PALESTINIAN CAUSE

To Boycott or Not to Boycott?

LUMS Religious Society
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“8 billion people in the world, each asking what change can poor old me create.” We've heard variations of this so often over the past three years. Why have I chosen to use “I’m too powerless” as a defence against my own conscience telling me that I’m complicit in the genocide of my own people. It is my brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers who are being murdered and butchered while I watch with a blank stare. The blank stare of 8 billion people that echoes, what can we do?

If you and I still find ourselves asking this question, then there is hope. We see suffering and know in our gut that simply expressing sympathy is inadequate. Our hearts are frantically searching for a solution to this problem the Global West has deemed too “complex” for the ordinary person to indulge in. This panic that we feel is powerful. It is human. It is what they fear. It is something we must use.

But then, we return to the same question, how? We have to admit there *are* many boundaries on an average individual with regards to the extent of impact they can create. We are asking the wrong question. It is not “what can I do”, it is “what can people like me accomplish when we organise the forms of power actually available to us?”

We instinctively think of power as the ability of one person to change an enormous outcome. By that definition, almost all of us are powerless. One person isn’t the relevant unit. A population is. An institution is. An organised movement is. It is the collective power of the entire body that creates motion.

Then the question rises: what power channels are available to us as individuals? It is our money. It is our voice. It is our institution. It is our skills. It is our numbers.

Every single one of these is invaluable. They’re essentially branches of the same tree. Our money can fund our institution. Our institution amplifies our voices. Our skills can make collective action effective. And our numbers give us leverage.

But, for the purposes of this discussion, the focus is on one of these branches: our money.

Why Economic Action Matters

As the saying goes, money talks. And as another saying goes, money is power. But what makes money powerful? The fact that we can choose where to direct it. Every time we spend money, we make a decision with consequences beyond the monetary. We direct revenue towards certain businesses, helping sustain them and the activities they undertake. When we coordinate our spending decisions, we can also choose to withdraw that support as a form of pressure.

“Oh, you’re making this so dramatic. It’s just a simple purchase.” Yes, it is a “simple” purchase. Yes, we are used to buying things. We buy things because they are convenient, affordable, familiar, and a lot of the time, just because we want them. The fact is this ordinary decision is not powerless.. So, when millions of people make the same decision in the same direction, it stops being a “simple purchase.”

In this sense, every purchase is an economic vote. You decide what companies you want to see flourish, and by extension, the ideologies and motives underpinning them.

Companies spend millions trying to persuade you to buy their products. They compete for your attention, study your preferences, and invest in advertising because your purchasing decisions matter to their revenue. If your decision didn’t matter, they wouldn’t care whether you buy or not. It is precisely the fact that your money holds power that they invest so much in getting you to buy.

This is the basic premise behind the boycott. We’re not asking if my individual purchase decisions bankrupt Nestle. They probably won’t. The boycott is about forming a collective and generating economic power when millions coordinate their purchasing decisions under a shared motive.

Now that we have a relatively better understanding of how money can become a source of collective power, the question is how do we effectively use this power?

The Problem of Local Impact

It is December 2023. Aunties (and uncles) are forwarding you long lists of companies to boycott. It seems like they have intentionally looked for every shampoo brand available in Pakistan and added it to the list, so now you must either spend your month's food budget on imported shampoos or use cheap alternatives that don't lather somehow leaving you with greasier hair than when you first showered. Or... God forbid, you just pick up Pantene and hope no one thinks you are a blood-drinking coward.

While the above paragraph is obviously dramatized for effect, many Pakistanis did face a similar predicament: Why should we boycott when it hurts us without meaningfully helping Palestinians?

Let's break that down.

"Hurts us" comes in three forms:

- Boycotting penalizes Pakistani workers at multinationals, for no fault of their own.
- Boycott-friendly alternatives may be more expensive, worse, or harder to find.
- Boycotting may harm our own economy.

1. "It penalizes Pakistani workers"

This is the strongest form of the objection. McDonald's Pakistan is locally owned and operated, with over 70 restaurants and about 5,960 employees by its own count. ("Our Journey - McDonald's: Burgers, Fries & More | McDonald's Pakistan") In Malaysia, KFC's operator QSR temporarily closed an estimated 108 outlets, roughly a fifth of its network. It attributed the closures to economic conditions and costs, while the media linked them to the boycott. QSR employs 18,000 people in Malaysia, about 85% of them Muslim. None of these workers chose the policies being protested. Forget the workers, even the franchisee owners didn't. (Aljazeera)

The strongest version of this objection is that the harm is certain, local and immediate, while the benefit is uncertain and distant. Workers lose shifts now; Palestinians might gain something later, if a chain of events goes right. The answer is that certain local harm is a cost to weigh, not a veto. If possible harm to innocent workers invalidated a boycott, almost no company could ever be boycotted. Harm creates an obligation to weigh consequences, and three tests help:

First, Proportionality: are the expected benefits enough to justify the foreseeable costs? A campaign with a credible prospect of changing a company's conduct may justify costs that a campaign with no clear objective or plausible route to success cannot.

Second, Necessity: are there less harmful ways to pursue a comparable objective? This is one reason targeted campaigns matter. If a company has a documented connection to the conduct being protested, and a coordinated campaign can exert meaningful pressure on it, the case for boycotting is stronger than it is for targeting a company simply because it is foreign, familiar, or named on a forwarded list.

Third, Mitigation: can the harm be reduced by redirecting spending or supporting affected workers? Redirected spending helps here. If you spend Rs. 2,000 at a local eatery instead of McDonald's, the money stays in the economy, and restaurants are labour-intensive, so they must hire cooks, cashiers, suppliers and riders. Obviously, every rupee redirected doesn't automatically create an equivalent job, since the jobs may differ in wages and conditions, so back local employers who hire at scale and help displaced workers directly.

Two questions for the objector. If protecting jobs is the real concern, local restaurants employ Pakistanis too, so why must we spend at these particular franchises? And would we refuse to boycott a company with exploitative practices because its employees might suffer? Applied consistently, the worker argument makes every boycott indefensible.

So, the point of these considerations is for them to give us a way to make responsible judgement. A just cause does not make every tactic justified, just as the possibility of harm does not make every form of pressure impermissible.

2. "The alternatives cost more, or are worse"

Yes, some switches will cost you: a few rupees more, a hunt through three shops, a shampoo that takes getting used to. That is part of the cost of standing by what you believe. A principle that never costs anything is just a preference. Here is what the evidence says about how big that cost really is:

- A short list keeps the cost small. A few documented targets, chosen where substitutes exist, are a far lighter burden than every brand someone forwarded. Local colas now make up about 12 percent of soft drink sales on the Krave Mart delivery app, up from 2.5 percent, so dropping Coke costs little (Reuters via Dawn). Where substitutes are still thin, start with the targets where switching is easy.

- Switching does not always mean paying more. Cola Next is cheaper than Coke and Pepsi, so for some products switching saves money. And the same fact means price explains part of why local brands grew.
- Quality is a mixed story. Dawn's reporting quotes industry voices who say local brands match multinationals in quality but struggle with distribution, marketing and availability. That is a real inconvenience for consumers, and it cuts both ways: demand from the boycott is what gives local firms the incentive and the revenue to fix those gaps. (Ayub)

Local isn't automatically better, though. Pakistani businesses must compete on price, quality and working conditions, and loyalty has to be earned.

3. "It harms our own economy"

Boycotted brands may have local operations: Carrefour Pakistan says it buys from over 700 local suppliers (Ali). The concern is investment. Multinationals have been leaving Pakistan since 2022, including Shell, Telenor, Pfizer and P&G (Siddiqui)("Procter & Gamble Departure Underscores Pakistan's Deepening Investment Crisis"), and a boycott could discourage more foreign investors from staying or arriving.

These are real concerns, but the response holds up well enough:

- Investment held up in the boycott's first two fiscal years. Net FDI was $2.35 billion in FY24, one of the stronger years of the past decade (Naeem)(Pakistan's FDI Pulse). It rose 5.5% to $2.48 billion in FY25 (Naeem). It fell 34% to $1.64 billion in FY26 (provisional) according to Naeem, but there is nothing tying that drop to the boycott.

In short, the economic harm, if present, is bounded, and it shrinks when targets are coordinated well.

Now, does it actually help Palestinian cause?

Suppose we grant that, chosen well, the boycott is warranted. The next question is: does it do anything meaningful for the Palestinian cause, or is it a curtain we hide behind to feel absolved?

Strategy separates the two. A boycott first needs a plausible link between a company's conduct and the boycott's demand. Encouraging boycotting brands without doing the required research has a high chance of misdirecting the boycott. Strategic boycotts can happen with movements like BDS. Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), is a Palestinian-led movement founded in 2005 to build coordinated pressure on companies, institutions, and governments over their involvement in violations of Palestinian rights.

BDS deliberately supports targeting a few companies, chosen for documented complicity and a realistic chance of winning. McDonald's meets that test, since its Israeli franchise gave free meals to Israeli soldiers in October 2023 (Archie).

Coordination matters just as much as target selection. Brayden King of Northwestern University studied 133 American boycotts and found about a quarter won a concession. Success tracked media attention more closely than lost sales (Kellogg School of Management). Organised groups were better positioned to generate that attention. So boycotts are also about making a demand visible, sustaining public pressure–giving a company a reason to respond.

Even well-run boycotts may not immediately make the political outcome of an economic choice clear. A company must change its conduct, then a government must change its policy, and either step can fail. McDonald's admitted a "meaningful" hit to its Middle Eastern sales and bought back its 225 Israeli restaurants, yet said it remained committed to the Israeli market, and its regional sales recovered by late 2024 (MoneyWatch). Israel's own Institute for National Security Studies concluded that BDS could do serious economic damage only if governments and businesses joined in (Archie). In September, that began to happen: Britain announced a ban on settlement imports, and eleven other countries backed restrictions. An Israeli financial outlet called the direct cost negligible but warned of restrictions spreading to companies and their banks (Megha Merani).

Does it create pressure? Puma is an example. In December 2023 it announced it would not renew its sponsorship of the Israel Football Association, which includes teams based in settlements, after years of boycott calls (Carlile). Puma says the decision came from a strategy review at the end of 2022, ("Puma to End Sponsorship of Israel's National Football Team In 2024") while BDS credits the pressure. Supporters of the campaign said their boycott would end when the contract did, in December 2024 (Clapton CFC).

Across countries it adds up. Coca-Cola Icecek's volumes fell 22.9% in Pakistan and 12.2% in Turkey in Q3 2024 (Bloomberg). Unilever's Indonesian sales fell 15% in Q4 2023 (Bloomberg), and it had recovered only about a quarter of its lost share by late 2024 (Carmona). McDonald's CEO conceded a "meaningful" business impact, and the company bought back its 225 Israeli restaurants. Franchisees in countries like Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia distanced themselves from the donations and pledged millions in aid to Gaza (Al Jazeera).

Building Political Capacity Through the Boycott

There is another reason why strategic boycotting must be taken seriously. A boycott's value need not be measured solely by what it makes a company lose, but also by what it enables people to build.

In a world where millions of people feel powerless in the face of political institutions and state violence, boycotting offers a relatively accessible way to begin acting collectively. The question, then, is not only what a boycott can achieve economically, but what it can make possible politically.

For millions around the world, boycotting is an accessible starting point for political participation. Many people care deeply about Palestine but lack the knowledge, resources, or connections needed to engage directly with political institutions and organised campaigns. Boycotting offers them a way to participate in a shared effort without requiring them to overcome all these barriers first.

A person who begins by avoiding a particular brand might encounter a campaign organisation, learn why particular targets were selected, attend a discussion, or discover how to approach their university administration about its investments. Through these encounters, people can develop the relationships, knowledge, and practical skills that organised action requires.

These are the foundations of political capacity. The networks can potentially be mobilised for demonstrations, petitions, fundraising, institutional advocacy, and pressure on decision-makers.

This progression, however, is an opportunity, rather than being guaranteed. The outcome lies in how we proceed with the means, and either choose to take it as a starting point or at worst the finest standard. Someone can boycott a product for years without becoming any more politically engaged. If campaigns treat purchasing decisions as their final objective, they may generate consumer pressure without developing the capacity to pursue broader political change. Therefore, participants must recognise that withholding economic support is only one tool among many.

The point, then, is not that boycotting can replace political action. It is that boycotting can help more people become capable of taking part in it. An expression of this capacity is seen, for example, in Sada-e-Haq, the series of events LRS organized this past week.

In the end

Here are a couple of thoughts. Adjust the boycott to the company’s response. If a boycott can never be lifted, companies learn that nothing they do matters, and a rational company stops trying.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that a targeted boycott is the floor, not the ceiling. This article argues for a short, documented list because that is what most people can keep up with, whether a student or an auntie on a budget. But some people can do much more. If you are avoiding all products, because their governments finance, arm or trade with Israel, then your choice deserves respect, but remember to let others define their own lists. The four questions below are the minimum a boycott should pass, not the most anyone is allowed to do.

So follow the campaign’s current call. To assess the validity of a boycott, ask four things: Is the complicity documented? Does an alternative exist? What does the campaign demand? Who is running it? Then ask a fifth: what else am I doing? The boycott is the cheapest thing you can do for Palestinians, which makes it a fine place to start and a poor place to stop.

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