

‘Hypocrisy’: Lawmakers fighting Israel boycott now all-in for Russia sanctions

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By Joseph Gedeon
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As the prospect of a Russian invasion into Ukraine was inching closer to reality, the U.S. took proactive steps with its allies to coordinate more concentrated sanctions against Moscow. And when the war erupted, the U.S. announced it was ready to impose stiffer sanctions, including freezing U.S. assets held by Russian banks, enforcing restrictions on high-tech imports and seizing oligarchs' homes, planes and yachts.

The tough rhetoric and swift reprisals have been embraced by lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, who have called for sanctions to decimate Russia's economy. To some longtime advocates of the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement meant to target Israel's economy amid bloody conflicts with Palestinians, those calls sound eerily familiar.

“We are watching at this moment a really horrific set of violations of international law and human rights in Ukraine, and we're seeing an international response that is

unified, robust and also completely hypocritical,” said Yousef Munayyer, a nonresident senior fellow at the Arab Center in Washington, D.C. “So it really shows that the issue is not that the tactics are illegitimate, [rather] a time-honored tactic that allows people in all parts of society to take a stance on issues of grave importance when it comes to human rights.”

The BDS movement, which Munayyer supports, is a Palestinian solidarity campaign aimed at putting international economic and political pressure on Israel, similar to the success that anti-apartheid activists achieved in South Africa.

But while U.S. politicians have jumped over themselves to sanction Russia back to the Stone Age, widespread anti-BDS sentiment among politicians has advocates iced out of public debate. An overwhelming majority of Congress voted in favor of a 2019 House resolution condemning BDS; only Reps. Cori Bush (D-Mo.), Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) and Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) remain among a handful of supporters in federal office.

About 35 states have laws, resolutions and executive orders restricting or banning any boycott against Israel. On March 3, Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.) introduced the “Israel Anti-Boycott Act” a day after tweeting that Americans should cut all oil imports from Russia.

“There’s absolutely no equivalence at all between the United States and our allies around the world sanctioning an authoritarian nation that has illegitimately and illegally invaded its sovereign neighbor and launched attacks against innocent civilians and the antisemitic BDS movement,” Zeldin said about whether boycotts and divestments are a legitimate tool. “[Russian President] Vladimir Putin is a war criminal and we must use all of the diplomatic, economic and informational tools of national power at our disposal to combat Russia’s aggression and help the Ukrainian people defend themselves.”

The push to punish Putin has also been championed by Sens. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) and Ted Cruz (R-Texas), who have called for a boycott of Russian energy and oil.

The senators also are co-sponsors of the Anti-BDS Labeling Act, a measure introduced in the Senate in 2021 that was meant to deter and prohibit a boycott of Israeli goods, months after demonstrations over the possible expulsions of residents from East Jerusalem turned violent. When escalated hostilities turned into a lopsided war, more than 25 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank and at least another 240 Palestinians were killed by Israeli air strikes in the Gaza Strip. Hamas also fired thousands of rockets into Israel during the same period, killing at least 12 people. The Biden administration did not issue sanctions after the attacks.

“The difference is that Russia is invading Ukraine,” Cotton’s spokesperson said in an email. “And according to our latest intelligence, Israel is not.”

Like Russia, however, both Israel and the Palestinians are facing an investigation by the International Criminal Court into possible war crimes. A month ago, Amnesty International issued a major report calling Israel’s treatment of Palestinians apartheid.

Still, some experts stop short of making the connection between Russia and Israel.

“The rules of war would say that Israel’s continued occupation and continuing settlements in those [Palestinian] territories is illegal,” said Eileen Babbitt, a professor of international conflict resolution at Tufts University. “But I think there is something qualitatively different about amassing 150,000 or 200,000 troops on the border of a sovereign country and then crossing into that country with the intention of decapitating the government.”

Advocates for the BDS movement say that sanctions are often applied for a wide array of violations, and that could include a military occupation.

“The U.S. has sanctions against many countries that haven’t invaded their neighbors,” said Khaled Elgindy, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute. “But whereas the international community mobilized swiftly to confront Russia’s occupation of Ukraine, it has done very little to roll back Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, [and the] Golan Heights. It’s exactly this lack of any real accountability or constraint on Israel, that ultimately led to the BDS movement.”

As the outrage against the invasion of Ukraine intensifies, sanctions and boycotts against Russia continue to mount, even on the state level. Governors from Texas, Ohio, New Hampshire, Iowa and North Carolina, most of which have anti-BDS legislation in place, have told retailers to pull Russian alcohol from their stores. In New York, legislators introduced a bill that would divest from Russian companies.

Supporters of the BDS movement say it’s heartening to see real sanctions, boycotts and divestments meant to hold the Kremlin responsible for waging war against its less powerful neighbor. But on Israel, they say, sanctions seem further away than ever.

“Let’s be perfectly clear: Russia should be held accountable,” Munayyer said. “Members of Congress have shown their hypocrisy on this issue by supporting anti-BDS legislation when it comes to demanding accountability for Israel’s human rights violations, but now they are all for these kinds of efforts.”