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IDENTITY

Do Feminists Have to Hate Israel?

The National Women's Studies Association has voted to cut all ties with Israel and its institutions. How 'feminist' is such a dramatic move?



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Last week, a group [considered](#) the largest academic feminist organization in North America approved a measure to cut all ties with the state of Israel, including the researchers, teachers, and academics who work in its universities, museums, and cultural centers.

The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) voted to [endorse](#) "the 2005 call by Palestinian civil society for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) of economic, military and cultural entities and projects sponsored by the state of Israel."

According to the [BDS website](#), this boycott for academics includes mandates such as:

Refrain from participation in any form of academic and cultural cooperation, collaboration or joint projects with Israeli institutions

Advocate a comprehensive boycott of Israeli institutions at the national and international levels, including suspension of all forms of funding and subsidies to these institutions

The website further stresses that BDS academic supporters should cut ties with those who desire to visit or maintain connections with Israeli institutions, even if they themselves are not affiliated.

It states: "Hosting those who cross our boycott 'picket lines,' many Palestinian organizations now recognize, can only undermine the boycott by presenting a 'false symmetry' or 'balance' between the colonial oppressor and the colonized."

That NWSA voted to support BDS is not necessarily surprising considering the recent trend in academic institutions. [Insider Higher Ed](#) reported that "about half a dozen U.S.-based scholarly associations in the social sciences and humanities have endorsed the BDS movement since 2013."

What is more curious and alarming is that members of NWSA have framed the BDS support as an expression of feminism.

“As feminist activists, scholars, teachers, and public intellectuals who recognize the interconnectedness of systemic forms of oppression, we cannot overlook the injustice and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, perpetrated against Palestinians,” the resolution in support of BDS states.

Professor Simona Sharoni of the State University of New York at Plattsburgh, who serves as a co-founder of the Feminists for Justice in/for Palestine group, told *Inside Higher Ed* that the “the vote of almost 90 percent of the members of the National Women’s Studies Association in support of this resolution underscores the fact that boycott, divestment and sanctions can be or is seen by members of our association as an example of expressing feminist solidarity.”

That stat is a little misleading: It is true that 88.4 percent of NWSA voters supported the resolution, but only 35 percent of all members voted. That means around 31 percent of NWSA members actually voted in support.

The Daily Beast spoke with Janet L. Freedman, who has been a member of the NWSA for decades, and formerly served as the chair of its Jewish Caucus.

She has [spoken out against the BDS endorsement](#), not only because of the resolution’s content but the way in which it was passed.

She attended the NWSA’s annual conference this past November in Milwaukee, where she felt organizers “were emphasizing a single point of view, which deeply troubled me.”

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She and three other women held a smaller event to debate the BDS resolution, which only about 20 or 25 people attended, according to Freedman. The NWSA declined to comment on any specific questions from The Daily Beast regarding the BDS vote.

“Having been at the conference, I asked so many people, ‘Have you read the resolution, I would like to discuss this?’ I spoke to few who had even read it,” she said.

Still, Sharoni championed the NWSA’s vote to boycott Israeli institutions as part of “redefining feminism and putting solidarity with Palestine into that definition of what it means to be a feminist.”

The NWSA’s endorsement may, in fact, be a step toward redefining feminism, but it does not take into account the many people who support the right of both Israel and Palestine to exist in two separate states.

Its critics are hardly the realm of right-wingers. Jay Michaelson (a Daily Beast contributing editor) wrote in the [Jewish Daily Forward](#), “BDS rhetoric distorts Israel’s motives, ignores Palestinian violence, singles out Israel unfairly and calls for destroying a society that many people love. Its supporters are often silent about bigotry within their ranks, and duplicitous as to their vision for the future.”

Even those who denounce Benjamin Netanyahu’s policies, and ardently support Palestinian self-determination, are outspoken critics.

Maajid Nawaz wrote in [The Daily Beast](#) just a few months ago, “I *oppose* this simplistic, collectively punishing, censorious, and intellectually dishonest BDS movement.”

He cited fears about “free speech, artistic creativity, and cultural expressionism,” while pointing out that BDS “punishes an entire people, due to the actions of a government.”

As a British author, Nawaz wrote, “I would be mortified if my work were censored or affected in any way around the world due to the actions of my government—such as the invasion of Iraq.”

Freedman, who has [identified herself](#) as a “progressive, feminist, pro-Israel, pro-Palestinian, pro-peace Jew,” felt the BDS movement went against the values of scholarship and academia.

“I think it’s rather draconian,” Freedman said. “The thing to do is to always encourage people to talk to one another. On the simplest level, it is inimical to what scholars should be doing, which is connect in every way they can.”

My colleague Lizzie Crocker [pointed out the problem](#) with conflating matters pertaining to Israel and campus rape last week when she wrote about how No Red Tape, a Columbia University anti-sexual assault group, had aligned itself with Students for Justice in Palestine.

“No Red Tape has lost the plot. In trying to be inclusive of other oppressed groups, they’ve alienated victims that their group is dedicated to advocating for,” Crocker wrote.

According to Freedman, since her time as a member of the NWSA in the 1970s (she noted she took a brief absence when she was busy with personal family matters but has largely remained a consistent member), she could not recall an analogous boycott involving a specific country and its scholars.

Because the NWSA declined to respond to The Daily Beast’s requests for further commentary, this could not be confirmed.

“Unless you are discussing every unjust condition in the world, I don’t know why [there’s focus on] this one painful, poignant clash, just Israel-Palestine,” Freedman said.

There is also something curious about Israel being singled out by a feminist academic group, considering that the country has a history of leading female politicians and women in military roles.

While that hardly is proof that Israel is some feminist utopia, one wonders why the NWSA doesn't launch boycotts against countries who far more [blatantly limit](#) women's rights, opportunities, and safety.

Still, for Freedman, what may be the most disheartening part of the BDS issue at the NWSA conference was that younger members, including graduate students, praised her for speaking out because they were too afraid to object.

“This is not something I would speak out against if I want to move ahead in my career,” she said women told her.

“It's so chilling and saddening to think people would be stifled and silenced. [Hearing people] say I ‘was courageous’ makes me terribly sad. It shouldn't take courage to not even speak out but ask questions, raise points of disagreement,” Freedman said.

In this academic and political climate, this reporter asked Freedman if she still saw a place for herself within the NWSA.

“I am going to continue to be a member,” she said. “I feel it's more important than ever to be there and express my viewpoint.”