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## **What Universities Can Learn from Israel's Status on Campus**

In the post-modern university where, at least in the social sciences and humanities, facts are no longer, well, factual, the country of Israel fares badly. Rather than information about the actual country, an abstract idea of Israel has emerged on college campuses over the past dozen years. The Jewish state appears as the single nation of the world deserving boycott of its (actual) products and academic institutions. A Palestinian narrative prevails, but it is a particular, monolithic, Palestinian narrative that leaves out, for instance, the opposition of Palestinians to Israel boycotts.

This abstract notion of Israel also shows up in countless campus forums, classroom lectures, protest demonstrations, associated students' election campaigns and, on many campuses for two weeks of every year, as performance activism confronting students with staged "checkpoints," photos of bloody victims and towering, cardboard, "apartheid" walls.

Writing in an important recent collection, *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, 32 scholars consider gaps between Israel's campus status and its real life. Among other topics, they address the assault on academic freedom that occurs if academics are boycotted because of their nationality (R. Berman; G. Brahm and A. Romirowsky; D. Hirsh; M. Nussbaum) and the absurdity of maligning Israeli institutions that not only exemplify multicultural learning and teaching but that are themselves bastions of academic freedom; the founder of the boycott Israel movement was getting an advanced degree at Tel Aviv University while advocating for its boycott (S. Wolosky; I. Troen). The book also offers a valuable, concise history of Israel (C. Nelson, R. Harris, and K. Stein), much needed because boycott movements and agitation against Israel on campus exhibit a startling lack of interest in verifiable evidence, dialogue, and the usual expectations of academic argument.

A number of writers in *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel* attest to one-sided presentation of proposals and procedural moves to minimize dissenting voices (S. Musher; J. Robbins). Further, the objections of students and faculty to singling out the Jewish state for approbation alone among the countries of the world and the extreme discourse with which this is promoted are often disregarded (D. Divine; M. Kotzin). While speech codes and sensitivity to even micro-aggressions are mainstream at universities, several of the authors note that Jewish concerns about anti-Semitism are dismissed or, worse, are considered merely ways of shutting down debate (R. Fine; K. Marcus).

By paying attention to Israel's status on campus we learn that debate on this topic is not really possible. The veracity of claims about Israel in boycott proposals is off limits for discussion. The only questions addressed are whether or not to boycott and whether or not academic freedom or the professional organization proposing the boycott will be harmed. Labels like "apartheid" and "colonialist" applied to Israel are not considered controversial in most academic settings. What is missing from discussion of Israel on campus is Israel: its history, people, current situation, daily life, and place in the Middle East.

Anti-Zionism at universities, notes co-editor Cary Nelson, is treated as if it is essential to progressive politics — regardless of Israel's genuine progressivism, its real-life democracy, its vibrant freedoms of speech, of the press, of religion, and its commitment to the rights of women, gays, minorities, and all its citizens.

This refusal to acknowledge the realities of Israel and to insist on singling out the one democracy in the Middle East for boycott may say more about universities than it says about the topic of Israel.

The American Studies Association called their Israel boycott a "litmus test" of the organization's "stance on Palestine." For, the current campus status of Israel is possible only in an academic environment of litmus tests, where one's progressive credentials rest on adhering to a party line, where facts are not merely malleable but acceptable only to the degree that they fit prevailing ideologies.

Israel on campus stands out precisely because there is pushback among students and some professors to university anti-Israelism. In fact, it may be

the only major challenge to mainstream campus politics. As such, the status of Israel on campus serves as a warning of encroaching dogmatism and lack of room for diversity of thought in what we used to refer to as the marketplace of ideas.