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Arabs reach for economic weapon

By George Baghdadi

DAMASCUS - Nineteen Arab countries have agreed unanimously to reactivate an economic blockade of Israel, which was first agreed upon in 1951, but has remained largely ineffective. It has also slackened particularly since the launch of the Middle East peace process in the early 1990s.

The Arab nations decided at a three-day meeting in Damascus last week to revive the boycott as a peaceful weapon to help secure Palestinian rights. The meeting was organized by the central office for the Boycott of Israel, set up in Damascus 50 years ago by the Arab League with the aim of isolating Israel economically.

Representatives of Syria, Iraq, the Sudan, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Libya, Somalia, Comoros, Morocco, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and Djibouti attended the meeting.

The decision follows an agreement among Arab leaders at their summit in Lebanon in March that an economic boycott should remain official policy until there is a "halt to Israeli aggression against unarmed Palestinians".

Tunisia, Morocco, Oman and Qatar, which used to have some economic links with Israel, have now responded to resolutions at the Lebanon





summit.

The boycott is planned at three levels. Primary boycott requires member states of the Arab League to refrain from doing business with Israel. That will not apply to Egypt and Jordan, who have peace treaties with Israel. At the secondary level it prohibits trade with companies that have a branch, agency, factory or plant in Israel. Finally, the so-called tertiary boycott is against firms and countries that do business with Israel indirectly, or have some Israeli links.

The Damascus office is believed to have blacklisted more than 10,000 such companies. The list is updated periodically. The Damascus office says that several US, Asian and European companies are on the list. But no names have been released.

For the Arabs, the economic pressure they can bring is about their only remaining weapon in the absence of military clout to force concessions from Israel. "The participants expressed their conviction that economic boycott of Israel and expanding [the boycott's] geographical boundaries ... constitutes a peaceful, active, legal and noble tool for deterring [Israeli] aggression and bolstering world peace and security," Ahmed Khazaa, commissioner general of the boycott office, said after the meeting.

Syrian delegate Mohammed Ajami said that "officials also agreed on working to expand the boycott to encourage Islamic and European countries sympathetic to the Palestinian cause to adopt similar measures". Syria has been the chief advocate of the renewed boycott, with the backing of Iraq and Libya.

The boycott could cost Israel around US\$3 billion a year in lost earnings, the Damascus office says. It claims that Israel has lost \$48 billion due to the boycott over the past 50 years. Israeli economists assessed in 1991 that Israel had lost \$400 million.

The once-influential Damascus office has held only two meetings since 1993 when the Palestinians signed a peace deal with Israel. Most meetings due twice a year could not be held for lack of a quorum. Arab representatives who now want to take these meetings seriously agreed that the next regular decision-making meeting will be held in October. In the Persian Gulf states, leading clerics are urging people to boycott hundreds of US products, ranging from Big Macs to Levi's jeans, in support of the intifada. Several non-governmental and civic organizations, student bodies and professional associations are already urging citizens to buy local and European alternatives to US goods.

(Inter Press Service)



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Building B - 5th Floor, 102/1 Phra Arthit Road, Chanasangkham, Bangkok 10200, Thailand