

## Elizabeth Redden, IS BDS ANTI-SEMITIC?

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Is the academic boycott against Israel anti-Semitic?

Variations of that question come up again and again in a new book of essays, *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel*, edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm (Wayne State University Press). In his introduction, Nelson, the Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, pulls no punches, writing of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel that all who join it “are effectively promoting the dissolution of the Jewish state whether or not that is their intention.”

The book’s 500-plus pages cover a lot of (contested) ground, with essays exploring the nexus between the boycott and the political left, the range of BDS-related activity on American campuses, and examples of Israeli-Palestinian collaboration in higher education, among other topics. The book does not include any essays from supporters of academic boycotts. It reprints the American Association of University Professors statement opposing academic boycotts, in general, “[i]n view of the association’s long-standing commitment to the free exchange of ideas,” and includes a whole range of essays examining the boycott in light of the Israel context, in particular. A section is devoted to analyses and reflections on the American Studies Association’s December vote to endorse the academic boycott of Israel. Another section consists of a 55-page history of Israel, authored by Nelson, Rachel S. Harris and Kenneth W. Stein.

Essayists examine a range of issues, including the distinction BDS advocates make between boycotting individuals versus institutions of higher education and the use or misuse of the analogy to the boycott movement against apartheid South Africa, but arguably no issue is as loaded as that of the BDS

movement and its relationship with anti-Semitism. Nelson writes in his introduction that supporters of the BDS movement have largely deflected questions of anti-Semitism by complaining that Israel's defenders dismiss all criticism of Israeli government policy as anti-Semitic -- a response that Nelson characterizes as a red herring.

"Many of the contributors here have criticized Israeli government policy themselves and recommended basic changes in it," writes Nelson, the former president of the AAUP. "That, however, leaves unanswered a series of more vexing questions: Does anti-Semitism help explain why Israel is singled out for especially severe international criticism when other states have much worse human rights records? Does anti-Semitism help underwrite demands that Israel literally be eliminated as a Jewish state and be absorbed into a larger Arab-dominated nation? Is the BDS movement as a whole contaminated by clearly anti-Semitic statements by some of its advocates? Are idealistic BDS advocates responsible for unintended anti-Semitic political and social consequences of the movement?"

"At issue, we should emphasize, is not whether individual BDS advocates are anti-Semitic, though some surely are, but whether the history of anti-Semitic discourse informs BDS reasoning even if supporters are unaware of that," Nelson writes.

Pertinent to this question are the specifics of the BDS platform, which, opponents point out, doesn't limit itself to calling for an end of the occupation of the West Bank but rather goes much further to demand the right of Palestinian refugees from 1948 to return to their homes -- a demand that Israel's advocates argue would result in an Arab-dominated country and the end of Israel as a Jewish state. While Omar Barghouti, a key BDS activist, has emphasized in his writings that the movement is "neutral" on the issue of a one-state versus a two-state political solution, some of BDS's leading thinkers (including Barghouti and the philosopher Judith Butler) have personally

advocated for a one-state solution that Nelson argues would be disastrous and even deadly for a minority Jewish population.

In his essay, "The Problem with Judith Butler" (who is among the BDS movement's most prominent proponents in American academe), Nelson argues that any solution that involves dissolving the Jewish state is "anti-Semitic in effect" and fueled, "at least obliquely," by an anti-Semitic legacy that views Jews as "secondary or expendable."

"Criticism that pressures Israel to improve its laws and practices, that helps Israel see its way toward a negotiated solution, that would lead to withdrawal from the West Bank -- while reaffirming Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state within secure borders -- is not anti-Semitic," Nelson writes. "Claims that Israel has no right to exist as a Jewish state, that it was an illegitimate colonialist enterprise from the outset, are indeed anti-Semitic in effect."

Butler preemptively addressed allegations such as these in her 2012 book, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press), in which she offers a critique of political Zionism informed by Jewish writers and traditions. "More often than not in the United States, when the question is posed, 'are you a Zionist?' the meaning is, 'Do you believe in Israel's right to exist?'" she writes. "The question always presupposes that we assume the existing form of the state provides legitimate grounds for its own existence. But if one argues that the current grounds for its existence as well as the existing formation of the state may not be legitimate, that is taken to be a genocidal position. So a political discussion on what constitutes the legitimating grounds for any state in that region is immediately silenced because to ask after the question of legitimacy (without knowing in advance how it will be answered) is taken not as an essential reflective moment for any democratic polity but rather as a dissimulation with to see a given population annihilated. Obviously, no thoughtful discussion about legitimacy can take place under such conditions."

Butler, the Maxine Elliot Professor in Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley, writes of the “founding contradiction” of the Israeli state in the wake of World War II in that the needs of one group of refugees (Jews) were addressed by creating a whole new group of refugees (Palestinians). “This founding contradiction is covered over by the causal argument that not only leads from the Nazi genocide to the founding of the State of Israel, but takes it at least two steps further, claiming (a) that the founding of the state on those grounds, and not others, was legitimate and (b) that any efforts to criticize the Israeli state for its policies of expulsion, occupation, and land confiscation amount to ‘delegitimation’ that threatens to reverse the course of history and expose the Jewish people to genocidal violence. These arguments have been made ex post facto in order to legitimate a state apparatus and a militarized colonial occupation, to build a sense of nationalist entitlement, and to rename all acts of military aggression as necessary self-defense.”

In addition to calling for the return of Palestinian refugees, the BDS platform calls on Israel to end the occupation of territories gained in the 1967 war, to dismantle the wall separating Israel from the West Bank, and to accord full equality to Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel.

"The reason why the Global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement includes among its goals the rights of Palestinians dispossessed in 1948 as well as the damaged rights of Palestinian Israelis is that it is not possible to restrict the problem of Palestinian subjugation to the occupation alone," Butler writes. "If we do so, we agree not only to forget the claims of 1948, bury the right to return, but also accept forms of unjust majority discrimination within the present borders of Israel. We fail to see the structural link between the Zionist demand for demographic advantage and the multivalent forms of dispossession that affect Palestinians who have been forced to become diasporic, those who live with partial rights within the borders and those who live under occupation in the West

Bank or in the open-air prison of Gaza or other refugee camps in the region.”

In *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights* (Haymarket Books, 2011), Barghouti writes of what he describes as the “ ‘delegitimization’ scare tactic.” “Indeed, BDS strives to delegitimize Israel’s settler-colonial oppression, apartheid, and ongoing ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian people, just as the South Africa boycott was aimed at delegitimizing apartheid there. In no other boycott against any state has the preposterous claim been made that this nonviolent tactic is intended to end the very physical existence of the target state,” he writes.

“The ‘delegitimization’ scare tactic further failed to impress any reasonable person because its most far-reaching -- and entirely unsubstantiated -- claim against BDS is that the movement aims to ‘supersede the Zionist model with a [single] state that is based on the ‘one person, one vote’ principle’ -- hardly the most evil or disquieting accusation for anyone even vaguely interested in democracy!”

“As to the anti-Semitism charge,” Barghouti writes elsewhere in the book, “it is patently misplaced and is clearly being used as a tool of intellectual intimidation. It is hardly worth reiterating that the Palestinian BDS Call does not target Jews, or even Israelis qua Jews; the call is strictly directed against Israel as a colonial and apartheid power that violates Palestinian rights and international law.”

The question of whether Israel rightly qualifies as a colonial and apartheid state is a deeply disputed one that won’t be resolved here. But a theme that emerges throughout the new book *Against Academic Boycotts* is a conviction that some who have embraced BDS have signed onto a movement that is more radical than they realize.

“I do not doubt that many people support the BDS [movement] out of genuine sympathy for the suffering of Palestinians,

which is no fantasy,” writes Emily Budick, the Ann and Joseph Edelman Professor of American Studies and director of the Center for Literary Studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. “And I am sure there are those among the BDS supporters who, like members of the organization itself, believe exactly what the BDS is calling for, which is destruction of the State of Israel as a nation and as a Jewish homeland. But I also suspect that there are many others who do not wish the extinction of Israel, either through its outright absorption into a new unitary state (Barghouti’s position) or its de facto dissolution into an Israel in which there is a Palestinian majority.”

In his contribution to the collection, an essay entitled “Is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement Anti-Semitic?” Kenneth L. Marcus situates the BDS movement within the history of prior anti-Israel and anti-Jewish boycotts and concludes that BDS is anti-Semitic, “as its predecessors were, because some of its proponents act out of conscious hostility to the Jewish people; others act from unconscious or tacit disdain for Jews; and still others operate out of a climate of opinion that contains elements that are hostile to Jews and serve as the conduits through whom anti-Jewish tropes and memes are communicated; while all of them work to sustain a movement that attacks the commitment to Israel that is central to the identity of the Jewish people as a whole.”

Marcus, the president and general counsel of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, an organization that bills itself as conducting “research, education, and advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses,” goes on to say that this does not imply that “all or even most” of BDS’s proponents are anti-Semitic. He concludes that indeed some do not have discriminatory or prejudicial motives.

“Nevertheless,” he writes, “it ought to give them pause to realize that, for whatever reasons, they are participating in a boycott that has deeply unsavory roots and ramifications. It is not coincidental that the world’s only Jewish state is subjected

to greater scrutiny and pressure than most of the world's other nations. Nor is it coincidental that current efforts to boycott the Jewish State resemble the nearly constant efforts that have been made to boycott Jewish businesses since well before Israel's establishment.”