

# Ben & Jerry's boycott plan 'sucks up to terrorism'

Israel plans to use counter-boycott of ice cream giant to pile economic and legal pressure onto parent company Unilever



Credit: Getty

Israeli politicians are mobilising to pressure ice cream giant Ben & Jerry's into reversing its decision to withdraw its ice cream from West Bank settlements, amid fears that other companies might follow suit.

"The management of global Ben and Jerry's has chosen to suck up to terrorism and antisemitic organisations," said interior minister Ayelet Shaked on Wednesday. "We have a year-and-a-half to change that decision."

The company's policy will not take effect for 18 months and Ms Shaked revealed that she is talking to Israel supporters in America — Jewish and Christian — to promote a boycott of Ben & Jerry's ice cream there.

She believes that the economic pressure of a counter-boycott will cause an about turn. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid is trying to leverage the fact that 35 American states have legislation against BDS action.

He wants each of the states to take steps against Ben & Jerry's. Israel's ambassador to America, Gilad Erdan, quickly fired off letters to all states that have enacted legislation asking that they sanction the company and consider speaking out against its move.

The states do not include Vermont, where Ben & Jerry's is based.

The controversy started on Monday, when Ben & Jerry's announced that it would stop selling in settlements. As part of its implementation, it is declining to renew its contract with the Israel-based manufacturer, which is based in an Israeli city far from the settlements.

Ben & Jerry's Israel is not on board with the anti-settlements stance — and even if it were, could face prosecution for flouting local laws if it followed the policy. “We will continue to sell all over Israel!” it stated, adding, “We call on the Israeli government and to all consumers: Do not allow Israel to be boycotted.”

Around 160 jobs are expected to be lost at its factory in Beer Tuvia, near Ashkelon and numerous contracts with dairies in southern Israel cancelled, as a result of the decision.

For the BDS movement, the decision was lauded as a big moment. “This is huge,” declared the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, calling it a “very important step” and a message to all companies that are considered “complicit” with Israel. It added: “The tide of history is turning.”

Analysts in Israel say that BDS is over-egging its victory, though they say it is a serious issue and not a storm in an ice cream cup. “It's potentially serious, as it goes to show that large corporations do give in to pressure from BDS, and it could be serious if others follow this example,” Emmanuel Navon, an international relations expert from Tel Aviv University, said.

Israel's best chance of overturning the decision and creating a deterrent against others following suit, he continued, is to make it a financial liability for the company, as the government is trying to do via a counter-boycott and legal moves.

Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett hit back at the decision, and warned of “severe consequences.”

He said: “Ben & Jerry's has decided to brand itself as the anti-Israel ice cream. This decision is morally wrong and I believe that it will become clear that it is also commercially wrong.”

Mr Bennett insisted: “The boycott does not work and will not work, and we will fight it with full force.” Mr Bennett also spoke to Alan Jope, the CEO of Unilever, which owns Ben & Jerry's.

According to a statement from the PM's office, he “made it clear that he views with utmost gravity the decision by Ben & Jerry's to boycott Israel.” He “emphasised that from the perspective of the State of Israel, this is an action that has severe consequences, including legal, and it will take strong action against any boycott directed against its citizens.”

Announcing the decision, the company said: “We believe it is inconsistent with our values for Ben & Jerry's ice cream to be sold in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.” It said that despite this move, and disassociation from its licensee, it will “stay in Israel through a different arrangement” — though it provided no details of how this may happen.

Ben & Jerry's has taken various political stances in recent years and been under increasing pressure in recent months to take a position on settlements, especially from a group called Vermonters for Justice in Palestine.

In a statement last month one of its leaders, Ian Stokes, asked rhetorically: “How much longer will Ben & Jerry's permit its Israeli-manufactured ice cream to be sold in Jewish-only settlements while Palestinian land is being confiscated, Palestinian homes are being destroyed and

Palestinian families in neighbourhoods like Sheik Jarrah are facing eviction to make way for Jewish settlers?”

But Dr Navon said that whatever claims are made against Israel, Ben & Jerry's should be called out for “double standards” by addressing its alleged actions and not those of players in other conflicts. “The question is why they should stop selling ice cream in the West Bank and not other disputed territories like northern Cyprus, Western Sahara and Crimea,” he commented. “We have a very clear case here of double standards.”

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Israel appeared to be teetering on the edge of a security crisis on Sunday but by Monday it was all over. And the story may tell us lots about the power play in the new government.

Sunday was the Fast of Av, commemorating the destruction of the Jerusalem temples. Tensions were high in the morning at Temple Mount, the spot where the ancient sanctuaries stood, with Palestinians resenting the planned arrival of around 1,600 Jewish visitors.

Things went surprisingly smoothly until Prime Minister Naftali Bennett decided to praise authorities who kept the calm. He said they had kept order while “maintaining freedom of worship for Jews on the mount,” he wrote.

According to all formal arrangements and the status quo understandings that keep relative calm in Jerusalem, Jewish people have no “freedom of worship” on Temple Mount.

Subsequent Israeli governments have upheld a policy by which Muslims can pray there but Jews can visit on the understanding they do not pray. Some people break the rule but there is no government backing for doing so.

The political temperature in Jerusalem suddenly rose. Everybody remembered that today's calm is fragile and the May clashes between Israel and Hamas and in cities across Israel started with a Jerusalem-based dispute. The Palestinian Authority started speaking out, as did Jordan, Turkey, and others. The Arab party Ra'am, which props up the coalition, was livid.

By early Monday, Mr Bennett's office was insisting there is no change to the status quo and said he had meant to discuss the right of Jews as well as Muslims simply to visit the Temple Mount. He had not intended to make a point about prayer, it was claimed. Tensions dissipated.

As of press time Israel was enjoying a relatively calm week in security terms, with the exception of two rockets fired from Lebanon to Israel and unconfirmed claims that Jerusalem was behind an attack on the weapons depot of an Iran-backed militia near Aleppo. Both developments were unrelated to the Jerusalem controversy. There were also 11 stone throwing attacks on Jerusalem buses, some of which may have been connected.

It is unclear whether Mr Bennett meant to say something else and made a real mistake, whether he had been testing a boundary - or even trying to make a real political change regarding Temple Mount. But what is clear is that the complex dynamic of Israel's broad new right-to-left government kicked in and helped it to navigate this big early challenge.

Ra'am's fury did not cause a coalition crisis or bolt the coalition. The centrist Yair Lapid, from Yesh Atid, did not start singing from the hymn sheet of the last “unity” government and lambasting Mr Bennett. Rather Mr Lapid, leader of the largest party the man who put the

coalition together, seemingly applied pressure on Mr Bennett to retreat from comments that seemed to be changing the status quo.

In doing so, he maintained calm in both Jerusalem and in the coalition, as frictions with the Ra'am party were calmed and confrontation with the left-wing factions Labour and Meretz was avoided.

And so, in a single day, the new government revealed both its weakness - that a few words by one prominent member can trigger chaos - and what seems to be its strength - a political balancing act that was able to calm the situation. The success of the government, in a country where coalitions fall so easily, is likely to hinge on which of these characteristics comes to define it.

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Israel has its biggest ever Olympic delegation, with 90 athletes, around double its previous high in 2016. And according to detailed predictions published by the Associated Press, it is on track for a record seven medals.

This would almost double Israel's current medal count, which stands at nine. AP foresees a gold for the male artistic gymnast Artem Dolgopyat, a bronze for the national baseball team and a silver for the female marathon runner Lonah Chemtai Salpeter.

It predicts silver for the male 81 kilo judoka Sagi Muki, and bronze medals for the rhythmic gymnastics team and for gymnast Linoy Ashram, and a bronze for female windsurfer Katy Spychakov.

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