

Boycotts and Pro-Palestinian Activism

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Millions of people are engaged in pro-Palestinian activism across the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—but their actions are unlikely to enter protest event datasets, which typically operationalize activism as street-level mobilization.

Following the October 7 attack by Hamas that killed approximately 1,200 Israelis and foreign nationals, Israel has conducted a brutal assault on Gaza that has so far killed over 31,000 Palestinians and destroyed or damaged at least half of all buildings in Gaza (Middle East Monitor 2024). In response, people across the MENA region and beyond have participated in a sustained economic boycott of Western companies, accusing

them of complicity in Israel's actions.

On January 4, the McDonald's CEO Chris Kempczinski noted on LinkedIn that its franchises in the region were experiencing a “meaningful business impact” due to the ongoing boycott of the company's restaurants (Reuters 2024). Starbucks similarly reported a hit to its bottom line in Egypt (El Gaafary 2023). Walking through Cairo in early March, most Western-owned restaurants and stores appear to be empty. Even locally owned establishments selling ‘Western’ style food have gone out of their way to express pro-Palestinian sentiment, hanging flags and placards along their storefronts.

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Figure 1 shows Google Trends data for the Arabic search term “مقاطعة” (*muqāṭa'a*, boycott). It indicates a surge in interest shortly after Israel commenced its assault on Gaza. In Egypt, the matter has become sufficiently serious that pro-government figures have weighed in, calling on consumers to support local businesses, even if they belong to foreign-owned franchises (Raouf 2023). At the same time, sales in locally produced alternatives to Western products have boomed (Husni 2023).

To help coordinate the boycott campaign, activists have developed apps that allow consumers to identify target companies.



Figure 1. Google Trends data for “مقاطعة” , July 2023-January 2024.



on the left, Figure 2.
Countries covered by
“قضبيٰ” (*qadiyatī*, my
cause) app

on the right, Figure 3.
Consumers can enter a
company's names to receive
instructions on whether they
should be boycotted or not



Against this backdrop, the boycott has several implications for how we conceptualize both the occurrence and effects of contentious politics in the region. To begin with, despite the tactic's importance in civil resistance campaigns from the Indian national movement to the Jim Crow South, these forms of oppositional politics will not be picked up by most quantitative measures of mobilization which typically count visible protest events and strikes. While these measures will capture those energetic protests across the Arab world against the ongoing Israeli assault, excising participation in the boycott will dramatically underestimate the true level of contention in the region.

This contributes to a larger measurement problem: Arab citizens in U.S. aligned autocracies overwhelmingly support the Palestinian quest for statehood and oppose normalization with Israel, but they are often afraid to say so in public (El Kurd 2020). This silence, paired with their states' normalization with Israel, is sometimes portrayed as apathy to the fate of the Palestinians. The strength of the boycott, now in its fifth month, problematizes this trope and reminds us of Asef Bayat's (2003) observation that, "The metaphorical [Arab] street is not deserted, so much as it is controlled."

The boycott also points to important long-run trends in political socialization. As Dana El Kurd (2022) has chronicled, pro-Palestinian activism frequently acts as a "gateway to dissent," and often prefigures other kinds of activism in autocratic Arab states.

Finally, the popularity of the boycott has important implications for the United States and several European countries. A number of national and state legislatures in those contexts have passed legislation targeting the move-

ment for the boycott, divestment, and sanctioning (BDS) of Israel. While many of these initiatives have subsequently been struck down by courts, the continued witch hunt against proponents of BDS raises important normative questions for democratic politics in those countries, and in particular the rights of individuals to participate in forms of nonviolent opposition to Israeli policies. ♦

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