



Academic Boycotts of Israel

Introduction

The Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement is a strategy to delegitimize the state of Israel. It is modeled after the successful effort against the Apartheid-era regime in South Africa in the 1980s and is a coordinated campaign that employs an extreme, inflammatory and biased political agenda to challenge Israel's legitimacy. Israel's detractors question its very right to exist by pressuring those in the economic, cultural, academic, organizational and diplomatic sectors to withhold support for it. And while all of these areas are cause for concern, the idea of an academic boycott and its implications for academic freedom are extremely troubling.

Ideas – the working material of academics – should not be dismissed because of the nationality of those who provide them. Yet BDS supporters continually attempt to divide the academic world into two: Israelis who should be shunned, and everyone else. Thus, BDS proponents have attempted to exclude Israeli academic institutions and professors from participating in scholarly and scientific events and contributing to prominent journals. More so, BDS puts pressure on leading intellectuals to not visit Israel or participate in its conferences, and encourage academic institutions to adopt anti-Israel resolutions that treat Israel as if it were a pariah state.

Peace for both Israelis and Palestinians depends on these two peoples working together towards a negotiated two-state solution. In contrast, BDS tactics are divisive and undermine this objective by presenting a one-sided, distorted picture of the region, which only further alienates both parties by placing sole blame for a complicated conflict on one side. Academic boycotts are also not only anathema to academic freedom, but they undercut the important role of academics in political conflicts such as this one: bringing together Palestinian and Israeli academics to work on common projects.

Analysis and FAQ

An essential principle of academia is academic freedom; the belief that scholars must be free to pursue ideas without being targeted for repression, institutional censorship, or discipline. The adoption of an academic boycott against Israel and Israelis therefore defies these very beliefs in a particularly extreme way. Scholars are to be punished not because of what they believe – which would be bad enough – but simply because of who they are based on their nationality. This is discrimination pure and simple. Worse, it is also discrimination which requires diminishing the pursuit of knowledge, by discarding knowledge produced by Israelis. This kind of censorship only acts to further damage our society.

In 2005, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) echoed this sentiment by releasing a [statement](#) expressing public opposition to academic boycotts as irreconcilable with the bedrock purpose of academic freedom: “[the] freest possible international movement of scholars and ideas.” It reiterated this stance in 2013, saying “In view of the association’s longstanding commitment to the free exchange of ideas, we oppose academic boycotts. On the same grounds, we recommend that other academic associations oppose academic boycotts. We urge that they seek alternative means, less inimical to the principle of academic freedom, to pursue their concerns.”

1. Are academic boycotts of Israel justified?

Academic boycotts of Israel are not an appropriate means for resolving any conflict, including the Israeli-Palestinian one. Promoting an academic boycott of Israel is counterproductive to the principles of academic freedom and the open spirit of international cooperation between scientists, scholars, academics and others. Additionally, Israel's universities enroll significant numbers of Arab students and are important forums



for interaction between Jews and Arabs. In fact, Omar Barghouti, a BDS movement founder, received his doctorate from Tel Aviv University, and Al Quds President Sari Nusseibeh publicly condemned academic boycotts, [telling The Associated Press](#), “If we are to look at Israeli society, it is within the academic community that we’ve had the most progressive pro-peace views and views that have come out in favor of seeing us as equals. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.”

Israel is a pluralistic and democratic state in which all Jewish and Arab citizens enjoy equal rights under one law. Free academic inquiry is encouraged, and Arab citizens of Israel have increasingly risen to high ranks within Israeli academia. Boycotting this realm would hurt the very people its proponents aim to protect.

2. **Would academic boycotts of Israel be an effective and positive agent of change?**

Academic boycotts will not help attain a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but rather, are more likely to have the opposite effect by encouraging extremists while discouraging interaction and compromise. Israel’s policies, like that of any country, are certainly not immune to criticism, but an environment that publicly rejects Israelis will not be able to promote peace. Similarly, boycotts won’t help the Palestinian people, whose future prosperity depends on mutual economic and political cooperation with Israel.

Further, in 2007, when the University and College Union (USU) in the UK adopted a resolution advancing the idea of a boycott of Israeli academic institutions, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) placed a national ad building off of a statement initially issued by Columbia University President Lee Bollinger rejecting that resolution as irreconcilable with academic freedom. The ad garnered signatories from over 400 American university and college presidents who stood in solidarity to say that if the UCU was intent on boycotting Israeli academics, they should view those American institutions as if they were Israeli, and boycott them too.

Talking Points

- Academic boycotts are irreconcilable with the notion of academic freedom. Academics and their ideas should not be dismissed or marginalized because of their nationality, religion or race.
- BDS, including the call for academic boycotts, aims to isolate and erode public support for Israel and diminishes the chance for real peace. It only emboldens the extremists on both sides, and does nothing to support the difficult compromises both Israelis and Palestinians must make in order to achieve peace.
- Anti-Israel organizational resolutions and boycotts unjustly hold Israeli academics responsible for policies put in place by the Israeli government. Israeli professors – just like professors in the U.S. or elsewhere -- are politically independent and enjoy the right to express opposition to their government and any of its policies.
- Israel’s universities enroll many Arab students and serve as important forums for mutual understanding. Targeting this community, which has a proud record of promoting self-examination within Israeli society, is neither productive, nor appropriate.
- Participation in the academic community should not be limited to those with a specific set of political or religious views. “Litmus tests” for “correct” politics in order to have a place at the table are reminiscent of dark days in history. Individuals certainly have the right to renounce events that contradict their individual beliefs, but encouraging others to systematically censor groups threatens the very core principles of academia.



- Boycotts of Israelis will not influence Israeli policy. Constructive efforts that actively bring people together, foster reconciliation and promote understanding and trust are what will enable Israelis and Palestinians to live side-by-side in peace and security. The BDS movement does none of this.
- Those who seek a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should focus on efforts that support reconciliation and bring Palestinian and Israeli academics together on joint projects, including those designed to help both peoples and increase empathy.
- Peace advocates should echo the sentiment of acclaimed author Ian McEwan, who, upon accepting a prize in Jerusalem in 2011 said, “If I only went to countries that I approve of, I probably would never get out of bed. It’s not great if everyone stops talking.”

Recommended Reading

- “Is an Academic Boycott of Israel Justified?” - http://www.engageonline.org.uk/journal/index.php?journal_id=15&article_id=61
- AAUP Statement on Academic Boycotts - <http://www.aaup.org/news/aaup-statement-academic-boycotts>
- AAUP Open Letter to the Members of ASA - <http://www.aaup.org/file/OpenLettertoASA.pdf>
- “How Stephen Hawking Is Wrong: Let Us Count the Ways” - <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/132327/how-stephen-hawking-is-wrong>
- “Palestinian University President Comes Out Against Boycott of Israeli Academics” - <http://www.haaretz.com/news/palestinian-university-president-comes-out-against-boycott-of-israeli-academics-1.190585>
- “The Dangerous ‘A’ Words” - <http://www.nysun.com/opinion/dangerous-a-words/34122/>
- AJC College Presidents Ad - http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42D75369-D582-4380-8395-D25925B85EAF%7D/NYT_ISRAEL_BOYCOTT_AD_080807.PDF