

# Media giant Axel Springer makes money on Israel's illegal settlements



✓ A picture taken from the Palestinian village of Karmah shows the Jewish settlement of Otniel on June 22, 2020.  
● HAZEM BADER/AFP

By Hanno Hauenstein  
Independent journalist

## PERSPECTIVE

One of the ways Germany sought to deal with its dark 20th-century past is its so-called *Staatsräson* — literally its reason of state — to support Israel. The commitment, which permeates German mass media, intensified after Hamas's October 7 attack and the subsequent Israeli war against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Axel Springer SE, Europe's largest publisher, typifies the approach. The owners of *Bild*, Germany's leading newspaper, Springer takes an unwavering pro-Israel stance. "God bless the IDF," *Die Welt*, a Springer-owned German daily, declared in a recent editorial. And the company's CEO wrote in Springer-owned *Politico* that the chants of "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" were tantamount to calling for genocide against Jews, a position in line with the German government's November declaration that the slogan was il-

legal.

Defending Israel against criticisms of human rights violations, however, is one thing. Making money off those violations is another. Yet that's exactly what Springer appears to be doing. Springer's Israeli classified ads website *Yad2* — the largest Craigslist-like classifieds site in the country — publishes real estate listings across Israel, including rental apartments and sales in Israeli settlements that are considered illegal under international law.

## What's BDS, the movement to boycott Israel?

By Frances Vinal  
Award-winning journalist

## PERSPECTIVE

Opponents of Israel's punishing war in the Gaza Strip have called for boycotts of companies they claim support Israeli policies, and have drawn millions of views on social media. Customers, particularly in the Middle East, have refrained from patronizing companies like Starbucks and McDonald's. The coffee giant has said in response to criticism that it is against all violence, while the fast-food chain has said it doesn't support either side in the conflict.

The calls have dovetailed with an almost two-decade-old movement — called BDS for Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions — that protests Israel's actions in the Palestinian territories by targeting businesses and institutions accused of aiding violations of Palestinian rights.

Over 18 years, BDS has pressured some companies to end investment in Israel, and others to pull operations out of the occupied West Bank. But the BDS movement's overall effect on Israel's economy is hard to conclusively measure and could be minimal, analysts say.

BDS is an organization run by a committee and has specific targets and strategies. It includes a coalition of Palestinian organizations, but is decentralized by design, endorsing a system in which activists decide what to target and how if they agree with BDS's principles.

It has found an influx of new adherents. By two months after the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel and the beginning of the war, the hashtag *#boycottisrael* had about 340 million views on TikTok, and *#BDS* at least 3 billion, although the latter captures some posts on other topics. By January, there were almost half a million posts hashtagged *#boycottisrael* and 887,000 hashtagged *#BDS* on Instagram.

Some users, but not all, name-check BDS and direct followers to its website, despite largely not coordinating with its leadership. The BDS official account shared a post on Instagram last year, voicing support of recent "grassroots" social media campaigns and endorsing new boycotting targets that had emerged organically.

"All peaceful popular efforts, including boycott and divestment... are justified and called for," it said on Instagram in November, while simultaneously calling for a more targeted approach than it had sometimes seen on social media since October 7.

### What is BDS?

BDS co-founder Omar Barghouti said the movement began in 2005, inspired by the boycotts that helped end apartheid in South Africa and the nonviolent methods of the US civil rights movement. Rights groups and some international law experts have accused Israel of committing apartheid, a crime against humanity under international law. Israeli officials reject comparisons to South Africa's former regime and say Israel's tight controls on the West Bank and Gaza

are needed for security. Barghouti, a Palestinian who resides in Israel, said in an email that the BDS movement has three goals. It is focused on ending Israel's occupation of land it captured and annexed in 1967 — which includes the West Bank and Gaza — and dismantling barriers that separate the territories from Israel; gaining "full equality" for Palestinian citizens of Israel; and establishing a right of re-

turn for Palestinian refugees, he said. The movement calls for boycotts of corporations and institutions seen as supporting Israel's stance toward the Palestinians, including through the contribution of financing, goods, and services, or cultural backing. BDS also calls for a withdrawal of investment in "complicit" projects, an end to specific company activities in Israel, and sanctions against the country, according to Barghouti.

### What do BDS critics say?

The BDS movement has faced stiff opposition in the United States. The European Union also rejects the movement, and bloc countries including Germany have criticized it. Britain last month banned local councils from participating in boycotting Israel.

Measures against it have passed in more than 30 US states — often prohibiting public money from going to an entity or individual involved in an anti-Israel boycott — although a few of these have been successfully challenged on First Amendment grounds. Five years

ago, the US House overwhelmingly passed a measure condemning BDS. A particular sticking point is the BDS movement's call for a right of return for Palestinians — and their descendants — who were displaced from what is now Israel during the state's creation in 1948.

This seeks to "destroy the Jewish state" because it would "create a Palestinian majority" outnumbering Jews, AIPAC has said. An estimated 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled 75 years ago, into the West Bank, Gaza, and else-

where, and their descendants number in the millions.

Barghouti said the movement is not antisemitic and opposes "all forms of racism and discrimination". BDS supporters have argued that suppressing the movement shuts down a leading path for nonviolent protest. "A boycott has a very long tradition of being something that people can do who are otherwise not necessarily very powerful," said John Chalcraft, a professor of Middle East history and politics at the London School of Economics.