

The Campus War over Israel

[The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel](#) Edited by Cary Nelson & Gabriel Noah Brahm • Wayne State University Press • 2014 • 552 pages • \$34.99

No issue on American college campuses today is more toxic and divisive than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For a decade now, “Israeli Apartheid Weeks,” which posit Israel as another South Africa, have featured extreme anti-Zionist events. Guest speakers friendly to Israel have been shouted down and silenced. At UCLA, candidates for student government were asked to pledge not to go on trips abroad sponsored by certain pro-Israel Jewish groups, but were not asked to avoid trips sponsored by pro-Palestinian or other organizations. At Ohio State, the police had to break up a student government meeting days after one undergraduate doused herself in blood (spoofing the “ice bucket challenge”) to protest Israel’s policies. At Temple University, a pro-Israel student was assaulted at a Students for Justice in Palestine leafleting booth.

Almost as regrettably, those who most fervently resist the anti-Israel activists tend to hail from the hard-line pro-Israel right and use Fox News-style rhetoric that inflames the situation. Faculty supporters of Israel, especially if they’re untenured, tread lightly. Belief in a two-state solution—coupled with mandatory denunciations of the occupation of the West Bank—constitutes the outer edge of acceptable opinion. (Taking extreme anti-Israel positions can also be professionally risky.) In the political arena, liberal Zionism is far from dead (contrary to public perception), but in campus debates it’s too often missing or muted.

The intense anti-Israel sentiment on campuses may surprise those who don’t keep up with the academic or Jewish press. When pollsters ask Americans about Israel, the results are what you’d expect: majority support for Israel, a U.S. ally; notable concern about Israel’s use of force during military conflicts like last summer’s Gaza incursion; the wish for the United States to be even-handed in negotiations for a two-state solution; and creeping frustration with Israel since 2009, when Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power as prime minister, a position he first held in the late 1990s.

But the relative stability of American public opinion conceals a worsening polarization in academia—a development to which non-academics should be paying much more attention, as *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm, drives home. As Samuel and Carol Edelman write in one essay in this authoritative volume, campuses lately have been experiencing “a barrage of anti-Israel films, speakers, panels, editorials, and faculty presentations portraying Israel as . . . a racist nation” and often championing a policy of boycotts, divestments, and sanctions (BDS) against the state of Israel. Within scholarly professional societies, such as the American Studies Association (ASA) and the Modern Language Association (MLA), activists have mounted campaigns to pass boycotts and related resolutions, including efforts to shun travel to Israeli conferences, bar intellectual collaborations with Israeli researchers, exclude Israeli academics from scholarly activities, and so on. According to Eric Fingerhut, the former Democratic congressman from Ohio who now heads the national Hillel organization, the last year witnessed “the most organized campaign to demonize Israel and attack pro-Israel students we have ever seen.” Even allowing for fundraising-letter hyperbole, it is hard to disagree.

It can be difficult to know how threatening the BDS movement really is. On one level, it can be dismissed as a fringe crusade. No universities have divested from Israel. The movement's few victories have been met with immediate and overwhelming condemnation. When a University of California graduate student union endorsed BDS last year, the United Auto Workers, the union's parent body, rebuffed it. When the ASA announced its own boycott of Israeli universities, college presidents lined up to denounce the move. At one point BDS claimed it got Sabra hummus removed from the Wesleyan University dining halls, but the decision to switch to Cedar's hummus turned out to have been driven by other factors—sustainability and the fact that Cedar's is a local brand. After the outcry, the dining halls pledged to stock both brands, ensuring Sabra business in perpetuity, since any change in the contract would now be seen as capitulation to pressure.

In other respects, however, real harm is being done. The first notorious example occurred in Great Britain in 2002, when Mona Baker, an editor of two small journals in the field of translation studies, fired two Israeli academics, Miriam Shlesinger and Gideon Toury, from journals she ran because of their affiliations with Israeli universities. The next year, Andrew Wilkie, an Oxford pathologist, refused to take on a graduate student because he was Israeli. Some boycotters have refused to write external assessment letters—the key element in evaluating the case for a scholar's tenure—for Israeli academics seeking promotion.

Even more important than these individual injustices, BDS has made strides in shifting the nature of the debate in academia, normalizing the notion of Israel as a pariah nation. Student government bodies, which rarely exert real power at universities but can reflect and shape undergraduate thinking, are sponsoring and backing BDS resolutions, most recently at Stanford University, hitherto seen as a bastion of moderation. At UCLA, BDS supporters on a student government council went so far as to question whether a prospective appointee to their judicial board, Rachel Beyda, could govern fairly simply because she belonged to Jewish campus organizations. The line between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism has always been fuzzy and debatable, but cases like Beyda's suggest that the rising anti-Zionism on campuses is eroding longstanding taboos against anti-Semitism. Two Trinity College professors recently found, in a survey of more than 1,000 Jewish college students, that more than half had personally experienced or witnessed anti-Semitism within the past half year. In contrast to Washington, the campus debate now centers not on which steps both antagonists might take to reach peace but on how Israel alone should be sanctioned.

Almost all the energy, too, now resides with BDS supporters. A few years ago, Jon Stewart, explaining why the Tea Party was mobilizing while ordinary Americans were quiescent, quipped that most of us “have lives.” Although a silent majority of students and faculty surely see both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, most of them don't have the time or inclination to organize, or to subsume their studies or scholarship or teaching to activism. Because of this imbalance, there has emerged a small library of BDS advocacy books—by the likes of Omar Barghouti, a Qatari-born academic who received his Ph.D. at Tel Aviv University, and Judith Butler, primarily known as a scholar of gender theory—but no book-length scholarly criticism of BDS. Until now.

The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel grew out of recent fights at the ASA and MLA over BDS-related resolutions. Nelson, a distinguished literary scholar and a former president of the American Association of University Professors, and Brahm, also a professor of literature and theory, have assembled an omnibus of arguments against the academic boycott in particular. The book also includes inquiries into related subjects like academic freedom and the history of Israel, as well as key documents from the ASA and MLA fights. Hefty,

endnoted, and at times abstruse, the book is scholarly in tone, with the inevitable shot of polemic here and there. (I've never met Brahm, but I have worked with Nelson in the Alliance for Academic Freedom, a liberal group devoted to promoting academic freedom on campus in relation to this issue, and have sometimes agreed with him, sometimes disagreed. I also read one of the book's essays before publication but don't discuss it in this essay.)

The book encompasses a broad range of opinions, with left-leaning contributors (Michael Bérubé, Martha Nussbaum, Mitchell Cohen) nestled alongside right-leaning ones (Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, Richard Landes). The contributors' differences suggest a raucous seminar more than a manifesto, and the diversity of opinion stands as a refreshing counterpoint to the propagandistic nature of so much literature on both the BDS left and the chauvinistic pro-Israel right. Indeed, the book tackles too many topics to cover here, but as a historian, I found particular value in its historical treatments of the boycott movement—though here, too, contributors offer slightly different interpretations. Paul Berman, in a preface, describes the current movement as part of “the oldest continuous-running boycott in the history of the world,” with its origins in the Arab boycotts of Jewish businesses in the Levant in the decades preceding the birth of Israel in 1948. In this view, the economic war against Israel continued through the longstanding Arab League boycott of Israel; ebbed after the 1978 Camp David Accords (which led Egypt to withdraw from those sanctions) and the 1993 Oslo Accords (after which Jordan and the Palestinian Authority followed suit); and then revived in the wake of the failed Camp David effort of 2000 and the ensuing Second Intifada.

On the other hand, Kenneth Marcus, of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, cautions against viewing BDS as “nothing more than a continuation of its Arab League and Nazi predecessors,” noting discontinuities as well as continuities. He sees these different boycotts as “a repetitive series of incidents that serve the same underlying function.” Still, he explains how in September 2001, not long after the Clinton peace talks collapsed, a conference of NGOs in Durban, South Africa—devoted, ironically, to the subject of racism and intolerance—yielded a call for Israel's “complete and total isolation” from the world community. This call spurred the boycott's revival. Richard Landes suggests that the terrorist attacks of September 11 (which occurred days after the Durban conference) also fueled the new surge. The attacks fed conspiracy theories centered on Jews and, especially after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, shored up far-left worldviews that depicted a militarily aggressive American imperialism rooted in U.S. support for Israel.

This recent history, since Durban, is taken up by several contributors, including Sabah Salih, a scholar of post-colonial literature and thought at Bloomsburg University. Looking at larger ideological developments, Salih argues that BDS “owes its rise in the West” to an “ideological transformation” on the left, which now imagines that the United States and Israel “are out to impose their hegemony on the world.” This ideology, Salih argues, typified by Edward Said's influential 1978 tract *Orientalism*, holds that criticism of Arab or Muslim political leaders or political culture—even if it arises organically from within Arab or Muslim societies (such as from the Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya), even if it is leveled in the name of liberalism and human rights (such as from Christopher Hitchens)—is misguided, because it inevitably amounts to a kind of complicity with Western imperialism. Once under this spell, proponents of this ideology can shrug off arguments that might otherwise disturb their settled understandings. What of the terrible human rights conditions (on speech, religion, women, and gays) in the Arab world, compared to Israel? What of the eliminationist anti-Semitism and terrorism of Hamas and Hezbollah? If one begins with not just sympathy for but active solidarity with the Palestinian cause,

these questions become red herrings, distractions from the overriding issue of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. Salih cites Martin Amis, who, returning to England in 2006 after two years abroad, was mortified to see "middle-class white demonstrators waddling around under placards saying, 'We Are All Hezbollah Now.'" But given the trajectory of recent times, asks Salih, "Why are we not surprised?"

Yet the questions don't go away. The most delicate matter addressed in the book is that of anti-Semitism. BDS opponents sometimes shrink from broaching it, because they're accused of using the charge scurrilously, to deflect criticism. In my experience, however, the charge is rarely if ever made tactically; rather, it's born of a genuine and deep fear that anti-Semitism is being normalized—and that *calling* someone anti-Semitic is now regarded as worse than *being* anti-Semitic. Nelson and Brahm deal with the subject forthrightly and with nuance.

The relationship of anti-Semitism to BDS might be likened to the relationship of racism to the Tea Party. Most Tea Party members insist they harbor no personal animus toward blacks, and at a conscious level that's probably true. The same is surely true for many BDS supporters regarding Jews. The pro-BDS "scholars known to me personally," writes Michael Bérubé, a professor at Penn State, "are people of principle and integrity, many of whom have been persuaded to their current position, in part, by pleas from the Israeli left." To be sure, Bérubé may not have had in mind someone like the writer Rania Khalek, who, as recounted by Stanford humanities professor Russell Berman, totted up the number of Jews—not Israel supporters, but Jews—writing for *The Nation* (hardly a pro-Israel magazine) in 2013 and judged their influence excessive. But in most cases personal animus toward Jews isn't the issue. As other contributors to the book point out, there's much more to understanding anti-Semitism—just as there's more to racism and sexism—than calling out conscious intentional bigotry.

One latent form of anti-Semitism consists in the witting or unwitting traffic in hoary anti-Jewish tropes. Most of us have no trouble seeing the racist content in a cartoon that fashions President Obama as a monkey, even if the cartoonist swears he didn't mean to draw on stereotypes of blacks as sub-human. But BDSers are loath to recognize how much their own literature is rife with portraits of Jews as child-murderers (the ancient "blood libel" held that Jews used the blood of Christian children to make matzo); as people prone to using their allegedly outsized power and money for parochial ends (AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobbying group, looms large in the BDS demonology); and even as vermin ("I've had a horrible influx of Zio-trolls today. It's like getting a case of the scabies. They burrow in and you want to rip off your skin," tweeted Steven Salaita, an Arab-American academic whose candidacy for a tenure-track position at the University of Illinois failed to win approval from the university's trustees because of his history of extreme and unprofessional anti-Israel rhetoric). This form of anti-Semitism may not always be conscious; it is shaped, as the philosopher Bernard Harrison has written, by a "climate of opinion" that is formed by "a multitude of spoken and written items—books, articles, news items . . . lectures, stories, in-jokes, stray remarks." Yet when a movement's rhetoric is so thoroughly suffused with these conceits and assumptions, it is normal that members of a long-persecuted group will discern bigotry between the lines. As Mitchell Cohen, editor emeritus of *Dissent*, writes, "If you are anti-Zionist and not anti-Semitic, then don't use the categories, allusions, and smug hiss that are all too familiar to any student of prejudice."

Beyond the realm of stereotypes and attitudes, there is the realm of outcomes. Larry Summers's oft-quoted formulation that the BDS movement is anti-Semitic "in effect" if not always in intent has rankled the kind of good leftists Bérubé writes about, who don't consider themselves anti-Jewish. But there's no getting around the reality that the victims of these boycotts are overwhelmingly Jewish (Palestinians affiliated with Israeli universities, of course, will suffer too). Again, to make an analogy with racism: Most liberals have no trouble seeing that while Republicans who try to tightly regulate voting may not hate blacks, they know that their preferred policies would disenfranchise blacks more than whites. Similarly, the British sociologist David Hirsh points to a UK court decision forestalling the closure of a particular university department because it had a lot of black employees, on the grounds that closing it would disproportionately hurt members of one race. The concept of "racism without racists" is not hard to understand. Yet the fact that a boycott of Israel would, in effect, target Jews seems not to trouble its advocates.

Finally, there is anti-Zionism itself. BDS advocates typically claim that they're not anti-Semitic, just anti-Zionist. This assertion requires, as my fellow academics would say, some unpacking. Just as the word *feminism*, which as a simple belief in women's equality should be easy to endorse yet now to some connotes militancy or radicalism, so the word *Zionism*, which simply posits the Jewish right to a homeland (and, post-1948, Israel's right to continue existing), has assumed negative and even demonic overtones in certain circles. This shift in Zionism's functional meaning is worrisome, because it implies that Israel's very existence is illegitimate: If Zionism is wrong, then Israel is wrong.

Now, pretty much everyone to the left of Avigdor Lieberman agrees that *criticism* of Israel isn't necessarily, or even usually, anti-Semitic. And it's hardly controversial to assert that Israel's occupation of the territories, its expansion of its settlements there, and many of the restrictions it imposes on its Arab citizens deserve condemnation. But what about the *negation* of Israel—not mere criticism of its policies or of the current government, but the belief that it should no longer exist? To deny to the Jewish people (who have always been a *nation* as much as a religion) a claim to self-determination at least raises the questions of why they alone should lose this fundamental right, and of what lies behind the wish to single them out for this deprivation. It's perfectly fair to ask BDSers for answers to these questions. It's also fair to ask if the desire to strip the right of self-determination from the Jewish people might be informed, consciously or unconsciously, by an animus toward Jews or an absorption of longstanding, prevalent anti-Jewish attitudes. Finally, even if we don't ultimately judge the goal of dissolving the state of Israel to be anti-Semitic, it is nonetheless deeply discriminatory. For this reason, write Brahm and the Middle East scholar and activist Asaf Romirowsky, "*the stigma that properly attaches to anti-Semitism should adhere as well to anti-Zionism*" (italics in original).

Apart from the question of anti-Semitism, this volume also provides less controversial reasons to oppose an academic boycott of Israel. Several essays take pains to show how the BDSers' claim that the boycotts target only institutions, not individuals, amounts to a distinction without a difference. In practice, any boycott with teeth amounts to a blacklist, which is anathema to all supporters of academic freedom. What Nelson makes clear in one of his essays is that to some BDS supporters, the sacrifice of academic freedom is not a problem. One pro-BDS Harvard undergraduate, Sandra Korn, was naïve enough to write in *The Crimson* that academics should jettison our "obsessive reliance" on academic freedom and instead pursue what she called "academic justice." Whether such "justice" would permit the ostracism of a whole people, or who would determine the nature of that justice, was left unsaid.

Another powerful argument against an academic boycott is that it would foreclose the very channels for fostering the dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis that might promote mutual understanding and ultimately peace. One bright spot in the Middle East in the last two decades has been the number of cultural exchanges, projects involving students from both peoples, and other efforts to surmount the cultural assumptions that produce hostility and distrust. These range from Seeds of Peace, a well-known camp for Israeli, Egyptian, and Palestinian teenagers, to a new Israeli-Palestinian youth soccer league. Unfortunately, these essays reveal that any rapprochement between the warring parties through such programs is inimical to the goals of the BDS movement.

The radical logic of BDS is carefully explored by Emily Budick, professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who points out that unlike professional peace processors, who know that only a token number of Palestinian families dispossessed in 1948 will be able to return to their homes (though others would receive compensation), BDS insists on a complete “right of return” for all Palestinians. Such maximalism would mean the end of Israel as the Jewish homeland. BDS thus shares the position not of Mahmoud Abbas, who opposes BDS and who has conceded the need to compromise on the right of return, but rather of Hamas, which holds all of Israel to be illegitimate. As contributor Nancy Koppelman further notes, for BDS advocates, the thwarting of academic and cultural exchanges is not a regrettable side effect of the boycott but its very purpose. Increased contact between Palestinians and Israelis, especially in a scholarly setting, could encourage mutual understanding, which might mean that more Palestinians would grant legitimacy to Israel’s claims to nationhood. It must therefore be avoided.

In the near future, the academic boycott seems unlikely to gain much traction in the United States. But the essays in this book are still an important wake-up call to academics and non-academics alike. Among other things, they make clear that these campaigns have as their purpose something bigger than the boycott itself. They aim not simply to shift opinion but to delegitimize Israel. That effort is already making headway, especially among college students, younger voters, and people on the left.

There are good reasons for liberals and small-d democrats to fear this development. Most immediately, it will damage the prospects for peace by encouraging extremism on both sides, at an hour when both Israel and the Palestinians desperately need to demonstrate greater flexibility in negotiating. It may also alter the discourse in Washington, and in our public debate generally; the current pragmatic focus on how both sides can make concessions for peace could soon give way to a polarized dynamic, in which neither side allows any merit in the other’s position. Netanyahu’s cynical pre-election assertion in March that he wouldn’t allow a Palestinian state under current conditions—although “clarified” immediately after the election to mean that he still supported a two-state solution, just not at the moment—has already dashed hopes of progress until the next Israeli election. Meanwhile, Obama’s unstatesmanlike displays of contempt for Netanyahu have rendered it impossible to envision new peace talks until the next American election as well. At this moment of despair, the academy needs to be generating ideas that point to constructive compromise, not dogmatism.

With BDS gaining strength, the rancor between Netanyahu and Obama—and more generally between the Likud leadership and other Democratic officials—is bad news in another respect, too. Historically, the Democratic Party has been the single best vehicle for upholding a liberalism that embraces Zionism—for preserving a middle ground between the anti-imperial left, which questions Israel’s legitimacy altogether, and the illiberal

right, in whose company Israel's defenders hope not to have to take refuge. But Obama's newfound rigidity toward Israel suggests a declining concern on his part with those pro-Israel liberals who supported him; seen alongside the increasingly anti-Israel tenor of left-liberal punditry, it makes one wonder how long the Democratic Party will remain committed to liberal Zionism. Here is where the BDS movement may have a long-term effect. Should the demonic picture of Israel now being propagated in the academy continue to be preached without significant rebuttal from liberal leaders, it could, within a generation, change the character of the Democratic Party. If so, the consequences would be baleful, for the party itself and for the elusive but necessary dream of peace in the Middle East.

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