

Palestinian civil society applauds UK Co-operative movement decision to end trade with companies involved with Israeli violations of international law

Occupied Palestine, 3 May 2012 – Palestinian agricultural organisations and farmers unions are heartened to learn that the Co-Operative Group supermarket chain in the UK has introduced a policy to end trade with companies that source products from Israel's illegal colonies built on occupied Palestinian land. The Co-Operative Group announced that it shall immediately end ties with four Israeli agricultural companies, Mehadrin, Agrexco, Arava and Adafresh, following a sustained campaign by Co-Op members and Palestine solidarity groups.[1] We see this as a crucial step towards heeding the 2005 Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS), which we all endorse.

As organisations that work with and represent those most effected by the actions of agricultural export companies, we wish to express our firm belief that ending trade with agricultural export companies that participate in and profit from Israel's protracted occupation and violations of international law is a principled and essential step consistent with the values and principles of the Co-operative movement and in support of international law and universal human rights.

Agricultural export companies, especially Israeli agricultural export companies, are at the heart of Israel's system of domination over the Palestinian people. They are an integral component of the on-going process of colonisation and environmental destruction of Palestinian land, the destruction of Palestinian agriculture, the theft of water, and the abuse of Palestinian workers' rights. For decades, Israeli agricultural companies have exploited land that was illegally expropriated from Palestinians and water that rightly belongs to Palestinians.

Policies that exclude the sale of produce grown or packaged in illegal settlements should be welcomed but are insufficient. Agricultural export companies routinely mislabel their produce and are known to market settlement produce as originating from inside Israel. More importantly, agricultural companies as a whole are accountable for their conduct, and any trade with companies that export -- even if partially -- from settlements or participate in other Israeli violations of international law only serves to encourage further Israeli violations of international law and is inherently unethical. It is fantastic that the Co-Operative supermarket has become the first major supermarket in Europe to introduce measures to end trade with all companies that operate in or export from illegal Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory. We look forward to working with the Co-Operative to provide it with any information that can assist with the implementation of its policy.

We call upon all major supermarket chains to implement a similar ban on trade with all companies that export from illegal Israeli settlements as a minimal form of ending complicity in Israel's occupation and apartheid as well as supporting Palestinian farmers and civil society at large. Following on from the European wide campaign against Agrexco, which we wholeheartedly supported and was a major factor behind the company's collapse, action must be taken to hold to account those companies seeking to replace it. We also call on all people of conscience to boycott all Israeli products, including agricultural produce.[2]

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli settlements, military zones and Israel's illegal wall have resulted in the confiscation of and restriction of Palestinian access to the most fertile land and important water resources. According to recent research published by the United Nations, 43% of the West Bank is now off-limits to Palestinians.[3] Amnesty International has accused Israel of depriving Palestinians of their water

rights in certain areas of the occupied territory “as a means of expulsion.”[4] Israeli domination of the water supply ensures that companies operating in illegal Israeli agricultural settlements in occupied Palestinian territory can grow water-intensive products for export to Europe, while Palestinian farmers are increasingly forced to resort to subsistence livestock farming as a result of an acute lack of water.[5] Palestinian trucks shipping Palestinian produce are constantly subjected to long hours of “security” checks and other bureaucratic measures to obstruct their timely access to markets, while Israeli produce is allowed to pass freely.

Israel’s medieval siege has all but destroyed the agricultural sector in Gaza. As of June 2009, a total of 46% of agricultural land in the Gaza Strip was assessed to be inaccessible or out of production owing to Israel’s destruction of these fertile lands during its war of aggression in 2008-09.[6] Restriction on the movement of essential goods has severely hampered the ability of Palestinians in Gaza to rebuild the infrastructure sector, and a 2010 study revealed 60% of households to be food insecure.[7]

The destruction of Palestinian livelihoods and the denial of supply of essential goods to Gazan farmers are not a side effect, but rather a tool consciously used by Israeli policy makers. In fact, the siege of Gaza is “a central pillar” of Israeli policy.[8] Dov Weissglass, top political advisor to former Israeli prime ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, stated that “the idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet but not to make them die of hunger”.[9]

Agricultural export companies profit from and directly participate in these Israeli violations of international law. Mehadrin, Israel’s largest agricultural export company, exports produce grown or packed in Israel’s illegal settlements, collaborates with state water company Mekorot in the illegal appropriation of Palestinian water and abuses the rights of Palestinian workers in its packing houses based in illegal Israeli settlements, employing them on far below minimum wage and without contracts or health insurance.[10] Other agricultural companies known to trade with European supermarkets including AdaFresh, Arava Export Growers, Edom UK and Jordan Valley Herbs, also routinely export produce from illegal Israeli settlements.[11]

For these reasons, we applaud the principled stance taken by the Co-Operative supermarket. We also congratulate Co-Operative members, the Boycott Israel Network and all of the other organisations that worked tirelessly to move motions and facilitate a debate within the UK Co-Operative movement about trade links with Israel. Your dedicated campaigning is a fine example of the BDS movement in action.

Signed by:

Palestinian Agricultural Relief Committees (PARC)
General Union of Palestinian Peasants and Co-op Groups
Union of Palestinian Farmers (PFU)
Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign (Stop the Wall)
Union of Palestinian Agricultural Engineers
Union of Agricultural Work Committee

- [1] <http://www.boycottisraelnetwork.org/?p=1031>
- [2] <http://www.bdsmovement.net/2011/palestinian-civil-society-welcomes-agrexco-liquidation-calls-for-celebration-of-this-bds-victory-8096>
- [3] http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_settlements_FactSheet_January_2012_english.pdf
- [4] <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE15/028/2009/en/634f6762-d603-4efb-98ba-42a02acd3f46/mde150282009en.pdf>
- [5] <http://www.blueplanetproject.net/documents/RTW/RTW-Palestine-1.pdf>
- [6] <http://stophthewall.org/2011/11/13/al-hadiye-be-demolished-once-again-halt-new-wave-ethnic-cleansing>
- [7] <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/MDCS-85SHU3?OpenDocument&rc=3&cc=pse>
- [8] <http://maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=286948>
- [9] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8654337.stm
- [10] <http://electronicintifada.net/content/starving-gaza/7342>
- [11] <http://corporatewatch.org.uk/?lid=3625>
- [12] <http://www.whoprofits.org/company/mehadrin-group>
- [13] <http://www.blueplanetproject.net/documents/RTW/RTW-Palestine-1.pdf>
- [14] http://www.whoprofits.org/s?vid_3=1832