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An Academic Boycott of Israel is Necessary But Not Sufficient



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

When I first heard about the Palestinian Campaign for an Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, about twenty years ago, I thought, *this makes perfect sense*. Here was a way to bring international pressure to bear on Israel—a peaceful way for people of good conscience to try to stop Israel’s abuse of the Palestinian people.

I saw this campaign and other calls to boycott, divest from, and sanction Israel for its oppressive behavior as akin to earlier efforts to compel the white South African government to abolish apartheid. Given the parallel injustices in both cases, how could anyone who supported sanctions against South African apartheid oppose sanctions against Israel?

As it turned out, I underestimated the power of pro-Israel lobbying groups and the commitment of the U.S. ruling class to protecting Israel as an outpost of imperialism in the Middle East. After some early successes in winning support from progressive, religious, and student groups, the movement for boycott, divestment, and sanctions—or BDS, as it came to be known—ran into a pro-Israel backlash.

Pro-Israel groups and the Israeli government itself ramped up their propaganda efforts in the U.S., seeking to paint the BDS movement as unfairly discriminatory, slanderous of Israel, and, of course, antisemitic. State legislatures soon began passing laws making it illegal to boycott Israel. Today, thirty-eight states have anti-BDS laws on their books. This seems like the opposite of progress.

As a professor, I had to wrestle with the argument that boycotting Israel threatened academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), an organization to which I had belonged for years—in large part because it staunchly defends academic freedom—opposed the boycott, even though it had previously supported a boycott of South Africa in the 1980s.

The AAUP's position, expressed in a 2006 statement, was that academic boycotts are bad because they impede the free creation and exchange of knowledge that might serve the common good. This was superficially plausible, but I wasn't persuaded.

One reason I supported the boycott of Israel is that it was aimed at institutions, not individuals. The point was to refuse collaboration with Israeli institutions that were complicit, one way or another, in oppressing the Palestinian people. As Maya Wind documents in her 2024 book *Towers of Ivory and Steel*, this would include, then and now, most Israeli universities.

To me, the boycott seemed analogous to refusing to do business with a company that engaged in unfair labor practices—much like organizing a picket line and asking others not to cross it. Even if a company makes useful products, it might still deserve to be picketed for its mistreatment of workers. Likewise with Israel.

Critics of the boycott were right in arguing that boycotting institutions could ultimately impinge on the academic freedom of individuals. For example, a boycott could make it harder for U.S.-based academics to collaborate with academics in Israeli universities. This was true; such cases could arise. If they did, they struck me as small impediments to careerism more so than threats to academic freedom.

Moreover, advocates of the boycott never wavered in saying that academics everywhere, in all universities, should enjoy freedom in research, teaching, and extra-mural expression. In

fact, this commitment to academic freedom underscored for me the best reason for a boycott: Israeli universities, and indeed the government of Israel, were complicit in denying the academic freedom of *Palestinian* scholars and students.

If faculty at Israeli universities enjoyed academic freedom in their work, this was as it should be (although, as I learned later, faculty who fight for Palestinian rights do not fare so well). But should this freedom come at the expense of Palestinian faculty and students? Why was the academic freedom of this group relegated to insignificance?

I couldn't accept the moral calculus that prioritized the academic freedom of some U.S. and Israeli faculty over every other moral consideration, including the rights of the Palestinian people to be free from illegal occupation, free from violence, free from apartheid—and no less free to pursue research, scholarship, and learning than their Israeli counterparts.

In the case of Israel, I thought the AAUP's opposition to a boycott was wrong. As much as one might value academic freedom in the abstract, there were conditions, it seemed to me, under which a boycott was warranted. There were far greater injustices that called for remedy than inconveniences to privileged U.S. and Israeli faculty. If a peaceful boycott could help end the suffering of a dispossessed and oppressed people, then it was the right thing to do.

Today, after a year of witnessing Israel's genocidal assault on Palestinians in Gaza, the situation has changed, as have many people's perceptions of what is now the greater moral imperative. Partly in response to what's been happening in Palestine, the AAUP has revised its position. A new statement, recently approved by AAUP's national council, no longer blanketly opposes academic boycotts.

As its drafters have taken pains to note, the new policy does not advocate for academic boycotts in general. Rather, it holds that academic boycotts “can be considered legitimate tactical responses to conditions that are fundamentally incompatible with the mission of higher education.” In short, the new statement comes around to where many AAUP members concerned about the academic freedom of Palestinian scholars and students were twenty years ago.

The new statement also makes clear that it applies to boycotts aimed at “institutions of higher education that themselves violate academic freedom or the fundamental rights upon which academic freedom depends.” It further carves out space for individual conscience, stating that while “faculty members' choices to support or oppose academic boycotts ... may be criticized and debated, faculty members and students should not face institutional or governmental censorship or discipline for participating in academic boycotts, for declining to do so, or for criticizing and debating the choices of those with whom they disagree.”

Predictably, there has been a Zionist backlash. A former president of AAUP, Cary Nelson, who has turned defense of Zionism into a late-life career, denounced the new statement as a betrayal of AAUP's long-standing principles. Other critics chimed in—undeterred, it would appear, by rulings against Israel issued by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court.

But one sign of progress is that this time the backlash appears morally bankrupt against the background of Israel's destruction of Gaza, its renewed program of violence in the occupied West Bank, and its campaign of assassination and bombing in southern Lebanon. Against this background, fewer people are willing to accept the idea that academic freedom for Israeli faculty and their U.S. collaborators inevitably yields a "common good" of such overriding importance that we must carry on relationships with Israel and Israeli universities as if genocide is normal and not reason enough for a boycott.

And yet, given the horrors Israel has perpetrated this past year, an academic boycott, though more necessary than ever, is weak tea. It seems that only a complete cut-off of military aid, combined with global divestment from Israel across the board, will make the difference that needs to be made. The alternative—allowing Israel's right-wing extremist leaders to carry on as they have, to carry on as if genocide is normal, to carry on as if international law means nothing—looks more and more like the path to regional, if not global, war.

I have to wonder, too, how these debates in the U.S., among those for and against an academic boycott of complicit Israeli institutions, appear to the Palestinian scholars and students whose colleagues have been killed and whose schools have been destroyed. They, too, would like academic freedom, I imagine. They, too, would like to work in peace. They, too, would like to engage in civil discourse about science, the human condition, and the state of world, as professors and students are wont to do. One problem, as they might point out to U.S. defenders of Zionism and opponents of academic boycotts, is that Israel has left them no place in which to do it.

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