

FAQs ON ACADEMIC BOYCOTTS

What is wrong with academic boycotts?

Regardless of whether one thinks an economic or other type of boycott may be justified to achieve a political end, academic boycotts are different. Ideas and knowledge are not, like a product, produced in a plant on a few acres of land. Scholars, of necessity, collaborate and learn from each other, across borders.

Academic boycotts are irreconcilable with the core principles of academic freedom, which stress that ideas must be debated and examined based on their merits, not the nationality, race or religion of the academics expounding the ideas.

Scholars must be free to collaborate with any academic institution to produce and disseminate knowledge without threat of interference or penalty, regardless of a government's policies. An academic boycott would be an obstacle to such collaboration, imparting a chilling effect on academic freedom.

Participation in the academic community should not be limited to those with a specific set of political or religious views. "Litmus tests" for "correct" politics in order to have a place at the table are reminiscent of dark days in history. Individuals certainly have the right to renounce events that contradict their individual beliefs, but encouraging others to systematically censor institutions threatens the very core principles of academia.

The idea that one can boycott an institution, and not an academic, is deceptive and without merit. Scholars require funds from their institutions for travel and other necessities. To require only Israeli academics to pay out of their pocket, or identify non-institutional alternative sources of funding, is inherently discriminatory, and denies Israelis equal footing with scholars from anyplace else in the world.

Undoubtedly, there are cases in Israel and Palestine in which academic freedom is violated. But the remedy for such cases is to protect academic freedom further, not to diminish it for Israeli academics and those who work with them.

If any academic institution votes a boycott of the academic institutions of a country, faculty at the boycotting institution will likely feel uncomfortable or tacitly pressured not to bring in a speaker from that country.

At its core, an academic boycott is not so much a boycott, but rather a blacklist since it identifies a group of people who should be excluded from the normal rights and privileges of the profession (Israeli academics). This is not a "secret" blacklist kept in a demagogue's pocket, but a public one, punishing people and harming their careers simply because of their nationality.

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. The Palestinian Call for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) academic boycott guidelines state: "projects with all Israeli academic institutions should come to an end." 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.

Is this proposed boycott to include Israeli Arab academics too? If so, it harms Israeli Arab students and faculty, people it is allegedly designed to help. If it is only intended against Jewish Israeli academics, it is doubly discriminatory.

Who is against academic boycotts?

A wide variety of institutions, associations and other prestigious academic groupings have roundly condemned academic boycotts generally, and those against Israeli institutions specifically.

More than 250 university presidents, chancellors and provosts have criticized academic boycott efforts in 2013.

Academic boycotts have been condemned by educational bodies, such as the American Council on Education (an umbrella of 1,800 institutions that is widely considered the largest higher education organization in the United States), the Executive Committee of the Association of American Universities (that represents 62 top institutions in the U.S. and Canada) and the American Association of University Professors (that counts more than 48,000 members).

Said AAUP in a 2013 statement, "In view of the association's longstanding commitment to the free exchange

of ideas, we oppose academic boycotts. On the same grounds, we recommend that other academic associations oppose academic boycotts. We urge that they seek alternative means, less inimical to the principle of academic freedom, to pursue their concerns.”

In 2007, over 400 American university and college presidents endorsed a statement by Columbia University President Lee Bollinger, which rejected a boycott call by the University and College Union (UCU) in the UK. In essence, the presidents said that if the UCU were intent on dividing the academic world in two – Israelis who should be shunned, and everyone else – the UCU should consider these American universities as Israeli, too.

Why should you care?

Israeli academics are no more responsible for their government’s actions than you are for the U.S. government’s. Is it wise to set a precedent that academics can be punished, their ability to do their work diminished, and the pursuit of knowledge sacrificed because one doesn’t like the policies of a government?

Furthermore, Israel’s academic community is, on the whole, to the political left of its government (just as American academics are). It makes no sense to isolate the very group that is at the forefront of raising and encouraging debate about political policy.

Academic boycotts cannot be applied consistently – scholars are not table grapes. A boycott would encourage faculty to come up with individual ways to punish other faculty and students.

An academic boycott will harm your students in general, and your Jewish students in particular. The boycott guidelines state that “international faculty should not accept to write recommendations for students hoping to pursue studies in Israel.”

Furthermore, the guidelines dismiss academic study programs in Israel as “propaganda efforts” and insist that “[p]ublicity and recruitment for these schemes through students’ affairs offices or academic departments (such as Middle East and international studies centers) at universities abroad should come to an end.”

But shouldn’t we support what Palestinians ask of us, to secure their rights?

Academic boycotts of Israel are advanced primarily by supporters of the Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and the supporters of the PACBI call for an academic boycott. PACBI claims the core of the problem is not so much specific Israeli policies (nor is even one aspect of the conflict in their view the fault of any Palestinian position), but rather Israel’s “Zionist ideology.” But Zionism is nothing more than the founding principle of self-determination of the Jewish people, just as the Palestinian quest for statehood is the expression of Palestinian national aspirations. BDS and PACBI do not seek peace via an academic boycott, but rather to end the existence of a Jewish state.

The positions of the BDS movement are neither the sole nor the consensus approach within Palestinian society (and even if they were, academics have the right and responsibility to think for themselves). For example, Al Quds President Sari Nusseibeh publicly condemned academic boycotts, telling *The Associated Press*, “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. If you want to punish any sector, this is the last one to approach.”^[1] Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is also against a boycott.^[2]

The BDS movement – despite claiming it has no formal position on the two-state solution – works unambiguously to undermine it, and to promote a “one-state” position, which is a formula for perpetual war. Both peoples will fight forever for their rights of self-determination and national self-expression, and both peoples deserve a state. This is why both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government are in favor of a two-state solution (and Hamas is not – seeking Israel’s destruction, as detailed in its charter).

The better approach is to encourage and facilitate joint projects with Israeli and Palestinian scholars and students, especially those with potential to improve the political, economic, and cultural life of both peoples, and those that promote empathy and understanding. Boycott proponents cynically call such peace-building efforts “normalization projects,” to be rejected, unless they are joint projects in support of BDS’s goals, and are ones which promote “co-resistance” rather than “co-existence.”

[1] <http://www.haaretz.com/news/palestinian-university-president-comes-out-against-boycott-of-israeli-academics-1.190585>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/22/mahmoud-abbas-rejection-israel-boycott>
.post

The **Alliance for Academic Freedom**