Arab League Boycott of Israel

Summary

The Arab League, an umbrella organization comprising 23 Middle Eastern and African countries and entities, has maintained an official boycott of Israeli companies and Israeli-made goods since the founding of Israel in 1948. The boycott is administered by the Damascus-based Central Boycott Office, a specialized bureau of the Arab League.

The boycott has three tiers. The primary boycott prohibits citizens of an Arab League member from buying from, selling to, or entering into a business contract with either the Israeli government or an Israeli citizen. The secondary boycott extends the primary boycott to any entity world-wide that does business in Israel. A blacklist of global firms that engage in business with Israel is maintained by the Central Boycott Office, and disseminated to Arab League members. The tertiary boycott prohibits an Arab League member and its nationals from doing business with a company that deals with companies that have been blacklisted by the Arab League.

The U.S. government has often been at the forefront of international efforts to end the boycott and its enforcement. Despite U.S. efforts, however, many Arab League countries continue to support the boycott’s enforcement. U.S. legislative action related to the boycott dates from 1959 and includes multiple statutory provisions expressing U.S. opposition to the boycott, usually in foreign assistance legislation. In 1977, Congress passed laws making it illegal for U.S. companies to cooperate with the boycott and authorizing the imposition of civil and criminal penalties against U.S. violators. U.S. companies are required to report to the Department of Commerce any requests to comply with the Arab League Boycott. In FY2007, U.S. companies submitted 1,633 reports on boycott-related requests. During the same period, penalties for violating U.S. anti-boycott legislation worth $194,500 were levied on ten companies. This is an increase from FY2006, when 1,291 reports were filed and penalties of $95,950 were assessed on nine companies.

This report provides background information on the boycott and U.S. efforts to end its enforcement. It will be updated as events warrant. More information on Israel is contained in CRS Report RL33476, Israel: Background and Relations with the United States, by Carol Migdalovitz.
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Arab League Boycott of Israel

Background

The Arab League is an umbrella organization comprising 23 Middle Eastern and African countries and entities. Arab League members are Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Mauritania, Somalia, Palestinian Authority, Djibouti, and Comoros. In 2003, Eritrea joined the Arab League as an observer.

The Arab League was founded in 1944, and in 1945 began a boycott of Zionist goods and services in the British controlled mandate territory of Palestine. In 1948, following the war establishing Israel’s independence, the boycott was formalized against the state of Israel and broadened to include non-Israelis who maintain economic relations with Israel or who are perceived to support it. The boycott is administered by the Damascus-based Central Boycott Office, a specialized bureau of the Arab League.¹

The U.S. government has often been at the forefront of international efforts to end enforcement of the boycott and to seek the Arab League’s revocation of it. The U.S. government participates in bilateral and multilateral negotiations with Arab League members regarding the boycott. U.S. legislative action related to the boycott dates from 1959 and includes multiple statutory provisions expressing U.S. opposition to the boycott, usually in foreign assistance legislation. In 1965, Congress adopted mandatory reporting of any requests for U.S. companies to participate in the boycott. In 1977, Congress passed laws making it illegal for U.S. companies to cooperate with the boycott and authorizing the imposition of civil and criminal penalties against U.S. violators. According to the Department of Commerce, participation in the boycott includes

- Agreements to refuse or actual refusal to do business with or in Israel or with blacklisted companies;
- Agreements to discriminate or actual discrimination against other persons based on race, religion, sex, national origin or nationality;
- Agreements to furnish or actual furnishing of information about business relationships with or in Israel or with blacklisted companies; and/or

Current Status of the Boycott

The boycott has three tiers. The primary boycott prohibits citizens of an Arab League member from buying from, selling to, or entering into a business contract with either the Israeli government or an Israeli citizen. The secondary boycott extends the primary boycott to any entity world-wide that does business with Israel. A blacklist of global firms that engage in business with Israel is maintained by the Central Boycott Office, and disseminated to Arab League members. The tertiary boycott prohibits an Arab League member and its nationals from doing business with a company that in turn deals with companies that have been blacklisted by the Arab League. The boycott also applies to companies that the Arab League identifies as having “Zionist sympathizers” in executive positions or on the board of the company. According to one analyst, the “nature and detail of these rules reflect the boycotting countries’ tolerance for only the most minimal contacts with Israel.”

The Arab League does not enforce the boycott and boycott regulations are not binding on member states. However, the regulations have been the model for various laws implemented by member countries. The League recommends that member countries demand certificates of origin on all goods acquired from suppliers to ensure that such goods meet all aspects of the boycott.

Overall enforcement of the boycott by member countries appears sporadic. Some Arab League members have limited trading relations with Israel. The Arab League does not formally or publicly state which countries enforce the boycott and which do not. Some Arab League member governments have maintained that only the Arab League, as the formal body enforcing the boycott, can revoke the boycott. However, adherence to the boycott is an individual matter for each Arab League member and enforcement varies by state.

There are indications that some Arab League countries publicly support the boycott while continuing to quietly trade with Israel. According to Doron Peskin,

2 See: [http://www.bis.doc.gov/complianceandenforcement/antiboycottcompliance.htm].

head of research at InfoProd, a consulting firm for foreign and Israeli companies specializing in trade with Arab states, “the Arab boycott is now just lip service.”

This sentiment has been echoed by Arab officials, albeit anonymously. One official commented to the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram* that, “boycotting Israel is something that we talk about and include in our official documents but it is not something that we actually carry out — at least not in most Arab states.”

Others assert that enforcement of the boycott waxes and wanes with the level of intensity of the Israeli-Palestinian issue and that currently interest in boycott enforcement among Arab countries may be increasing due to the ongoing Iraq conflict. However, the Arab League has acknowledged that U.S. pressure has affected its ability to maintain the boycott. At the May 2006 Arab League conference on the boycott, one conference participant reportedly said, “The majority of Arab countries are evading the boycott, notably the Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia.” He added that a major reason for these countries bypassing the boycott is “growing U.S. pressures in the direction of normalization with the Jewish state.”

Some states and entities have formally ended the boycott, or at least some aspects of it. Egypt (1979), the Palestinian Authority (1993), and Jordan (1994) signed peace treaties or agreements that ended the boycott. Mauritania, which never applied the boycott, established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia do not enforce the boycott. In 1994, the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates — announced that they would only enforce the primary boycott. In 1996, the GCC states recognized that total elimination of the boycott is a necessary step for peace and economic development in the region. However, U.S. companies continue to receive requests to cooperate with the boycott from GCC member countries. Lebanon enforces the primary, secondary, and tertiary boycotts.

**Impact of the Boycott**

Since the boycott is sporadically applied and ambiguously enforced, its impact, measured by capital or revenue denied to Israel by companies adhering to the boycott,
is difficult to measure. The effect of the primary boycott appears limited since intra-regional trade and investment are small. Nonetheless, there is some limited trade between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In 2004, according to the Manufacturers Association of Israel (IMA), Israeli exports to Arab countries and entities (mainly Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority) totaled $192 million.  

Enforcement of the secondary and tertiary boycotts have decreased over time, reducing their effect. A 1996 study by researchers at Tel Aviv University looked at the effect of the Arab boycott on the Israeli economy through the automobile market. Following a relaxation of boycott enforcement in the late 1980s through the early 1990s, Asian countries began exporting cars to Israel. The study found that if the boycott had continued to be enforced, and these cars did not enter the Israeli market, the Israeli car market would have been 12% smaller – leading to a $790 price increase per car. Total welfare loss for the study year, 1994, would have been an estimated $89 million. Thus, it appears that since intra-regional trade is small, and that the secondary and tertiary boycotts are not aggressively enforced, the boycott may not currently have an extensive effect on the Israeli economy.

Despite the lack of economic impact on either Israeli or Arab economies, the boycott remains of strong symbolic importance to all parties. Many Arab countries want to deny normalization with Israel until there is a final resolution to the conflict in the Palestinian territories. Israel, on the other hand, asserts that it wants to be accepted in the neighborhood both in political terms and as a source of, and target for, foreign investment.

U.S. Activity to End the Arab League Boycott of Israel

The U.S. government officially opposes the boycott and works to end its enforcement on multiple levels. For many years, language has been included in successive foreign operations appropriations legislation concerning the boycott. Section 635 of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2008 (P.L. 110-161), states that it is the sense of Congress that (1) the Arab League boycott is an impediment to peace in the region and to United States investment and trade in the region; (2) the boycott should be revoked and the Central Boycott Office disbanded; (3) all Arab League states should normalize relations with Israel; and (4) the President and the Secretary of State should continue to oppose the boycott vigorously and encourage

11 “Exports from Israel Up, Up, Up!,” Bridges for Peace, June 27, 2005. U.S. efforts to increase trade in the region include the Qualified Industrial Zone (QIZ) program, which allows goods jointly produced by Israel and either Jordan or Egypt to enter the United States duty free. See CRS Report RS22002, Qualifying Industrial Zones in Jordan and Egypt, by Mary Jane Bolle, Alfred B. Prados, and Jeremy M. Sharp.


Arab states to assume normal trading relations with Israel; and (5) the President 
should report to Congress annually on specific steps being taken by the United States 
to encourage Arab League states to normalize their relations with Israel to bring 
about the termination of the boycott.

The U.S. government also works to end the boycott through bilateral and 
multilateral trade agreements. During FTA negotiations with Bahrain, Oman, and 
the United Arab Emirates, the status of the boycott was an issue of concern and these 
countries reaffirmed their position not to comply with the boycott.\(^\text{14}\) However, the 
credibility of their position has been questioned since all three countries outwardly 
continue to support the boycott. In June 2006, an Omani customs official reportedly 
told *The Jerusalem Post*, “Products from Israel are not permitted because of the 
boycott ... If someone brings products from Israel, they will be confiscated.”\(^\text{15}\) In 
reported remarks before Bahrain’s Chamber of Commerce, Bahraini Foreign Minister 
Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa stated that “relations would be normal with 
Israel when the Arab League orders the Arab countries to end the boycott, and until 
then the Kingdom was sticking to the boycott.”\(^\text{16}\)

The United States began negotiating an FTA with the United Arab Emirates 
(UAE) in 2005 and their enforcement of the boycott has been a contentious issue 
during the negotiations. In February 2006, at the height of debate in the United 
States over whether to allow Dubai Ports World to have control over six U.S. ports, 
Muhammad Rashid a-Din, a staff member of the Dubai Customs Department 
reportedly told *The Jerusalem Post*, “Yes, of course the boycott is still in place and 
is still enforced ... if a product contained even some components that were made in 
Israel, and you wanted to import it to Dubai, it would be a problem.”\(^\text{17}\) As of July 
2008, the U.S.-UAE FTA talks are on hold, and it is expected that talks will not 
resume during the Bush Administration.\(^\text{18}\)

Multilaterally, the United States has used Saudi Arabia’s accession to the World 
Trade Organization in return for its agreement in November 2005 that it would cease 
participation in the boycott. Despite this concession, it appears that Saudi Arabia’s 
enforcement of the boycott is ongoing. The Bush Administration argues in the 2007 
National Trade Estimate Report (NTE) that Saudi boycott violations “appear to

\(^{14}\) 2007 National Trade Estimate, *op. cit.* For more information, see CRS Report RS21846, 
*U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement*, by Martin A. Weiss and CRS Report RL32638, 
*Middle East Free Trade Area: Progress Report*, by Mary Jane Bolle.

\(^{15}\) Michael Freund, “Boycott of Israel still in effect, Omani official tells ‘Post’,” *The 
Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2006.

\(^{16}\) Michael Freund, “Bahrain’s Israel Boycott to Continue,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 11, 
2006.

\(^{17}\) Michael Freund, “Dubai Ports Firm Enforces Israel Boycott,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 

\(^{18}\) Safura Rahimi, “US puts UAE free trade deal on ice,” *Emirates Business 24/7*, December 
reflect out-of-date language in recycled commercial and tender documents.” However, in June 2006, The Jerusalem Post said that Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the United States told a luncheon audience at the Brookings Institution that Saudi Arabia intends to continue enforcing the primary boycott. Reportedly, Prince Turki Al-Faisel stated that he believed “the primary boycott is an issue of national sovereignty guaranteed within the makeup of the WTO and its rules.”

Lastly, concerns have emerged that Iraq has increased its own enforcement of the Boycott in the past several years, due to increasing frustration with the ongoing violence and U.S. presence. In FY2007, the number of requests from Iraq for U.S. companies to comply with the boycott was 72, an increase from 31 in FY2006 and 8 in 2005. The Commerce Department reports that for all boycott countries, during FY2007, U.S. companies submitted 1,633 reports on boycott-related requests from Arab League members and other countries that enforced the boycott on Israel (Table 1). The United Arab Emirates remained the largest source of boycott-related requests with 682 requests.

### Table 1. FY2007 Boycott Requests Received by U.S. Companies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Requests to Comply with the Secondary and Tertiary Boycotts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates (UAE)</td>
<td>682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
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### U.S. Antiboycott Compliance Legislation

The United States passed antiboycott legislation in the late 1970s to discourage U.S. individuals from cooperating with the secondary and tertiary boycotts. Antiboycott laws apply to “U.S. exports and imports, financing, forwarding and shipping, and certain other transactions that may take place wholly offshore.”

Although U.S. legislation and practices were designed to counteract the Arab League boycott of Israel, in practice, they apply to all non-sanctioned boycotts. According to the Department of Commerce’s Office of Antiboycott Compliance, the legislation was enacted to “encourage, and in specified cases, require U.S. firms to refuse to participate in foreign boycotts that the United States does not sanction. They [the legislation] have the effect of preventing U.S. firms from being used to implement foreign policies of other nations which run counter to U.S. policy.”

U.S. regulations define cooperating with the boycott as: (1) agreeing to refuse or actually refusing to do business in Israel or with a blacklisted company; (2) agreeing to disseminate or actually discriminating against other persons based on race, religion, sex, national origin, or nationality; (3) agreeing to furnish or actually furnishing information about business relationships in Israel or with blacklisted companies; and (4) agreeing to furnish or actually furnishing information about the race, religion, sex, or national origin of another person.

U.S. antiboycott laws are included in the Export Administration Act of 1979 (EAA) and the Ribicoff Amendment to the Tax Reform Act of 1976 (TRA). The

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Requests to Comply with the Secondary and Tertiary Boycotts</th>
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<tr>
<td>Other (Algeria, India, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Yemen)</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,633</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Commerce.
export-related antiboycott provisions are administered by the Department of Commerce and prohibit U.S. persons from participating in the boycott. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) administers tax-related antiboycott regulations that deny tax benefits to U.S. taxpayers that participate in the boycott.

Export-Related Antiboycott Legislation

Regulations promulgated under section 8 of the EAA prohibit any U.S. person or company from complying with an unsanctioned foreign boycott and require them to report requests they have received to comply with a boycott. Such requests must be reported quarterly to the Department of Commerce’s Office of Antiboycott Compliance (OAC) in the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS). These regulations are implemented in part 760 of the Department of Commerce’s Export Administration Regulations (EAR).

The EAA prescribes penalties that may be imposed for violation of the antiboycott regulations. Civil penalties for violating the antiboycott provisions are a maximum fine of $50,000 per violation and a potential loss of export privileges for a period of time. Particularly egregious cases may be referred to the Department of Justice for criminal prosecution. Criminal penalties imposed for each violation can include a fine of up to $50,000 or five times the value of the exports involved, whichever is greater, or imprisonment for up to five years, or both. Willful violations, where the violator has knowledge that the items are also intended for any country to which exports are restricted for national security or foreign policy purposes, are punishable by fines up to $250,000 or imprisonment for up to ten years.

In FY2007, according to the Department of Commerce, ten companies paid $194,500 to settle allegations that they violated U.S. antiboycott provisions, an increase from nine cases and $95,950 in FY2006. In July 2007, BIS amended existing penalty guidelines to introduce a voluntary disclosure program that could reduce a potential fine levied on an exporter if it voluntarily discloses its violation of U.S. antiboycott laws. For the disclosure to have a mitigating effect, notification must take place prior to BIS learning about the violation from other sources and commencing an investigation. The new guidelines also created a new supplement no. 2 to the antiboycott provisions that more clearly describes how BIS investigates violations of U.S. antiboycott laws and determines penalty rates.

Tax-Related Antiboycott Legislation

The Ribicoff Amendment to the TRA added section 999 to the Internal Revenue Code. This section denies various tax benefits normally available to exporters if they participate in the boycott. In addition, the IRS requires U.S. taxpayers to report operations in, with, or related to countries that the Treasury Department includes on its annual list of countries that may require participation in an international boycott.
Denying tax benefits to U.S. firms that participate in the boycott appears to be an effective antiboycott strategy. According to one study, U.S. legislation reduces overall participation in the boycott by U.S. taxpayers by between 15 and 30%.\textsuperscript{27} However, the effectiveness of U.S. antiboycott tax legislation may diminish since the U.S. government is reducing export tax benefits that are available to U.S.-based companies to comply with World Trade Organization (WTO) rulings.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{26} The current list is Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Iraq is not included in this list, but its status with respect to future lists remains under review by the Department of the Treasury. “List of the Countries Requiring Cooperation with an International Boycott, Department of the Treasury,” Department of the Treasury, 73 F.R. 50, March 13, 2008.
