

CRS Report for Congress

Arab League Boycott of Israel

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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, selling, 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. Lastly, U.S. taxpayers who cooperate with the boycott are subject to the loss of tax benefits that the U.S. government provides to exporters. These benefits include, among others, the foreign tax credit, the benefits for foreign sales corporation (FSC) since repealed, and the tax deferral available to U.S. shareholders of a controlled foreign corporation (CFC).

Current Status of the Boycott

The boycott has three tiers. The primary boycott prohibits citizens of an Arab League member from buying, selling, 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

¹ Nancy Turck, "The Middle East: The Arab Boycott of Israel," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1977.

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.”²

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, 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.”³ 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.”⁴

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. The U.S. Department of Commerce has reported that requests for U.S. companies to participate in the Arab League Boycott increased in 2006 for many countries including Bahrain, Lebanon, Qatar, and Iraq. However, the Arab League has acknowledged that U.S. pressure has affected its ability to maintain the boycott. In May 2006, the Arab League held its most recent conference on the boycott in

² Howard N. Fenton III, “United States Antiboycott Laws: An Assessment of Their Impact Ten Years after Adoption,” *Hastings International & Comparative Law Review*, Vol. 10, 1987, cited in Eugene Kontorovich, “The Arab League Boycott and WTO Accession: Can Foreign Policy Excuse Discriminatory Sanctions,” *Chicago Journal of International Law*, Vol. 4 No. 2, Fall 2003.

³ Orly Halpern, “Arab Boycott Largely Reduced to ‘Lip Service,’” *Jerusalem Post*, February 28, 2006.

⁴ Dina Ezzat, “Boycott Israel? Not so simple,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, April 11-17, 2002.

Damascus, Syria. At the meeting, one conference participant reportedly said, “The majority of Arab countries are evading the boycott, notably the Gulf states and especially Saudi Arabia,” and that a major reason for these countries bypassing the boycott is “growing U.S. pressures in the direction of normalization with the Jewish state.”⁵

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.⁶ Mauritania, which never applied the boycott, established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia do not enforce the boycott.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹

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

⁵ Arabs evading economic boycott of Israel, United Press International, May 16, 2006.

⁶ Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, March 26, 1979, Article III, paragraph 3; Treaty of Peace between the State of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, October 26, 1994, Article 7, Section 2, paragraph A; Declaration of Principles, September 10, 1993.

⁷ *2007 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers*, United States Trade Representative, March 30, 2007.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “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.

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.¹⁰ Thus, it appears that since intra-regional trade is small, and that the secondary and primary 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 for, foreign investment.¹¹

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 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.¹² However, the credibility of their position has been questioned since both countries 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

¹⁰ Chaim Fershtman and Neil Gandal, "The Effect of the Arab Boycott on Israel: The Automobile Market," Tel Aviv University, January 1996.

¹¹ Anju S. Bawa, "Israel Embarks on PR Face-lift," *The Washington Times*, December 5, 2006.

¹² 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.

someone brings products from Israel, they will be confiscated.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ As of July 2008, the U.S.-UAE FTA talks are on hold, it is expected that talks will not resume during the Bush Administration.¹⁶

Multilaterally, the United States has used accession to the World Trade Organization to secure agreement from Saudi Arabia in November 2005 that all aspects of the boycott would be dismantled. 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 reflect out-of-date language in recycled commercial and tender documents.”¹⁷ 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-Faisal stated that he believed “the primary boycott is an issue of national sovereignty guaranteed within the makeup of the WTO and its rules.”¹⁸

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.¹⁹ In FY2007, the number of requests from Iraq for U.S. companies to

¹³ Michael Freund, “Boycott of Israel still in effect, Omani official tells ‘Post,’” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 8, 2006.

¹⁴ Michael Freund, “Bahrain’s Israel Boycott to Continue,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 11, 2006.

¹⁵ Michael Freund, “Dubai Ports Firm Enforces Israel Boycott,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 28, 2006.

¹⁶ Safura Rahimi, “US puts UAE free trade deal on ice,” *Emirates Business 24/7*, December 23, 2007.

¹⁷ *2007 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers*, Office of the United States Trade Representative, p. 17.

¹⁸ Michael Freund, “Saudi Ambassador to US admits boycott of Israel still in force,” *The Jerusalem Post*, June 22, 2006.

¹⁹ “Iraq’s Enforcement of Arab Boycott of Israel Is Concern, ITA Official Tells Iraqis,” *The Jerusalem Post*, (continued...)

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.²⁰

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

Country	Number of Requests to Comply with the Secondary and Tertiary Boycotts
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	682
Lebanon	114
Qatar	94
Syria	79
Iraq	72
Saudi Arabia	65
Kuwait	56
Libya	50
Bahrain	24
Egypt	1
Jordan	0
Other (Algeria, India, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Yemen)	396
Total	1,633

Source: Department of Commerce.

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.”²¹

¹⁹ (...continued)

Export Practitioner, March 2007.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security Annual Report Fiscal Year 2007, Appendix E-3, p. 72.

²¹ Website of the Department of Commerce’s Office of Antiboycott Compliance. [<http://www.bis.doc.gov/AntiboycottCompliance/oacrequirements.html#whatscovered>].

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, 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 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."²²

U.S. regulations define cooperating with the boycott as: (1) agreeing to or actually refusing to do business in Israel or with a blacklisted company; (2) agreeing to or actually discriminating against other persons based on race, religion, sex, national origin, or nationality; (3) agreeing to or actually furnishing information about business relationships in Israel or with blacklisted companies; and (4) agreeing to 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).²³ The 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 included in 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 to comply with a boycott they have received. 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

²² Website of the Office of Antiboycott Compliance. [<http://www.bis.doc.gov/AntiboycottCompliance/oacrequirements.html>]

²³ Section 8 of The Export Administration Act of 1979 (P.L. 96-72; 50 U.S.C. app. §2407) has expired but its provisions are continued under the authorization granted to the President in the National Emergencies Act (NEA) (P.L. 94-412; 50 U.S.C. §1601-1651) and the International Economic Emergency Powers Act (IEEPA) (P.L. 95-223; 50 U.S.C. app. §2407), most recently under Executive Order 13222 signed August 17, 2001 (66 F.R. 44025, August 22, 2001). Antiboycott export regulations are at 15 C.F.R. 760.1 et seq. The Ribicoff Amendment to the Tax Reform Act of 1976 (P.L. 94-455) added section 999 to the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended (26 U.S.C. §1 et seq). Tax regulations are at 26 C.F.R. §7.999-1.

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 they voluntarily disclose their violation of U.S. anti-boycott 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, and with any other country from which they receive a request to participate in a boycott.²⁴

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%.²⁵ 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.²⁶

²⁴ 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, 72 F.R. 139, July 16, 2007.

²⁵ James R. Hines, Jr., "Taxed Avoidance: American Participation in Unsanctioned International Boycotts," *NBER Working Paper 6116*, July 1997.

²⁶ See CRS Report RS20746, *Export Tax Benefits and the WTO: The Extraterritorial Income Exclusion and Foreign Sales Corporations*, by David L. Brumbaugh.