

Boycotts, Bias and Politics in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

By Gerald M. Steinberg

Academic boycotts are, by their very nature, blunt weapons to be used with extreme caution. When implemented, they silence the open exchange of knowledge, and promote the antithesis of academic freedom. Such extreme measures cannot be justified when casually invoked as part of a cynical political campaign to promote one side in a complex ethno-national or religious dispute.

But this is precisely the nature of the campaign to impose a boycott against Israeli scientists and universities -- the call to cut-off this research community is nothing more than a one-sided political weapon in an ongoing war, while ignoring dozens of other identity conflicts around the world. If a single and consistent moral standard were used to decide on boycotts, then surely the ethical academic community, at least in the democratic West, would begin with a boycott China for its repression and ethnic cleansing in Tibet. If real human rights violations were the standard, and not media-driven political campaigns, morally outraged faculty would be debating responses to the outrageous discrimination against the Roma in many European societies. And there are many more examples -- a truly moral and consistent approach to boycotts would leave the global academic community in tatters, with more holes than fabric.

Similarly, if one isolates the Arab-Israeli conflict for this exercise in moral indignation, and applied a single set of universal moral principles, where and when would an academic boycott begin? Perhaps in 1948, after the blanket Arab rejection of the United Nations partition plan which would have created two entities -- one a Jewish nation-state and the other a Palestinian-Arab state. The Arab leaders joined in a violent war with the explicit goal of preventing the Jews from establishing any sovereign equality in the territory they have claimed as their homeland. In this war, one-percent of the Jewish population was killed, with no special "rights of return", and Jews were ethnically cleansed from cities and villages, including the ancient Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem. Surely, this form of violent discrimination, in direct violation of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, would qualify as a moral crime.

Or perhaps the starting point should be May 1967, when the Egyptian leaders, at the head of an Arab coalition with Syria, evicted peacekeepers along the borders with Israel, used military means to cut-off shipments of vital food and fuel through international waters, and mobilized troops with the explicit objective of destroying Israel. The ensuing war led to the current situation of occupation and the absence of agreed borders. After, when the Arab League met in Khartoum, the participants, including PLO head Yassir Arafat, rejected Israeli and international calls for

negotiations based on the "land for peace" formula. Instead, they declared that there would be no talks, no recognition, and no peace.

Alternatively, if the justification is based on alleged lack of freedom at Palestinian academic institutions on the West Bank, the boycott should be directed at the PLO and Hamas cadres that dominate these institutions. Blaming Israel and the "occupation" is little more than a slogan which, as in the other dimensions of the boycott campaign, hides the complexity.

In other words, given this complex history, and the multiplicity of possible perspectives, the current campaign promoting a discriminatory boycott against Israelis cannot be justified on universal moral or consistent ethical grounds.

Instead, this campaign is far removed from the moral language with which it is promoted, and is actually a form of political warfare in which universities are simply exploited as a vehicle. The origins are found in the NGO Forum of the 2001 Durban Conference, in which Palestinian officials, including Arafat, produced a final declaration which made unsupported allegations of Israeli "war crimes" in order to justify boycotts designed to result in the "complete international isolation of Israel as an apartheid state." Shortly afterwards, following Palestinian mass terror attacks that murdered many Israeli civilians, entirely false claims of a "massacre" and "war crimes" in Jenin, based on unsupported allegations from many of the participants in the Durban forum, were cited to launch the academic boycott movement in the UK.

Furthermore, while supporters of the anti-Israel boycott often refer to their desire for peace, such one-sided political campaigns are not particularly conducive to promoting the mutual understanding, tolerance and compromise that is necessary to end bitter conflicts. Many boycott adherents simply condemn Israeli military power, as if the ability to defend civilians from attack is an inherently immoral act, comparable to the Nazi genocide or South African apartheid, and justifying the violation of academic freedom.

In all of the justifications that are provided for supporting the academic boycott of Israel, none of the central issues and complexities are considered. And in the process, every dimension of the academic process is violated – supporters systematically exclude evidence which does not support their pre-determined conclusions; they present no consistent criteria used to analyze different cases in order to reach conclusions; and they do not consider and respond to critical analysis and opposing views.

In order to avoid further damage to universal moral values, including the principle of academic freedom, the political and ideological dimensions that propel the process must be acknowledged.

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