



This document was constructed as a guide to help understand some of the complexities and nuances about the Black Lives Matter movement. As this document outlines there have been segments of BLM that have engaged in BDS activity, but that should not stop us from rallying behind the concept of BlackLivesMatter or from working with BLM activists.

What Is Black Lives Matter?

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a non-centralized grassroots social justice movement. Organized by regional chapters, BLM urges society to value Black lives and recognize their marginalization. The now international movement originated in America in 2013 following George Zimmerman's acquittal for the death of Black teen Trayvon Martin. As details of the shooting unfolded, two Black and LGBTQ social justice leaders, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors, created the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter in response to Martin's death. The hashtag quickly spread, thereby birthing a 21st-century, millennial-driven civil rights movement.

Differences within BLM

Decentralized, nonhierarchical, and tech savvy, BLM differs in structure from past American civil rights groups. Each local BLM chapter, including those within the same city, is unique in their tactics: some prefer protests, while others prefer direct action strategies, like shutting down public highways. For instance, West Coast BLM leader Patrisse Cullors has endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and participated in a "Black for Palestine" delegation to the Palestinian Territories. At the other end of the spectrum is a group called "Campaign Zero." Unlike BLM's more unpredictable West Coast chapters and subgroups, Campaign Zero does support engagement with the political system, and one of its leaders, DeRay Mckesson, has served as a mayoral candidate in Baltimore.

Recently, the divides among the BLM chapters have become more apparent. In the wake of George Floyd's murder in May of 2020 and the recent protests condemning police brutality, BLM chapters have taken different approaches to dealing with this important issue. For instance, Campaign Zero has formulated a plan to institute eight major changes in police entities that are projected to decrease police-caused deaths by at least 70%. Some BLM chapters, however, are pushing back against this initiative, arguing that this plan does not call for a sufficiently radical change. This illustrates clearly that BLM is an overarching movement that contains many different identities.

How Is BLM Different from the Movement for Black Lives?

On August 1, 2016, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) released a national platform, claiming that it represents the views of over 50 organizations. Of these entities, 29 are identified as part of the "United Front," which is the list of signatories that are also member organizations. The list includes the organization Black Lives Matter Network (BLMN), which is the decentralized grassroots social justice organization that is most closely associated with BLM. The document includes 40 policy suggestions divided into six categories, which range from economic policies to matters related to the criminal justice system, and it calls for the suspension of American military aid to Israel.

For a time, the entire platform was highly publicized on the M4BL website, now the section regarding Israel is shared on a document link from the Invest-Divest page. The language focuses on ending military aid to Israel, arguing this assistance “not only diverts much needed funding from domestic education and social programs, but it make [US citizens complicit in the abuses by the Israeli government.](#)” This language is similar to what has been seen in several recent municipal campaigns to divest local funds from Israel. Many of the arguments used in M4BL’s resource are based on falsified information endorsed by the BDS movement. Updated in May 2020, the linked resource also calls on supporters to “[f]ight the expanding number of Anti--BDS bills being passed in states around the country” which “harms the movement to end the Israeli occupation of Palestine.” This is similar language as some local BDS efforts we have seen over the past year.

Identification with the Palestinian cause is growing within some sectors of the BLM. It is critical, however, that we understand that BLM is not necessarily represented in its entirety by the M4BL platform, nor by the BLMN. There are other nationally focused groups that take a different approach and are sometimes in disagreement with other segments of BLM. Additionally, even within the M4BL platform, there are many other areas that are a greater focus of the Movement such as police brutality and the school-to-prison pipeline. This gives the Jewish community the opportunity to build bridges with BLM members in a genuine way before the issue of Israel is broadly discussed.

How Is BLM Intertwined with the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict?

On August 19, 2014, Michael Brown was fatally shot by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO. Protests, both peaceful and violent, ensued, lasting for months at a time. Simultaneously, Israel was in the midst of Operation Protective Edge with the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. As protesters in Ferguson were being tear-gassed by the police, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza started tweeting at Ferguson protesters, advising them to insulate themselves from tear gas and using the hashtag #Ferguson. This ignited the “From Ferguson to Palestine” call to action that many activists continue to invoke today.

Black and Palestinian activists quickly began to use social media as a tool to express support for and solidarity with each other. This confluence of events created the perfect storm for collaboration and increased kinship between the two groups. Those employing the “Black for Palestine” effort believe that Black Americans and Palestinians are similar victims of repressive, armed, and largely white colonialist governments. Both groups believe that their movements are perceived by outsiders as illegitimate and share a narrative of dehumanization, oppression, and resilience. The sense of shared experience between both peoples has coalesced into an intentional coupling and conflating of their narratives.

In 2015, over a thousand Black activists and organizations signed a “Black Solidarity Statement with Palestine” endorsing BDS. This occurred around the same time that Patrisse Cullors opted to endorse the BDS movement. A select group of BLM activists and West Bank Palestinians traveled across the Atlantic to visit one another and strengthen their ties.

In closing, it must be restated that there is a great diversity of views among BLM chapter and activists. Additionally, many of the marches since George Floyd’s death are not affiliated with any particular #BLM chapter, but are organized around the idea that #BlackLivesMatter and not with an organized group. Many activists have minimal knowledge of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and/or are not affiliated with the BDS movement.

Recommended Reading:

<https://www.heyalma.com/stop-using-israel-as-an-excuse-to-not-support-black-lives-matter/>

<https://forward.com/opinion/448213/you-dont-have-to-choose-between-black-lives-matter-and-israel/>

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-leave-palestine-out-of-black-lives-matter-for-now-1.8893188?v=1592253260389>