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The Case for Raising Our Voices

Why academia is the epicenter of BDS



IVEN ITS GOAL of punishing the Israeli economy, the movement known as Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) has been an abject failure. During 19 years of BDS activism, foreign direct investment to Israel has more than quadrupled, increasing by 411 percent, according to the World Bank. BDS's strong suit has not been economic impact. The one sector in which it has achieved spectacular success is in higher education, where there is a growing conviction, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, that discriminating against Israeli researchers, scholars, students, and universities aligns somehow with the pursuit of justice.

This is no surprise. As Hebrew University's Netta Barak-Corren, chairwoman of its Initiative Against Academic Boycott, has observed, academia is where the foundations of BDS were first laid, where the slanderous retelling of the social, economic, political, and

religious history of the modern state of Israel was given intellectual legitimacy. All of it—the settler-colonialist state, the genocidal state, the apartheid state—has been long established in higher-ed circles. With BDS’s arrival, faculty sympathetic to the post-colonialist, Soviet-style skewing of humanities and social sciences now had the opportunity to feel righteous by voting in favor of boycotts. Even better, BDS provided additional cover for disregarding academic rigor, which long ago allowed propaganda against the State of Israel to go unchallenged.

Some recent examples: From 2005 until October 2023, Israel had ceased all military and civilian presence in Gaza. Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza 19 years ago entailed forcibly removing Israeli settlers and razing their communities. Gazans soon voted Hamas into power, and Hamas has not held elections since. Yet the Middle East Studies Association, the main scholarly society devoted to study of the region, has continued to refer to “the occupied Gaza strip,” a convenient falsehood for increasing support for BDS.

Another example of useful disregard for the academic enterprise: Some faculty have canceled class so their students could attend anti-Israel campus demonstrations. Such faculty exhibit neither intellectual curiosity—which would lead them to explore with their students why Israel might be in conflict with its neighbors—nor professorial responsibility toward students who might oppose these rallies. This willingness to poison their own classroom learning environments by trumpeting their ideological biases is tolerated or even encouraged by school officials.

Most telling of all, perhaps, is that the Dreyfus Affair can be taught at Harvard these days without mentioning antisemitism or even that Dreyfus was Jewish, as author Dara Horn recently reported in the *Wall Street Journal*. Students studying modern European history can no longer be expected to learn about the origins of modern Zionism.



It is precisely in BDS's intellectual shamelessness, in fact, that we see reason for optimism and a path forward. We know from personal experience that many academics — including those who are not Jewish or Zionist or who have little to do with either — feel discomfort and disdain for the violation of fundamental academic standards associated with BDS. Last summer, when the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) reversed its long-held position opposing academic boycotts, political scientist Ronald Krebs, literature scholar and former president of the AAUP Cary Nelson, and Ron Hassner, faculty director of Berkeley's Israel studies program, authored a counterstatement that quickly received more than 3,000 signatures. It clearly hit a nerve. As Krebs later elaborated, the AAUP reversal represents “nothing less than a profound and dangerous (attempted) normative shift in how the profession should think about academic freedom.” At least to some subset of academics, universities are supposed to be places of learning, characterized by rigor in the pursuit of knowledge. The objectives of BDS clash directly with an aspect of university culture that remains definitional to the research enterprise.

It is instructive that the Association of American Universities (AAU), composed of North America's leading 71 research universities, came out strongly against BDS ten days after the AAUP's reversal. In contrast to the AAUP, “the king of membership-based faculty organizations,” as Krebs describes it, the AAU, whose members are universities rather than individual faculty, understands itself to represent the highest standard of academic research. To do otherwise than object to academic boycotts would violate the AAU's own *raison d'être*. Herein lie the headwinds facing BDS: Excellence in the academic enterprise will always, somewhere,

somehow, resist capitulation to ideology and instead seek rigor in the pursuit of knowledge.

The AAU statement was unequivocal, stating that it

continues to oppose boycotts of academic institutions based upon disagreement with policies of their governments. Scholarly exchange with institutions and scholars around the globe promotes the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Universities aiming to live up to this goal cannot deny engagement with academic colleagues “solely on the basis of whether one likes or dislikes the policies of the government where an academic institution is located. It is this scholarly engagement which underpins academic freedom, a fundamental principle of AAU universities and of American higher education in general.”

The more egregiously BDS persists, the more a community of scholars who feel affronted by its assault on core academic values will grow. The opportunity now is to lower the social and professional cost to those who would otherwise encourage colleagues to collaborate with Israeli academics and universities in shared intellectual inquiry. Our optimism stems from awareness of such a community, broad though disparate, within the American professoriate. The key will lie in building an effective infrastructure of support for this contingent of faculty and administrators.

When it comes to expertise in creating effective academic communities, no one has more of a track record of success than professionals in alumni affairs, donor relations, and student affairs. Let’s turn to these professionals for guidance in creating programs with a new type of focus: bolstering the connectedness and mutual reinforcement among faculty and administrators, as well as students, staff, alumni, and donors who value academic excellence over academic bigotry.

The logic of such a project is like the flywheel—slow-moving and small-scale at first, but with a momentum that will increasingly give voice, energy, and opportunity to those who hold dear the most fundamental values of academic inquiry. We know it's a risky landscape. We also know those voices—and the human and capital resources to back them—are out there. Now's the time to bring them together. *