

ANALYSIS PAPER

RESISTANCE REVIVED:

MAR 2024

# BDS MOVEMENT GAINS MOMENTUM AMID GAZA GENOCIDE

BY BENJAMIN FÈVE

SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE SPREADS DESPITE ATTEMPTS TO SILENCE ACTIVISM



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

Profound shifts in pro-Palestine activism have been observed since October 7, 2023, underscoring not just a momentary reaction to the Gaza War but a broader realignment in the global perception and engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The groundswell of support, particularly evident in the West, reveals an evolving narrative—one that transcends traditional ideological confines and resonates with a broader spectrum of the population, driven by a shared demand for justice and human rights in the region.

The implications of this shift are profound and multifaceted. The growing discontent and the critical scrutiny of government policies towards Israel, especially among the younger demographics and certain political factions, has the potential to reshape future policy directions, both in the US and internationally.

However, the journey of pro-Palestine activism, notably through the Boycott, Divest and Sanction (BDS) Movement and its affiliated grassroots initiatives, is fraught with complexities and challenges. Despite the marked increase in collective actions and the establishment of robust organisational structures, the actual impact on the ground remains modest. This is primarily due to the intricate political and economic ties between Israel and the West, legal hurdles, and the persistent pro-Israel sentiment in mainstream discourse.

Yet, dismissing the recent developments in pro-Palestine activism as inconsequential would be an oversight. The formation of local, regional, and national networks, the engagement of diverse demographic segments, and the successful instances of boycotts and divestments, though limited, indicate a slow but

persistent shift. These efforts not only amplify the cost for entities engaged with Israel, but also carve out a larger arena for Palestinian advocacy and narratives.

Thus, while the path to a meaningful and impactful pro-Palestine activism is laden with obstacles, the recent developments signal a paradigm shift in global consciousness. As such, these changes, while nascent, represent a burgeoning movement with the potential for substantial long-term influence.

## SUPPORT FOR PALESTINE GROWS DEEP AND WIDE

---

The Gaza War has been followed by notable 'quantitative and 'qualitative' shifts in solidarity with Palestine in the West, according to Sai Englert, a lecturer on Middle East political economy at Leiden University in the Netherlands. The most apparent quantitative evidence has been the [mass demonstrations](#) since October 7. The United States has seen its largest Palestine-focused demonstrations [in the country's history](#), while protests in the United Kingdom have been [described as](#) the largest since those against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. [Paris, Rome, Madrid](#), and many [other cities](#) across the west have also seen significant rallies.

Opinion polls in recent months have helped to quantify these increasing pro-Palestinian public sympathies. An initial poll conducted by The Economist/YouGov between [October 8 and 10](#) revealed that 9 percent of American respondents were sympathetic to Palestine, with this figure rising to 17 percent by [March 2024](#). During the same period, pro-Israel sympathies decreased from 42 percent to 32 percent. Similarly, in the UK those saying that they supported

the Palestinian side increased from 15 to 28 percent between [October 9](#) and [March 8](#).

While these figures remain relatively low, favourable sentiment towards Palestinians is much stronger among specific segments of the population, such as younger respondents, liberals, and ethnic minorities.

In the [United States](#), polls in March showed respondents aged 18 to 29 were more sympathetic to Palestinians than Israelis—27 percent vs 17 percent. The reality of this statistic is reflected in the [frequently](#) occurring protests on [university campuses](#). Other self-identified groups that showed greater sympathy for Palestinians included Democrats (25 percent vs 19 percent) and liberals (35 percent against 16 percent). Among [British respondents](#), 47 percent of the 18 to 24 demographic sympathized with Palestinians vs 9 percent with Israelis, with 48 percent of Labour party respondents supporting the Palestinian cause (see Figure 1).

The ‘qualitative shift’ has seen far more senior and influential figures voicing support for Palestine. As an example, Englert point to, “people within the civil service, such as state employees, are starting to break rank, and some even resigning.”

Among other examples are US Senator Bernie Sanders, who has [questioned the unconditional aid](#) provided to Israel, and US Senator Elizabeth Warren who also declared “[no more blank checks for Netanyahu](#).” Former director at the State Department Josh Paul [resigned over arms deliveries](#) to the Jewish state, while Craig Mokhiber, the director of the New York office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), resigned. In Spain, the Barcelona Municipality [suspended](#) its ties with Israel

“*The ‘qualitative shift’ [in Palestine support] has seen far more senior and influential figures voicing support for Palestine... This spectrum of support transcends traditional ideological boundaries.*”

over Israel’s humans rights violations, as Social Rights Minister Ione Belarra [called on the European Union](#) to sanction Israel. Most recently, the Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez [declared](#) on March 9, 2024, that he will propose that the Spanish parliament recognise a Palestinian state. In Ireland, Prime Minister Leo Varadkar also [declared](#) that his government would be in favour of recognising the state of Palestine. In the Netherlands, a Dutch court [ruled against](#) the government by ordering it to halt the deliveries of F-35 fighter jet parts used by the Israeli army. In France, the Foreign Ministry [expressed frustrations](#) with the French President’s handling of the war.

As a result, the Palestine cause, often been seen as fringe issue in western politics, has been mainstreamed, thereby creating a spectrum of support that transcends traditional ideological boundaries.

## **RISING BDS MOMENTUM AND THE BACKLASH**

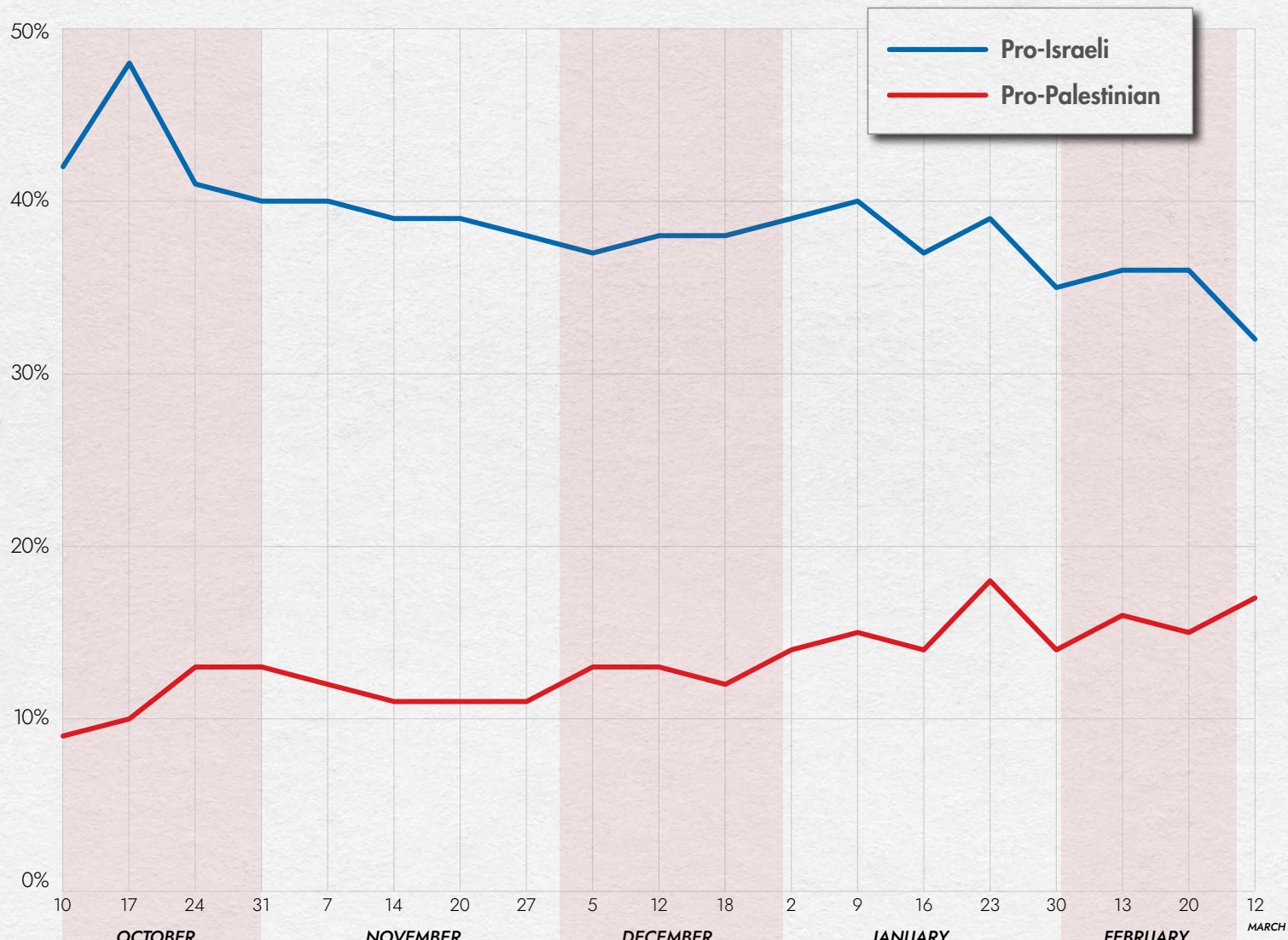
Established in 2005, the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction Movement has aimed to apply economic and political

## Pro-Palestinian & Pro-Israeli Sympathies in the General Population

USA, between October 10, 2023 and March 12, 2024



**GENERAL POPULATION**

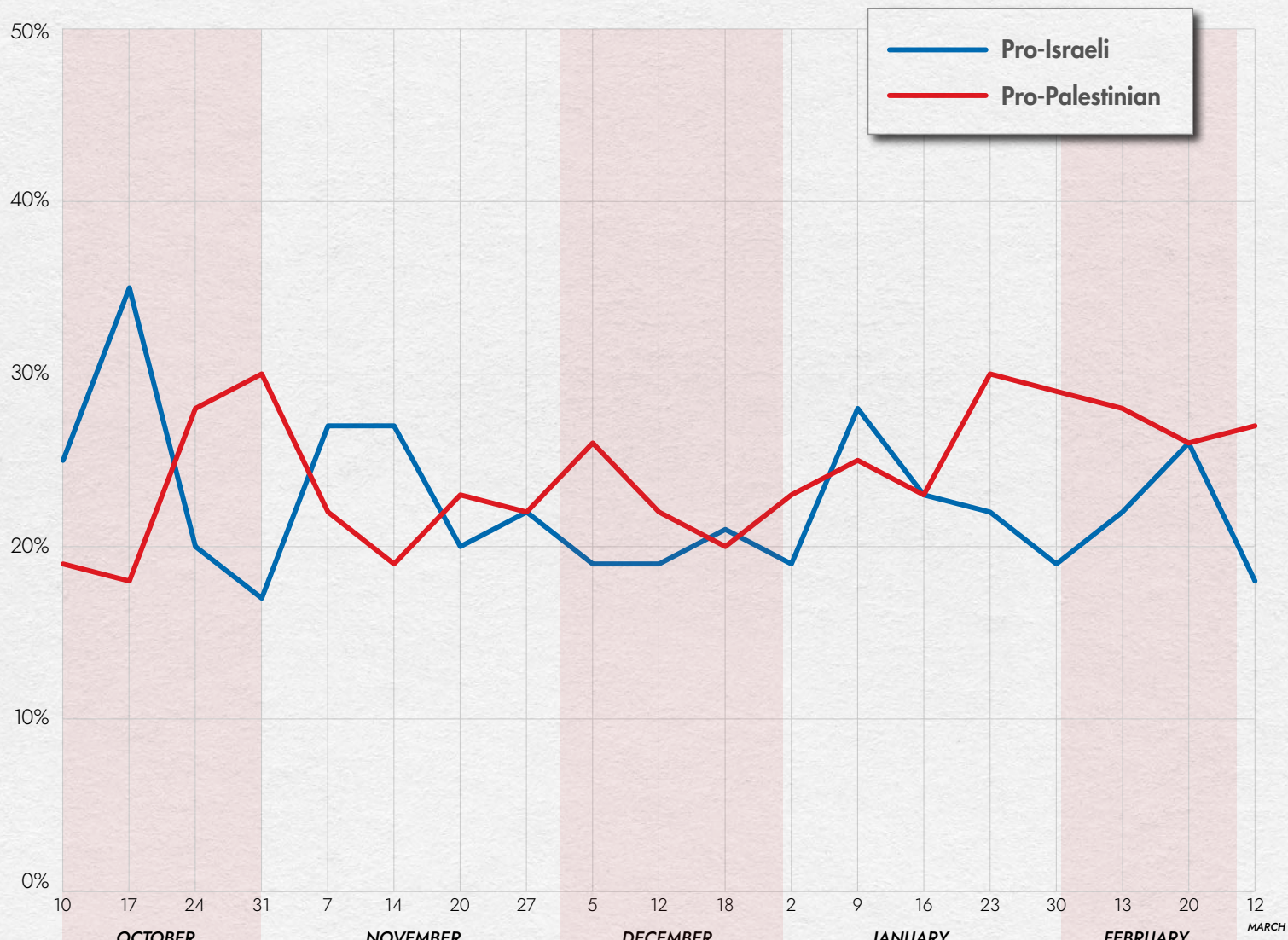


## Pro-Palestinian & Pro-Israeli Sympathies in the 18 to 29 Age Range

USA, between October 10, 2023 and March 12, 2024



**18 TO 29 YEARS OLD**

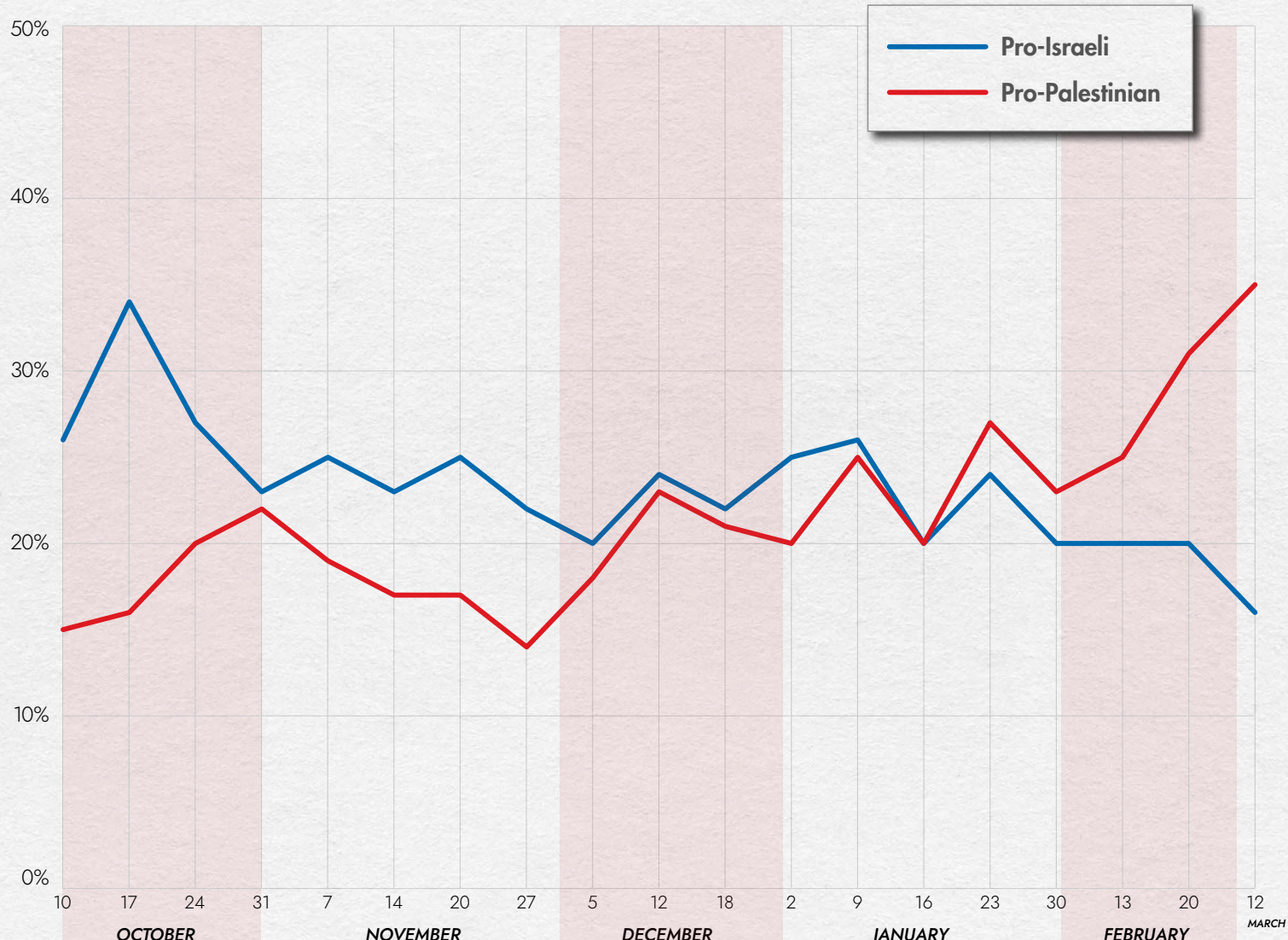


## Pro-Palestinian & Pro-Israeli Sympathies among Democrats

USA, between October 10, 2023 and March 12, 2024



**DEMOCRATS**



pressure on Israel to readdress its [persecution and apartheid](#) policies towards Palestinians. The boycott aspect involves consumers actively avoiding products and services associated with Israel, divestment actions mean pushing institutions and companies to withdraw their investments from Israel, and sanction efforts are meant to lobby governments to impose economic and political restrictions.

Prior to October 7, 2023, the BDS movement had claimed many successes. Namely, positing that its targeted campaigns led to multinational companies such as Veolia, Orange, G4S, General Mills, and CRH exiting the Israeli market, and [HSBC bank](#) and the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund divesting from Elbit, Israel's largest arms manufacturer. The companies and institutions in question, however, regularly cite business or regulatory concerns as prompting their decisions. Gaging how much BDS campaigns weighed on their boardroom decisions is therefore unclear. Even when [NSWF publicly stated](#) that Elbit's role in securing illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank prompted its divestment, the announcement made no mention of the BDS movement.

“

***"As the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) continue to militarily pulverise the Gaza Strip in the months since Operation Al Aqsa Flood, further momentum has built to disassociate from Israel both commercially and financially."***

”

As the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) continue to militarily pulverise the Gaza Strip in the months since Operation Al Aqsa Flood, further momentum has built to disassociate from Israel both commercially and financially. For example, various global pension funds have [divested](#) from their Israeli investments, while the Norwegian Pension Fund's sale of nearly half a billion dollars' worth of Israeli government bonds contributed, [according to activists](#), to Moody's [downgrading Israel's credit rating](#) for the first time in the country's history in February. Again, it is difficult to discern how much these moves were based on the sound business calculation that a country at war is unsafe for investment, or the ethical and reputational risks of being seen as financing Israel's slaughter of Gazans and apartheid policies in the West Bank. Or, perhaps, a convenient combination of both.

In other instances, the motivation has been clear. For example, in February 2024 the student government at the University of California Davis [voted to prohibit](#) any of its \$20 million budget from being spent on "companies complicit in the occupation and genocide", citing corporations such as McDonald's, Sabra, Starbucks, Airbnb, Disney and Chevron.

Starbucks, in particular, became a symbol of the boycott movement after the company's board sued the Starbucks Workers United union, encompassing some 360 stores and 9,000 employees, for an October 9 "Solidarity with Palestine" post on X (formerly Twitter). McDonald's became a boycott target after McDonald's Israel announced that it [provided thousands of free meals](#) to the IDF. While analysts argue that the boycott campaign against Starbucks has only had a [negligible impact](#), Al-Shaya Group, the Starbucks franchise owner in the Middle East and

North Africa region, reportedly **plans to cut 4 percent of its workforce** across the region “as a result of the continually challenging trading conditions over the last six months”. At the same time, McDonalds **reported “meaningful” negative impact** on its business in the Middle East, though the region constitutes just 5 percent of the company’s global business.

A growing number of **labour unions globally** have also taken steps to show solidarity with Palestine. This included dock workers in countries like the **US, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Greece**, refusing to handle military equipment bound for Israel. Last month in **India**, workers across 11 ports refused to handle all cargo ships transporting weapons to Israel following a motion from one of the country’s major trade unions. Meanwhile, in higher education, a substantial number of academics have advocated for their institutions to **cut off relations** with Israeli academic entities due to the escalating conflict in Gaza.

International sanctions against the Israeli state still seem politically unpalatable for most western governments. However, some American and European lawmakers have attempted to temporarily stave off public criticism by sanctioning **extremist Israeli settlers** in the West Bank.

## **BUILDING THE NETWORKS OF RESISTANCE AMID BACKLASH**

Despite growing support for the aims of the BDS movement, none has proven effective in dissuading Israel from its military assault on Gaza, which the International Court of Justice has said “**plausibly**” **constitutes genocide**. Neither has the increased pro-Palestinian solidarity prompted Israel’s staunchest ally, the US, from continuing to replenish the Israeli campaign with weapons as well

as repeatedly vetoing United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire.

Western policymakers have, for years, sought to directly counter the BDS movement. For instance, nearly 300 bills have been introduced in various US states since 2014 to try to limit actions related to BDS. As of March 2024, **23 percent of these bills** were passed across 38 states. The UK legislators have similarly **sought to quell** BDS activism.

This legal stance, coupled with public campaigns branding BDS supporters as anti-Semitic, fosters an antagonistic atmosphere, deterring potential allies and casting doubt on the movement’s intentions and legitimacy, thereby **compromising its effectiveness and outreach**. Students and academics demonstrating for Palestine have also frequently been **targets for retaliation** across the US and Europe.

It is thus apparent that despite the recent growth in pro-Palestine support, it remains overshadowed by a more pervasive pro-Israeli sentiment. This disparity manifests in public opinion, media representation, and political discourse, curtailing the efficacy of pro-Palestinian advocacy in these areas.

“**A growing number of labour unions globally have also taken steps to show solidarity with Palestine. This included dock workers in countries like the US, Spain, Belgium, Italy, and Greece, refusing to handle military equipment bound for Israel.**”

“

***“Building intersectional, progressive ‘people power’ to effect policy change, asserting that real change goes beyond legal and moral arguments and requires a strong, mobilised public to achieve social, racial, and justice goals.”***

”

The current popular mobilisation has, however, provided an opportunity for people to organise locally, nationally, and internationally. As Englert points out, “activists have been establishing robust organisational structures, such as setting up committees and networks, which not only foster a solid foundation for advocacy, but also provide a constructive outlet for people to express their concerns and actively engage in the movement.”

Increased mobilisation has accompanied previous escalations of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. “Wars on Gaza like those in 2021, 2018, and 2014, consistently spark a surge in activism,” according to Sami Hermez, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University in Qatar. He adds that this draws “both new and passionate individuals to the BDS movement, driven by a compelling need to contribute to change.” In academic and cultural circles, those previously mobilised have helped onboard those newly engaged with the Palestinian struggle. Often, while pro-Palestinian social groups align with the BDS Movement’s ideology and framework, they are not explicitly associated, helping to insulate them and their members from legal or reputational risk.

The ‘quantitative’ and ‘qualitative’ shifts are all the more significant in the current western context of growing right-wing populism, according to Joseph Daher, author and academic specialised in the Middle

East, which “would traditionally play against a broad Palestinian solidarity.”

In realising the objectives put forward by the BDS Movement, these should not be viewed as absolutes. Englert argues that “it’s a misconception to believe that the BDS movement will directly halt a war or end the colonial project in Palestine” but that the movement’s “true potency lies in escalating the cost for companies, institutions, and governments engaged with Israel,” which, in turn, amplifies “the pressure for change and carving out a larger space for Palestinian agency.”

In that sense, the Gaza War’s cost for the West could prove significant. While the economic cost associated with BDS-related activism remains difficult to assess, the political price is already apparent. The growing discontent among large swathes of the Democrat electorate have the Biden administration anxious about the president’s November 2024 re-election. About half of young Americans [consider](#) that a genocide is taking place in Gaza, so do registered Democrats.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Speaking recently, Omar Barghouti, co-founder of the BDS Movement, [emphasised the necessity](#) of collective action in several ways. He specifically noted the need to disrupt the “business as usual” mindset in complicit state institutions, corporations, and cultural

entities, and to escalate boycott and divestment campaigns against strategically chosen targets, rather than pursuing an endless list of complicit companies. Barghouti advocated pressuring governments to implement lawful sanctions on Israel and shifting the mainstream narrative in the West through accurate and ethical communication. He underscored the necessity of building intersectional, progressive “people power” to effect policy change, asserting that real change goes beyond legal and moral arguments and requires a strong, mobilised public to achieve social, racial, and justice goals.

Doing this requires cultivating and enhancing networks for solidarity and action. It’s crucial to encourage individuals and groups sympathetic to the cause to establish or join local BDS support circles. These communities are pivotal in fostering a sense of solidarity, sharing valuable insights, and orchestrating coordinated local boycott and divestment campaigns. The strength of these networks lies in their ability to bring together diverse voices and resources, creating a unified force to advocate for the Palestinian cause.

**“Identifying and aligning with movements that have overlapping objectives, such as anti-racism and freedom of expression, creates a unified front against shared challenges.”**

Extending beyond grassroots initiatives, this should also encompass professional sectors such as workers’ unions, academia, culture, and public service, as discussed above. These professional networks are pivotal in amplifying the movement’s impact as they integrate society vertically. The synergy of these professional networks with grassroots initiatives creates a multifaceted force, enhancing the reach and effectiveness of collective actions. However, a key consideration Hermez points to, “is to make sure the movement’s networks are secure and not infiltrated, [...] something the Israelis will try to exploit,” thus making “the exponential rise in supporters both a challenge and an opportunity.”

Another crucial step is to empower newcomers and optimise collective efforts. Providing comprehensive guidance and resources is essential to familiarise new supporters with the movement’s objectives and methodologies. This is where the role of well-established networks becomes critical. While the BDS National Committee already offers substantial guidance, the reality is that individuals seeking to engage with the movement come from diverse backgrounds and face unique circumstances. As such, a one-size-fits-all approach is not sufficient. Students, workers, and academics, for instance, operate in different environments and possess varying degrees of influence and resources. Therefore, they should be encouraged to act in ways that are distinct yet coherent and complementary to each other.

This is especially important considering that newcomers, likely to be inexperienced in mobilisation, are liable to create more chaos than structure. For instance, individuals eager to do *something* will start by circulating long lists of companies complicit in Israel’s actions



towards Palestinians, encompassing hundreds of names. However, these broad 'boycott lists' that emerged following the Gaza War, though well-intentioned, may prove overwhelming and counter-productive for newcomers. In several instances, they have diverted focus from the BDS's carefully selected targets known for their complicity in Israeli policies, according to Hermez.

Another step is building robust ties with other social justice and human rights movements. Identifying and aligning with movements that have overlapping objectives, such as anti-racism and freedom of expression, creates a unified front against shared challenges. Establishing mutual dialogue and understanding is crucial, as it lays the foundation for collaborative action. By recognising the interconnectedness of their struggles, these diverse movements can pool their resources, share strategies, and amplify their collective voice. This is what Barghouti [recently highlighted](#), arguing that since opponents of the BDS Movement "are very intersectional and all gang up against us, minority movements must connect, unite, and uncover the injustices that bind us. It's not just a principled ethical issue; it's a pragmatic one. We need each other to succeed because our enemies are so powerful."

Joint initiatives and campaigns are pivotal in this collaborative effort. Pro-Palestine activists can partner with groups fighting systemic racism to highlight parallels between their struggles, such as discrimination, profiling, and militarised suppression. Organising combined protests, awareness campaigns, and educational workshops can effectively draw attention to these shared issues. This approach not only increases the visibility and impact of the movements involved but also educates and engages a broader

audience, fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of their causes.

Communicating better and addressing the narrative surrounding pro-Palestine activism is also key. This should involve strategic communication, education, and transparency. Firstly, efforts to educate the public about the reasons for taking particular actions are crucial. In the context of boycotts, an emphasis should be placed on educating the public about boycotting specific companies and the expected impact of these actions.

Secondly, it's vital to counter misconceptions and help foster a positive image of the BDS Movement, emphasising its focus on human rights, international law, and ethical practices. Building on the need to create intersectionality between social justice groups, maintaining a positive image for the Movement would entail collaborating with organisations that support human rights and oppose unjust policies, regardless of their religious or cultural background. Furthermore, all BDS communication should be carefully crafted as to make sure that it "does not give an extra excuse for repression," as [highlighted](#) by Omar Barghouti.

Thirdly, developing robust mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of boycotts and divestment campaigns enables the movement to track progress and refine strategies. Establishing systems for monitoring the financial impact of boycotts, changes in public opinion, and shifts in institutional policies is crucial. Collaborating with research institutions to analyse market trends and consumer behaviour, and transparently communicating this data, will build trust, demonstrate accountability, and showcase the tangible impact of the movement's efforts.