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The campaign against SodaStream, by *Jamie Levin and Sarah Treleaven*

This image was created by a Palestinian-American activist as a parody of an advertisement for SodaStream, a kitchen appliance made by an Israeli company. The SodaStream allows users to carbonate their own tap water and, with the addition of syrup, transform it into flavored soda. The device, which retails in the United States for \$79.95 and up, is marketed as a thrifty and environmentally friendly alternative to the purchase of name-brand soft drinks. Between 2009 and 2012, SodaStream's sales in the Americas grew from \$14 million to \$158 million; the company's current market value is estimated at \$1.2 billion. With this increase in popularity has come the attention of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign (BDS), a loosely affiliated movement that urges consumers worldwide to shun Israeli goods and services until the country "complies with international law and Palestinian rights" by ending its occupation, establishing full equality for Palestinians in Israel, and offering the right of return to Palestinians abroad. The movement's messaging has gained traction in Western Europe, where SodaStream's sales reached \$204 million in 2012, and anti-SodaStream campaigns are now active in twenty North American cities. Partly in response to pressure from BDS, SodaStream has intensified efforts to promote itself as a socially conscious employer and a force for reconciliation in the West Bank.



SodaStream's primary manufacturing facility has, since 1998, been located in the Mishor Adumim industrial zone, just east of Jerusalem. Mishor Adumim is overseen by Ma'ale Adumim, the third largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Since the BDS campaign began, the company has cast its location as a selling point. SodaStream president Yonah Lloyd says that the West Bank facility, which was previously a munitions factory, went "from bullets to bubbles," while CEO Daniel Birnbaum calls it "the fulfillment of the prophecy of turning your swords into plowshares." SodaStream further notes that it employs hundreds of Palestinians alongside its Jewish workers in Mishor Adumim, and that its factory jobs (no Palestinians hold executive-management positions) pay better than others in the area. Labor activists counter that conditions at the SodaStream plant improved only after a successful court challenge four years ago. "These jobs are tenuous at best," says BDS organizer Anna Baltzer. "They're not a substitute for Palestinian freedom and equality."

In its original ad, Bed Bath & Beyond alludes to the style of the American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein. The female character calls the man Brad, a name spoken by women in several comic-book paintings by Lichtenstein, who chose it for its mock-heroic sound and said it signified oversimplification and cliché. Fittingly, then, Lichtenstein's ironic intent is absent from the original ad, which does little more than co-opt pop (art) to sell (soda) pop. The BDS parody adds another layer to the pastiche by turning the previously forlorn female character into an antihero. In fact, Ma'ale Adumim was originally an outpost of the IDF's Nahal Brigade. In the years just after the Six-Day War of 1967, the Israeli presence in the West Bank was largely limited to security outposts, but in 1975 dozens of religious Zionists from Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful") constructed the first buildings in Ma'ale Adumim, in defiance of government policy. With the election in 1977 of the right-wing Likud party, many such settlements were legalized, and government inducements for Israeli companies to move in—such as lower tax rates and Israeli-only roads—soon followed.

Birnbaum responds to charges of human rights abuse by labeling BDS activists "economic terrorists"—deflecting their accusations without seriously addressing his company's relationship with the occupation. (SodaStream does not appear to lobby in Israel for Palestinians' economic or political rights.) Such name-calling militates, as always, against honest discourse. In 2012, when Brooklyn's Park Slope Food Coop debated whether to stock Israeli products—of which SodaStream was the best-known brand—New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg stated that those calling for a boycott wanted "Israel to be torn apart and everybody to be massacred." The BDS campaign frequently neglects to mention in discussions of SodaStream that its boycott extends to all goods made in Israel proper—but its spokespeople are careful not to engage in hyperbole on the order of Bloomberg's.

SodaStream has positioned itself as an "Active Green" company by supporting clean-drinking-water initiatives in Africa and portraying its product—most notably in a 2013 Super Bowl ad—as an eco-friendly alternative to soda in single-use plastic bottles. "With SodaStream," the ad claimed, "we could have saved 500 million bottles on game day alone." BDS has attempted to undermine SodaStream's environmental claims by focusing on the negative impacts of the Israeli occupation as a whole. "Palestinian water resources are systematically polluted," says Baltzer. "Olive groves thousands of years old are destroyed; toxic fumes from settlement factories hang in the air across the territory." BDS activists offer no specific evidence of pollution by SodaStream's facility, but the company is less than forthcoming about the calculations it used to arrive at the figure of 500 million bottles saved. Its current total, more than 3.2 billion, is prominently displayed in a rapidly rising counter on SodaStream.com.

As SodaStream sales continue to grow in the United States, the company risks repeating battles it has had to fight in Europe. In 1995, the European Union signed a preferential-trade agreement with Israel, a move many considered a reward for progress in peace talks with the Palestinians. A dispute arose in 2003 when German authorities imposed tariffs on SodaStream products, which they suspected of being manufactured in the occupied West Bank despite MADE IN ISRAEL labels, and in 2010 the European Court of Justice ruled that goods made in the West Bank do not qualify for tariff exemptions. In Sweden, where nearly 20 percent of households own a SodaStream, consumer concerns prompted major retailers to refuse to stock units made in Mishor Adumim. To address this issue, SodaStream claimed to have shifted production for the Nordic market to other facilities, including ones in China. Despite China's troubling record on labor and human rights, many consumers appear to have been satisfied by this shift—which has given Birnbaum ammunition for his charges of "economic terrorism." "It's so cynical of people," he says, "to expect that we are going to fire these Palestinians in favor of employment in China." That appears unlikely to happen, though SodaStream is building an 850,000-square-foot factory, five times larger than its West Bank facility, just south of Tel Aviv—on the other side of the Green Line. ■

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