

HUMAN RIGHTS

## BDS Win: How Tunisian Groups Blocked Entry of an Israel-Linked Cargo Ship

Stopping the “Cornelius A” was the culmination of a battle of wills between civil society and oppression.

By David Palumbo-Liu & Ahmed Abbas, TRUTHOUT

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A Tunisian demonstrator flashes the sign for victory and waves the Palestinian flag during a demonstration on December 7, 2017, on Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis.

FETHI BELAID / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

**T**his August, the Tunisian General Labour Union, Tunisia’s main labor federation, and Tunisian civil society succeeded in turning back (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/dockworkers-force-israel-linked-ship-away-tunisia>), a cargo ship that was seeking to unload its goods in the Tunisian port of Radès.

On July 31, the [Tunisian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel](https://taebi.org) (<https://taebi.org>), a group affiliated with the BDS movement, learned that a vessel named *Cornelius A*, operated on behalf of the Israeli shipping company [ZIM](https://www.zim.com/) (<https://www.zim.com/>), was due to stop at the Tunisian port of Radès on August 5. The vessel is owned by the Turkish company Arkas, which has a “[Vessel Sharing Agreement](https://web.archive.org/web/20180815063824/https://www.arkas.com.tr/en/news_detail.html?newsId=1133)” with ZIM.

According to the [Jerusalem Post](https://www.jpost.com/International/BDS-claims-victory-in-Tunisia-forcing-Israel-linked-ship-from-port-564862) (<https://www.jpost.com/International/BDS-claims-victory-in-Tunisia-forcing-Israel-linked-ship-from-port-564862>), a call then came from [Palestinian trade unions](https://bdsmovement.net/ar/news/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%88-%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A6-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9) (<https://bdsmovement.net/ar/news/%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%88-%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%86-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A6-%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9>), a [local Tunisian union](https://www.ugtt.org.tn/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9/) (<https://www.ugtt.org.tn/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9/>), and international [boycott, divestment and sanctions \(BDS\) activists](https://taebi.org/node/36) (<https://taebi.org/node/36>) to prevent the ship from entering the port. The successful blocking of the ship was a meaningful victory for the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, which originated in Palestinian civil society in 2005 and asks the international community to cease normal relations with Israeli state institutions until Israel gives the Palestinians the rights due to them according to international law.

At the heart of this battle of wills between the shipping company and Tunisian civil society and labor groups was the question of the normalization of relationships between Tunisia and Israel. The event ended with a decisive victory for the BDS movement, shining a light on the broader struggle to honor international law, which has declared it [impermissible](https://electronicintifada.net/content/trading-israeli-settlements-against-law/20141) (<https://electronicintifada.net/content/trading-israeli-settlements-against-law/20141>) to trade Israeli goods made in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The BDS movement has relied on the peaceful inventiveness of civil society to resist Israel’s policy of colonization and apartheid towards the Palestinians. It is not surprising that BDS finds a resounding echo in Tunisia with its gender equality, free elections, real public debate and lack of a military lobby. The January 2011 revolution that triggered the Arab Spring and the subsequent democratic transition in Tunisia are largely due to the vitality and dynamism of civil society, and the Tunisian General Labor Union framed and protected the claims of the civil society. The labor union was a key player in the national dialogue quartet that [won the Nobel Peace Prize](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/12/10/l-ugtt-a-ete-la-piece-maitresse-du-dialogue-national-tunisien_4829048_3212.html) ([https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/12/10/l-ugtt-a-ete-la-piece-maitresse-du-dialogue-national-tunisien\\_4829048\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/12/10/l-ugtt-a-ete-la-piece-maitresse-du-dialogue-national-tunisien_4829048_3212.html)), in 2015 for its decisive contribution to the construction of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia.

## **The Same Alliances in the 2011 Revolution Led to BDS Victory in Tunisia**

The movements of the *Cornelius A* follow a regular ZIM shipping line between Haifa (Israel) and Radès (Tunisia) via the port of Valencia (Spain). This information was available on the ZIM website but it was erased on August 3. This was likely done to cover the connections between Israel and Tunisia. However, the Tunisian boycott campaign

took a [screenshot](https://tacbi.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/ZIM-Haifa-Rades_2018-08-02%20Find%20Your%20Route.%20Shipping%20Schedules.png_pdf) of the ZIM website on August 2, and the information is still available on [Google Cache](https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:55JxPE2AtwJ:https://www.zim.com/schedules/point-to-point?portcode=ILHFA;10&portdestinationcode=TNTQS;10&fromdate=02-08-2018&weeksahead=6&direction=True&ccd=4&hl=fr&ct=clnk&g=it&client=firefox-b-ab) (accessed August 15) and also on [web.archive](https://web.archive.org/web/20180814214047/https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:55JxPE2AtwJ:https://www.zim.com/schedules/point-to-point?portcode=ILHFA;10&portdestinationcode=TNTQS;10&fromdate=02-08-2018&weeksahead=6&direction=True&ccd=4&hl=fr&ct=clnk&g=it&client=firefox-b-ab) (accessed August 15) and also on [web.archive](https://web.archive.org/web/20180814214047/https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:55JxPE2AtwJ:https://www.zim.com/schedules/point-to-point?portcode=ILHFA;10&portdestinationcode=TNTQS;10&fromdate=02-08-2018&weeksahead=6&direction=True&ccd=4&hl=fr&ct=clnk&g=it&client=firefox-b-ab) (accessed August 15). Why the cover-up?

Activists in Palestine and Tunisia accuse the Turkish owner of the ship, the Arkas company, of providing Israel with a “Trojan horse” to effectively continue trade with Tunisia, despite both the still-standing Arab boycott of Israeli products, and the fact that the largest union in Tunisia had voted to endorse the BDS movement. TACBI says that ZIM also uses another ship from the Caribbean, named *Allegro*, as a cover to bring its goods into Tunisia:

The violation of the Tunisian national sovereignty, led by ZIM to facilitate the circulation between Haifa and Radès, for import as well as for export, is even deeper than what the first [Tunisian boycott campaign] discovery of the *Cornelius A* showed. As for Arkas’s *Cornelius A*, the *Allegro* has been making regular tours to Radès for months or even years, as part of the ZIM program.

Tunisian activists say it is especially unacceptable for an Israeli-linked ship to land in Tunisia while Israel maintains a maritime blockade on the occupied Gaza Strip. On July 29, Israeli military forces stormed and commandeered the *Al Awda*, one of two boats carrying activists, journalists and medical supplies in an attempt to break the siege of Gaza.

The Tunisian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel has worked closely both with Palestinian activists and the Tunisian General Labor Union to stop what they see as a persistent effort to get around the boycott. Despite the irrefutable evidence, both ZIM and Arkas deny that the affair of the *Cornelius A* has anything to do with Israel. Yet, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, “Arkas Container Transport announced in January 2014 it would offer regular services to Ashdod [Israel]. It was described as a ‘new player in Israel’s maritime trade’ at the time by the website [port2port.com](https://www.port2port.com/article/Sea-Transport/Liner-Shipping/Arkas-Line-a-new-player-in-Israel-s-maritime-trade/).”

This episode in Tunisia must be placed within the wider context of unions and other groups in other countries engaging in boycotting Israeli goods, especially those made in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Dockworkers have refused to load or unload ZIM ships in the past—in Sweden

2010 and in Long Beach (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/zim-shipping-suspends-services-at-california-port/>), and Oakland (<https://araborganizing.org/block-the-boat-declares-decisive-victory-over-apartheid-israel/>) in 2014.

In 2017, Norway's largest trade union federation endorsed (<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/norways-largest-trade-union-calls-for-blanket-boycott-of-israel-1.5471815>) a full boycott of Israel. To give a sense of the magnitude of this endorsement, the federation represents one-fourth of Norway's working population. In 2016, the US National Labor Relations Board reaffirmed (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/us-labor-board-affirms-unions-right-boycott-israel>) its dismissal of charges against the 30,000-member United Electrical workers union because of its support for BDS.

Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/eu-right-bds-boycott-israel-palestine-protected-free-speech-federica-mogherini-a7394536.html>), the EU firmly protected the freedom of expression, including with regard to BDS actions carried out on EU territory. In 2013, the EU has issued a binding directive ([https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/neat/files/guidelines\\_on\\_the\\_eligibility\\_of\\_israeli\\_entities\\_and\\_their\\_activities\\_in\\_the\\_territories\\_occupied\\_by\\_israel\\_since\\_june\\_1967.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/neat/files/guidelines_on_the_eligibility_of_israeli_entities_and_their_activities_in_the_territories_occupied_by_israel_since_june_1967.pdf)), for its 28 states prohibiting any funding, cooperation, awarding of scholarships, funding for research or awards to anyone residing in Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The right to boycott Israeli goods is also widely acknowledged by other bodies. As reported in The Electronic Intifada (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/adri-nieuwhof/norway-gives-green-light-boycotts-israels-settlements>), “international jurists” (<https://www.eccpalestine.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Letter-on-settlement-trade-FINAL-.pdf>), Human Rights Watch (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/end-all-business-israeli-settlements-says-human-rights-watch>) and Amnesty International (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/take-action/stop-supporting-israeli-settlements-on-occupied-palestinian-land/>), have been clear that governments which facilitate or engage in any trade in or with the settlements (<https://electronicintifada.net/tags/israeli-settlements>) do not fulfill their human rights obligations (<https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/adri-nieuwhof/letter-undermines-dutch-claim-tel-aviv-embassy-discouraged-settlement-trade>).

It is becoming more and more apparent that the fight for Palestinian rights is most effectively carried out not by hesitant countries that each have their political interests most at heart, but by the moral and ethical commitments of civil society groups working in solidarity.