



## **Progressive Issue Brief**

# **Academic Boycotts of Israel: Selective, Collective and Misguided Punishment**

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## ISRAELI SCHOLARS ARE THE WRONG TARGETS

Academic boycotts of Israel are appealing to some progressives who want to help end Israel's occupation, stop discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel and pursue other worthy goals. In fact, such boycotts make it **harder** to achieve those goals.

“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,” according to Palestinian educator Sari Nusseibeh, the former president of Al Quds University in Jerusalem. “If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.”<sup>i</sup>

A large proportion of Israeli academics are on the left side of the political spectrum. They include fierce opponents of the occupation, the settlement enterprise and Arab-Jewish inequality within Israel proper. At a time when Israel is drifting further to the right, it is a mistake to isolate and punish thought leaders who are trying to stop that drift. Yet that is an inevitable consequence of academic boycott resolutions targeting Israel.

Those who defend these resolutions frequently insist that they are boycotting institutions, not individuals. The world doesn't work that way. “The idea that one can boycott an institution, and not an academic, is deceptive and without merit,” according to the Third Narrative's [Academic Advisory Council](#). “Scholars require funds from their institutions for travel and other necessities.”<sup>ii</sup>

As Russell Berman puts it, “Individual scholars can thrive only because of their institutional contexts and the resources that institutions make available. Strip away the institution and the individual scholar barely survives.”<sup>iii</sup>

“If one has objections to the government of Israel, how could one suppose that it would be swayed in any way by imposing publication disabilities on some powerless young scholars,” argues Martha Nussbaum. “Boycotts are supposed to be a weapon of the weak against the powerful...It doesn't make practical sense to boycott scholars, typically among the most powerless of society's members, and it also doesn't make symbolic sense.”<sup>iv</sup>

## THE ANSWER TO DISCRIMINATION IS NOT MORE DISCRIMINATION

Boycotts of Israeli academic institutions are also touted as a response to discrimination against Palestinian teachers and students. It's true that there have been instances of restrictions against Palestinian educators and students. Most were the result of Israeli security measures and regulations, which Israel's government justifies as necessary to protect armed threats to Israel. It's also true—and rarely acknowledged by boycott advocates—that Egypt has severely restricted the freedom of movement and academic

pursuits of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, and so has Hamas.<sup>1</sup> When such restrictions are unjustified, they should be protested against, and certainly North American academics have a valuable role to play in that regard.

But two wrongs do not make a right: the answer to discrimination against Palestinian scholars is not to discriminate against their counterparts in Israel.

An academic boycott of Israel is inherently discriminatory because it creates a blacklist against people based solely on their nationality. [TTN's Academic Advisory Council](#) also asserts:

This blacklist, of necessity, would also include a “secondary” list of academics to be shunned, or at least tarred – American academics who choose to ignore their institution’s decision to ghettoize Israeli academics, and to work with them anyway. This prohibition would apply to faculty and student authors, who are told not to publish in, or in collaboration with, Israeli universities, or reprint articles that first appeared in such Israeli publications. Many of the American academics shunned would be Jews.v

### **SELECTIVE, COLLECTIVE PUNISHMENT**

Supporters of academic boycotts of Israel charge that Israeli universities and colleges are “complicit” in the occupation. There is no doubt that some objectionable policies of the Israeli government are directly supported by Israel’s academic researchers and institutions. It’s also true that policies of the U.S. government that are anathema to the left are propped up and promoted by American academics. BDS proponents in the U.S. are not arguing for a boycott targeting their own educational institutions.

Many countries are guilty of human rights violations and other practices that are more egregious than anything practiced by the Israel. So why single out Israel? BDS advocates typically respond by arguing that it is the largest recipient of American military aid and deserves special attention. Certainly, the “special relationship” between the U.S and Israel warrants engagement by American citizens. Still that still doesn’t explain—let alone justify—the single-minded, selective fury of BDS activists against Israel.

As Marc Edelman notes in response to a pro-boycott report by an American Anthropological Association (AAA) task force:

Other countries in the (Middle East and North Africa) region are also among the greatest beneficiaries of Washington’s military largesse (and others, rather than aid recipients, are major arms customers. Saudi Arabia, for instance, uses U.S. bombs to wreak havoc in Yemen).

Just as “many Israelis are unfamiliar with even the word ‘Nakba,’ the Arabic term for the Palestinians’ 1948 catastrophe, many BDS proponents with whom I have

spoken seem strikingly uninformed or — worse still — singularly unconcerned about the human rights records of other recipients of U.S. military aid and hardware. BDS proponents have expressed little or no outrage about today’s Egypt, where Abdel Fattah el-Sisi seized power in a military coup and launched court-martials that sentenced hundreds to death in single one-hour show trials...If the AAA were consistent, it would have to suggest that U.S. academics boycott the American University of Cairo, because the Egyptian government is oppressing Palestinians and its own people, detaining tens of thousands without charges and destroying thousands of homes. vii

BDS proponents insist that they are also opposed to injustices perpetrated by other governments besides Israel’s. A supporter of the AAA’s boycott resolution [claimed](#) that “if someone would like to make an argument that another issue also deserves our attention and action – whether in the form of a boycott or any other policy – we will listen with open ears.”

The problem is that few people make that “argument.” Academic associations and universities are almost never mobilized to boycott their counterparts in countries other than Israel. Instead, their agendas have been hijacked by those who have bought into a simplistic, one-sided, ahistorical ideology that treats Israel as evil incarnate, a nation state so loathsome that it deserves to be singled out for collective political action. That is, to put it kindly, illogical and troubling.

## PRODUCTIVE ALTERNATIVES

Academic boycott supporters believe it is imperative to do something about Israeli policies that oppress Arabs on both sides of the Green Line. We agree. But they offer no credible explanation of how a boycott will bring about concrete change. Boycotts of Israel are meant to send some kind of angry message to the Israeli government and people, a signal of disapproval. But, other than a vaguely defined strategy of pressuring Israel, BDS supporters have no game plan for achieving anything tangible, no path from A to B.

Do BDS activists think that, as a result of academic boycotts, more Israeli professors and students will be motivated to oppose the occupation than are doing so already? Do they believe Israel’s institutions of higher education will be able to sever their institutional relationships with the Israeli government, and –unlike any universities and colleges in the world—stop receiving government funds?

If they believe any of that, they are out of touch with reality.

Fortunately, there are better alternatives for progressive scholars and teachers who want to foster human rights and social justice in Israel/Palestine...but don’t want to hurt Israeli academics who are working tirelessly for the same goals. TTN provides a range of options for progressive professors and students in our *Activist Guide: Progressive Action for Human Rights, Peace and Reconciliation in Israel and Palestine* (See

<http://thirdnarrative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The-Third-Narrative-Progressive-Action-Guide.pdf>). It describes groups and activities that aim to:

- Mobilize non-violent resistance to the occupation and the promotion of human rights in Israel and the Palestinian territories.
- Press for creative, vigorous American diplomacy and encourage peace negotiations aimed at achieving a resolution that works for both Palestinians and Israelis.
- Foster and promote constructive Arab-Jewish dialogue, shared community building, peaceful coexistence, joint economic development, and reconciliation.
- Build the infrastructure of a Palestinian state and address problems in the health, environmental and municipal spheres.

Academic associations can also help bring about positive changes on the ground in Israel/Palestine. For example, in December 2015, when an [academic boycott resolutionviii](#) was proposed to the American Anthropological Association (AAA), a sensible alternative [resolution](#) was proposed. While opposed to an academic boycott, it strongly criticized Israel's policies and action. And it called upon the AAA to devote resources to academic programs that would enable members "to become engaged in Israel/Palestine in ways that applied anthropological insights and analytical frameworks to promote justice," as explained by Michelle Rivkin-Fish.ix [Anthropologists for Dialogue on Israel and Palestine](#) has posted several instructive videos in which individual scholars explain why the boycott is misguided.x

An academic boycott of Israel is "feel-good" activism that will not change lives in Israel or the occupied territories. There are more productive activities that should be explored by scholars and students who want to foster an end to the occupation and protect the human rights of all people between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea.

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i Associated Press, "Palestinian University President Comes Out Against Boycott of Israeli Academics," June 7, 2006 (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/palestinian-university-president-comes-out-against-boycott-of-israeli-academics-1.190585>).

ii Third Narrative Academic Advisory Council, "Frequently Asked Questions About Academic Boycotts" (<http://thirdnarrative.org/uncategorized/frequently-asked-questions-on-academic-boycotts/>).

iii Russell Berman, "The Boycott as an Infringement on Academic Freedom," in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, eds. Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm (MLA Members for Scholars Rights, 2015) p. 51.

iv Martha Nussbaum, "Against Academic Boycotts," in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, eds. Nelson and Brahm, p. 46.

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v Op. cit., Third Narrative Academic Advisory Council, “Frequently Asked Questions About Academic Boycotts.”

vi For an overview of academic restrictions imposed by both Egypt and Hamas, see, Alliance for Academic Freedom, “A Flawed Resolution: Errors, Misrepresentations and Omissions in the Resolution Before the AHA” (<http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/161650>).

vii Mark Edelman, “Outsized Outrage: American Anthropologists and the Gifts of BDS,” *PoLar*, Political and Legal Anthropology Review (<https://polarjournal.org>).

viii Anthropologists for the Boycott of Israel Academic Institutions, “The Resolution,” (<https://anthroboycott.wordpress.com/the-resolution/>).

ix Michele Rivkin-Fish, “American Anthropologists Wrong to Boycott Israeli Academic,” *The Third Narrative*, December 2, 2015 (<http://thirdnarrative.org/uncategorized/american-anthropologists-wrong-to-boycott-israeli-academia/>).

x Anthropologists for Dialogue on Israel and Palestine, “Watch Anthropologists Who Are Now Willing To Speak Out About the Boycott” (<http://www.anthrodialogue.org/#!personal-stories/advfd>)