbagai strategi hukum, diplomatik, dan propaganda untuk mendiskreditkan BDS dan mengaitkannya dengan antisemitisme, upaya tersebut menghadapi tantangan yang signifikan. Kebijakan represif Israel justru memperkuat narasi BDS mengenai pelanggaran kebebasan berekspresi dan delegitimasi klaim demokratis Israel, sehingga mendorong solidaritas global yang lebih luas dan menunjukkan efektivitas narasi BDS dalam membentuk opini publik internasional.

Kata kunci: gerakan BDS, kekuatan narasi, konflik Israel-Palestina, undang-undang anti-BDS.

Introduction

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has been ongoing since 1948, beginning with the establishment of the state of Israel and the expulsion of many Palestinians, known as the Nakba. For decades, Palestinian resistance was largely carried out through traditional military action, until it began to transform into more strategic and non-violent forms. Resistance was no longer limited to armed confrontation between the two sides, but also included international campaigns aimed at pressuring Israel through various means. One of the most prominent forms of non-violent movement was the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which emerged as an effort to end Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory and demand fairer rights for the Palestinian people.

BDS movement is a global social movement founded in 2005 by 170 Palestinian civil society groups that issued the 'Call of BDS' (Morrison, 2015). Under the initiative of Omar Barghouti, Palestinian civil society groups around the world chose to launch this non-violent boycott to exert global economic and socio-cultural pressure. This step is an effort to force Israel to comply with international law (Barghouti, 2011). These groups compare their grievances against Israel to the struggle of South Africans against apartheid, and seek international support for non-violent punitive measures against Israel. The movement campaigns for individuals, groups, and countries to massively boycott products and services affiliated with Israel, withdraw investments from companies that support Israel's occupation of Palestine, and push for international sanctions against Israel's violations of international law and human rights abuses against

the Palestinian people (Kurniawan, 2023). The BDS movement's primary goal is to force Israel to fulfil its international obligations, namely to end the occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands, demolish the separation wall in the West Bank, grant full equality to Arab-Palestinians in Israel, and respect, protect, and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties.

The Israeli government strongly opposes the BDS movement and views it as a form of economic warfare and delegitimisation of Israel. According to the Israeli government, the main objective of this movement is not to achieve peace or coexistence between Israel and Palestine, but to isolate and discredit the State of Israel on the international stage (Shaban & Awais, 2023). Around 2017, the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs expanded a large-scale international campaign against the BDS movement, funding networks and organisations abroad to counter boycott activism and delegitimise the movement in global public discourse (Thrall, 2018).

In dealing with the BDS movement, Israel uses a strategy based on a gradual approach, starting with gathering intelligence on the movement's activists and focusing on understanding their activities before implementing measures to hinder and threaten their interests. This approach is known as a direct attack on the movement's activists, not merely a defensive one. Israel then mobilises public opinion and increases pressure on the BDS movement by linking it to 'anti-Semitism'. Israeli State Comptroller Yosef Shapira criticises the strategy applied in dealing with the international boycott movement (BDS), which has shifted from a strategy of dialogue and efforts to influence various organisations and movements to a strategy of surveillance and offensive propaganda (Lees, 2017). Furthermore, Israel has also conducted an intensive diplomatic campaign to persuade countries and international organisations to reject and criminalise the movement. In an effort to counter the movement, the Israeli government has blacklisted organisations associated with BDS and banned their members from entering the country (Bahar & Sachs, 2018). Some countries have even passed laws prohibiting BDS activities, demonstrating the level of influence Israel wields in global foreign policy.

Several studies have examined the BDS movement and its implications for international politics. Amir Prager (2019) explains how the Israeli government strategically lobbies Western countries, particularly the United States and several European states, to adopt anti-BDS legislation aimed at restricting the movement's operational space. Similarly, David Hirsh (2021) discusses how the term "Zionist" is often used within debates surrounding BDS and how accusations of antisemitism become an important discursive strategy to discredit the movement and limit public support. In its attempt to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, the Israeli government is helped by

non-state organisations that maintain close ties to the state and its institutions (White, 2020). Cohen & Avraham (2018) used image repair theory and a multi-step model for image change to analyze the strategies employed by seven NGOs in their efforts to oppose the BDS movement, which calls for a boycott of Israeli academia.

Other scholars highlight the broader implications of these strategies. Hitchcock (2020) argues that the BDS narrative challenges Israel's international legitimacy while simultaneously raising debates about freedom of expression in political advocacy. Cohen & Freilich (2017) further note that efforts to link criticism of Israeli policies with antisemitism may narrow the movement's operational space but also risk generating international criticism related to civil liberties. From another perspective, Younes (2019) shows how BDS successfully connects the Palestinian struggle with global human rights discourse, thereby strengthening international solidarity. Meanwhile, Beinart (2012) argues that criticism of Israeli settlements should be distinguished from antisemitism and suggests that boycotting settlements may represent a more constructive political strategy. Similarly, Farsakh (2017) emphasizes that criticism of Israeli policies should be understood within the broader struggle for Palestinian self-determination and human rights.

Although previous studies have explored the motivations, narratives, and global impact of the BDS movement, relatively limited attention has been given to how Israel specifically responds to the narrative constructed by the movement. In particular, the strategies used by Israel to counter the BDS narrative and shape international perceptions remain insufficiently examined. Therefore, based on this gap, this research seeks to answer the question of how Israel responds strategically to the narrative created by the BDS movement during the period of 2017–2019. The period was chosen because it represents a crucial phase in the increasing complexity and aggressiveness of Israel's response to the BDS movement. In March 2017, the Knesset passed a law allowing for the denial of entry or residency to foreign nationals who support BDS or oppose Israeli settlements, demonstrating the use of legal instruments to address the movement. Furthermore, the Israeli government expanded surveillance of BDS activists through the Ministry of Strategic Affairs. In 2018, the Knesset again deliberated on a bill restricting support for boycotts, although the process was delayed due to the dissolution of the Knesset and the early elections in 2019. Therefore, this period was chosen because it demonstrates an intensification of Israel's legal and political strategies in responding to the BDS movement.

By analysing the legal, diplomatic, and narrative strategies employed by Israel, this study aims to explain how Israel attempts to mitigate the impact of the narrative created by the BDS movement. This study employed qualitative methods with data

collection techniques in the form of a literature review. Data were collected from various written sources relevant to the Israeli government's response to the BDS movement during the chosen period. This article is structured in several sections. The first section discusses the development of the BDS movement against Israel in the period 2017–2019 and the impact of the narrative the movement has constructed on Israel. The next section analyzes the strategies used by the Israeli government in responding to the BDS movement, including the implementation of anti-BDS laws and the rejection and arrest of BDS activists. The next section discusses the challenges Israel faces in constructing a counter-narrative to the BDS movement. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections summarize the main findings of this study.

Constructivist Theory

Constructivist theory in international relations emphasizes the role of norms, identities, and social interactions in shaping global political reality. Constructivism argues that social structures and the ideas shared by international actors significantly determine their behavior. Onuf first introduced the term in 1989 and emphasized that many important aspects of international politics are socially constructed, not determined by human nature or material structures (Onuf, 2012). Wendt (1999) explains that anarchy in the international system is not a condition that automatically leads to conflict, but rather a social construct that states interpret differently based on their interactions. The international structure consists not only of material power but also of ideas, norms, and values that influence how states interact (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

In constructivism, identity refers to how states or other actors define themselves and their perceived roles within the international community. These identities are dynamically constructed, continuously changing based on historical interactions and experiences. For example, Israel constructs its identity as a "Jewish democratic state". Norms also serve as unwritten rules that influence actors' actions through social and diplomatic pressure. In this context, the BDS Movement uses human rights and social justice norms to promote international support for Palestine, while Israel seeks to reject this narrative by emphasizing national security concerns (BDS Movement, 2018b).

Constructivism also emphasizes that power is not only related to the ability to influence the actions of other actors but also relates to the identities, interests, and meanings formed in social interactions. Normative structures can shape actors' identities and interests and provide legitimacy to their actions (Baylis et al., 2020). Consequently, this approach is relevant to explaining the dynamics between Israel and

the BDS movement, where both sides seek to shape meaning, identity, and legitimacy in international politics through competing narratives.

The Concept of Narrative Power

Narrative power is a crucial phenomenon in international relations, describing the ability of political actors to shape and disseminate narratives that influence public perception and international policy. According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), this power reflects as the capacity of actors to construct and maintain dominant stories that catalyze perceptions, policies, and power relations. Narratives function as strategic instruments that can shape political reality. Through the process of selecting facts, the deployment of metaphors, and framing specific issues, narratives can influence how a conflict or event is perceived by the public. Narratives can also dictate the distribution of power by shaping public opinion and driving policy transformation.

Narrative power is competitive as various actors seek to dominate discourse in the public sphere. In practice, narrative power can function in several dimensions. First, narratives shape how audiences understand political realities. Second, narratives can mobilize public support to encourage collective action. Third, narratives provide legitimacy to political actions taken by state actors and social movements (Miskimmon et al. 2013). In the context of this research, the concept of narrative power is used to understand how the BDS movement constructs a global narrative regarding human rights violations in Palestine, and how the Israeli government responds and attempts to construct a counter-narrative to influence international perceptions of the conflict.

The BDS Movement against Israel in 2017–2019

Launched in 2005, the BDS movement emerged as an alternative strategy to compel Israel to adhere to international law, following significant global criticism in the wake of the Second Intifada, or second Palestinian uprising. The movement is spearheaded by over 170 Palestinian civil society organisations worldwide, aiming to emphasize the 'collective responsibility of the international community' (Barghouti, 2011) to combat injustice, drawing parallels to the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. As part of its strategy, the coalition compiles a list of companies and products that either fund the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) or contribute to the normalisation of settlements in the West Bank, deemed illegal under international law (BDS Movement, 2018a).

During the 2017-2019 period, BDS solidified its status as a global movement by expanding its solidarity network, raising political awareness, and reframing public

discourse on Palestine within the context of social justice and international law (Sukarieh, 2024). BDS movement increasingly highlighted terms like “Israeli apartheid,” “illegal occupation,” and “severe human rights violations” to critique the state apparatus and underscore the structural injustices faced by Palestinians (Barghouti, 2025). The term “apartheid” specifically draws parallels between Israel’s policies and the apartheid system in South Africa, creating a strong moral and historical basis for international solidarity. This narrative consistently points to the forced displacement of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the construction of settlements in the West Bank, deemed violations of international law and the Geneva Conventions (Hitchcock, 2023). Moreover, in response to Israel’s attempts to delegitimize and legislate against BDS, the movement has enhanced its communication strategies and reaffirmed its rejection of antisemitism, while showcasing support from diverse communities, including progressive Jews (Hitchcock, 2023).

BDS narrative presents as a movement that not only opposes occupation but also rejects all forms of oppression and racism inherent in Israel’s current political and social structures. This narrative has strong appeal, especially among academics and activists who demand racial and social justice around the world (Musleh, 2018). In addition, BDS uses a legal and moral approach by holding Israel internationally accountable for war crimes and violations of international humanitarian law, including UN resolutions violated by Israel (Shaban & Awais, 2023). The movement encourages countries and international institutions to engage in divestment and economic sanctions as a form of pressure to stop these policies. As part of the boycott effort, the BDS movement emphasises the importance of using economic pressure as a tool for political change. This narrative portrays the boycott as a concrete way for individuals and institutions to contribute to the Palestinian liberation effort and curb the profits Israel derives from controversial economic activities (Musleh, 2018).

The Impact of the Narrative Created by BDS on Israel

The narrative constructed by the BDS movement between 2017 and 2019 not only enriched the global political discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also had a tangible impact on public opinion, government policy, and social dynamics in various countries. The impact of the BDS movement can be observed across several key dimensions, including shifts in public perception, political and legislative responses, and influence on international cultural and economic spheres. Furthermore, BDS movement has contributed to changing public perceptions, particularly among young people, academic communities, and intellectual circles in Western countries.

In 2017, a number of significant developments took place in the BDS movement supporting Palestinian rights. A UN report stated that Israel had implemented an apartheid system against the entire Palestinian people and called for the implementation of BDS measures to end this apartheid regime. In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) provided a valuable lesson to the world on how to fight injustice by unanimously voting to downgrade diplomatic relations with Israel at their general conference. In the United States, the 25,000-member Democratic Socialists of America organisation declared its full support for the Palestinian struggle and endorsed the BDS movement (BDS Movement, 2018). In 2018, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib made history as the first members of the US Congress to openly support BDS, with Tlaib also calling for cuts to US military aid to Israel (Prager, 2019). In 2019, the BDS movement significantly pressured Israel, particularly in the political, legal, and international reputation spheres. Although the direct economic impact remains limited, the movement has succeeded in provoking a strong reaction from the Israeli government, which considers BDS a strategic threat to the legitimacy of the state (Shaban & Awais, 2023).

At the global level, BDS has succeeded in influencing public opinion and the policies of several countries. For example, in May 2019, the German Parliament (Bundestag) issued a resolution condemning BDS as an 'antisemitic' movement, reflecting Israel's efforts to link the movement to racism (Deutsche Welle, 2019). However, this resolution sparked controversy, as it was seen as blurring the distinction between criticism of Israeli policies and anti-Jewish sentiment. BDS activists condemned this decision as an attempt to silence resistance to the occupation of Palestine. The Spanish parliament upheld the right to advocate for Palestinian rights through BDS as protected by freedom of speech and association, with hundreds of elected officials supporting BDS (BDS Movement, 2018). The Barcelona City Council adopted ethical procurement guidelines to exclude companies linked to Israel's military occupation, and numerous city councils across Spain declared themselves 'Israel Apartheid Free Zones' (Prager, 2019). The British government suffered a judicial defeat from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and its allies, ruling it illegal to restrict local authorities from divesting from companies involved in Palestinian human rights violations. Additionally, the Swiss parliament successfully thwarted Israeli lobbying efforts to criminalise BDS support (BDS Movement, 2018).

Enforcement of Anti-BDS Laws

The Israeli government, together with its strategic partners, has taken decisive steps to counter attempts at delegitimisation through the BDS movement. This movement, which is often associated with a biased anti-Israel agenda, is considered not only harmful to the Israeli economy but also an obstacle to peace efforts in the region. To protect national interests and ensure economic stability, Israel and several of its key allies, including the United States and a number of European countries, have enacted anti-BDS laws. This policy is designed to prevent discrimination against Israeli products and businesses, while ensuring that international economic and political relations are not sabotaged by baseless boycott campaigns.

Israel has implemented a series of systematic policies to counter the BDS movement, beginning with Amendment No. 28 to the Entry into Israel Law in 2017, which grants broad authority to the Minister of the Interior to deny entry to boycott supporters. Official data from the Ministry of the Interior records 20 denials of entry in the first year of implementation, primarily against activists with overt involvement in BDS (i24NEWS, 2018). In the area of funding, the NGO Transparency Law increased scrutiny over foreign government funding received by Israeli NGOs (Levush, 2016). The law requires organizations receiving more than half of their funding from foreign political entities to disclose this information in official publications and communications.

Israel has pursued an effective multilateral strategy to counter the BDS movement in the US, combining diplomacy, economic data, and political advocacy. Report H.Res.246 (2019) reveals that Israel has successfully framed BDS not only as a Palestinian issue, but as a threat to regional stability and US-Israel security. Israel links BDS to rising global antisemitism, highlighting that boycott campaigns often go beyond policy criticism and instead attack Israel's identity and legitimacy, even accusing BDS of promoting antisemitic narratives and endangering Jewish security worldwide (Barnett, 2020). This narrative is reinforced by comparing BDS to the boycott of the apartheid regime in South Africa, but Israel insists that accusations of apartheid and genocide against it are baseless and politically motivated (Feuerherdt, 2021). With this narrative, Israel has successfully convinced the United States that BDS is not merely a human rights movement, but a threat to strategic allies and shared democratic values (Barnett, 2020). As a result, the US government and parliament actively issued anti-BDS policies and laws, and supported Israel diplomatically, economically, and legally in the face of international pressure (Lustick & Shils, 2022).

The United States has emerged as one of the most aggressive jurisdictions opposing the movement through state-level legislation. Between 2017 and 2019, at

least 12 states have enacted laws or policies restricting support for boycotting Israel, either through bans on government contracts, divestment of public funds, or loyalty declaration requirements (Hirsh, 2021; Prager, 2019). US support reflects domestic political conditions, in which Israelis are able to influence US legislation. Pro-Israel organisations clearly support pro-Israel legislators (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2006). Furthermore, the United States federal and state governments view Israel as a vital democratically and a major trading partner. In this context, BDS, which is perceived as an anti-Israel policy, may also be interpreted as an anti-Texas policy (Algemeiner, 2018). Meanwhile, several European Union member states have imposed legal restrictions on BDS activities. In France, the Supreme Court (Cour de Cassation) ruled in 2015 that calls for a boycott of Israeli products could be classified as 'incitement to discrimination, hatred or violence' under Article 24 of the French Press Law of 1881 (Cohen & Freilich, 2017). This ruling was based on the interpretation that calls for a boycott are discriminatory against Israeli citizens. In Germany, the Federal Parliament (Bundestag) issued a resolution on 17 May 2019 stating that the BDS movement uses 'antisemitic methods and rhetoric' (Deutsche Welle TV (DW), 2019). Although this resolution is not legally binding, it has an impact on public funding policies towards organisations suspected of supporting BDS.

When faced with the BDS movement, the European Union does not institutionally support a boycott of Israel, and Germany firmly rejects BDS and encourages other European countries to do the same, while France, despite domestic pressure, maintains economic ties and rejects an official boycott (Berenskötter & Mitrani, 2022). Thus, it is this history of relations based on economic, moral, and political interests that has prompted the European Union, particularly Germany and France, to assist Israel in countering the BDS movement, despite the dynamics and differences in stance among European countries (Pardo, 2019).

Israel's Measures Against BDS Activists and Supporters

The Israeli government has adopted a restrictive policy towards BDS activists, including denying them entry into Israel and the West Bank and arresting individuals deemed to support the movement. These measures aim to silence critical voices and restrict the movement of human rights activists advocating for Palestinian rights. Israel systematically uses narrative power to justify its rejection and arrest of BDS activists through three main interrelated strategies. First, Israel frames BDS activists as a 'national security threat' by linking them to potential violence and disruption of state stability. The case of Benjamin Ladraa (2018), a Swedish activist who was deported for

his Walk for Freedom campaign, is an example of how Israel uses internal Shin Bet documents (2019) to claim that 60% of entry denials are related to 'efforts to delegitimise Israel' (Al-Araj, 2018). The amendment to the Entry into Israel Law (2017) became a legal instrument that reinforced this narrative by granting the authority to deny entry to anyone who 'supports a boycott' in the name of 'protecting sovereignty' (ACRI, 2020). However, these narrative faces serious challenges because 'security' claims are often not supported by concrete evidence, as in the case of Ariel Gold in 2017, a Jewish-American activist who was deported solely because of pro-BDS social media posts, which instead undermined Israel's image as a democratic country (Alon, 2018).

Israel links BDS to antisemitism and terrorism to discredit activists. Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy (2019) labeled BDS activists as 'part of a network that supports terrorism'. However, a Human Rights Watch report (2019) refutes this, showing that 90% of deported activists had no ties to violence. Prime Minister Netanyahu's statement at the Munich Security Conference reinforced this stance: "BDS is a strategic threat. We will fight it as we fight physical terrorism." This approach is evident in the allocation of US\$72 million to the anti-BDS ministry (Kane, 2019), militarising the response to the peaceful movement. The case of Salah Hamouri in 2017, a French-Palestinian lawyer detained for alleged 'links to the PFLP' without evidence of violence, exemplifies this narrative (Amnesty International, 2018). Visual propaganda from Israel's Ministry of Strategic Affairs (2019) equating BDS activists with ' Hamas supporters' further reinforces this stigma. However, this strategy has faced international criticism, including from the UN, which condemned 'administrative detention' as a violation of due process (OHCHR, 2018), and sparked backlash on social media with hashtags like #NoToBDSBlacklist trending after the ban on 20 European academics.

Furthermore, Israel creates a narrative of 'self-defence' by portraying itself as a victim of an unjust global campaign, while depicting BDS activists as 'foreign agents.' A notable instance is the visa denial for the ECCP delegation (2018), which included 20 European parliamentarians, justified by claims of 'interference in domestic affairs' (The Guardian, 2018). Minister Gilad Erdan labeled them 'BDS propagandists,' and Israel employs AI technology to monitor and block potential BDS-related visitors (Levinson, 2017). While this narrative upholds the idea of 'sovereignty,' it has counterproductive effects. The European Union formally protested, and the rejection of activists led to increased global solidarity, exemplified by the #LetThemEnter campaign backed by 50 human rights NGOs.

Beyond rejection and arrest, BDS activists and supporters have also faced legal, economic, and professional pressure. In the United States, several state-level anti-BDS

statutes require individuals or companies that want public contracts to certify that they do not support the boycott of Israel. If they refuse to sign the certification, they may lose access to public contracts or state funding. Although these measures do not always directly criminalize BDS activism, they can discourage individuals, professionals, and organisations from openly supporting boycott campaigns. Legal scholars have therefore argued that anti-BDS laws generate serious concerns regarding freedom of expression, particularly because they link political advocacy to eligibility for public contracts (Sheffey, 2024). In addition, anti-BDS measures have contributed to a wider “chilling effect” by making supporters of Palestinian advocacy vulnerable to reputational attacks, institutional sanctions, and professional insecurity. This shows that the pressure faced by BDS activists extends beyond physical exclusion and arrest, and includes legal restriction, economic pressure, and discursive delegitimation.

Furthermore, Israel's propaganda strategy was also supported by digital tools such as Act.IL. Launched in 2017 to mobilize pro-Israel volunteers in online debates. It used a mission-based system, where users were asked to do specific online actions, such as liking, sharing, commenting on, or reporting social media content related to Israel and BDS (Amouyal, 2017; DFRLab, 2019). Act.IL can therefore be seen as part of Israel's digital diplomacy strategy, where online platforms are used to shape narratives and respond to criticism in global digital spaces (Tsinovoi, 2020). Israel's counter-BDS strategy was not only carried out through official diplomatic statements, but also through coordinated online activities to influence public perception.

Challenges to Israel's Counter-Narrative to BDS

Although Israel has implemented various strategies to mitigate the impact of the BDS movement, these efforts faced a number of significant challenges during the 2017–2019 period. These obstacles include resistance from the international community, contradictions with democratic principles, and the growing communicative effectiveness of the BDS movement itself. In a public discourse (a YouTube video) titled *Do boycotts against Israel work?*, Fatima Bhutto and Omar Barghouti, the latter a co-founder of the movement, elaborated on how the campaign systematically undermines Israel's international legitimacy. They explained how the movement systematically undermines Israel's legitimacy by leveraging three key issues: illegal occupation, the apartheid system, and the rights of Palestinian refugees, which all guaranteed by international law (Barghouti, 2025).

A primary challenge to Israel's counter-strategy lies in the arena of democratic legitimacy. Anti-BDS laws enacted by Israel and its allies face criticism for restricting

freedom of expression and human rights advocacy. Amnesty International (2021) condemned Israel's policy of preventing BDS activists from entering its territory as 'a violation of international legal principles.' The entry bans on activists like Benjamin Ladrach in 2018 and Ariel Gold in 2017 prompted protests from global human rights organisations, which pointed out that these actions violate instruments such as Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Amnesty International, 2018). Similar critiques arose in the United States, where federal courts in Arizona and Kansas deemed parts of anti-BDS laws unconstitutional (Hirsh, 2021). Barghouti claims, 'Israel is a state for Jewish people, not its citizens' (Barghouti, 2025), a view supported by reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. This challenge weakens the legitimacy of Israel's narrative as a 'democratic state.'

Israel's efforts to silence support for BDS in academic and cultural circles have sparked backlash. In 2018, over 200 European academics signed a petition against restrictions on BDS discussions, claiming they 'threaten academic freedom' (Younes, 2019). In the US, professors like Steven Salaita were fired for supporting BDS, turning his case into a symbol of resistance against political censorship (Hirsh, 2021). Moreover, international film festivals like Cannes and Berlin continue to showcase works by pro-Palestinian artists despite Israeli diplomatic pressure (BDS Movement, 2018). Barghouti notes that young people increasingly see the Palestinian struggle as part of their identity (Barghouti, 2025). This illustrates how the BDS narrative effectively uses universal values like freedom of expression to counter stigmatisation.

Israel has attempted to discredit BDS by associating it with antisemitism, but this strategy encounters difficulties since many BDS activists are Jewish or part of progressive Israeli groups. Organisations like Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and Boycott from Within openly support BDS while denying antisemitism claims (Hallward, 2022). In 2019, 40 international Jewish groups released a joint statement asserting that 'criticism of Israeli policy is not antisemitism' (BDS Movement, 2018). The failure of this narrative became clear when the European Court of Justice dismissed Israel's proposal to criminalise BDS, stating that boycotts are a legitimate form of political expression (Lynk, 2020). Barghouti argues that the backing of the progressive Jewish community undermines Israel's claim that BDS is anti-Jewish (Barghouti, 2025).

The BDS movement has successfully expanded its influence to the global level, including in multilateral institutions. In 2017, the UN Human Rights Council issued a report calling Israel an 'apartheid regime,' providing additional legitimacy to the BDS narrative (Shaban & Awais, 2023). Countries such as South Africa and Ireland officially support BDS, while cities in Spain and the United Kingdom have declared themselves 'Israel Apartheid-Free Zones' (Prager, 2019). This support complicates Israel's efforts to

diplomatically isolate the BDS movement. Barghouti notes that this multidimensional global solidarity from academics, artists, and labour unions has made the movement a broad anti-colonial and social struggle (Barghouti, 2025).

Israel claims that BDS threatens its economy, but available data suggests that its direct macroeconomic impact remains limited. Bahar & Sachs (2018) argue that BDS poses little threat to Israel's overall exports because many Israeli products, particularly in high-technology sectors, are difficult to replace in global markets. However, BDS may still create reputational pressure by targeting multinational companies associated with Israeli policies in the occupied territories. Airbnb's 2018 decision to remove listings in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank illustrates this reputational dimension (Reuters, 2018). By contrast, Barghouti's claim that Intel's halted \$25 billion factory expansion reflects BDS's economic influence should be treated cautiously, since independent reporting does not confirm BDS as the direct cause and instead frames the issue as a corporate adjustment related to changing timelines and business considerations (Reuters, 2018). Thus, BDS's impact is better understood as reputational and perceptual rather than as direct macroeconomic damage.

Finally, international response to Israel's anti-BDS grand strategy remain heavily fragmented. While the US and Germany have adopted hardline policies, countries like Norway and Switzerland refuse to criminalise BDS on grounds of protecting civil liberties (Younes, 2019). Even within the US domestic arena, states like California and New York failed to pass sweeping anti-BDS statutes due to opposition from progressive civil society coalitions (Hirsh, 2021). This fragmentation reduces the effectiveness of Israel's strategy to create a solid international front against BDS. Hence, Israel faces immense difficulties controlling the narrative in the digital age, where decentralized BDS campaigns proliferate rapidly across platforms like Twitter and Instagram. Digital markers such as #BDS and #FreePalestine reached billions of impressions between 2017 and 2019, whereas state attempts to dismiss online critics as mere 'provocateurs' frequently triggered digital backlashes (Al-Araj, 2018). This image crisis is further highlighted by a B'tselem report (2021), which noted that 60 per cent of young Europeans surveyed expressed heightened sympathy for the Palestine narrative due to prolonged exposure to digital human rights content.

The Counterproductive Effects of Israel's Anti-BDS Policies

In this article, we have argued that studying how policy actors use social construction of the target populations adds value to the issue framing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict literature, particularly concerning the BDS movement. Analyzing

how the BDS movement and its activists are framed as target populations in legal, political, and civil discourses, we have presented evidence in this article that policy actors use social constructions of BDS to justify their policy positions.

The Israeli government's aggressive legal and enforcement measures, such as the anti-BDS laws and the denial of entry to activists, while seemingly effective in restricting the movement's physical presence, inadvertently strengthened the BDS narrative of human rights violations and delegitimation of Israel's democratic claims. As highlighted by Hitchcock (2020) and Cohen & Freilich (2017), these actions often drew international criticism for infringing upon freedom of expression. The cases of Ladraa, Gold, and Hamouri, for instance, were widely reported by human rights organisations as examples of Israel's repressive policies, thereby validating BDS's claims of an "apartheid regime" (Amnesty International, 2021). This creates a paradox: the more Israel attempts to suppress BDS, the more it risks reinforcing the very narrative it seeks to mitigate. Through a case study of Israel's response to BDS, our research adds further evidence to the literature on state responses to social movements that repressive policies can be counterproductive, validating a movement's underlying claims and encouraging wider global solidarity.

Furthermore, this study argues that Israel's legal and diplomatic efforts to suppress a movement are less relevant than the movement's ability to leverage universal values and digital media. Our findings suggest that the more Israel attempted to suppress BDS through legal restrictions and accusations of antisemitism, the more it risked reinforcing the BDS narratives that Israel limits legitimate criticism and political expression. Therefore, this study proposes that counter-narratives are less effective when they are based mainly on repression, especially when the opposing side presents itself as struggle for justice and human rights. Israel's primary diplomatic and propaganda strategy was to equate BDS with antisemitism. While this narrative gained traction in some political circles, it faced substantial challenges. The fact that many BDS activists are Jewish (e.g., Ariel Gold, Jewish Voice for Peace) or that the movement explicitly rejects antisemitism (BDS Movement, 2018) undermined Israel's claims. As Farsakh (2017) argues, conflating criticism of Israeli policies with antisemitism obscures legitimate concerns about human rights and self-determination.

This discursive struggle over the definition of antisemitism in relation to BDS reflects a "narrative war" (Miskimmon et al., 2013) where Israel's attempt to control the narrative is met with counter-narratives emphasizing freedom of speech and human rights. Despite Israel's intensive lobbying, international support for its anti-BDS stance remained fragmented. While the US and Germany adopted strong anti-BDS policies, other nations like Norway and Switzerland resisted criminalizing BDS, citing concerns

over civil liberties (Younes, 2019). This fragmentation limited Israel's ability to form a solid international front against BDS. Conversely, the BDS movement successfully leveraged digital media and transnational activist networks to expand its global reach and solidarity. The increased awareness of social justice issues, particularly among younger generations, contributed to broader global support for BDS, often viewing it as part of a larger anti-colonial and human rights struggle (Shaban & Awais, 2023).

Finally, while Israel claimed BDS threatened its economy, data suggests the direct financial impact was limited (Bahar & Sachs, 2018). However, BDS successfully created perceptual instability by targeting multinational corporations like G4S and Airbnb, leading them to withdraw from controversial projects in occupied territories. This highlights that the power of BDS lies not just in direct economic harm but in its ability to influence corporate reputation and moral standing, challenging Israel's image as a 'safe investment country'.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Israel's efforts to mitigate the impact of the narrative created by the BDS movement during the 2017-2019 period show Israel as a country with narrative power. The Israeli government implemented various strategies covering legal, diplomatic, and propaganda aspects in response to the challenges posed by the BDS movement. From a legal perspective, Israel adopted a fairly aggressive approach by passing various anti-BDS laws. One of the most notable was Amendment No. 28 to the Entry into Israel Law (2017), which granted the government the authority to ban foreign individuals who were considered to be supporting the BDS movement from entering the country. In addition, Israel has also actively encouraged its allies, particularly the United States, to enact similar policies at the state level. Furthermore, on the diplomatic front, the Israeli government has engaged in intensive lobbying efforts at international forums to link the BDS movement with antisemitism. One important achievement in this regard was Israel's success in persuading the European Parliament to pass a resolution in 2019 stating that there were elements of antisemitism in the BDS movement.

The propaganda strategy developed by Israel in response to BDS focuses primarily on efforts to stigmatise the movement as a form of extremism and anti-Semitism. Through various media channels, the Israeli government seeks to construct a narrative that BDS is a threat to the existence of the State of Israel. This study has identified three main challenges faced by Israel in its efforts to mitigate the impact of the BDS narrative. First, the issue of delegitimation, where various repressive policies mobilised by Israel have further strengthened the country's negative image in the eyes

of the international community. Second, the fragmentation of international support, which has prevented Israel from building a solid front against BDS. Third, the effectiveness of the BDS narrative, which is able to utilise digital media and transnational activist networks to expand its influence globally.

The implications of these research findings suggest that Israel needs to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the various strategies it has orchestrated. An approach that focuses solely on silencing criticism through legal instruments and propaganda appears to yield sub-optimal results. A more sustainable solution may lie in efforts to resolve the root causes of the conflict, namely the issues of occupation and discrimination against the Palestinian people. Substantive policy changes in this regard may be more effective in reducing support for the BDS movement than the repressive measures that have been implemented thus far. Overall, this study shows that although Israel has deployed various resources and strategies to mitigate the impact of the BDS narrative, these efforts face serious obstacles. The strength of the BDS narrative, supported by universal values and a solid transnational network of activists, has enabled the movement to continue to grow and gain significant influence at the global level. The findings of this study reinforce the importance of a deep understanding of the dynamics of narrative power in the context of contemporary international relations.

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