Boomerang: Economic pressure hits BDS campaigners

• By BENJAMIN WEINTHAL

For the first time since its formal establishment in 2005, the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement has encountered a set of countervailing forces that is depriving it of funding platforms, and branding it as an enabler of terrorism. A checkered and sporadic attempt to blunt the BDS movement existed prior to 2016, but that fragmented approach has now been replaced with a high-intensity, systematic counter-movement.

In interviews with top representatives of Israel's ministry of strategic affairs; the prominent Israeli lawyer Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, founder of the Shurat HaDin Israel Law Center; and Gerald Steinberg, president of NGO Monitor, a picture emerges of the dramatic setbacks met by BDS organizations over the last three years.

The Ministry of Strategic Affairs, along with a growing pro-Israel community around the world has breathed new life and fire into both defunding and reducing financial contributions to BDS organizations.

"These [BDS] organizations are obsessed with eradicating Israel as a Jewish state," said Tzahi Gavrieli, director of the National Campaign for countering Delegitimization and acting director general for the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy.

Gavrieli explained that as the ministry investigated the entities, it found "links between designated terrorist organizations and these [BDS] organizations," which resorted to deception in an effort to conceal the connections. "In the values of 2019, you can't present yourself as a terrorist," said Gavrieli. "You need to have a human rights facade for a Western audience."

The ministry addressed this tactic in its 2019 monograph, "Terrorists in Suits: The Ties between NGOs Promoting BDS and Terrorist Organizations." The results of the one-two punch by the ministry – and the international pro-Israel community – against BDS organizations has revealed that hardcore antisemitism and terrorism are integral elements of scores of BDS entities and individuals.

Without naming countries, Gavrieli cited the disturbing immorality involved when "states friendly to Israel are aiding groups that are involved in BDS."

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One of the most telling examples of a humanitarian organization pumping funds into terrorism involved World Vision. In August 2016, Israeli authorities revealed that Mohammed El-Halabi, director of the international NGO's Gaza branch, siphoned $7.2 million a year to the Hamas terrorist movement. According to the Israeli government, "more than half of World Vision's resources in the Gaza Strip – originating in aid money from Western states such as the United States, England and Australia – were transferred to Hamas to strengthen its terrorist arm."

After the World Vision terrorism connection was revealed, Australia and Germany swiftly suspended their funding to the NGO.

Gavrieli explained because of the nature of state funding, "We have taken it [the issue of BDS and terrorism finance] to the state level." Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan, for example, has addressed foreign states' interior ministers and security service leaders.

"We are still in the process of communicating this message," said the high-energy Gavrieli, "We see positive results," he added, with scores of banks, online payment service accounts and other financial platforms having closed accounts of BDS groups due to concern over terrorism funding.

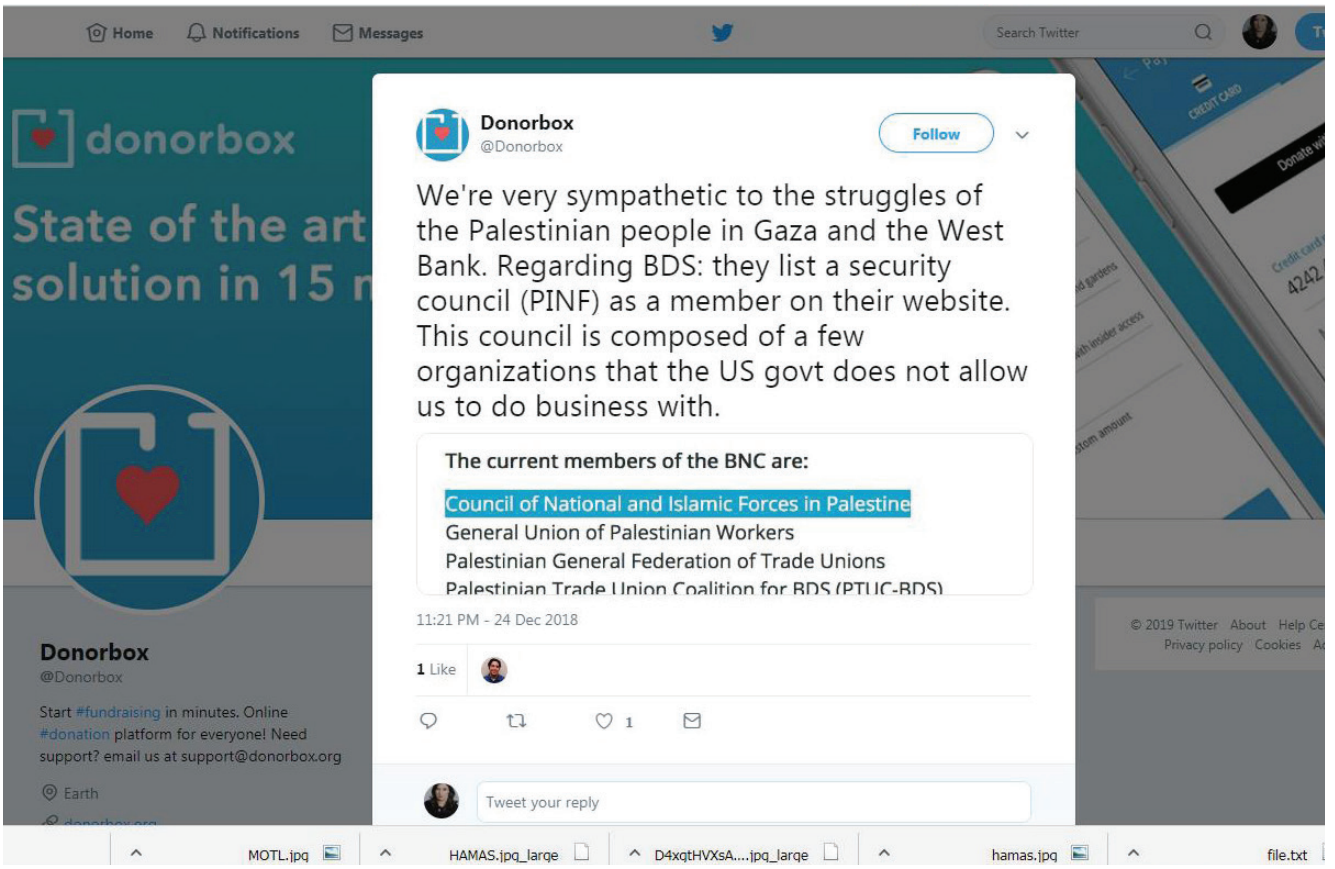
One holdout is the German Bank for Social Economy, which maintains an account for a hardcore BDS group. Erdan urged the bank to close the account. The Simon Wiesenthal Center included the Bank for Social Economy in its 2018 top-10 list of the worst occurrences of antisemitism.

Gavrieli stressed that the ministry "doesn't take all of the credit," because there are a number of "pro-Israel organizations waging war against delegitimization [of Israel] and BDS." He said that there has been a salient shift by states and NGOs, which



▲ Tzahi Gavrieli, Acting Director General, Ministry of Strategic Affairs

(Courtesy)



▲ 'Terrorist organizations have one foot in the terror world and one foot in the legitimate world. They cannot act without bank accounts,' says Nitsana Darshan-Leitner *(Courtesy)*

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previously ignored funding streams and bad actors, to tracking money trails due to terror finance.

The Strategic Affairs Ministry published another monograph in January, "The Money Trail: European Financing of Organizations Promoting Boycotts Against the State of Israel." Along with the sea-change in methodology targeting NGOs and BDS entities tainted with terrorism and antisemitism, the monograph has triggered a long-overdue public conversation about the nature of funding streams. The questions now being asked, according to Strategic Affairs officials, consist of: "Are these organizations connected to terrorism? Are these organizations antisemitic?"

Dr. Shay Har-Zvi, executive director of research in the ministry, said that the German authorities' decision two months ago to deport the convicted terrorist and BDS activist Rasmea Odeh from Berlin was an important step and a clear message that the real face of the BDS activists is revealed. Har-Zvi cited an article on a pro-BDS website in the US a few months ago and said "they [BDS organizations] feel they are under pressure and lack money" due to the counter-attacks.

Har-Zvi, who wrote a dissertation on Jordan's policy toward Jerusalem, said the three stages of financed BDS are: state-sponsored BDS; philanthropy; and financial platforms and crowdsourcing that are the lifeblood of BDS activity. "We have begun to see that European countries have already started to reconsider their grants given to BDS organizations" with respect to unsavory NGOs, said Har-Zvi.

Governments and NGOs "should know if designated terrorist organizations are using a facade" to stoke BDS, said Gavrieli, adding that there is a need for "better due diligence."

The unfolding anti-BDS movement led to the PGGM – the second-largest pension fund in The Netherlands – rescinding its blacklist of five Israeli banks in January. The Dutch pension group had blacklisted the five banks in 2014.

In December 2017, Denmark's government announced that it pulled the plug on funds to Palestinian NGOs because of their links to terrorism. "I am glad that Denmark understood that the Danish taxpayer should not finance, directly or indirectly, Palestinian organizations that have direct connections to terrorist groups," Erdan said at the time. "I call on other countries in Europe to exercise the same moral responsibility and take similar steps."

Following Denmark, Norway's government announced in December 2017 that a "Boycott creates distance, while the Norwegian government believes in dialogue and cooperation to create mutual trust as part of the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The Danish government funded the terrorist-linked NGOs via the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Secretariat in Ramallah. The now defunct controversial and non-transparent Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Secretariat was the main clearinghouse for EU funds to be funneled to NGOs.

Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, head of Shurat HaDin, works to expose the lack of due diligence, with a view toward winning high compensation for victims of terrorism and stopping the finance of proscribed terrorist entities.

Shurat HaDin has a track record of success against targets involved in illicit terror finance. In one case in 2017, the organization won a $178.5 million judgment in US court against Iran and Syria for their material support of Hamas. The court ordered the Sunni terrorist entity to pay damages to the family of Chaya Zissel Braun, a baby girl with US citizenship who was murdered near a station of the Jerusalem Light Rail in 2014. Hamas publicly called the terrorist a "martyr" and a "son" of Hamas.

The Ramallah-based BDS National Committee (BNC) experienced the effectiveness of Shurat HaDin when the US-based online fund-raising platform DonorBox rapidly suspended and then closed its account due to suspected terrorism links. In December 2018, Darshan-Leitner's organization sent an "emergency letter" to DonorBox, and the account was suspended within a week.

DonorBox tweeted after it closed the BNC's account: "This council [BNC] is composed of a few organizations that the US govt does not allow us to do business with."

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In other words, the BNC is tainted by terrorism. "Now the name BNC is toxic," said Darshan-Leitner.

She explained how "terrorist organizations have one foot in the terror world and one foot in the legitimate world. They cannot act without bank accounts. We have the opportunity to go after them." Omar Barghouti, an Israeli resident and co-founder of the BDS campaign, runs the BNC.

BDS assaults on the legitimacy of Israel's existence – or what has become known in anti-BDS circles as "delegitimization" – is the chief concern for Darshan-Leitner, Gavrieli and Har-Zvi.

Darshan-Leitner said the delegitimization attacks are prevalent on college campuses, where students are learning to become future "leaders" in government.

"The students are being brainwashed," she said.

Steinberg's NGO Monitor zooms in on ground-zero of the anti-Israel NGO world: European NGOs and their funding streams. Steinberg does, however, see progress in confronting the anti-Israel NGO sector. "For the last five or six years, the Israeli government has taken [these] NGOs seriously. It is raised at bilateral [government] meetings [with other countries]. That is a change. We see our work being highlighted."

Steinberg sees the adoption by many European countries of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism as important. "When a significant NGO like CMI [Crisis Management Initiative, a group based in Finland] says we abide by the IHRA definition, it can be held to those terms. CMI did it voluntarily and it is a good precedent for other NGOs."

The recently elected Finnish MP Hussein al-Taee, a supporter of the Islamic Republic of Iran who served as an adviser for CMI covering Iraq, was embroiled in an antisemitism, racism and homophobia scandal in May. After revelations in the Israeli and Finnish media about his antisemitic Facebook posts, CMI scrubbed him from its website, and said he would likely not be reemployed. In response to NGO Monitor criticism, CMI accepted the IHRA definition of Jew-hatred that includes expressions of contemporary antisemitism, namely discriminatory attacks on the Jewish state.

Taken together, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and the pro-Israel community in the Diaspora have reversed the BDS momentum from 2005. While still in its infancy, the counter-BDS movement has demonstrated tangible results in the ongoing economic war. In short, the BDS campaign is running scared.

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▲ Nitsana Darshan-Leitner, the founder of the Shurat HaDin Israeli Law Center *(Courtesy)*