

Britain and the Academic Boycott of Israel

David Newman

David Newman is a professor of political geography and a senior research fellow at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, where he founded the Department of Politics and Government. Editor of the international journal, Geopolitics, he has published widely on issues relating to territory and borders, with a focus on the territorial dimensions of the two-state solution for Israel-Palestine. His book Borders in a Borderless World will be published in 2009. During the past year Prof. Newman has represented Israeli universities in the UK on all matters related to the academic boycott.

Introduction

During the past five years, there have been four attempts by the unions of academic professionals in the UK to impose an academic boycott on Israel. The third attempt, proposed at the annual conference of the University and College Union (UCU) in April 2007, was eventually withdrawn by the union executive following legal advice to the effect that such a move would be discriminatory and contrary to both UK and European law. Nevertheless, a renewed motion was tabled for the UCU conference to be held in Manchester in May 2008. Potential boycotts remain on the public agenda of a number of professional unions in the UK, while British university campuses have become a staging center for intense faculty and student discussion concerning Israel, Palestine, solutions to the ongoing Middle Eastern conflict and the very legitimacy of the existence of the Jewish state.

History of the Boycott

The roots of the boycott can be found in a letter published in *The Guardian* in 2002 by a group of British academics protesting the activities of the Israeli army in the Jenin refugee camp. The letter accused the Israeli government of having carried out a massacre and called on their academic colleagues to express their disapproval through an academic boycott against their Israeli colleagues.

There followed four separate attempts to recommend an academic boycott of Israeli universities, the last of which has yet to be debated. The first of these took place at the annual meeting of the Union of Academic Teachers (UAT) in 2005, where a proposal was made to boycott two academic institutions—Bar-Ilan and Haifa Universities. The former was targeted because of its patronage of the College of Judea and Samaria in Ariel, on the West Bank, and the latter

because it purportedly denied the full academic rights of faculty who were highly critical of Israel's policies. The motion was passed but later put to another vote and overturned.

The second attempt, a year later, was approved at the annual conference of the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) union, with a motion recommending the boycott of Israeli academics who were not forthcoming in their condemnation of Israeli occupation policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This more selective boycott also passed by majority vote. However, since it had previously been agreed that the two academic unions (UAT and NATFHE) would be disbanded later that year and would amalgamate to form a single trade union the following year, all motions passed at this conference were seen as constituting nothing more than recommendations requiring approval at the inaugural conference of the new UCU union, which was to be held in the spring of 2007 in Bournemouth. This recommendation was passed by a majority vote, calling on the various union branches throughout the country to debate the issue with a view to implementing a full boycott at the next annual meeting. Following legal advice taken by the union leaders in the autumn of 2007, the motions were withdrawn on the basis that this would constitute discriminatory activities on the part of publicly funded institutions.

In the spring of 2008, another motion was tabled for the forthcoming conference in Manchester, recommending a boycott of the college in Ariel, with a view to expanding the debate to include other Israeli academic institutions and personnel. At the time of writing, this debate had not yet taken place.

Issues

The major issues which have been raised by the pro-boycott lobbies range from a condemnation of the Israeli academic community for not voicing their opposition to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, to questioning the very legitimacy of the existence of Israel as an exclusively self-defined nation-state (in a period of post-nation statehood) as a last vestige of European colonialism in an era of post-colonialism.

The basic argument used to justify a boycott has been the accusation that Israeli universities and, by association, all academics employed therein, are guilty of complicity with the Israeli authorities in the continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The fact that Israeli universities enjoy high standards of research and modern infrastructures while their Palestinian colleagues carry on in inferior conditions is evidence enough, they argue. The constant closures of Palestinian universities by Israeli authorities plus the fact that some Israeli

researchers and scholars are engaged in work funded by the country's security institutions strengthens this argument. The fact that Israeli universities are the centers of strong social and political criticism of the state, that they are the core of liberal discourse and are the seat of much Israeli-Palestinian research cooperation is totally ignored in this argument. Israeli universities are accused of remaining silent in the face of continued occupation, despite the fact that it is not their role to take a political stance. At the same time, many in Israel's liberal academic community are at the forefront of activities—political and grassroots—protesting the Palestinians' conditions under occupation and promoting the Palestinian right to independence. Contextually, Israeli universities are no different than universities elsewhere, in which the widest range of views is reflected.

The “complicity” argument has spilled over into the wider political accusation that Israel is an apartheid state, comparable to South Africa—and, therefore, to be treated as such in terms of international isolation, disinvestment and boycotts. British university campuses have been the focus of numerous debates on apartheid and racism in general, with a focus on Israel as the main source of contemporary, post-South Africa apartheid. The fact that Israeli universities are open to all Israeli citizens, that they contain a large and growing Arab student body and that they have affirmative policies in place to increase the number of Arab-Palestinian faculty is, conveniently, ignored.

The pro-boycott discourse has also expanded to include questions concerning the existential legitimacy of Israel as a self-defined nation (Jewish) state in a perceived era of post-nation states, such that even the two-state solution to the conflict, which is supported by the international community, the majority of Israel's citizens and a significant proportion of the Palestinian population, is rejected as being colonial in nature. As such, boycott seminars at universities are tied to wider discussions concerning the legitimacy of the State of Israel, beyond its policies vis-à-vis the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Reactions to the Boycott Proposals

Reactions to the pro-boycott motion were widespread, but by no means limited to Jewish and Israeli groups. Condemnation was heard from across the British political spectrum, with strong statements by then prime minister Tony Blair, his successor Gordon Brown and the leader of the opposition, David Cameron. The British media came out strongly against the boycott motions, with editorials in all of the leading newspapers, including those which were not always perceived as friendly to Israel. Stopping short of making any formal public declaration, most university rectors and vice chancellors voiced their opposition to the boycott, noting that the recommendations and motions of the members of the academic

unions were not in any way binding on the universities and colleges as institutions, and that they would not allow any discriminatory activity to take place on their campuses.

Within the relatively small (less than 300,000) Anglo-Jewish community, a community not known for being especially proactive, the threat of the academic boycott served as a catalyst for a great deal of political coordination between the plethora of Jewish groups. Media statements on behalf of the British Board of Deputies and the newly formed Stop the Boycott campaign were widespread, linking the boycott attempts to the general growth of antisemitic activity in the UK.

Beyond the UK, particularly in North America, Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) published full page advertisements in both North American and European newspapers condemning the attack on academic freedom. Anti-boycott advertisements, including the signatures of leading world scientists, many of them Nobel Prize laureates, were also published. One notable Nobel Prize recipient for physics, Steven Weinberg, cancelled his visit to Imperial College at the University of London as a mark of protest.

The arguments against the proposed academic boycott can broadly be divided into three categories: antisemitism, a denial of academic freedom and the singling out of Israel.

- **Antisemitism**

Initially, the pro-boycotters were collectively labelled antisemites. This charge emanated more strongly from the USA and from within Israel itself than from within the UK. For its part, the pro-boycott lobby pointed out that many of its leading activists were, themselves, Jewish and therefore could not be accused of antisemitism. Other pro-boycotters stressed that they were also active in opposing racism and anti-ethnic activity on campuses, including anti-Jewish activities. The recently published All-Parliamentary Report on Antisemitism describing the growth of antisemitism in the UK during the past decade was not seen as significant by the pro-boycott lobby. Also not considered significant was the increasingly uncomfortable feeling among Jewish students on some British campuses, especially when participating in activities arranged by either the Jewish or Israeli student societies. At most, they accepted the fact that the tone of the pro-boycott and anti-Israel debate had become more vehement throughout the campus environment and that it did, at the very least, create a back door through which proponents of antisemitism could easily enter and disseminate their material of hate. By the third

boycott attempt in 2007, most anti-boycott groups agreed that blanket accusations of antisemitism were not effective in turning the tide of the debate, and that some of the pro-boycott lobby who could be engaged in discussion were automatically turned off by being branded antisemites. This argument was therefore used less intensively during the 2007 debate.

- **The Denial of Academic Freedom**

A second argument used to counter the academic boycott was that its implementation would result in the denial of freedom of speech. This was the line taken by government and university officials, as well as by most of the media. Since the pro-boycott lobby had argued against working with Israeli academics and universities because of the lack of academic freedom experienced by their Palestinian counterparts, it was seen as being hypocritical to suggest that this would somehow be resolved by denying their Israeli counterparts the very same academic freedoms. Israeli universities are the venue of much left-wing critique of the Israeli government and its policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moreover, many Israeli academics have initiated collaborative research with their Palestinian counterparts, and have even signed petitions on behalf of Palestinian rights and Palestinian universities. Therefore, the attempt to boycott Israeli universities was seen as being a negative step towards achieving what should have been the objectives of the pro-boycotters in the first place—namely, greater Palestinian rights and freedoms. Opponents of the boycott drew attention to the fact that some leading Palestinian academics, most notably the president of Al-Quds University, Sari Nusseibeh, had voiced opposition to the idea of academic boycotting of Israel as being counterproductive. Most left-wing Israeli academics, many of whom are highly critical of Israel's policies with respect to the Palestinians, were also strongly opposed to the boycott strategy, although there are a small number of faculty members who have supported the boycott proposals, or at best have remained silent in debating the issue. Those who have chosen to remain silent do so because they do not wish to compromise their political links with colleagues throughout the world.

Indeed, Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza have sometimes made it difficult for Palestinian academics to move freely and to attend foreign universities outside the region. In several cases, Israeli academics have initiated or signed petitions to the Israeli authorities requesting that the same academic freedoms experienced by their own colleagues inside Israel should be enjoyed by their Palestinian counterparts. Requests to organizations such as Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (SPME) or the International Advisory Board (IAB) for Academic Freedom—both of whom argue against the proposed boycott on grounds of academic freedom—to take on these causes and to include Palestinian and Arab academics in their own boards

have consistently been rejected on the grounds that when it comes to Palestinian academics in the West Bank and Gaza, there are “legitimate security concerns” that prevent Israeli authorities from granting freedom of movement and access to these scholars. These responses serve to weaken the outcry against the denial of academic freedoms.

- **The Singling Out of Israel**

The fact that only Israel was singled out for boycott motions was seen as clear evidence of the strong antisemitic undertones of the argument. The many cases of human rights abuses (to say nothing of acts of ethnic cleansing or genocide) which were occurring elsewhere in the world and which were not raised by the UCU were highlighted by the boycott opponents, as was the fact that British universities and academic institutions had a diverse range of scientific exchange and research cooperation projects with universities in China, dictatorial regimes in Africa and other countries with dubious political regimes. Those projects involved government-sponsored research activities. For their part, the boycott advocates argued that Israel was, indeed, a special case because it presented itself as the “only true democracy” in the Middle East. As opposed to dictatorial regimes in which nothing better could be expected to happen, they argued that Israel was carrying out policies of occupation and “repression.” Not all anti-boycott actors were happy with the “singling out” argument because, in their view, it indicated that Israel did carry out unacceptable and unjustified political policies, but was simply not the only country in the world to engage in such activities.

The obvious comparison with South Africa was raised continuously as part of this debate, with Israel being equated to South Africa as a country practicing apartheid policies. International boycott activities were perceived as having played a major role in the eventual dismantlement of the apartheid regime. This comparison was unacceptable to the anti-boycott groups, because apartheid policies of the type carried out in South Africa are not carried out in Israel. Even if discrimination exists in certain areas, Arab citizens of Israel enjoy political rights and are represented within the Israeli parliament (Knesset), where they can even argue against the legitimacy of the existence of the Jewish State of Israel. At a tactical level, it was also argued that the boycotts and sanctions that did affect South Africa were in the areas of sports and trade relations, while the academic boycott had limited impact. In retrospect, it prevented liberal, anti-apartheid academics from taking on positions within South African universities and in engaging in the type of open debate that takes place on all Israeli campuses, including strong criticism of government policies in the occupied territories.

The Actors

Despite the outcry by the Israeli government and universities, the practical response to the proposed academic boycott has come mostly from institutions that are not affiliated with the government. Israeli universities, potentially the most affected by such a boycott, were largely muted in their response and dragged their heels in providing some minimal funding to counteract the threat. In their place was an organization entitled, somewhat pretentiously, the International Advisory Board (IAB) for Academic Freedom. Originally established within the framework of Bar-Ilan University (one of the two universities to be affected by the first boycott proposal because of its association with the college in Ariel), the IAB provided a mouthpiece for, and acted as a disseminator of, information on all matters relating to the boycott.

The Jewish lobby, especially in the UK, saw the boycott as a means of revitalizing itself. The creation of the Fair Play Group (FPCG) and the Stop the Boycott campaign enabled a previously lethargic Anglo-Jewish community to become proactive. As such, the main actors focused on the political aspects of the boycott rather than the academic and scientific ones. The decision by Israeli universities and the IAB to appoint an academic representative in the UK was not, initially, backed up with the funds necessary to promote the visits of Israeli academics to UK campuses. These visits could have enabled real dialogue to take place between scholars, instead of engaging in direct political confrontation. For its part, the IAB was eventually forced to close down, due to the lack of funding for its activities by the Israeli universities themselves, whose coordinating body *Va'ad Rashei Ha'universitaot* (VERA) [the Committee of Israeli University Heads] could not even find time to have a single formal discussion on the topic. The largely ineffective pro-Israel lobby in the UK, British Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM), underwent a renaissance after the infusion of funds raised locally for the express purpose of fighting the academic boycott.

The academic boycott provided a rallying call for a great deal of cooperation between academic, Jewish and Israeli institutions and advocacy groups, to an extent rarely seen beforehand. In retrospect, the attempt to specifically boycott Israeli universities and scientists was seen as “the last straw.” It followed a period in which anti-Zionist and antisemitic discourse had been increasing in Europe, and in which universities (unlike other political or economic institutions, which were also the subject of continued disinvestment or boycott attempts) were seen as the last vestige of liberal discourse. There, Israeli and Palestinian scholars did undertake collaborative research and dialogue, and were regarded in the UK as places of empowerment and cooperation rather than of boycotts and exclusionary tactics.

The Funding of Boycott Activities

The issue of funding the various pro- and counter-boycott groups is a critical factor in their relative success. The question of “who funds?” is, itself, part of the public debate, indicating the direct influence of non-academic, political actors in the process. It is unclear what the funding source of the widespread pro-boycott activities is. These activities extend beyond the limited arena of universities and the academic community into some of the more powerful trade unions, such as the Union of Public Sector Workers (UNISON) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), as well as the unions of the architects, journalists and the British medical profession. Within all of those, there have been moves to promote boycotts and/or disinvestment. The unions have agreed to fund visits of Palestinian activists and academics to the UK in order to present their case to the potential voters in the lead-up to various pro-boycott proposals at annual conferences and to generally raise awareness among students and faculty about the situation in Palestine. However, there is no attempt to balance the debate with Israeli academic or political discourse.

The pro-boycott lobby accused boycott opponents of being sustained by a powerful Jewish lobby and the Israeli government, while pleading poverty for the continuation of their own campaign. At the UCU conference in Bournemouth, the pro-boycott lobby made a show of selling the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) pamphlet, as compared to the pamphlet put out by Engage (an anti-boycott lobby), which was distributed free of charge. It also pointed out that BICOM, the pro-Israel lobby in the UK, was attempting to raise £2 million per annum for its renewed activities, and that much of this funding had been provided by a billionaire philanthropist, Poju Zabłudowicz, one of a new and more proactive generation of political activists within the Anglo-Jewish community.

The source of the pro-boycott funds remained hidden; calls for transparency went unanswered, despite the fact that it was clear that the boycott’s spread from the limited arena of academia to the larger realm of trade unions must have significant funding behind it. Various university societies and trade unions have provided funding for specific events, while it has been suggested—though this has yet to be proved—that more significant funding has emanated from pro-Islamic and pro-Palestinian sources in North America and the Middle East.

Alternative Strategies

After each vote, strategies to counter boycott activities were initially aimed at pointing out the discriminatory nature of collective boycotts and questioning the

legality and the morality of such activities. The ultimate aim was to impress upon the membership of the academic unions that a relatively small group of radical activists had hijacked the union and were bringing British academia into global disrepute.

One of the most influential actors in this context was a group of left-wing academics organized under the umbrella of Engage. Many of them were themselves highly critical of Israeli government policies, but strongly opposed the attempted boycott on ethical grounds. They were also opposed because of the links between the stated anti-Israel positions of the pro-boycott groups and the growth of what has become known as the “new antisemitism.” Members of Engage were able to “engage” their academic colleagues in dialogue and, as members of academic trade unions, were able to represent their case at branch meetings and at national conventions. Nevertheless, this organization is now increasingly perceived as a pro-Israel lobby within the UCU.

A parallel strategy implemented by Israeli universities and backed by both the British and Israeli governments has been to strengthen and promote the academic and scientific links between the two countries. Principals and vice chancellors of universities had largely come out strongly against the boycott attempts, not necessarily because of their sympathies for Israel, but because they saw the union activists as engaging in issues which were not part of their mandate. They also saw those activists as bringing about potential international condemnation, which would result in the isolation (especially within North America and among the major international research funding agencies) of their own institutions, which would be deemed discriminatory and no longer worthy of support or assistance. A visit by a delegation of British university vice chancellors and principals to both Israeli and Palestinian universities in October 2007 resulted in the recommendation that British universities strengthen their ties to both their Israeli and Palestinian colleagues through bilateral and, to the extent possible, trilateral projects. These would be funded through private channels but with the express support of both British universities and government agencies, such as the Ministries of Education, Science and Technology and the British Council. The strengthening of bilateral Israeli-UK scientific projects, in an era when the majority of bilateral research resources had shifted from individual countries to EU agencies in Brussels, served to create a contrast to those who would have promoted collective boycotts. Efforts were also made to promote scientific exchanges between Israeli and British scholars as a means of highlighting the mutual benefits of such collaboration, especially within such fields as medicine, bio-technology and the eradication of poverty.

Concluding Comments

The decision by the UCU in the autumn of 2007 to retreat from the boycott debate was vehemently opposed by the pro-boycott lobby. The head of the UCU, Sally Hunt, was accused of capitulating to what was perceived as a strong and powerful Israeli government and Jewish lobby. It was further suggested that the fact that in the lead-up to the elections for the post of UCU chairperson, Hunt had been less favorable toward a boycott motion than her challenger, Roger Kline, was partially responsible for her finding a way to back down from this contentious move on the part of the new union. The UCU leadership now stood accused of denying the basic right of academic freedom to its membership, following its decision to prevent further debates on the matter and to cancel the road show of Palestinian and Israeli academics planned for six campuses throughout the country in October and November of that year. Nevertheless, by March 2008, a new motion was being discussed at the National Executive Council (NEC) of the UCU with a view to presenting it to the next UCU conference in Manchester, in May. This elicited an immediate response from the anti-boycott lobbies within the Anglo-Jewish community, providing the pro-boycotters, yet again, with media exposure well beyond their own limited capacity, even before it was clear whether the motion would, in fact, be tabled.

The pro-boycott groups joined with Palestinian student societies and BRICUP to promote renewed discussions of boycotting Israel within the framework of public debates and seminars focusing on the one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A two-day conference at the School of African and Asian Studies (SOAS) at the University of London was followed by public debates at Hampstead Theatre and at the Oxford Union in the autumn and winter of 2007. The linkage of the two issues—one state and the desire for an academic boycott—again raised the question concerning the nature of the critique against Israeli government policies, or against the legitimacy of the existence of Israel as a nation state in its own right.

The chances of boycott proposals being implemented have always been, at best, minimal, given the fact that the majority of scholars engaged in bilateral and collaborative research projects and academic exchanges have little interest in pursuing political actions of this nature. Nevertheless, the public discourse created around the boycott attempts has been significant. British universities perceived the actions of radical elements within the academic unions as harmful to their prestige and reputation and distanced themselves from this form of political intervention in academic affairs. For their part, Israeli universities failed to respond adequately to the potential threat of a boycott, arguing that other critical issues—such as

the Israeli lecturers' strike of 2007 or the general cut in public funding to Israel's universities—were of much greater importance. Israeli governmental responses, especially those of the foreign ministry, were more vocal but were not reinforced by practical actions. This, despite the government's stated commitment to assist in academic exchange programs. The arrival of a new, proactive Israeli ambassador to London in autumn of 2007, Ron Prosor, resulted in greater Israeli public visibility in response to anti-Israel activities on UK campuses.

The most effective actions were those carried out by the local Jewish community lobbies within the UK, but they focused on the increase in antisemitism, while largely avoiding the critical issues of academic freedom and the essential nature of scientific collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian scholars. For these community organizations, the attempted academic boycott is but one component in a series of boycott and disinvestment attempts which have now spread beyond the limited impact of universities and scientific research to more significant economic unions, such as the TGWU, UNISON and the unions of architects, journalists and actors. This would suggest the existence of a concerted campaign, funded by unknown sources, aimed at the delegitimization of Israel through a growing public discourse among diverse professional organizations. The fact that most of these boycott proposals will never be implemented does not negate the fact that the issue has become part of a broad public discourse within the UK. This further weakens Israel's position, especially given the relative lack of effective response and actions on the part of the Israeli government and affected Israeli institutions.

Postscript, Late May 2008

As this journal goes to press, the UCU unanimously voted to recommend to its members a new boycott proposal of Israeli universities. This was done despite the fact that it had been determined that such an action would contravene the UK race relations act. In its closing session, which took place on the same day as the motion was discussed in the UK, the International Board of Governors of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev noted that this act was counter to Statute 5 of the International Council of Science. The Board called upon the international academic community to condemn such acts of blatant discrimination.