

On Academic Boycott

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Calls to boycott Israeli academic institutions have stimulated heated debate over the relationship between boycotts and academic freedom. Academic boycotts raise complex issues, as they typically infringe upon academic freedom to some degree. Nonetheless, I oppose a blanket rejection of these boycotts. Rather, I believe that boycotts should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Boycotts are non-violent actions. They are one of the few effective ways in which citizens may directly express moral outrage over the behavior of a state or other actor. Maintaining academic freedom generally requires rejecting academic boycotts. But case-by-case consideration would acknowledge that academic freedom may, under unusual or extreme circumstances, be justifiably subordinated to other fundamental values.

The United Nations General Assembly acted as such in its 1980 resolution supporting an academic, sporting, and cultural boycott of apartheid South Africa. In that context, the world body judged that the freedom of South African academics, along with athletes, artists, and others, could be sacrificed in the interest of achieving freedom and equal rights for all South Africans. The resolution specifically noted that the South African regime employed culture, sports, and academic exchanges as a means to legitimate its “inhuman policies of apartheid and ‘bantustanization’.”

Supporters of boycott efforts against South Africa were also aware of the pride that white South Africans placed in the prowess of their sporting teams. The extension of the boycott to athletes was not based on their culpability in apartheid as such, but on the expected impact that shunning them would have on the white South African community more generally.

Likewise, Israel’s treatment of Palestinians is such an exceptional circumstance.

In July 2005, one year after the International Court of Justice ruled Israel’s separation wall illegal, over 170 Palestinian civil society organizations called for a comprehensive

boycott of Israel. The academic dimension of the boycott targets Israeli institutions, not individuals. Thus, formal research and other agreements with Israeli universities would be suspended, while invitations to Israeli professors to attend conferences or to publish in international journals would continue. Even so, it is likely that the boycott would impose limitations on freedom for some Israeli academics. Moreover, Israeli audiences would lose access to speakers, cultural performers, and others choosing to honor the boycott.

Israel's defenders have protested that Israel is not the worst of human rights offenders in the world, stating that singling it out amounts to hypocrisy or even anti-Semitism. Rhetorically, such objections shift focus from Israel's human rights record to the imagined ulterior motives of its critics.

However, "the worst first" has never been the yardstick for whom to boycott. Had it been, the Pol Pot regime of Cambodia — not apartheid South Africa — would have been targeted in the past. Yet Cambodia's ties to the West were insufficient to make any embargo effective. In contrast, Israel assiduously guards its public image. A dense web of economic and cultural — and yes, academic — relations ties Israel to the West, rendering it susceptible to the pressure of boycott.

Assuming a general boycott of Israel is justified, should academic institutions be exempted? Many Israeli academic institutions either benefit from, or participate in, Israeli government actions that violate Palestinian rights. For example, Tel Aviv University sits in part on land belonging to Sheikh Muwannis, a Palestinian village whose residents were expelled by Jewish militias or fled in fear in March 1948. Hebrew University in Jerusalem uses over 800 acres of land illegally expropriated from Palestinian private owners in the West Bank after the 1967 war. Bar Ilan University has established a branch in an illegal Israeli settlement in the West Bank. Furthermore, academic institutes like the Technion are involved in developing the arms industry and providing the military with sophisticated equipment. Finally, discrimination against students who are Palestinian citizens of Israel in admission policies is widespread as revealed by the decision of the heads of Israeli universities in 2003 to reverse experimental admission policies that had increased the number of Arab students.

Admittedly, a handful of Israeli academics are deeply critical of their government's policies. Nevertheless, many others have provided state agencies with expertise in demography, psychology, strategic studies, history, anthropology, and other fields that have assisted in their control of Palestinian populations. Israeli university administrations have harassed dissident scholars, yet turn a blind eye to openly racist expression by right wing Israeli academics.

No doubt many Israelis will initially react defensively to academic boycott. In the long term, however, it may serve to stimulate reflection within Israel, including among Israeli academicians, on the policies which have led them to international isolation. Carrying on "business as usual," including academic business, has the opposite effect — that is, it normalizes Israel's actions, and communicates to its citizens that nothing is truly amiss.

Boycotts are somewhat blunt instruments. But if some Israeli academics suffer mildly, that may be the regrettable but necessary price to pay for the freedom and equal rights for nearly 10 million Palestinians.

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